

New Testament Life and Times

The World of Jesus in the Early Church --

5. History from Persia to Rome
6. The Jewish Context
7. The Greco-Roman Context

Leander Church of Christ

December 6, 2020

Notes available from <https://ClassNotes.LeanderChurch.org>

NTiiW - 6 Jewish Context of Early Church

Picking up where we left off last week...

PHARISEES

- Most important sect for study of the New Testament
 - Pharisees are depicted in the gospels as Jesus' primary adversaries.
 - The apostle Paul was once a zealous Pharisee.
 - (What would be different about his message had he been a Sadducee using same words?)
 - Pharisees dominated the Jewish world after Jerusalem's fall in 70 AD and the failure of the Bar-Kochba revolt in 135 AD.
- Only two Jewish groups survived the war with Rome
 - Pharisees
 - Christians
 - These two groups were now effectively competing to be the voice of the Jewish world in a post-Temple age.

PHARISEES-2

- Several thousand Pharisees in first century AD
- Marginalized politically during the Herodian period
- Mainly concerned with creating the conditions necessary for Israel's eschatological restoration through a strict regime of Torah observance.
 - They were not separatists, but were trying to draw all Israel into a state which would hasten its restoration and elevation over surrounding nations.
- Hugely significant were their concerns with 'purity.' This was not about personal cleanliness, but symbols for the purity and maintenance of the tribe, the family, or the race.

PHARISEES-3

The clash between Jesus and the Pharisees, therefore, must be seen in terms of two alternative agendas, generated by the alternative eschatological beliefs of two competing renewal movements.

Jesus was announcing the kingdom in a way that did not reinforce, but rather called into question, the agenda of revolutionary zeal that dominated the horizon of the leading group within Pharisaism.

The coming of the kingdom, as Jesus announced it, put before his Pharisaic contemporaries a challenge, an agenda: *give up your interpretation of your tradition, which is driving you towards ruin*. Embrace instead a very different interpretation of the tradition, one which, though it looks like the way of loss, is in fact the way to **true victory**, the way of the cross!

SADDUCEES (priests and aristocrats)

- The great majority of priests were not aristocrats and were not wealthy. They were dependent on tithing. Most lived outside of Jerusalem. They were the main teachers of the law.
- Believed in free will, but from a practical standpoint, not philosophical.
- Only concerned with Torah (the Pentateuch). Anti “traditions of the elders”, i.e., Pharisees. Conservative. Averse to innovation. Comfortably in power.
- Denied resurrection. (Broader than bodily resurrection; this had come to mean the total reconstitution of Israel – a serious worry for those supported in power by Roman might.)
- Footnote – The Resurrection of the Son of God, by N. T. Wright

The Resurrection of the Son of God, by N. T. Wright

N. T. Wright takes us on a fascinating journey through ancient beliefs about life after death, from the shadowy figures who inhabit Homer's Hades, through Plato's hope for a blessed immortality, to the first century, where the Greek and Roman world (apart from the Jews) consistently denied any possibility of resurrection.

We then examine ancient Jewish beliefs on the same subject, from the Bible to the Dead Sea Scrolls and beyond. This sets the scene for a full-scale examination of early Christian beliefs about resurrection in general and that of Jesus in particular, beginning with Paul and working through to the start of the third century.

Wright looks at all the evidence, and asks: **Why did Christians agree with Jewish resurrection belief while introducing into it—across the board—significant modifications?** To answer this question we come to the strange and evocative Easter stories in the gospels and asks whether they can have been late inventions. Wright seeks the best historical conclusions about the empty tomb and the belief that Jesus really did rise bodily from the dead, recognizing that it was this belief that caused early Christians to call Jesus "Son of God." In doing so, they posed a political challenge as well as a theological one.

These challenges retain their power in the twenty-first century.

ESSENES

- Not mentioned in New Testament, but via
 - Josephus
 - Philo
 - Pliny
- Known for their ascetic way of life, concern for ritual purity, corporate reading of scripture, refusal to own slaves, sharing of property, and communal meals
- Qumran – “Teacher of Righteousness”
- The sect separated from other Jews and followed this teacher into the wilderness, where they were trying quite literally to ‘prepare the way of the Lord.’

