

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Vox Evangelica* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_vox_evangelica.php

*The Greek and Roman Background of the New Testament**

H. Carey Oakley, M.A.

[p.7]

In this brief sketch of the Greek and Roman background of the New Testament, we shall consider, first, the external world in which Christianity grew up—the world of the Roman Empire; and, secondly, the religious and philosophical ideas that were current in that world.

I. THE ROMAN EMPIRE

(a) *Its organization by Augustus*

‘Now it came to pass in those days there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled.’ So Luke in his second chapter introduces us to the thought of the inhabited world (οἰκουμένη) of the Roman Empire and to its ruler, Augustus.

It is one of the marvels of history that in the generation before the birth of Christ civil war and anarchy in this world had given place to peace and ordered government. In the preceding century, a corrupt oligarchy and a parasitical city-mob at home, rival war-lords in the provinces, and threats of invasion from without had brought the Roman Republic to the verge of ruin. The survival of Rome for another four hundred years, during which Christianity was to spread throughout her empire, was due chiefly to the genius for diplomacy, the cautious and canny statesmanship, and the clear and steady vision of one man Augustus. The very enrolment of which Luke speaks was part of his plan to distribute more fairly the burden of taxation throughout the lands controlled by Rome.

It is true that the constitution of Rome, as re-modelled by Augustus, differed radically from that of the past. Though the outward forms of the Republic remained, the army, and with it the reality of power, was in the hands of one man. Freedom of speech was in some degree restricted and no longer did orators in the Forum or in the Senate determine the destinies of nations. In prestige the *princeps*, or first citizen, as Augustus chose to call himself, towered above all others, however he might seek to disguise his authority. But Rome was prepared to surrender some of her liberty for the boon of peace, and it was peace that Augustus gave to the Roman world. The administrative system which he built up continued to function under his less worthy successors, and we see it at work in the New Testament.

The Roman Empire encircled the Mediterranean Sea and all the countries bordering on that sea were directly or indirectly subject to Rome. The Mediterranean gave cohesion to the Empire, and Augustus was the first to see that there were natural limits within which Rome’s rule should be confined. ‘He left’, says Tacitus,¹ ‘an empire bounded by the Ocean or distant rivers.’ To the west was the Atlantic; to the north, the Rhine and the Danube; to the east, the Euphrates; while on the south the desert made a natural boundary. This was

[p.7]

* The Annual Public Lecture of the College given in the Summer Term, 1962.

¹ Tacitus, *Annals*, i. 9.

the 'inhabited world' to which Luke refers. Outside it were the Parthian Empire in the east and the barbarian tribes to the north.

Within these frontiers peace was secured by the Roman army, and justice administered, on the whole impartially, by the provincial governors, the most powerful of whom were directly responsible to the emperor. We remember how Gallio, governor of Achaia and brother of Nero's tutor, Seneca, refused to listen to the Jews who tried to accuse Paul before him. 'If it were a matter of wrong or wicked villainy, O ye Jews, reason would that I should bear with you; but if they are questions about words and names and your own law, look to it yourselves.'² There were exceptions, of course. Pontius Pilate allowed himself to be intimidated by the veiled threat, 'If thou let this man go, thou art not Caesar's friend.'³ Judaea indeed suffered from a number of bad governors, one of the most notorious being the Greek freedman Felix, brother of Claudius' favourite, Pallas, who, in the words of Tacitus 'with every kind of cruelty and lust exercised the power of a tyrant in the spirit of a slave'.⁴ Yet, on the whole, Rome deserved her reputation for even-handed justice. The words of a late Roman poet, himself a Gaul, are true: 'under your rule the lawless have only gained by their defeat.'⁵

(b) *Its unification*

Augustus and his successors were much concerned to draw the peoples of the empire together. Under the Republic, there had been a great gulf between the rulers and the ruled; under the Empire this distinction gradually disappeared. This was partly effected by the spread of Roman citizenship to the provinces. At first, the imperial citizenship was confined to Italians and a few favoured communities and individuals outside Italy, but gradually it was extended more widely. Claudius particularly followed a liberal policy in this direction. Hence a double citizenship became possible: Paul was proud to be a citizen of Tarsus, 'no mean city', but he also rejoiced in and took advantage of the privileges of a citizen of Rome. With Roman citizenship went Roman customs, Roman dress and the Latin language. In the time of Agricola (A.D. 77-84) the sons of British chieftains were receiving a liberal education and were encouraged to rival the Gauls as orators in Latin.⁶ There was no racial or colour bar, and a man of industry and ability might rise from a humble origin to a high position in the imperial service. As early as A.D. 70 a Roman general, addressing Gauls, could say: 'All is common between us; you often command our legions, you govern these and other provinces. There is no privilege, no exclusion.'⁷ To quote another late Roman poet: 'She (Rome) alone has received the vanquished into her bosom.'⁸

