

# The Roman World of Jesus: An Overview

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The Hellenistic/Roman world of Jesus is a fascinating one, but unfortunately, more often than not, it is largely ignored by students of the New Testament and Christian Origins. It is important to become familiar with the political, social, cultural, and religious ideas and realities of this wider Mediterranean context. Even Judaism, as particular and different as it was from other religions of the time, can only properly be understood as set against this broad background. This is even more the case in trying to come to an understanding of Jesus as a Jew in Palestine in his time, but also a subject of the mighty Roman Empire. We can take several approaches here. There is the political point of view that emphasizes the arena of struggling empires that waged war until one military dictatorship, the Roman Empire, gained control over the lands that border the Mediterranean Sea. There is the economic point of view that examines a vast system of business and finance dominated by international trade, an enforced system of taxation, and large bodies of slave labor. There is the sociological approach that looks at the pluralistic assortment of ethnic peoples, high government officials, merchants, small business people, slaves and minorities. This world has its literature, sculpture, philosophy, art, and architecture from the civilizations of ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, Rome, Greece, and Canaan (the area settled by the ancient Hebrews, called Palestine by the Romans). Finally, this ancient Mediterranean world gave rise to a diverse and often, from the modern western point of view, exotic religious life. It is impossible in an introduction such as this to study all of these facets of ancient Mediterranean civilization in detail, but it is important to gain some knowledge of the civilization in order to bring the New Testament--as a collection of books of particular times and of particular places--to life.

## The Political Scene

The New Testament is a product of the Hellenistic world (Greek *Hellas*, "Greece"), a world that came into being as a consequence of the conquests of Alexander the Great (356-323 B.C.E.). When Philip II of Macedonia (northern Greece) was assassinated in 336, his brilliant and ambitious son, Alexander, only 20 years old, consolidated his power and then launched a campaign east-ward. He gained mastery over the far-flung Persian Empire that extended from western Asia Minor (modern Turkey) to India, and included Egypt. Alexander's first major victory over the Persian king and general Darius III took place at Issus in southeastern Asia Minor in 333 B.C.E.. The young commander then moved down the eastern Mediterranean coast, overcame resistance at Tyre and Gaza (332), induced submission of the Jews of Palestine and was welcomed in Egypt as a conquering hero. There he founded the city of Alexandria, destined to become one of the greatest cities of Hellenistic civilization. Then he moved further eastward, decisively defeated the armies of Darius at Gaugamele, and took possession of the wealth of the eastern cities. According to Josephus, the 1<sup>st</sup> century C.E. Jewish historian, Alexander took control of Jerusalem and entered the Temple there as part of his sweep of Palestine. When Darius was murdered by the Persian princes, Alexander proclaimed himself "King of Asia" and quickly accustomed himself to the divine honors paid an oriental monarch. When he advanced into India in 326, his weary army refused to follow him. Alexander returned to Mesopotamia, settled in Babylon, and began to consolidate his huge empire. But he was not to enjoy it for long, for in the summer of 323 B.C.E. he died of a fever. In thirteen years this amazing young man had become master of the whole eastern Mediterranean world. Alexander was a brilliant military strategist, but there was more to his dream than military conquest. He had been tutored by Aristotle and saw himself as the apostle and emissary of the classical Greek culture. Attached to his general staff were historians, ethnographers, geographers, botanists, zoologists, mineralogists, and hydrographers.

His vision was "one world" (*oicumene*), or one great "world city" (Greek *cosmopolis*). Alexander's conquests spread Hellenism in a vast colonizing wave throughout the Near East and created, if not politically, at least economically and culturally, a single world stretching from Gibraltar to the Punjab in India with Greek (*koine*) a lingua franca.

