

CHAPTER 1

THE WORLD INTO WHICH CHRISTIANITY CAME

(no extra-biblical evidence for the church until AD 80)

The Roman Empire

1. Importance to church

provided tradition of law and justice: *Pax Romana*

terrible persecutions were the exception (worst AD 306-323)

2. How the Roman empire started

Tiber River town expanded, used fusion, constitutional law, individual liberty for citizens

rapid growth 220-146 BC (3rd Punic War in 146 BC destroyed Carthage); subjugated nearly all Mediterranean

47 BC, Julius Caesar pushed out Pompey; Caesar then killed by Cassius and Brutus in 44 BC; they in turn defeated by Mark Anthony and Octavian (Julius's nephew) in 42 BC at the Battle of Philippi

31 BC, Octavian defeated Anthony at Actium, became Caesar Augustus (30 BC - AD 14); time of peace, centralized power under emperor, with appearance of constitutional government

3. Roman citizenship

by time of Christ, all Italians citizens, a few others (as Paul)

by AD 200, all in empire citizens (much less important by then)

4. Rapid history up to Constantine

1st century. Two reigning families:

Julian (last one Nero, d. AD 68)

Flavian (able family, to AD 96)

2nd century. Best emperors in general ability, the Antonines (started with old man Nerva, who only reigned two years, but adopted an able successor; this policy continued throughout the Antonine period, with the exception of the last

emperor)

Trajan (30 years)

Hadrian (30 years)

Antoninus Pius (20 years)

Marcus Aurelius (20 years)

Commodus (unworthy son of M.A.; ca. 10 years; assassinated in AD 193)

3rd century.

in hands of army; over 20 emperors; time of great confusion

4th century.

Diocletian (was head of guard; able administrator; greatest persecution of the church, empire-wide)

Constantine (Christianity recognized; persecution ceased by AD 324)

5. Advantages to Christianity

a. Comparative peace and safety

military presence throughout empire

b. Lack of borders

no passports

small tax for use of roads

c. Roman roads

maintained under emperor's expense; governed by board of senior senators

inscription from Hierapolis: a merchant says he went to Rome and back 72 times

cf. Paul's use of the Egnatian Way in Macedonia, the travels related to Paul's epistle to the Philippians (Epaphroditus sick, etc.)

d. Roman legal system

protected individual liberty, especially for citizens

cf. Paul's use of citizenship in Philippi, in Jerusalem, and during his trials

at beginning, Christians were tolerated by the empire, as a sect of the Jews (*religio licita*)

6. Disadvantages to Christianity

a. Growing emperor cult

comet appeared July, 44 BC, four months after Julius killed, during games in his honor—thus Julius a god

Roman generals often deified by eastern peoples they conquered (as Antiochus Epiphanes had been)

Augustus sought revival of old Roman gods; restored ancient priesthods, Vestal Virgins; 12 BC, became “pontifex maximus,” = “chief bridge-builder”

all expected to do religious obeisance to emperor, as act of “loyalty”; belief not required

b. Official opposition to Christianity

Christians considered atheists, since denied emperor and the Roman gods any worship

after Nero and until Constantine, no right even to exist

Hellenistic culture

1. Achievements of Greece

golden age, 800-300 BC

surpassed every other civilization (until and including now) in art, culture, philosophy, literature

best in applied science until the 19th century

failure in government (cf. Renaissance Italy); conquered by 300 BC

2. Spread of Greek civilization

by 340 BC, Philip of Macedon united Greek states

trained son Alexander (Aristotle his tutor, took *Iliad* and *Odyssey* on campaigns); Philip murdered in 336 BC

333 BC, Alexander defeated Persians; took Asia to Indus River; died 323 BC; spread Greek culture to conquered areas

four successors promoted Greek culture, especially Ptolemys in Egypt and Seleucids in Babylonia and Syria

Greek language adapted in other areas (called “Hellenistic” Greek, rather than the “Hellenic” Greek spoken in Greece)

3. Advantages to Christianity

a. Greek language

common language throughout the empire (cf. Acts 2); excellent vehicle for the NT; good language for precise definitions and subtle distinctions (as identity of antecedents, etc.); most early theology in Greek

b. Greek skepticism

pagan gods so ridiculous that Greeks allegorized them; belief widely abandoned
philosophies basically dead: stoicism, epicureanism; only sterile forms remained
desire and basic belief in monotheism (cf. Acts 17)

c. Greek oratory

provided vehicle that developed into Christian preaching

4. Disadvantages to Christianity

a. Many still attached to the Greek gods

especially the lower classes; e.g., silversmiths in Ephesus, promiscuous worshipers in Corinth

b. General skepticism

skepticism spread to all religions, including Christianity; cf. strong opposition to resurrection in Acts 17

Judaism

1. Population throughout the empire

widespread (cf. Acts 2)

very evangelistic, many proselytes (Mt. 23:15); 100,000 in Alexandria alone; many still in Babylon

most in the dispersion read the LXX (cf. Apollos, Hebrews, etc.)

2. Jewish worship

temple destroyed AD 70

synagogue worship since post-exilic times (Mishna, *Meg.* 4:3)

- 1) Shema (Dt. 6:4; cf. 6:4-9; 11:13-21; Num. 15:37-41); with phylacteries (Mt. 23:5)
- 2) Prayer (written, formalized, cf. Lk. 11:1)
- 3) Reading of the Law (with Aramaic or Greek paraphrase, verse by verse)
- 4) Reading of the Prophets (three verses at a time before paraphrase)
- 5) Exposition optional (Lk. 4:17; Acts 13:15)

synagogue worship attracted proselytes by its simplicity, dignity, piety

3. Critical dates for Jews in Palestine

AD 70, fall of Jerusalem and the temple after revolt led by Jewish Zealots; Masada last to fall (AD 73); Jews have no longer sacrificed

AD 132-135, revolt of Bar-Kochba (“son of a star,” claimed to be the messiah, Num. 24:17); crushed by Romans; Jews not allowed to come near Jerusalem on pain of death; city became Aelia Capitolina for two centuries; temple of Jupiter erected; temple of Aphrodite erected over Golgotha

4. Advantages for Christianity

a. The true faith: Monotheistic and Messianic

most important: Christianity the legitimate continuation of OT Judaism; all “true Jews” recognized Jesus as God’s Son (Jn. 5:30-47; 7:17; 8:14-19, 38-47); hence, the same religion; present Judaism is a split-off from the main trunk

b. Christian beginnings

provided OT scriptures, Christ, all the apostles, nearly all the NT writers (except Luke), earliest missionaries

c. Mission bases and church leadership

missionaries first go to synagogues; Jewish converts were early leaders in churches, had background knowledge, godly life-style

d. Church government

early Christian churches adopted same government system as the Jewish synagogue and sanhedrin system, with government by elders in the local churches and gathered together in presbyteries or councils

e. Umbrella of legal protection: *religio licita*

until Nero, Christians protected from state persecution by association with Judaism, a religion permitted by the Romans (e.g., Acts 18:14-15; 23:29; 25:18-

20; 26:32)

5. Disadvantages for Christianity

a. Opposition to Christianity from the Jews

before AD 70, provided the most consistent opposition to Christianity (cf. Acts 4:18; 5:40; 7:57-58; 13:50; 14:2, 19; 17:5-9, 13; 23:12-13; 24:1-9, 27; 25:7; 1 Th. 2:14-16)

b. Anti-Jewish sentiment

Christians sometimes were associated with Jews in anti-Jewish attitudes, actions (e.g., Acts 18:2)