(c) *Imperial propaganda*

There were, however, other and more subtle means by which the emperors sought to win the loyalty of their subjects. Augustus was a master of propaganda and he set the pattern for his successors. In an age which lacked a popular press, sound-broadcasting and television, the most effective means of propaganda was the coinage. The emblems and inscriptions on the coins were carefully chosen and frequently changed. As they passed from hand to hand they

² Acts xviii. 14,15.

³ John xix. 12.

⁴ Tacitus, *Histories*, v. 9.

⁵ Rutilius, *de reditu suo*, 64.

⁶ Tacitus, *Agricola*, 21.

⁷ Tacitus, *Histories*, iv. 74.

⁸ Claudian, *de consulatu Stilichonis*, iii. 150.

were closely scrutinized and carried their message far and wide. 'Whose is this image and superscription? And they said unto Him, Caesar's.' Ves-

[p.9]

pasian issued gold coins showing Judaea captive to mark the capture of Jerusalem. The blessings of imperial rule were brought home by figures representing Peace, Valour, Good Fortune, Abundance, Providence and many others. Scholars have only recently come to appreciate the far-reaching influence of the imperial coinage.⁹

Another way in which the emperors influenced public opinion was the creation of a sentiment of personal relationship between themselves and their subjects. All soldiers swore an oath of allegiance to their Emperor and acclaimed him after every victory won by his subordinates. Claudius, the least soldierly of men, recognized the importance of this personal link with the army, and came to Britain specially to witness the crossing of the Thames at London by his victorious troops and receive their acclamations. With the civilian population too the emperor strove to establish a personal bond of allegiance. He was *Pater Patriae*, the father of his country. All the inhabitants of the empire were under his protection and he stood to them in the relation of patron to client. An inscription is extant, dating from the time of the birth of Christ, in which the inhabitants of Paphlagonia in Asia Minor, with the Roman business-men resident among them, swear an oath pledging loyalty in word, deed and thought to Augustus, his children and their descendants; they identify themselves with them in their friendships and enmities, and will, if necessary, sacrifice life and children in their interests.¹⁰ Such oaths of allegiance to the emperor made it easy for the enemies of the early Christians to bring them before the local magistrates on the charge that they were disloyal to the emperor 'saying that there is another king, one Jesus'.¹¹

(d) Emperor-worship

Emperor-worship was another means adopted by Augustus to link together the peoples of the empire in loyalty to the ruling house. Since the days of Alexander the Great, who claimed divine honours in his lifetime, it had been common in the East to accord such honours to monarchs and benefactors. Such deification was not unnatural in a polytheistic society. There were legends of heroes, like Hercules, who had been deified after death as benefactors of mankind, and Euhemerus, in the third century before Christ, had put forward the theory that all the gods of Greek mythology were originally kings and conquerors to whom mankind had showed their gratitude by worshipping them as gods. The distinction between divine and human was thus blurred for all except the Jews. Augustus deprecated worship of himself in Rome but he allowed the worship of his 'genius' or guardian spirit. In 29 B.C. he permitted the city of Pergamum to erect a temple to Rome and Augustus. It is probably to this temple that reference is made in the letter to the church at Pergamum: 'I know where thou dwellest even where Satan's throne is.'¹² Seeing in such a cult an expression of loyalty to the empire and himself, Augustus not only encouraged it in the East, where it was spontaneous, but

⁹ See H. Mattingly, *Roman Imperial Civilization* (1957), pp. 46-55, with plates. See also E. Stauffer, *Christ and the Caesars* (ET 1955).

¹⁰ Dessau, *I.L.S.*, No. 8781. V. Ehrenberg and A. H. M. Jones, *Documents illustrating the reigns of Augustus and Tiberius* (1949), No. 315. See E. A. Judge, *The Social Pattern of Christian Groups in the first century A.D.* (1960), pp. 32-35.