The extent to which Alexander went in his attempt to create a "single world" can be illustrated by two points. First, he married Persians, including Statira, the daughter of Darius III, then he induced eighty of his officers to marry local women. In the spring of 324 B.C.E. during a "feast of fraternization" he gave gifts to 10,000 of his men for marrying Persian women. Second, he built a network of almost thirty Greek cities throughout the empire, a building program that was expanded by later Hellenistic rulers. These became enclaves of Greek culture. Here gymnasia, baths, and theaters were built. The upper classes spoke *koine* Greek, wore Greek dress, absorbed Greek learning, adopted Greek customs, and took part in Greek athletics. Palestine, the land of the ancient Hebrews, or Israelites (now known as "Jews," from the word *Judah*), was no exception to this phenomenon. Furthermore, the process of Hellenization continued through the beginning of the Roman Empire (27 B.C.E.) and beyond, for the Romans perpetuated Greek culture.

Despite the cultural revolution, the Hellenization of the East was limited. The urban nature of the phenomenon meant that traditional cultures in non-urban regions continued much as before. Indeed, while Hellenization continued in the cities, there occurred a revival of Eastern ways, both spiritually and materially, so that eventually the West began to experience the impact of the East.

The death of Alexander the Great in 323 B.C.E. led to a bitter political power struggle among his Macedonian generals. In 301 three distinct Hellenistic empires emerged: (1) Macedonia and parts of Greece; (2) the Seleucid Empire ("Syria") from western Asia Minor to Mesopotamia, established by Seleucus; and (3) the Ptolemaic Empire in Egypt and the North African coast, along with some islands in the Mediterranean, established by Ptolemy. There was constant probing of the balance of power between the Ptolemies and the Seleucids in border areas. Following their historical fate as inhabitants of a buffer zone, the Jews were controlled first by the Ptolemies and then, after 198 B.C.E., by the Seleucids. The Jews soon found that the Hellenizing policies of the Seleucids, especially Antiochus IV, were intolerable. As a result, they revolted in 167 B.C.E.; they gained their independence gradually, and established an independent monarchy. But there was a new power over the horizon with which the Jewish people would have to contend, and which would ultimately end their independence in 63 B.C.E.: the power of Rome.

Roman history can be divided into three major periods: (1) the monarchy, traditionally founded in connection with the legend of Romulus and Remus (753 B.C.E.), (2) the Roman Republic, established in 509 B.C.E.; and (3) the Roman Empire, which sought to bring peace and order to the faltering Republic in 27 B.C.E., and which lasted until its western lands began to fall to Germanic invaders from the north in the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries C.E.

During the later period of the Roman Republic Rome gained control over the Hellenistic empires surrounding the eastern Mediterranean Sea. Although Rome was unable to extend her control as far eastward as the Persians and the Greeks had, the western part of the empire eventually took in Spain, Gaul (modern France), southern Germany, and southern Britain. Each of the Hellenistic empires was subdivided into Roman provinces in the second and first centuries B.C.E. The formation of Syria as a Roman province brought Palestine under Roman control in 63.

The vast extension of Roman power over the whole Mediterranean region put an immense strain on the Roman Republic. New tax revenues and interest created an expanded economy, a higher standard of living, and a new wealthy class at Rome. But it also brought political corruption, social dislocation, and moral decline. Political bribery was common; abused slaves on the countryside plantations revolted and were often joined by the oppressed poor. Traditional Roman respect for family gave way to childless marriages, divorce, adultery, prostitution, and pederasty. Exploits abroad created instability at home; a highly centralized, stronger role seemed necessary, and eventually the Romans looked more and more to the military.

A series of strong leaders emerged in the first century B.C.E., among them Pompey, Julius Caesar, Antony, and Octavian. By 42 B.C.E. the armies of Octavian and Antony had decisively defeated those of Caesar's murderers, leaving Italy and the West in the control of Octavian, and the East as far as the Euphrates in the control of Antony. In 31 B.C.E. Octavian's defeat of Antony's forces at the battle of Actium, followed by the subsequent suicides of Antony and Cleopatra in Egypt, meant that Octavian was in a position to assume great power. Upon his return to Rome, he was made *Imperator*, or supreme commander of the army; the Senate conferred upon him the additional titles *Augustus*, the August, and *Princeps*, the first of the Senate. Thus the Roman Empire was born in 27 B.C.E., and Octavian, called Caesar Augustus, was its first emperor.