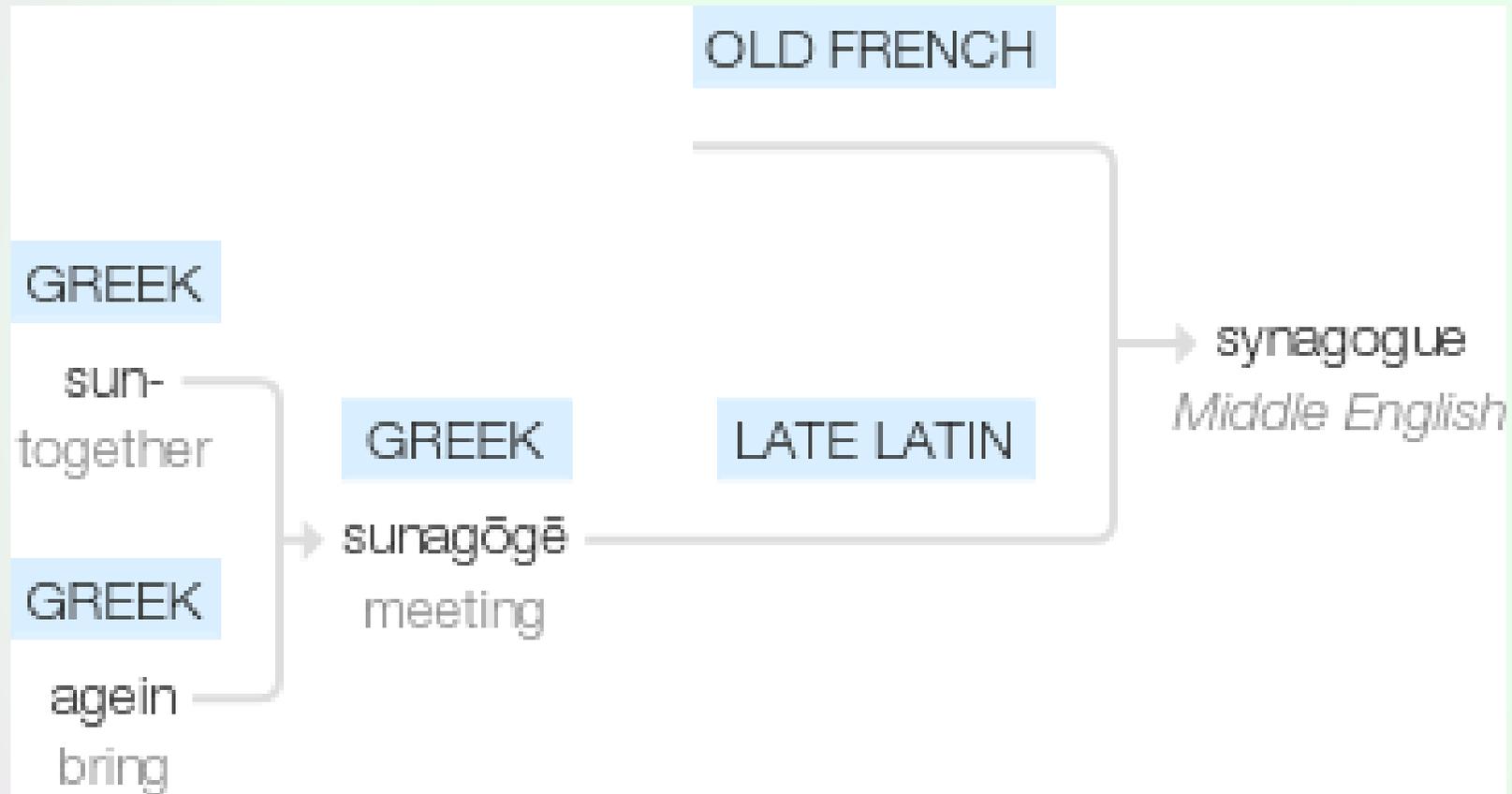
ULTIMATE JEWISH BELIEFS

- *ONE GOD, ONE PEOPLE* (Monotheism and Election)
- It is this belief that sustained them through domination and enslavement by multiple pagan kingdoms.
- At their core is the conviction of the Jewish people that **their God was the creator God**, not a tribal god or a local deity, but ‘God Almighty’, the ‘maker of heaven and earth’. **He had called Israel to be his special possession**, the people of his pasture, a kingdom of priests, and a light to the nations. Though the world was ravaged with evil and savaged by dark powers, it would not always remain so. Many Jews cherished, and brought to various expression, the hope that this one true **God would deliver Israel** through his agents—prophets, priests, and kings—to bring about a new exodus. This would utterly transform Israel’s fortunes and future; and, **through this transformed Israel, God would one day transform the entire world**.

Extra Credit --

- What Questions may be asked by Spelling Bee contestants?
 - alternate pronunciations
 - a definition
 - a part of speech
 - for the word to be used in a sentence
 - for the word to be pronounced again
 - **language of origin**
- SYNAGOGUE
 - Language of Origen?
 - Greek
 - Why?

Deuteronomy 17:11



Ecclesia?

3618 [e]	1473 [e]	3588 [e]	1577 [e]
oikodomēsō	mou	tēn	ekklēsian
οἰκοδομήσω	μου	τὴν	ἐκκλησίαν
I will build	My	-	church
V-FIA-1S	PPro-G1S	Art-AFS	N-AFS

Ecclesia, Greek **Ekklēsia**, (“**gathering of those summoned**”), in ancient Greece, assembly of citizens in a city-state. Its roots lay in the Homeric agora, the meeting of the people. The Athenian Ecclesia, for which exists the most detailed record, was already functioning in Draco’s day (c. 621 BC)... the Ecclesia became coterminous with the body of male citizens 18 years of age or over and had final control over policy

Q. Why do English Bibles continue to translate the Greek "ekklesia" to "church," considering that the two words are not etymologically related or connected? For example, translations such as the Tyndale Bible or Young's Literal translate [Matt 16:18](#) with the more literal "[congregation](#)" or "assembly."

A. This is a very good question, which opens up for discussion larger issues that concern the very nature of what a translation is, as it involves reflection on both source language (in this case Greek) and target language (in this case English).