¹¹ Acts xvii. 7.

¹² Rev. ii. 13.

introduced it in the West, where there was no precedent for it. Further, starting with Julius Caesar, emperors were deified after death, unless their memory had been condemned, and temples and priests were assigned to them. Such temples were symbols of Roman rule. The rebel Britons, in A.D. 61, regarded the temple of Claudius at Colchester as 'a citadel of perpetual tyranny'.¹³

[p.10]

Emperor worship brought together the various communities in a province and enabled them to present their petitions to the emperor; it also symbolized the wider unity of different races within the empire. But it remained a formal and official cult and never touched the heart. Jews were exempt from it. Christians could not conform to it, and the offering of a few grains of incense before the image of the emperor proved that the offerer was not a Christian.¹⁴ What to the pagan was a mere formality, for the Christian meant the denial of his faith.

(e) Communications by land and sea

The strong rule of Rome made travel in the Mediterranean area during the first century of our era safer and easier than it has been at any time until the last hundred years. 'Caesar', says Epictetus, 'seems to provide us with profound peace; there are no wars nor battles any more, no great bands of robbers or pirates; we are able to travel by land at every season, and to sail from sunrise to sunset.'¹⁵ Rome was the centre of a vast road system covering the whole empire. Roman roads were usually military in origin, for swift and easy movement of troops was vital to the safety of the empire. Road-building was one of the regular tasks of the Roman soldier when he was not fighting. Under the empire, the central government seems to have been responsible for maintaining the main roads, though local communities were sometimes called upon to share the cost. The roads were skilfully planned and so solidly built that stretches of them remain today. In Macedonia there can still be seen part of the Egnatian way, the great trunk road from the Adriatic to Constantinople, along which Paul travelled from Philippi to Thessalonica. The road over the Pennines at Blackstone Edge is a superb example in this country. The Romans may be said to have invented the milestone. Augustus set up the 'golden milestone' in Rome from which all the roads in Italy were measured; in the provinces distances were usually reckoned from the chief town. Maps were to be had, and a girl in Propertius, whose lover is fighting against the Parthians, consoles herself by studying a map of the Eastern front.¹⁶

The *cursus publicus*, or imperial courier service, was instituted by Augustus on the model of the service organized by Darius of Persia, to keep in close touch with the provinces. Rest-houses were provided at intervals of twenty-five miles and changes of horses at shorter distances. An imperial courier could cover fifty miles a day and reach the Bosphorus from Rome in twenty-five days. These facilities, however, were strictly limited to official use. Ordinary travellers proceeded much more slowly.

Among the dangers to which Paul was exposed on his missionary journeys were 'perils of robbers', and we remember the man who, going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, 'fell among

¹³ Tacitus, *Annals*, xiv. 31.

¹⁴ Pliny, *Epp.* x. 96, 5. *Mart. Polycarp*, ix.

¹⁵ Epictetus, *Discourses*, iii. 13, 9.

¹⁶ Propertius, v. 3, 35.

thieves'.¹⁷ It must be admitted that brigandage was not entirely stamped out, though it was much less prevalent than under the late Republic. The imperial government took seriously its duty of ensuring the safety of travellers. In some places troops were employed to keep order along the roads and provincial governors were charged to hunt out highwaymen, kidnappers and thieves. The usual punishment for these offences was crucifixion or death in the arena.

Four years before Augustus was born, Pompey had cleared the Mediterranean

[p.11]

of pirates and during the first two centuries of our era travellers could sail the seas without fear of molestation. Storms made sailing dangerous from September 14th to November 11th and after that all navigation ceased on the open sea for the rest of the winter.¹⁸ It was because the captain refused to winter at Fair Havens that the ship on which Paul travelled ran into bad weather and was wrecked. In the summer, the Etesian winds from the north-west made for swift voyages between Rome and Alexandria, but the reverse journey took much longer. The ship on which Paul sailed was doubtless one of the great fleet, organized and protected by the Roman government, which supplied Rome with corn from Alexandria.¹⁹ Outside the Mediterranean there were regular sailings from the Red Sea to India and Ceylon.