Augustus was a wise ruler. He secured the borders of the empire and built roads. The result was a new era of peace and stability (the *pax Romana*). He reorganized the provinces to achieve a more just administration, instituted tax reform, developed a civil service, and engaged in many public works projects, especially in Rome. It was during his reign that Jesus of Nazareth was born.

Not all of Augustus' successors, however, were as capable. Tiberius (14-37 C.E.), though experienced, was unpopular and spent his last eleven years in a life of debauchery on the island of Capri; one of his infamous appointees was the prefect of Judea, Pontius Pilate. Tiberius was followed by his grandnephew and the great-grandson of Augustus, Gaius Caligula (37-41 C.E.) who became absorbed with power, demanded that he be addressed as a god, and proposed that his horse be made a consul (he rewarded this animal with a marble stall and a purple blanket!). He also drained the treasury to pay for his dissolute life and reckless building activities, and he fomented a crisis among the Jews by demanding that statues of himself be set up in the Temple at Jerusalem. The crisis was averted only when he was assassinated by his private Praetorian Guard. Fortunately, his uncle and successor, Claudius (41-54 C.E.), though considered weak in body and mind by his relatives, turned out to be a competent ruler. When Claudius was poisoned by his fourth wife Agrippina, Nero (54-68 C.E.), who was Agrippina's son by a previous marriage, became emperor. Though at first the empire ran smoothly under the direction of the philosopher Seneca, Nero took control and things began to deteriorate. He poisoned Claudius' son, executed his own wife, and arranged for the assassination of his mother. There were other murders. In 64 C.E. a great fire devastated Rome, and Nero found his scapegoat in the Christians. Tradition has it that Peter and Paul were martyred by Nero. Finally, matters got so bad that military commanders seized several provinces and Nero fled the royal palace. Upon hearing that the Senate had condemned him to death *in absentia*, the last of the Augustan family rulers committed suicide in 68 C.E.

Widespread unrest in the empire and chaos at home led to a quick succession of emperors: Galba, Otho, and Vitellius, each military commanders vying for power as the next Emperor. In 69 C.E., Vespasian, a seasoned commander who had been dispatched to Palestine to crush a full-scale Jewish revolt that had broken out (66-70 C.E.) was popularly acclaimed emperor. Vespasian provided a decade of peace and prosperity for the empire (69-79 C.E.) reminiscent of the Augustan era. Similarly Vespasian's son and successor, Titus, who had concluded the war with the Jews, reigned wisely for two years (79-81 C.E.). But a second son of Vespasian, Domitian (81-96 C.E.), was a tyrant of the first order. He relied on informers, had his enemies murdered, and laid a heavy tax on the people of the empire, especially the Jews. Enamored with his own divinity, he also persecuted the Christians, and it is his reign that provides the backdrop for the most anti-Roman book in the New Testament, the book of Revelation. The following Flavian emperors, as they are called, were some of Rome's best: Nerva (96-98 C.E.), Trajan (98-117 C.E.), Hadrian (117-138 C.E.), Antonius Plus (138-161 C.E.), and the Stoic philosopher-emperor Marcus Aurelius (161-180 C.E.).

This brief sketch of the Roman emperors cannot offer a detailed understanding of the period; it can, however, depict the general flavor and tenor of the times, and especially some of the difficulties faced by Jews and Christians.

