

THE NEW TESTAMENT WORLD

PART 3: THE GRECO-ROMAN CONTEXT OF
THE EARLY CHURCH

A "HELLENIZED" WORLD

- Greek influence, spread by Alexander the Great
- Mixture of Greek and local culture
- Greek language: "lingua franca" of the Empire
- Polis - city-state
- Religious syncretism - local deities identified with gods from the Greek pantheon

**"Greece provided the cultural capital of the
ancient world, but it was the Romans who spent
it in expanding their empire."**

-Michael Bird

FROM REPUBLIC TO EMPIRE: A BRIEF HISTORY OF ROME

- City-state to transcontinental Empire
- Punic War (218-201BC) - defeat of Carthage
- Expanded control of hellenistic city states - Rome had an "empire" before it had an "Emperor"
- Julius Caesar - paved way for transition
- Augustus (Octavian) - first Emperor

AUGUSTUS

- 31BC-14AD
- Consolidated Empire
- Time of unprecedented peace and security
- "son of god" (adopted son of Julius Caesar)
- Rapid economic and population growth



STRATIFICATION OF ROMAN SOCIETY

- Social status generally inherited but upward mobility possible
- Social tiers:
 - Senatorial - primary civil and military administrators
 - Equestrian - "knights" - governors of territories
 - Decurion - members of civil councils in municipal cities
 - Plebeian - general citizens, small business owners
 - Freedman - ex-slaves, often in dependent relationship with former masters
 - Slave - regarded as property; could be prisoners of war, kidnapped, sold into slavery to avoid destitution, slave by birth; possible to buy out or be released

SOCIAL STRATIFICATION AND THE EARLY CHURCH

- Churches were socially diverse, which led to challenges
- Corinth example: rich/poor divide, social inferiority in marriage - 1 Cor. 6:1-10; 11:17-34

RELIGION AND PHILOSOPHY: CULTURAL MYTHOLOGY

- "Mythology" - strictly speaking, does not equal "fictional"
- Rather, "myth" is the master narrative of a culture that determines its values, identity, and aspirations
- Think of American "mythology:" Revolution, freedom, individualism, the "American dream," etc.

GRECO-ROMAN MYTHOLOGY

- Rome: stories and symbols from the past - Romulus and Remus, deification of emperors, temples and gods
- Rome was soaked with religion, with interlocking mythology about its city, its gods, and its emperor
- Acts 17 - Paul in Athens
- Christianity offered a completely different construction of history featuring one God, the history of Israel, and the Lordship of Christ—a "mythology" tied up in the "gospel"
- It was not simply an alternative religion, it was a completely different worldview

GRECO-ROMAN RELIGION

- "Religion" not merely a body of beliefs and practices kept separate from secular culture, but rather an all-encompassing way of life
- Romans didn't *have* a religion, their life was a religion—a binding together of gods and humans in community

FEATURES OF ROMAN RELIGION

- **Concern with the present life rather than an afterlife** - pursuing favor of the gods for this life
- **Focus on cultic ritual rather than on doctrinal beliefs** - rituals court the favor of the gods
- **No secularism with a separation of religion and state** - Religious practices were part of statecraft

FEATURES OF GRECO-ROMAN RELIGION

- **Pluralism but not necessarily tolerance** - Worship of a god not exclusive, tendency to incorporate local "gods," but maintenance of worship to Rome's deities expected

RITUAL OBSERVANCE

- Means of negotiating the divine and human world
- Temples and sacrifices
- Patronages and prophecies
- Shrines, groves, music, magic, omens, oracles, divination

CHRISTIANITY: A ROMAN "ATHEISM"

- No priesthood, no temple
- Rituals, but devoted to one God revealed in a crucified human
- Christ as "Lord" vs. emperor - refusal to embrace imperial cult
- Causing people to abandon Roman "religion" threatened the state
- Example: Acts 19:23-41



GRECO-ROMAN PHILOSOPHY

- Socrates (469-399 BC) - the examined and examining life
- Plato (428-348BC) - Space, time, and matter secondary to ultimate world of "Forms" or "Ideas"
- Aristotle (384-322BC) - tutor of Alexander the Great, concrete categories of things, discourse of logic

GRECO-ROMAN PHILOSOPHY

- Epicurus (341-270BC) - Good and evil aesthetic rather than absolution: pleasure = good, pain = bad. A forerunner of "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism"
- Zeno (333-264BC) - Stoicism - Pantheistic, aimed at continual moral enlightenment, self-mastery, living in accordance with nature
- Cynics - Scorned human pretension, society corrupt and worthless, called for radical re-evaluation of human life, anti-social critique

EXCURSUS: THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

- John 1:1-18 - a counter to philosophy
- "Word became flesh" - counter Plato
- Logos - wisdom embodied
- God made known in human form; matter matters!

THE JEWISH DIASPORA

- 80 percent of Jews did not live in Palestine
- Dispersion caused by Assyrian and Babylonian exile
- Major concentrations of Jews in Alexandria, Syrian Antioch, Rome, Parthia, and elsewhere
- Scriptures - portable land and Temple; synagogue
- Saul of Tarsus - diaspora Jew who also knew Hellenistic culture
- Septuagint (LXX) - Greek translation of OT with expanded Apocrypha - became "Scripture" for the early church



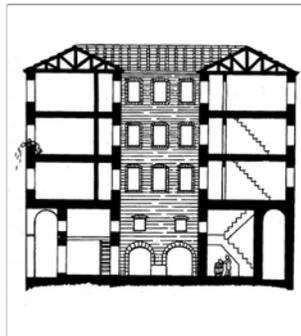
ROMAN ROADS

THE SPREAD OF CHRISTIANITY



CHRISTIANITY IN ROME

- Generally connected with lower classes of society
- Most people lived in tenement apartments (most expensive on the ground floor)
- House churches
- A strange community that attracted outsiders because of its ethics and practice



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