(f) Exchange of goods and ideas

Along these land and sea routes, goods circulated freely. There were no barriers to trade except moderate customs dues, which were not protective in character. Corn came to Rome from Africa and Egypt, metals from Spain and Dalmatia, carpets and fine linen from Egypt, ivory and pepper from India and Arabia. Italy itself exported wine and olive-oil and the best pottery was made in Southern Gaul. Much of the trade was in the hands of Greek and Syrian merchants. We find Lydia, who came from Thyatira in Asia Minor selling the purple dye, for which her city was famous, three hundred miles away in Philippi.

No less free was the circulation of ideas. On the Roman roads you might meet the priests of the Syrian goddess, preying on the superstition of simple country folk; or Cynic philosophers, 'the mendicant friars of antiquity', with their staff, scrip, and rough cloak, preaching the simple life and the vanity of riches and learning, or more cultivated philosophic missionaries like Dio Chrysostom, many of whose speeches have come down to us. Exiled from Italy under Domitian, he spent years travelling through the Balkans and Asia Minor, sometimes, like Paul, working with his hands, attacking the moral evils of the day, and convinced of his divine mission as a doctor of the soul. Slaves from the East and soldiers returning from service there brought oriental customs and cults to Rome, so that Juvenal, writing at the end of the first century after Christ, complains that 'long ago Syrian Orontes has flowed into the Tiber'.²⁰

Among Christian travellers, besides Paul and his companions, we find Phoebe, a deaconess of the church at Cenchrea, journeying from Corinth to Rome and taking with her Paul's letter to the Romans; Epaphroditus travelling from Philippi to take the love-gift of the Philippian Church to Paul in prison, and many others. In John's third epistle we meet the travelling

¹⁷ II Cor. xi. 26: Luke x. 30.

¹⁸ Vegetius, *de re militari* iv. 39, quoted by F. F. Bruce on Acts xxvii. 9, *The Acts of the Apostles* (1951), *ad loc.*

¹⁹ Acts xxvii, 6, 38. Cf. M. Rostovtzeff, *Social and Economic History of Rome*, 2nd ed. (1957), Vol. ii. p. 708.

²⁰ Juvenal, *Satires* iii. 62.

Christian teachers of a generation later, who 'for the sake of the Name went forth, taking nothing of the Gentiles'.²¹ In the *Didache* careful instruction is given about the reception of such itinerant teachers. 'Let every apostle who comes to you be received as the Lord, but let him not stay more than one day, or, if need be a second as well; but if he stay three days, he is a false prophet. And when an apostle goes forth, let him receive nothing but bread until he reaches his night's lodging; but if he ask for money, he is a false prophet.'²² When the risen Lord issued his instructions to the apostles: 'Go ye into all the world,' the routes by land and sea lay open and ready for their obedience.

[p.12]

(g) *The cities of the Empire*

The nodal points in the system of Roman roads were the great cities of the empire. Herself a city-state in origin, Rome fostered city life wherever she found it and created it where it did not exist. She made the city the usual unit of administration within the province, attaching to each city the country round it as its 'territory'. In the East, particularly in Asia Minor and Syria, Rome took over many cities which had been founded by Alexander or his successors. The amount of local independence allowed to the cities varied. The most favoured were the Roman colonies, like Philippi and Corinth, which were communities of Roman citizens settled at key points in the empire. The constitution of the cities conformed to a general pattern. Each had annually elected magistrates, a senate drawn from the landed aristocracy, and a popular assembly. Rome consistently favoured the upper classes as being more sympathetic to her rule, and the common people had little power. Occasionally, however, they were roused to noisy demonstrations, like the uproar in the theatre at Ephesus. From the vivid account in Acts we see that the authorities were much concerned at such riots, fearing the intervention of Rome.²³

The first century of our era was the golden age of city life in the Roman Empire. City vied with city in the magnificence of its public buildings, town-halls, temples, theatres, baths, aqueducts. Rich men, some of whom had risen to high positions in the emperor's service, delighted to honour their native towns with munificent gifts, and were rewarded by having their statues set up, with a careful record of all the offices they had held. In the Acts of the Apostles we have the best contemporary picture of life in the cities of the eastern Mediterranean. For Paul, himself a native of a Greek city, based his missionary strategy on these cities. His starting point was Antioch, the third city in the empire, the capital of the province of Syria and the metropolis of Gentile Christianity. On his first missionary journey he visited the cities of South Galatia and found in every city a synagogue of Jews, settled there centuries before by the successors of Alexander. To the worship of the synagogue many 'God-fearing' Gentiles had been attracted and through these the pagan population became interested in Paul's message.²⁴ Moreover, Greek was spoken in all the cities of the Eastern Mediterranean (though in out-of-the-way Lystra the inhabitants used 'the speech of Lycaonia' among themselves)²⁵ and so the preaching of the missionaries was everywhere understood. Later, Paul visited Thessalonica, the capital of the province of Macedonia, spent eighteen months in Corinth, the great commercial city on the Isthmus, with its ports on two seas and

²¹ 3 John 7.