The meaning of a word depends primarily on the context in which it is used. This means that words are not static capsules carrying fixed meaning through time and across cultures. Rather, they are dynamic tools of communication that adapt to the usages we subject them to. For example, the Greek word *idiotes*, from which the English word 'idiot' originates, has changed meaning over time, so that we would hardly translate [1Cor 14:23](#) using this English word today (NRSV has instead 'outsider'). Thus, the etymology of a word, while certainly important in its own right, cannot do much in helping us understand its meaning, which would be the first step in the process of translation. *In principle*, then, we may have to find a different, etymologically disconnected modern word, such as 'church,' to express the meaning for us today that *ekklesia* conveyed to the ancients.

The choice of a (modern) word aimed at transferring to us the ancient meaning(s) we have identified in the source language is determined by how the word in the target language behaves, so to speak, when we use it in ordinary speech. What frames of reference does it assume? What opposites does it evoke? For example, can we use the term 'church' today as a synonym for 'synagogue'? Or for a democratic-like political assembly? The answer to both is no, which is why 'church,' as we shall see below, is an inadequate translation of ancient usages of the Greek *ekklesia*.

In the ancient Mediterranean world, the word *ekklesia* was used in various ways and for various types of both political and unofficial, or semi-public institutions. For Jews, it was one of seventeen Greek words used for what we today translate as synagogue. As such, it could be used for both public civic Jewish institutions and assemblies (as in [Josephus](#); [Ben Sira](#)) and for what we would call voluntary associations (as in [Philo](#)). *Ekklesia* was, then, a term applied in both Jewish and non-Jewish contexts to designate various types of institutional settings. The way the word '*ekklesia*' functions in these ancient discourses thus differs from how the term 'church' functions in common usage today; if we agree that a translation should communicate approximate meaning across time and culture then clearly this particular translation is inaccurate.