### **The Cultural Scene**

We have noted that Hellenization was primarily an urban phenomenon. In the cities of the Greco-Roman period, Greek ideas were disseminated, Greek dress was fashionable, and the externals of Greek

civilization--baths, theaters, amphitheaters, hippodromes, fountains, aqueducts, arches, and the like--were highly visible. A new cosmopolitanism emerged in which any city might become a center for the interchange of ideas from all over the world. This was extremely important for the rise of early Christianity. Though it emerged from the Galilean countryside and perpetuated many ideas from its rural and Jewish origins, it moved quickly to the cities of the empire where its beliefs were gradually recast with the mold of Hellenistic thought. In such places its ranks were filled largely, though not exclusively, with believers of low status who nonetheless produced a substantial literature in the Greek language.

What was daily life in the Greco-Roman world like? Generally speaking, safe travel became possible as it had never been possible before, but with it came the spread of disease. Physicians and healers of all sorts were in great demand. There were many advantages of city life, but at the same time the problem of feeding the increasing urban populations was never adequately solved and famine was an ever-recurring possibility. War was prevalent until the Augustan peace in 27 B.C.E.; thereafter it was confined largely to securing the frontiers--an exception being the wars with the Jews in 66-70 C.E. The practice of enslaving conquered populations was common, and slaves made up a sizable proportion of the population, especially in Rome. It should be realized that though slaves were often abused on some of the plantations, loyal slaves were sometimes given their freedom while those who became secretaries, domestics, tutors, or financial overseers could occasionally accumulate enough money to purchase freedom. The emperor's slaves held especially influential and powerful positions in government. Still, slaves were chattel and their legal rights were limited. There were no great political movements to abolish the institution. It is not surprising, then, that the image of the master and the slave occurs frequently in the New Testament. Below the slave on the social ladder were the free poor who could barely subsist from day to day. The vast wealth of the empire was controlled by a few aristocrats, who often gained honor and status with their public works and philanthropic deeds, but the gap between rich and poor remained great.

Finally, the shift from older, established, local cultures to new, changing, international environments meant for the urban dweller social dislocation. The loss of a sense of belonging to a natural and continuing community must have been a common experience. It is clear that for the vast majority of people the traditional religious systems of ancient Greece and Rome held little meaning. These religions were formalistic and unemotional, and their function had become largely political. The people longed for some form of physical or spiritual healing, some pertinent philosophy of life, some religious peace and harmony within. It is no surprise that with the revitalization of the East much of the populace was attracted to the somewhat more exotic and emotional religious movements of the orient, as well as popular religious philosophies and local religions which shared some of the same features. We will now briefly review some of these intellectual currents and religious movements, as far as possible calling attention to matters that are important for understanding particular parts of the New Testament.

### **Popular Philosophy**

There were a number of philosophies of the Hellenistic Age that were quite popular and that functioned as religions for many who held them. Part of the common stock of much Hellenistic thinking about the world was derived from Platonic "dualism." Plato (d. 347 B.C.E.) presented the view that the transient material world we perceive through the senses is only a shadow of the true reality, that is, the eternal world of abstract ideas known through reason.

Plato also believed that the transient, material body was a prison of the divine, immortal soul, and that the good and just man disciplines the body and its emotions, allowing the reasonable side of the soul to achieve virtue, which is knowledge. This philosophical dualism--especially its view that this world is transient--is reflected at points in the New Testament, especially when the earthly realm is described as a shadow of the heavenly realm (for example in the letter to the Hebrews). It also influenced such religious movements which stressed that human origins and destinies lie in a higher world, or that this world is evil, for example, Gnosticism (see below). Early forms of such religious movements provide some of the environment of early Christian writings, especially the gospel of John and the writings of Paul.

Another popular philosophy of the period was Stoicism. Stoicism took its name from the Greek word *stoa*, "a painted portico" where the founder of Stoicism, Zeno (ca. 336-263 B.C.E.), taught in Athens. The Stoics believed that the world was ordered by a divine Reason, the *Logos* (a Greek term for "word," "reason"). *Logos* was associated with fire, and capable of being identified with God, or Zeus. They also believed that a spark or seed of the *Logos* dwelt within human beings, and that a person could find a place in the world by obeying the spark or seed within. This orientation tended toward world affirmation and the denial of evil; all is according to Reason. The Stoic philosophy sought to teach a person to attain happiness by maintaining inner peace and contentment in a world full of troubles. To be in harmony with Nature meant self-sufficiency, tranquillity, suppression of emotion, and freedom from external constraints and material things. The ethical orientation of Stoicism emphasized the importance of the will and a certain detachment from property, wealth, suffering, and sickness. This led to a cosmopolitan egalitarianism, a focus on the natural and innate rights of all people, including slaves and women, and Stoics often formed brotherhoods stressing these great ethical themes.

