

A Historical Introduction to the New Testament

Chapter 17: The Graeco-Roman World

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It is obvious that in dealing with the Graeco-Roman world at the time when Christianity came into existence our problem is not to obtain sufficient materials for study but to make some kind of selection from these materials. We can discuss only those matters which seem to possess fairly immediate relevance to Christian origins. We shall therefore limit our discussion to those aspects of Graeco-Roman life which bear directly, or almost directly, upon our subject.

The Roman Empire

With the civil wars and the murder of Julius Caesar in 44 BC., the Roman republic came to an end, and his heir and successor Augustus became the architect of the Roman empire, reigning from 27 BC. to AD. 14. For peoples subject to, or allied with, the Roman state, this change in the form of government did not make a great deal of difference, except that in the early years of the empire the power struggles which accompanied the decline of the republic seemed to have come to an end, and tax-collection by private companies, often accompanied by extortion, was replaced by tax-collection by civil servants. Roman control over local affairs remained much the same. The provinces were administered by Roman governors or, in some cases, procurators, whose authority was based on the power of legionary and auxiliary troops. About twenty-four legions were stationed in various trouble spots mostly at the frontiers of the empire.

At the top of the social structure were the members of Roman senatorial families; below them came the equestrian order, followed by free men, freedmen, and slaves. This structure was relatively fluid, since membership in the two highest orders was based chiefly on property qualifications, and in our period many men became rich, partly through politics and partly through trade or ownership of real estate in a time when business was generally good and money was gradually becoming cheaper. Slaves were often able to buy their freedom; non-citizens could purchase Roman citizenship. This citizenship involved such rights as trial before Roman judges, not local ones, and appeal to the imperial court at Rome, as well as exemption from some local taxes. It is not clear how Roman citizenship could be proved; presumably something like a passport was necessary.

Within the empire, and even beyond its confines, a busy commercial life was going on. Trade was primarily responsible for the development of an elaborate network of well built roads and a system of shipping which made full use of the potentialities of the Mediterranean Sea. Bandits had been driven away from most of the overland routes, and piracy had practically been brought to an end. In other words, communications among the various parts of the empire were very good, and the papyrus letters found in Egypt suggest that even though there was no government postal service for private mail it was still possible to send letters without much difficulty.

The distribution of the wealth produced by trade and commerce was extremely uneven, and wage rates for common labourers were low, often a denarius or drachma a day. (Legionary soldiers received little more, but they had opportunities for other gains.) To some extent these low wages were due to the competition provided by slave labour; more significantly, free workmen were rarely organized, and the labour supply tended to exceed demand. The low wage level was balanced, to a considerable extent, by a low price level for necessities and by government subsidy and/or price control. Generally speaking, life for the lower and lowest classes was quite tolerable, especially in the absence of advertising and the invention of new products for mass consumption. The rich were very rich, but their position was often insecure because of demands made upon them by emperors and other officials. They did not have to cope with an income tax, graduated or otherwise, and the inheritance tax was very low (five per cent); at the same time, it was quite possible for them to lose everything by political misadventure.

Religion

The religions of the Graeco-Roman world were primarily, and traditionally, civic; this is to say that the gods were the gods who were recognized by the state -- either the Roman state or the local city-state. The priesthoods were reserved, in most instances, for the more prominent citizens, and at Rome the emperor himself expressed his religious function in the rôle of *pontifex maximus*. For a considerable time a working relationship between Greek and Roman religion had been effected by means of an identification of Greek and Roman gods; Zeus was Jupiter, Hera Juno, etc. The same kind of identification was made between local gods and Greek gods; when Lycaonians hailed Barnabas as Zeus and Paul as Hermes (Acts 14:12), presumably they had their native deities at least partly in view. This tendency to amalgamate cults and gods was characteristic of the period; though to a considerable extent it was resisted by Jews, there were Jews who used the term 'God most high' in a way which was at least ambiguous. Papyri and inscriptions, along with literary documents, reveal the extent to which various gods and goddesses originally national acquired universality partly by being identified with others. A conspicuous example was the Egyptian goddess Isis.

The gods and goddesses of subject peoples were widely worshipped throughout the empire and often won adherents simply because they were not closely identified with the state. In many instances their worship was conducted by priests who wore vestments of native origin and perpetuated ritual actions of an exotic character. Their rites of initiation, to some extent modeled after the famous and generally acceptable Eleusinian mysteries, were well known, although it is by no means certain that many persons participated in them. The precise meaning of the rites is unclear, and we do not know that in the first century of our era they were regarded as conferring immortality or as involving dying and rising with the god involved. Preliminary purifications were required, and sometimes it was believed that initiation resulted in better moral character. In the rites of the great mother Cybele, legally forbidden to Roman citizens, the initiate castrated himself. Such sacrifices were uncommon.

Following the practice of some oriental and Hellenistic kingdoms, the Roman Senate, after the time of Julius Caesar, was accustomed to vote the deification (*consecratio*) of dead emperors who had served well, and it became a regular custom for some witness to swear that when the dead emperor's pyre was ablaze he had seen the emperor's soul wing heavenward. In the provinces post-mortem deification was sometimes anticipated by enthusiastic loyalists, but in the first century those emperors who during their lifetime claimed to be divine (Caligula, Nero, Domitian) were not so regarded when dead. The first example we possess of compulsory veneration of a living emperor is to be found in Pliny's investigation of the Christians (AD. 112), and such a practice, not encouraged by Trajan, never became universal. It may, however, be referred to in Revelation 13.15. If so, it probably originated in Asia Minor, a centre of the

imperial cult. Popular and provincial reverence for the emperor was usually more pronounced than the attitude at Rome.