A historically more attuned translation of *ekklēsia* would be 'assembly,' since this word leaves open for a variety of applications in religio-political or semi-public settings and does not lock the meaning of *ekklesia* into an anachronistic frame of reference.

The question of why some English translations, such as the NRSV, still use the word 'church' to translate *ekklesia* is more difficult to answer. It is possible that this English word was chosen due to the fact that it may establish a sense of continuity between modern Christians attending church on the one hand and the first followers of Jesus on the other. From a historical perspective, however, such a translation is a disservice to the reader. **It**

misrepresents the nature of these ancient institutions which Jesus' followers belonged to and obscures their collective and institutional identity in relation to Jews and Judaism and to their non-Jewish neighbors.

Anders Runesson, "Ekklesia", n.p. [cited 6 Dec 2020]. Online: <https://www.bibleodyssey.org:443/en/tools/ask-a-scholar/ekklesia>

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NTiiW - 7 Greco-Roman Context of Early Church

Hellenistic Culture and Roman Empire

When we reach the first century, the eastern Mediterranean is culturally Greek, but politically dominated by the Roman empire.

1. The primary instrument of Hellenization was **language**. Greek became the lingua franca of the ancient world, and remained dominant for centuries even after the Latin-speaking Romans had gained overall power.
2. The second instrument of Hellenization was the polis or **city-state**. As the Greeks conquered regions, they established colonies with a Greek way of life. Here the Greek polis was the political, economic, educational, religious, and social hub of a civilization. Cities were adorned with temples honoring the gods, a gymnasium for training young men, schools for instruction in philosophy and rhetoric, an agora for traded goods, and amphitheaters and stadiums for arts and sports.
3. A third instrument of Hellenization was **religious syncretism**. Local deities could be identified with gods from the Greek pantheon. The Samaritans identified YHWH with Zeus under the Seleucid ruler Antiochus Epiphanes IV in the second century BC, and then with Jupiter (the Roman equivalent of the Greek Zeus) under the Roman emperor Hadrian in the second century AD.

Hellenistic Culture and Roman Empire (ii)

The Hellenism of the eastern Mediterranean must be distinguished from the culture of the classical Greek period, the time of Sophocles and Socrates. It was now, to speak loosely, more oriental.

Greek culture in the time after Alexander was shaped, in the different regions, by Egyptian, Judean, Arabian, Asian, Syrian, and even Iranian influences.

Hellenism provided a regnant culture in which Jesus and the early Christians lived their lives and carried out their vocations. We see this throughout the New Testament.

Hellenistic Culture and Roman Empire (iii)

Roman empire had grown out of an insatiable hunger for conquest. Rome's military power enabled the **capital to grow rich with taxes** imposed throughout its territories. The lower tiers of society in urban centers swelled with those who were made **slaves** or else displaced by military conflict. This put considerable **pressure on the empire's ability to feed the populace** of Rome itself, and the city became **dependent on grain levied from Egypt**.

Roman **colonies** in places like Corinth and Philippi and Antioch in southern Turkey were intended to deal with the simultaneous problems of overcrowding in Rome and the **large number of old soldiers** to whom land had been promised.

Roman social stratification created other headaches too. For example, **Christian noblewomen had a dilemma**. There was at times a shortage of Christian men from the upper classes, but Christian noblewomen were not supposed to marry pagan men. If, in order to marry a Christian, they married a social inferior, they would lose their status among the nobility. Bishop Callistus, a third-century bishop of Rome, recognized that mixed marriages with pagans were undesirable for Christian noblewomen, but that it was preferable for them to retain their social status. He therefore gave the church's blessing to Christian women living in concubinage with a socially inferior Christian man, even with a slave, without being legally married. This was the kind of thing that some found necessary if Christians were to negotiate their way within the social structures of the Greco-Roman world.

** Love feasts?

Religion, Philosophy, and Culture

Presented with any given speech, play, coin, statue, novel, or religious rite, a first-century inhabitant of the Greco-Roman world would pick up allusions to Hercules, the Trojan War, the founding of Rome by Remus and Romulus, and the deification of Roman emperors. They knew these stories as well as today's western culture knows the present state of various soap operas, or film franchises such as Star Wars.