²² *Didache*, xi. 3-6.

²³ Acts xix. 29 ff. especially verse 40: 'For we are in danger to be called in question for this day's uproar.'

²⁴ Acts xiii. 43-49.

²⁵ Acts xiv. 11.

the trade of the world flowing through them, and nearly three years in Ephesus, another great commercial city on the main route from Rome to the East. From these centres, through which sailors, merchants and other travellers were constantly passing, the Good News 'sounded out' to all the surrounding regions.²⁶

(h) Social life and its problems for Christians

The social life of these cities contained features which presented difficult problems to the early Christians. 'Even the streets and the market-places,' says Tertullian,²⁷ 'the baths and the taverns and our very dwelling-places are

[p.13]

not altogether free from idols. Satan and his angels have filled the whole world.' The immorality of some of the cities was notorious. In the park of Daphne, five miles from Antioch in Syria, the worship of Artemis and Apollo was tainted with the immoral practices connected with the Syrian goddess Astarte and her consort. Corinth had its temple of Aphrodite with its priestess-courtesans whose sacred prostitution was part of the worship of the goddess.²⁸ Many Christians before their conversion had followed such practices as part of their religion. Hence the frequent and urgent warnings in the Epistles against fornication. Another difficulty was concerned with the 'guilds' (*collegia*) which flourished in these cities.²⁹ These were not trade-unions, but voluntary associations of people with common interests. Guilds of artisans and traders of every kind are mentioned in the many inscriptions that have survived. No doubt it was to the guild of silversmiths at Ephesus that Demetrius applied to take action in view of the danger to their trade from the preaching of Paul.³⁰ There were also guilds of a more convivial nature; we hear of 'The Late Diners' and 'The Late Sleepers'. Most common were the burial-clubs, which ensured decent burial for the poor freeman or the slave. Many such guilds had religious connections and held their banquets in a heathen temple. Could a Christian conscientiously 'sit at meat in an idol's temple'? We see from I Corinthians that this was a burning question in the church at Corinth. Some, who claimed to have superior knowledge, argued that for a Christian all things were lawful, and were prepared to compromise. Paul meets this by teaching the duty of considering the conscience of the weaker brother, and also by a clear statement of the incompatibility of partaking of the Lord's Supper and sharing in the feasts of pagan deities.³¹ Nevertheless, the view that compromise was admissible persisted, and meets us again in the Epistles to the Seven Churches. It seems clear that the Nicolaitans, mentioned in the letters to Ephesus and Pergamum,³² were a sect that was prepared to compromise with pagan standards in matters of sexual morality and idolatrous worship.³³

Some conscientious Christians, on the other hand, could not feast with their guild when it met in an idol's temple, nor could they, as we have seen, take part in emperor worship. This led people generally to regard Christians as anti-social kill joys. Once a hostile public opinion had

²⁶ I Thess. i. 8.

²⁷ Tertullian, *de spectaculis*, 8.

²⁸ E. M. Blaiklock, *The Christian in Pagan Society* (1951), pp. 15 ff.

²⁹ S. Dill, *Roman Society from Hero to Marcus Aurelius* (1905), pp. 251-286.

³⁰ Acts xix. 24-28.

³¹ I Cor. viii. 10; X. 19-22.

³² Rev. ii. 6, 15.

³³ E. M. Blaiklock, *op. cit.*, pp. 22 ff.

been created, charges of a more positive nature gained ground, such as that Christians practised incest and cannibalism at their meetings. Hence Tacitus³⁴ describes the Christians as 'a class hated for their abominations... criminals who deserved extreme and exemplary punishment'. He tells us that Christians were regarded as 'enemies of the human race', a charge similar to that which he brings against the Jews, who, he says,³⁵ were animated by 'enmity and hatred towards all other men'. All these charges had their root in the refusal of both Jews and Christians to join in social activities connected with pagan deities. The Jews, though unpopular, were recognized as a people demanding special treatment, and their religion was protected by law. So long as the Roman government failed to distinguish between Jews and Christians, a similar toleration was extended to Christianity. But after the fire of Rome in A.D. 64, for which Nero made the Christians scapegoats, to confess the Name of Christ was an offence punishable by arrest and death; and public opinion sided with the government, believing the Christians to be guilty of anti-social activities.