The founder of Stoicism, Zeno, was a follower of Crates who, in turn, was a disciple of Diogenes, the first to call himself "dog," from which the philosophical movement called Cynicism derives (from the Greek word *kyon*, "dog"). The Cynics were counter-culture street preachers who attempted to convert people from the quest for fame, fortune, and pleasure to a life of austere virtue as the path to true freedom and happiness. Many Cynics restricted their diets, begged for food, wore short cloaks, carried only a wallet and staff, rejected social institutions such as marriage and the state, and believed that such a practical moral philosophy was "according to nature." This stress on ethics and right living was gradually absorbed into the more moderate and philosophically reflective Stoicism of the lecture hall, but the Cynic way of life was revived as an ideal among first-century Stoics who wished to appeal to the masses. Thus, later Stoics like the ex-slave Epictetus (late first, early second century C.E.) and emperor Marcus Aurelius (ruled 161-180 C.E.) highlighted the ethical life. Though there is no evidence to suggest that Epictetus was in direct contact with early Christians--in fact he made unfavorable comments about them--there are nonetheless many parallels between Cynic-Stoic lifestyles and those of early Christians, most visible in austerity and apostolic mission. The Cynic-Stoic style of argumentation and the habit of listing virtues and vices are also characteristic of the apostle Paul (Rom 1:16ff.; cf. also James 2:14ff.).

Another philosopher whose views were influential in the Hellenistic Age was Epicurus (ca. 342-270 B.C.E.). Epicurus' critics denounced him as lewd, fraudulent, and uneducated. These estimates, as well as the charge of atheism, were denied by Epicurus. He preached that one should not fear the gods, as religion so frequently taught, and that true happiness lies in the individual's attempt to avoid pain and find pleasure in this world.

In the larger Hellenistic world the ideas, beliefs, and sometimes the lifestyle of religious-philosophical leaders were often perpetuated in the "schools." As early as the sixth century, the followers of Pythagoras gathered around him in southern Italy to form a tightly-knit brotherhood or association. Many such schools were formed in Athens, the most famous being Plato's Academy, Aristotle's Lyceum, Epicurus' Garden, and Zeno's open-air Stoa. The school tradition was also highly prevalent among the Jewish Pharisaic teachers, though its ultimate origins probably lay in the prophetic guilds of the Ancient Near East.

### **Religions and Religious Movements**

If the Stoic view that everything was ordered according to Reason led to divine providence, there were also those who believed that the plan of the universe was mysteriously difficult to fathom. The early Greeks had come to believe that each person had his or her own "Fortune," "Chance," or "Destiny," deified as the goddess *Tyche* (Latin *Fortuna*). A somewhat more deterministic and less kindly view was called "Fate" (Greek *Heimarmene*). It was influenced by Babylonian conceptions about the impersonal, fixed order of the stars and planets (who were also deified as gods, goddesses, and demons; in the New Testament, cf. Gal 4:8-10; Col 2:8). Hence the view arose that one's fortune or destiny was determined by the position of the stars at birth; by a knowledge of the stars, or astrology (Greek *aster*, "star"), one could learn about his or her fate. The study of astrology was extremely widespread in the Hellenistic world, affecting almost every

religion or religious philosophy. The most obvious reference to astrology in the New Testament is the star of the Magi (Matt 2:1-12, 16).