We cannot begin to understand how ordinary people in the first century thought, imagined, reasoned, believed, prayed, and acted unless we try to get inside their myth-soaked culture. Importantly, **this was a culture in which religion was everywhere.**

Religion, Philosophy, and Culture (ii)

When someone like Paul arrived in Thessalonica or Ephesus with his message about the one God and his crucified and risen son, he was not offering an alternative way of being 'religious' in the sense of a private hobby, or something to do for a few hours on the weekend. **He was offering a heart transplant for an entire community and its culture.** In cities like Thessalonica, this meant offering a direct challenge to the imperial cult, with its claim to being the religious and political glue that **kept society together.** Paul's message implied the eclipse of local rites and cultural identities (as with the goddess Artemis in Ephesus): when people were grasped by the gospel of Jesus they gave up all other worship—but it was that other worship, soaked into every aspect of local culture, that most people regarded as vital for the health and safety of a city, a community, or a household.

It is not surprising that Paul's work often produced riots.

Religion, Philosophy, and Culture (iii)

To understand the New Testament,
we need to be able to grasp
what ancient religion **was** and **wasn't**, and
how it differed from our own modern ideas
of religion and its boundaries.

GRECO-ROMAN RELIGION

The first issue we have to broach is that the ancient world did not have something called 'religion' as we understand it today.

If by 'religion' we mean a body of beliefs about 'the supernatural', with various ethical corollaries that can be kept in a separate compartment from secular culture, then clearly there was no such thing as 'religion' in that sense.

There wasn't a word for that kind of thing, because **it was unknown**.

The idea that there might be different 'religions' was an innovation of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

GRECO-ROMAN RELIGION (ii)

The parameters and spheres in which religion exists today are very different from those of the ancient world.

1. Concern with present life rather than with an afterlife. One of the main attractions of Christianity is the promise of life after death in an unending eternity with God. Ancient views on an afterlife were quite diverse. Most seemed to think that after death they would **join the ranks of those in Hades**, in some kind of shadowy and subterranean existence. Men and women pursued the favor of the gods not primarily for what the gods might give them in a future life, but for blessings, boons, help, security, peace, and prosperity **in this life here and now**.
2. Focus on cultic ritual rather than on doctrinal beliefs. On the whole, Greco-Roman religion was **not concerned with credal beliefs** about gods, but with **cultic acts** that demonstrated devotion to the deities. The offering of food to a household spirit, the utterance of prayers before a long journey, the sacrifice of an animal in a temple or at a festival—all this was designed to court the benevolence and benefaction of spirits and gods.
3. No secularism with a separation of religion and state. If one reduces secularism to ‘a separation of church and state’, then it is safe to say that the ancient world was far from secular. Political leaders wanted peace and security, and ‘religion’ was one vital way to achieve that. This is why emperors built temples, sponsored religious rites, often attempted to reform religious practices, and sometimes even enforced participation in religious observances by whole cities. **Religious practices were part of statecraft.** Political authorities took more than a passing interest in religious groups and their rituals.

GRECO-ROMAN PHILOSOPHY

Resist the anachronism of imposing upon the ancient world our modern idea of philosophy as an abstract academic discipline.

Philosophy in antiquity **was** far more **integrated** with religion, politics, rhetoric, art, science, and wider culture. It was everyday life as lived, reflected upon, and interpreted in this or that way. Philosophy shaped the intellectual currents of the Greco-Roman world as it reflected on the meaning and purpose of life, ethics, religion, politics, science, nature, law, public speaking, and even agriculture.

GRECO-ROMAN PHILOSOPHY (ii)

The entire edifice of western philosophy owes its origins to ancient Greece,

and to the important trio of **Socrates**, **Plato**, and Aristotle.

They set the questions and agenda for western philosophy ever afterwards. *(2500 years and counting)*

GRECO-ROMAN PHILOSOPHY (iii)

Socrates (469–399 BC) was regarded as the first great philosopher and the first philosophical martyr as well. To paraphrase Cicero, it was Socrates who brought philosophy down from heaven to earth. Socrates did not see philosophy as primarily a discourse about nature, but as a matter of practical living. He emphasized virtue and religious disposition.

