

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 13, 2020

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

NTiiW - 7 **Greco-Roman Context** of Early Church

Picking up where we left off last week...

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.
- Examples
 - **Watergate. Vietnam. Chernobyl. Alexander Campbell. The pope. Lady Diana.**
 - If we wrote a letter to a first century reader, he would be clueless to understand any reference we might make to these events and people.
 - Or worse, he might THINK he understands and draw a wrong conclusion. For instance, if we refer to the Lady Diana, a reader in Ephesus might easily assume, without giving it a second thought, that we were referring to their god *(And when they heard these sayings, they were full of wrath, and cried out, saying, Great is Diana of the Ephesians.)*

Religion, Philosophy, and Culture (b)

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 Diana 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 creedal 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 (or more precisely, the church’s control of the interpretation of 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

Video Clips, if time permits...

- 3.0 [Chosen-Scene S1E7 Jesus calls the misfit tax collector 02m40s](#)
- 1.0 [Chosen-Scene S1E3 MyFamilyIsNotWealthy 01m01s](#)
- 3.0 [Chosen-Scene S1E6 LeperHealed 02m18s](#)
- 2.0 [Chosen-Scene S1E7 Nicodemus Born Again 01m19s](#)
- 4.0 [Chosen-Scene S1E8 IAmHe\(SamaritanWoman\) 03m47s](#)

Online Versions –

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Closing (2)

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