Mention of the Magi leads to one of the areas where astrology was highly visible, namely, magic (Greek *magus*, a word borrowed from the Persians referring originally to the priests who practiced it). For those who believed in it, magic was an attempt to gain some control over the mysterious powers that determined one's fate, and especially to provide protection against demonic powers (associated with stars) who brought about war, famine, disease, and family problems. To know the correct formula, and to recite it correctly, was a primitive "scientific" way of dealing with life's evil tragedies. The New Testament mentions a certain Simon from Samaria who practiced magic and attempted to buy Peter's powers (Acts 8:9-24); some details of gospel healing stories can be best understood in connection with magic.

Still another type of religion in the Hellenistic world is the "mystery religion." Mystery religions seem to have originated in different countries but the gods or goddesses of one religion were often identified with those of another because they had similar characteristics. These religions are called "mystery religions" because they stress secret initiations. Our knowledge of these initiations is incomplete. But there were also public celebrations that displayed great pageantry, usually involving the recital or reenactment of a myth to celebrate the death and resurrection of a hero or heroine corresponding to the death and rebirth of vegetation during the cycle of the agricultural year. There was also a sacred meal connected with the ritual. Though by modern standards many of these religions had bizarre qualities, they did promise the initiates immortality, mystical communion with their Deity, and membership in a close-knit community. Examples of such mystery religions could be found in Greece (the Eleusinian Mysteries at Eleusis, not far from Athens; the religion of Dionysus or Bacchus, god of wine and the vintage harvest); Asia Minor (Cybele, the Great Mother, and her consort Attis, whose priests were castrated in imitation of Attis, driven mad by the jealous Cybele); Syria-Palestine (the Adonis fertility cult); Persia (the religion of Mithras, god of light and patron of the soldier); and Egypt (the religion of Isis and Osiris). Though the mysteries had sacred shrines in these regions, many of them spread to other parts of the empire, including Rome. There is no clearly direct influence of the mysteries on early Christianity, but they shared a common environment and many non-Christians would have perceived Christians as members of an oriental Jewish mystery cult.

A widespread religious movement which surfaced in the Roman Empire was Gnosticism. The term *Gnosticism* comes from the Greek word *gnosis*, meaning "knowledge," that is, revealed religious knowledge necessary for salvation. Gnosticism was not a single religion but a diversified and complex religious phenomenon both independent of, and interacting with, Judaism and early Christianity. Discoveries in modern times (the Mandaean literature, the Manichaean papyri, the Nag Hammadi texts) combined with the previously known Hermetic literature have convinced scholars that it was pre-Christian and originated in the East. There is still no consensus, however, on whether its essential ideas were current at the time of the rise of early Christianity. This is of particular interest since the myth of the Gnostic Redeemer, which some scholars believe influenced the way many early Christians understood the meaning of Jesus, can be documented with absolute certainty only in later Gnostic texts. Yet, some form of early Gnosticism was probably in the air and it seems likely that on occasion New Testament writers were influenced by it or attempted to counter it.

Basic to the Gnostic view is the perception that the world is an evil place, and that the only possible means of liberation from it is *gnosis*--secretly revealed knowledge about God, the world, and the origin, condition, and destiny of humankind. The Gnostic Theodotus once summarized the content of *gnosis* as: "Who we were, what we have become; Where we were, whither we were thrown; Whither we are hastening, from what we are redeemed; What birth is, and what is rebirth?"

Gnostic myths show that the evil world was not created by the good God, but by a second, inferior Deity, and that the true self, the divine self seen as a spark of light, is trapped in an alien body with all of its sensual passions. This body-spirit dualism is expressed in another way, that the evil powers attempt to keep the true self in a state of sleep or drunkenness in order to hold the creation of the evil world together. To know the myths--to have *gnosis*--is to have salvation.