Plato (428-348BC), Socrates' student, taught that the world of space, time, and matter was essentially a secondary thing, a world of illusion, by comparison with the ultimate reality, the world of the 'Forms' or 'Ideas', the invisible realities of which this-worldly things were mere copies. Plato established his own school, known as the **Academy**, in Athens.

Aristotle, Plato's star pupil, did not become part of the Academy. Plato had a flair for the abstract, but Aristotle moved in the opposite direction, towards concrete categorizations of things, distinguishing objects, animals, behavior, and beliefs. He tackled areas as diverse as biology, virtue, rhetoric, aesthetics, music, and metaphysics, and practically invented the discourse of logic with his three-point syllogisms. Aristotle returned to Athens in 335 BC and established his own school in the **Lyceum**, just outside Athens.

GRECO-ROMAN PHILOSOPHY (iiii)

By the first century, various other philosophical schools besides the Academy and Lyceum joined the scene.

Epicureanism outlined a philosophy that was tantamount to a metaphysical dualism. There were gods, but they were distant and detached deities, uninvolved with the world, supremely happy with themselves, and the best thing a human could do was attempt a similar detachment from the cares of this life. The highest virtue was therefore ataraxia ('undisturbedness'), trying to imitate the gods in their happy and carefree state. Good and evil were aesthetic, rather than absolute: pleasure was good, pain was bad. In the modern period, it has become the **implicit underpinning of the western Enlightenment**, the multifaceted culture that regards itself as detached from the 'uncivilized' or 'underdeveloped' world all around.

Stoicism is a classic form of pantheism, seeing 'divinity' in everything. Zeus and his associates in Greece were all variegated manifestations of the one 'divinity' which permeated all things. World history was based on a number of repeating cycles, at the end of each of which a great cosmic conflagration would purify the world so that its true self would enjoy a time of stillness before history repeated itself again.

'**Cynics**' were not, as the word might suggest today, known for philosophical skepticism. Rather, they prided themselves on pouring scorn on all human pretension. The word 'Cynic', which comes from the Greek kyōn, 'dog', was originally a nickname, since the Cynics appeared to bark and yap like dogs at the rich, the respectable, and any who gave themselves airs. Cynicism was a type of uninhibited Stoicism, exulting in its anti-social critique.

SO WHAT?

Why do we need to know this Greco-Roman stuff?

- MANY links between and references to themes, teachings, and ideas in the Greco-Roman world are found in the New Testament.
- Acts 17.18 “A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him.”
 - v24 “The God who made the world... does not live in temples built by hands.”
 - Source: Seneca, a Stoic philosopher
 - v28 For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’
 - Source: Aratus, a Cilician poet

SO WHAT? (2)

- MANY links ...
 - Gal 5.23b ...Against such there is no law.
 - Reference: Aristotle
 - Rom 7:22,23 Paul says, “But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members.”
 - Plato says, “There is a victory and defeat – the first and best of victories, the lowest and worst of defeats – which each man gains or sustains at the hands not of another, but of himself; this shows that there is a war against ourselves – going on in every individual of us.”
 - 1 Cor 8.2 Paul says, “And if any man think that he knoweth any thing, he knoweth nothing yet as he ought to know.
 - Socrates: “... he supposes he knows something when he does not know, while I, just as I do not know, do not even suppose that I do...” (from *Apology*, 21d)

SO WHAT? (3)

- MANY links ...
 - 1 Cor 15.33 Be not deceived: evil communications corrupt good manners.
 - Direct quote from: Menandros, an Athenian comic playwright (who may have gotten the quote from Euripides' tragedy, *Aiolos*)
 - The references from the last few slides are the tip of the iceberg, being almost direct quotes from philosophers, poets, playwrights, and so forth. Legion are the *concepts* referenced in the New Testament which have parallels in Greek philosophy.