Education

In the Graeco-Roman world considerable emphasis was laid on education, and at the beginning of our era the level of literacy was quite high. Most people could speak, read and write either Greek or Latin, and many could deal with both languages. The common language of the empire was Greek, as we learn from inscriptions and papyri, though in border lands native languages such as Celtic, Punic and Aramaic continued to be employed. A minority of cultivated men (and a few women) went on from grammar to rhetoric, to the 'encyclical studies' which included arithmetic, music and other 'liberal arts', and some ventured into philosophy.

In so far as philosophical theology was studied, it was regarded as a branch of either philosophy or rhetoric. Its relation to philosophy is obvious; not so obvious is the connection with rhetoric. But rhetorical training involved taking various 'theses' and either defending or opposing them, and one such thesis, commonly employed, was 'concerning providence'. A rhetorician's manual lists no fewer than seventeen arguments which could be provided in favour of providence, most of which assume the existence of God or the gods and proceed to providence by inference. One example argues for providence from the nature of the universe.

The nature of the universe testifies that in accordance with providence everything has taken place for the preservation of the things in the world: the times of the years receiving alteration according to the seasons, the rains and fruits taking place in the proper time, and the parts of the body also fashioned by nature for their preservation and safety -- as Xenophon makes clear in his *Memorabilia* (1, 4, 5-8).

The resemblance of this argument to two sermons in Acts (14 and 17) is fairly plain, and it may not be unrelated to Paul's discussion of the unity of the body in I Corinthians (12).

The doctrine implied and stated in this thesis was widespread in the Graeco-Roman world, where poets, philosophers and legislators were regarded, especially by Stoics, as setting forth a consistent teaching. Only the Sceptics argued in favour of the relativity of all human opinions, especially in matters of religion.

Combined with the common acceptance of belief in God or the gods was a strong stress on moral teaching. The manifold variety of doctrines which could be encountered in early Greek philosophy and in the early Hellenistic age was abandoned (though to some extent revived in Gnostic circles), and in its place came a fairly uniform teaching, largely Stoic in origin, which laid emphasis on the four virtues of justice, courage, sobriety and understanding, and was addressed by preachers to individuals. The Stoics and others compiled lists of virtues and vices; they used short summaries of the duties of fathers to children and children to fathers, husbands to wives and vice versa, and masters to slaves and vice versa. They exhorted the individual to accept social responsibility; true inner freedom was to be found through and in this acceptance. In making these exhortations they developed what is called the 'diatribe', a lively moral address delivered in semi-conversational style.

Along with belief in the gods and the importance of social ethics went a widespread faith in the life of the soul after death and, often, in the celestial spheres. Denial of the innate immortality of the soul was sometimes expressed (for example, by Peripatetics), but such denials were unfashionable, especially since the *consecratio* of a dead emperor involved the belief that his soul had been carried into heaven.

As for the heaven or the heavens, the first-century naturalist Pliny expresses views already traditional when he tells us that the universe is spherical and constantly revolves about the earth, which is therefore spherical itself. The learned, therefore, are aware that on the other side of the globe there are men whose feet are

opposite ours. The vulgar may ask why these men do not fall off, but in Pliny's view the nature of things keeps this from happening. Not everyone agreed with Pliny.

Between the earth -- in the centre of the universe because day and night are equal at the equinox -- and the heaven are the seven planets with their different cycles. In the absence of space travel the practical ancients could not see what purpose these planets served, and since it was an axiom of their thought that God or nature does nothing without purpose, the way was open for a widespread acceptance of the principles of astrology. Philosophers might argue for free will against fate, astrological or not, but many men followed the example of the Roman emperors and believed that the stars governed men's lives. Christian writers constantly insisted upon human freedom from astral determinism; indeed, when Paul lists those things which cannot separate us from the love of Christ some of his terms have astrological parallels (Rom. 8:39).

It is obvious that we have severely limited the extent of our discussion of the Graeco-Roman world and have only touched upon three aspects of its life: political-social, religious, and educational. The reason for this limitation has already been indicated in Chapter v. If our basic purpose is to understand the New Testament, some knowledge of its historical environment is essential (and the student will be well advised to add to the meagre materials we have supplied); the study of the environment does not, however, directly illuminate the New Testament writings themselves. For instance, it is important for an archaeologist to find traces of a meat-market in the Agora at Corinth. Such a discovery contributes nothing to our understanding of

I Corinthians 10:25, where such a market is mentioned. The precise nature of an 'appeal to Caesar' is interesting, since according to Acts 25:11 the apostle Paul made such an appeal. It could probably be assumed, however, without reference to the history of Roman law and administration, that such an appeal was made and that the practice was not unheard of.

The function of the study of the New Testament environment seems to be a double one. (1) By correlating the New Testament documents, and the events described within them, with Graeco-Roman records and events, we can see more clearly what in the New Testament was like, what unlike, the world in which the early Church arose. (2) By correlating New Testament studies with the work of modern historians, we associate two kinds of critical investigation and thus make some contribution, however minor it may be, towards holding together a culture seemingly on the verge of disintegration. A theological purpose is also involved. Since the early Church was facing, and at the same time being influenced by, the ancient world, it may be important to know something about what was involved then, in the hope that the situation then may cast some light on the situation now.

For this reason we now turn to the Jewish background of early Christianity.