

The World of the New Testament

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New Testament Survey

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Introduction

“The interval between the Old and the New Testaments is the dark period in the history of Israel. It stretches itself out over about four centuries, during which there was neither prophet nor inspired writer in Israel. All we know of it we owe to Josephus, to some of the apocryphal books, and to scattered references in Greek and Latin historians. The seat of empire passed over from the East to the West, from Asia to Europe. The Persian Empire collapsed, under the fierce attacks of the Macedonians, and the Greek Empire in turn gave way to the Roman rule.” (Orr, e-sword® ISBE dictionary entry for “Between the Testaments”)

This paper surveys the effects of the Hebrew, Greek and Roman Civilizations upon the world before the time of Christ. At a high level the influence can be described as follows. The Hebrew faith provided the basis for a moralistic existence and a mono-theistic spiritual belief structure in the one true Yahweh or God. The Greeks contributed to the known world a universal language and a cultural uniformity. The Romans provided the known world a navigable infrastructure and an imposed military/police force that kept the peace and promoted a feeling of safe travel.

The Effect of the Hebrew Civilization Upon the World Before Christ

The Hebrew Scriptures provided a mono-theistic and moralistic set of rules for life based on the Mosaic Law. Starting with the Babylonian captivity and with the destruction of the Jewish Temple (i.e. the Jews’ means to be connected with their God), these Mosaic Laws (a.k.a. the Torah) and the crystallization of the “Oral Traditions” (i.e. interpretations of these laws in the Mishna and Talmud) became known as Judaism. Judaism became a model for ethical behavior throughout the known world of the time. But dissemination of this information was a problem because of the language.

“But when Ptolemy had taken a great many captives, both from the mountainous parts of Judea, and from the places about Jerusalem and Samaria, and the places near Mount Gerizzim,

he led them all into Egypt, and settled them there. And as he knew that the people of Jerusalem were most faithful in the observation of oaths and covenants.” (Josephus, Book 12, Chapter 1)

“When Alexander had reigned twelve years, and after him Ptolemy Soter forty years, Philadelphus then took the kingdom of Egypt, and held it forty years within one. He procured the law to be interpreted, and set free those that were come from Jerusalem into Egypt, and were in slavery there, who were a hundred and twenty thousand... But he said he had been informed that there were many books of laws among the Jews worthy of inquiring after, and worthy of the king's library, but which, being written in characters and in a dialect of their own, will cause no small pains in getting them translated into the Greek tongue... and therefore he wrote to the Jewish high priest, that he should act accordingly... because that God, who supporteth thy kingdom, was the author of their laws as I have learned by particular inquiry; for both these people, and we also, worship the same God the framer of all things. We call him, and that truly, by the name of GREEK, [or life, or Jupiter,] because he breathes life into all men. Wherefore do thou restore these men to their own country, and this do to the honor of God, because these men pay a peculiarly excellent worship to him.” (Josephus, Book 12, Chapter 2)

So, with the Greek translation in hand, the Jewish moral code became widely available.

How the Hebrew Civilization Prepared the World for the Coming of Christ

One of the most direct influences of the Hebrews in preparing the world for the coming of Christ was a pious sect of Jews known as the “Hasidim.” They refused to allow their beliefs and ways of life to be obliterated by the pagan influences. No better example of this was the Maccabean Wars and the victory of Judas Maccabee. These victories won the Jewish nation a significant level of independence and notoriety which set the stage to allow their ethical and moral culture/religion to permeate the known world. This became solidified when King Ptolmey II had their Scripture translated into Greek at great effort as we will see later in this paper.