SO WHAT? (4) <one more>

- The gospel of John ... calls Jesus the **Logos** ('the Word')
- Biblical Theme (Ps. 33.6; Isa. 55.11, and elsewhere) but ALSO...
- Echoes an idea initially developed by the **sixth-century BC Greek philosopher Heraclitus**, subsequently taken up by **Stoic philosophers** to describe the rational principle by which the universe came into being and by which all things exist.
- The **Logos**, as the personified 'idea', becomes the one through whom the invisible God interacts with the corporeal world. This notion of the **Logos** was adopted by Jews like Philo of Alexandria, and Christians like the second-century apologist Justin Martyr, **employing the philosophical tools of antiquity to explain their beliefs about God.** To what extent this development was compatible with John's own intended biblical allusions remains a matter of debate.

Greco-Roman Philosophy -- Close

The New Testament comes to us as a book belonging in the Greco-Roman world as much as in the Jewish world. To grasp and be grasped by the New Testament, it is important to be immersed as far as possible in its wider culture, **Greco-Roman as well as Jewish**. Only so can we avoid anachronism, imagining that the early writers were straightforwardly addressing 'our' concerns. **Questions have changed**; the words to articulate key ideas have shifted in meaning. By exploring **ancient philosophy, culture, politics, religion, and worldview**, contemporary readers will be more equipped to see otherwise unimagined depths and dimensions.

Having a grasp of the wider context of the New Testament, or not having such a grasp, is therefore like the difference between watching a film in **black and white on an ordinary screen**, and watching the same film **in color on a 3D screen**.

THE JEWISH DIASPORA

- Strabo (64 BC–AD 24) once commented about the Jews:
 - *‘This people has already made its way into every city, and it is not easy to find any place in the habitable world which has not received this nation and in which it has not made its power felt.’*
- That is because, by the first century, the majority of Jews, up to 80 per cent by some estimates, did not live in Palestine, but in the lands of other nations.

THE JEWISH DIASPORA (2)

By the first century there were major concentrations of Jews in Alexandria, Syrian Antioch, Rome, Babylon, and elsewhere. And wherever the Jews went, they of course took their scriptures with them. The scriptures functioned as a portable land and Temple: studying Torah, they could come into the divine presence as if they were in the Temple itself.

They built synagogues and prayer-houses, wrote their own literature, and tried to live as faithful Jews in a foreign city.

So much so that at the Jerusalem council, James could declare: 'For the law of Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath.'

THE JEWISH DIASPORA (3)

Josephus –

The masses have long since shown a keen desire to adopt our religious observances; and there is not one city, **Greek or barbarian**, nor a single nation, to which our custom of abstaining from work on the seventh day has not spread, and where the fasts and the lighting of lamps and many of our prohibitions in the matter of food are not observed.

THE SEPTUAGINT -- “LXX”

- Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible
- Commissioned by Ptolemy II of Egypt, for the Library of Alexandria
- **This was the ‘scripture’ of the early church.**
- Normally the version that New Testament authors cite when quoting the Old Testament.
- In fact, sometimes the wording in the Septuagint was used for NT doctrine even when the Hebrew did not support the teaching. (Romans 4.1-8, Acts 15.15-19).
- Primary until 4th century AD, when Jerome’s Latin Vulgate became the preferred Bible of the Roman church.

A Little Church History

- Sixth Century AD – To possess a non-LATIN copy of the scriptures was punishable by death.
- 1490 AD – Thomas Linacre (Oxford professor, personal physician to King Henry the 7th and 8th), decided to learn Greek. After reading the Gospels in Greek, and comparing it to the Latin Vulgate, he wrote in his diary, **“Either this (the original Greek) is not the Gospel... or we are not Christians.”**
 - The Latin had become so corrupt that it no longer even preserved the message of the Gospel

A Little Church History (2)

- 1516 AD – Erasmus published a **Greek-Latin Parallel New Testament**. Not the old corrupt Latin, but a fresh rendering of Latin from the Greek. This was the first NON-LATIN text of the scripture to be produced in a **thousand years**.
- 1517 AD -- ??
 - 95 _____ at Wittenberg

Closing (1)

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