In general, Gnostics believed that *gnosis* can be taught or that it can be transmitted through a secret ritual, but ultimately it comes from above as a "call," or by a Gnostic Redeemer who descends from the world of light, disguises himself in human form without becoming bodily, teaches *gnosis*, and returns or re-ascends. It is precisely the origin of this myth that is debated. Did it exist in New Testament times? Undoubtedly the possibilities for such mythical thinking were current in Mediterranean antiquity whether we label them "Gnostic" or not. However the Gnostic gains his *gnosis*, he learns that this world and this body are not his true home, that he has been "thrown" into an alien world. Often he totally renounces the body and its passions (asceticism) or, knowing that the world is not his true place and cannot really affect him, he allows himself the utmost freedom (libertinism). Either way, he experiences rebirth and becomes part of the privileged few.

It is clear that the problem of the origin of evil in Gnosticism differs from that found in Genesis, though the Genesis account is sometimes used to interpret that myth. Similarly, the reluctance of Gnostics to think of a Redeemer who can literally take human flesh, suffer, and die conflicts with the view of those early Christians who persisted in believing that Jesus of Nazareth was a god incarnate in the flesh. This latter belief became orthodox. But it must be recalled that this orthodoxy and its literature were only gradually accepted; until they were accepted, Gnostics, Gnostic Jews, and Gnostic Christians continued to exist side by side with other types of Jews and Christians in the period of the early Christian movement.

### **Gods and Saviors**

The Greco-Roman world did not lack gods and goddesses. These are the deities of myth, who dwell in the heavens or in some mythical mountain to the north, and who are associated with the rhythms of the seasons. Occasionally these eternal, immortal gods are said to descend, or are sent from heaven to earth, for some important redemptive mission on behalf of humankind. Occasionally they can be identified with historical figures, for example, the identification of the Gnostic Redeemer with Christ in certain Gnostic circles. Essentially they are gods, not human beings.

But there were also human figures known from history and legend who were believed to be so endowed with divinity as to perform superhuman feats, to be "supermen." They could be offspring of divine-human unions, but what is most characteristic of them is their wisdom and special powers, including their ability to work miracles. Usually they were considered to be the great benefactors of humankind. In this category were all manner of kings, emperors, military conquerors, politicians, philosophers, physicians and healers, poets, and athletes. The notion of emperor worship, for example, was an adaptation of eastern beliefs about the divinity of the king or pharaoh. But western conquerors fostered such ideas on their marches eastward; in the eastern provinces the Roman emperor was often believed to be divine. At home, the Greeks and Romans cautiously tolerated such views as a means to political unity and stability, but in fact discouraged them. When Roman emperors claimed divine prerogatives, they encountered stiff opposition, though it was customary to pay worthy emperors divine homage after they died. Also, majestic titles were often bestowed on the emperor (or demanded by some!) such as "Lord," "God," "Son of God," and "Savior." Titles of this sort were also given to Jesus.

Especially widespread was the notion of a hero or philosopher who was venerated for his ability to perform miracles or for his great wisdom, or both. Some modern scholars have called such a figure the "divine man." These tremendous abilities were believed to be a manifestation of deity, even if the figure was not an immortal god. Yet, it may be that there was also a special class of "divine men" who, it was believed, were rewarded with the status of immortality at death. One of the most famous was the itinerant Pythagorean philosopher Apollonius of Tyana (Asia Minor) who was said to have been sired by the Egyptian God Proteus, and to have gathered followers, taught, helped the poor, healed the sick, raised the dead, cast out demons, and appeared to his followers after death to discourse on immortality. He lived through most of the first Christian century, and shortly after 217 CE a "Life" of him was written by Philostratus. There is no evidence that Philostratus drew on the gospels; thus, the lives of famous heroes raise the question whether there were any literary prototypes for the New Testament "gospel."

This article, with very minor modifications, was written by Dennis Duling of Canisius College and was published in his 2nd edition of Norman Perrin and Dennis Duling, *The New Testament: An Introduction* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), pp. 4-35, now out of print. This excellent work, revised, expanded, and continually improved, is now published by Wadsworth and is in its 4th edition with Duling as the sole author.