The Effect of the Greek Civilization Upon the World Before Christ

Greece is a region in southeastern Europe between Italy and Asia Minor. It was bounded on the east by the Aegean Sea, on the west by the Adriatic Sea, on the north by Mt Olympus, and

on the South by the Mediterranean Sea. In 338 BC, Philip II, king of Macedon conquered the southern peninsula of Greece. Then, under the rule of Philip's son, Alexander the Great (336-323 BC), the Greek Empire was extended throughout Asia Minor to Egypt and to the borders of India. (Youngblood, 524) Between 334 and 331 BC Alexander's army had three decisive battles against the Persian king, Darius III, in which Alexander gained control of the entire Persian Empire. Thus the land of Israel passed into Greek control in 332 BC. Alexander's military conquests and his passion to spread Greek culture contributed to the advancement of Greek ideas throughout the ancient world. (McArthur, 1369) After Alexander's death in 323 BC his generals, the Ptolmeys of Egypt and Seleucids of Syria, contented for control of the Empire but were common in their focus on forcing Greek ideas on the conquered peoples.

These Greek ideas were known as Hellenism and included the worship of many gods and astrology. In fact, Alexander studied under Aristotle, a renowned philosopher and thinker of the time. So, even though these pagan tenets would be rejected by Judaism and Christianity, they did tend to have a harmonizing effect on the world's methods of thinking and cultural exposure. The Greek language became the dominant language of the known world. Greek was a more precise and expressive language than was Hebrew or Aramaic. The Greek language remained dominant as a world language even after Greece fell to Rome in about 146 BC. At that time Greece became the Roman Province of Achaia with Corinth as its capital and Gallio as its Roman proconsul. The Romans brought political organization but did little to dampen the Hellenistic cultural influences. (Youngblood, 524-525)

“The great number of these Jews and Samaritans that were formerly carried into Egypt by Alexander, and now by Ptolemy the son of Lagus, appear afterwards in the vast multitude who as we shall see presently, were soon ransomed by Philadelphus, and by him made free, before he sent for the seventy-two interpreters; in the many garrisons and other soldiers of that nation in Egypt; in the famous settlement of Jews, and the number of their synagogues at Alexandria, long afterward; and in the vehement contention ... about the place

appointed for public worship in the law of Moses, whether at the Jewish temple of Jerusalem, or at the Samaritan temple of Gerizzim;... (Josephus, Book 12, Chapter 1)

How the Greek Civilization Prepared the World for the Coming of Christ

The Greek Civilization has been clearly shown to provide a world language. With the creation of the Septuagint (The Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament Scriptures) by seventy elders from Jerusalem based on a request of King Ptolemy II, the God of Abraham was approachable by the entire known world. The spread of the great commission is made possible. “But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth. (Acts 1:8 KJV) The resistance of the Jews to the Greek mystery religions culminating in the Maccabean Revolt won the Jews some level of independence and certainly solidified the continuance of Judaism. The Greek language and implacable Jewish religion made spreading the Word of God much easier and more consistent compared to being left to oral translations by the apostles. Much of the basis of the teaching of Christ was the fulfillment of the Law by Him. Jesus Christ often quoted from the Old Testament and having that document in Greek allowed proselytes to personally verify what they had heard.

The Effect of the Roman Civilization Upon the World Before Christ

The capital city of the Roman Empire, Rome, was founded in 753 BC fifteen miles from where the Tiber River flows into the Mediterranean Sea. During its long history, Roman government went through the forms of a monarchy (753-510 BC), a republic (510-31BC), and an Empire (30 BC until its fall). As a republic, Rome was governed by elected consuls who presided over the senate. Under the republic, Rome expanded its borders and engaged in major internal reforms [and construction of a vast public infrastructure of buildings, local governments, other

public works and roads]. The republic form of government ceased when Caesar Augustus became the first Emperor in 29AD. Augustus further developed and beautified Rome with the consent of the Senate. He also required the registration of all persons within the bounds of the Roman Empire, affecting the lives of Joseph and Mary. During the reign of Augustus, Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea. Roman influence penetrated the entire Jewish community and continued to be felt in the life and mission of the New Testament church. (Youngblood, 234, 1101)

The Roman Empire was eventually made up of miscellaneous cities, states, and territories reporting to a central government. As the Empire grew among “allied” or “subject” peoples so did its governmental machinery; spreading political and civil stability. When Rome conquered new domains they were organized into provinces. Rome really started to come into power when it took Sicily from Carthage around 250 BC. As expansion continued and governors and pro-consuls were appointed, taxation was instituted. Sometimes taxes were used to the benefit of the local officials but often the more public-minded officials used tax proceeds to build roads and harbors. The latter was also promoted by remote Roman oversight and tended to improve trade and local economics. (Tenney, 13-15) On the next page the relevant leaders of the period are listed with the highlights of their reign.

<u>Roman Emperor</u>	<u>From</u>	<u>To</u>	<u>Highlight of Reign</u>
Julius Caesar		44 BC	Last Roman ruler of the “republic.” Was assassinated
Caesar Augustus (a.k.a. Octavian)	27 BC	14 AD	1 st Emperor (30BC), senate appointee, reigned at time of Jesus’ birth, revived religion, rebuilt temples, etc.
Tiberius	24 AD	37 AD	Adopted Son of Augustus, an Old Soldier who was very suspicious, not popular, and plotted against frequently. He reigned at the time of Jesus’ crucifixion.
Gaius Caligula	37 AD	41AD	Initially popular through pardons, reduced taxes, public works, & then became obsessed with his own deity. Wanted his statue in the Jewish Temple and was finally killed by imperial guard due to his excess and tyranny.
Claudius	41 AD	54 AD	Put in power by the praetorian guard this physically deformed ruler organized rule by committee, expelled Jews from Rome, and adopted father of Nero.
Nero	54 AD	68 AD	Initially a successful ruler, he was most notorious as he burned Rome and Blamed Christians. His excess emptied the treasury so was dethroned via troop revolt.
Galba	68 AD	68 AD	Not a Senatorial pick he showed the power of the Army to enthrone their pick. Ruled only shortly and not well.
Otho	69 AD	69 AD	Senate endorsed him but killed by Vitellius’ troops.
Vitellius	69 AD	69 AD	A failure as a ruler and commander he was overthrown and killed by his own soldiers lead by Vespasian.
Vespasian	69 AD	79 AD	A plain old soldier whose administration and frugality restored finances and infrastructure to Rome.
Titus	79 AD	81 AD	Very popular and generous while his reign for 3 years was marred by the loss of Pompeii, eruption of Vesuvius and major fires in Rome.
Domitian	81 AD	96 AD	Brother of Titus appointed by the Senate was a hard ruler and thought to have persecuted Christians due to their refusal to worship him as a god.
Nerva	96 AD	98 AD	An older man selected by the Roman Senate was relatively kind and reigned free of tensions.
Trajan	98 AD	117 AD	An energetic and aggressive Spaniard and soldier he enlarged the eastern frontier and died returning to Rome because of other revolts.

[Tenney, 4 -13]

How the Roman Civilization Prepared the World for the Coming of Christ

The Roman Empire provided the economic, geographical, and militaristic glue that was needed to spread the Gospel of Christ (in the Greek language) once He had been rejected by the Jews. The Roman infrastructure made the coming of Christ more than a local Jewish happening.

The travel and commerce routes available at the time allowed the Word of Christ to spread world wide; particularly after the onset of persecution of the Jews in Jerusalem.

“In this environment of imperial expansion Christianity grew from an obscure Jewish sect to a world religion. Jesus was born in the reign of Augustus (Luk 2:1); [Jesus] public ministry and death [and resurrection] occurred in the time of Tiberius (3:1); the great period of missionary expansion came in the reigns of Claudius (Acts 18:2) and Nero (25:1-12). According to tradition the Apocalypse was written in the reign of Domitian, and its allusion to imperial power and government tyranny may have been reflections of the conditions prevalent at the time. (Tenney, 13)

Conclusion

The Greek's Hellenistic language and cultural harmony, the Roman Empire's political, social, and militaristic infrastructure, and the Hebrews' ethical, moral, and spiritual laws through Judaism set the stage for the Gospel of Christ to go worldwide. God's providential plan went off like clockwork. If any one of the elements mentioned above were not in place, the cause of the Gospel would have been hampered. “And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.” (Romans 8:28 KJV)

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