[p.14]

(i) Slavery

The world in which Christianity grew up recognized slavery as an institution and many of the early Christians were slaves. Legally, the slave had no rights and was simply the chattel of his master. Moreover, there was a strain of cruelty in the Roman character that had made the lot of the slave in Rome less happy than it was in Athens. About the time that Paul was in prison at Rome, the prefect of the city, a high-ranking senator, was murdered by one of his own slaves. Ancient custom demanded that all the slaves of the household who had been under the same roof at the time should be put to death. The common people of Rome protested and the matter was debated in the Senate. It was argued that, unless the execution took place, no master would be safe in future; and this view won the day. The household of about four hundred slaves was executed without distinction of age or sex, but troops had to be called out to prevent their being rescued by the angry people.³⁶ This incident illustrates both the hard lot of the slave and the growing feeling against their cruel treatment. Under the influence of Stoicism, a more humane attitude to slaves was gaining ground, the classical expression of which is found in a letter of Seneca.³⁷ 'Remember', he says, 'that he whom you call your slave sprang from the same stock, is smiled upon by the same skies, and on equal terms with yourself breathes, lives and dies. It is just as possible for you to see in him a free-born man as for him to see in you a slave.' In Rome, too, slaves, especially Greeks, were often better educated than their masters and were entrusted with important business. The Christians 'of Caesar's household'³⁸ whose greeting Paul sent to the Philippians, were slaves and freedmen in the imperial service. Funeral inscriptions testify to the love of slaves for their masters and of masters for their 'humble friends'. Slaves were allowed to associate with free men on an equal footing in the guilds. Manumission was common and a slave could usually buy his freedom by the savings (*peculium*) which his master allowed him to accumulate. So when Christianity, while accepting the institution of slavery as part of the contemporary order

³⁴ Tacitus, *Annals*, xv. 44.

³⁵ Tacitus, *Histories*, v. 5.

³⁶ Tacitus, *Annals*, xiv. 42-45.

³⁷ Seneca, *Epp.* xlvii. 10.

³⁸ Phil. iv. 22.

of things, struck at its roots by proclaiming that in Christ there is neither 'bond nor free',³⁹ its teaching was not wholly alien to the spirit of the times.

II. THE RELIGIOUS AND PHILOSOPHICAL BACKGROUND

When we turn from the external world to the world of ideas, we are struck by the preponderance of Greek and Oriental influences in the thought of the first century after Christ. The Greek, though less successful in the art of government, was far superior to the Roman in intellect. In Horace's words: 'captured Greece took her conqueror captive.'⁴⁰ But the Greek with whom we are dealing here was not the pure Greek of the age of Pericles, but the product of that fusion of Greek and Oriental civilizations which had begun with the conquests of Alexander the Great and been carried further by his successors. Greece contributed her power of abstract thought and her technical skill, the East her mysticism, with which superstition was often mingled. Moreover, the first century Greek was not the citizen of a small, independent city-state, controlling about as much land as a small English county, but was involved in

[p.15]

the life of a great empire, mingling with other peoples and often a wanderer on the face of the earth.

(a) A materialistic age

The age in which the New Testament was written was, like our own, a materialistic age. The inhabitants of the cities were interested, first and foremost, in the making of money and the enjoyment of the comforts and luxuries it provided. It was an age in which fortunes could be made quickly by judicious ventures in commerce, like that of Trimalchio in Petronius's novel, who started as a favourite slave, inherited his master's money, invested it in commercial enterprises, especially the wholesale wine-trade, and finished up as the owner of a beautiful villa in Campania, living on the income from his large estates and the interest on his investments. In such a society a man's value is what he is worth, and no more.⁴¹

(b) The failure of the old religion

This materialism was partly the result of the failure of the old Greco-Roman religion. Of course, the temples of the great gods were still thronged at festivals and the great games of Greece were celebrated in honour of the Olympians. Cities still had their tutelary deities—'Great is Diana of the Ephesians'—and at Lystra Barnabas and Paul were thought to be Zeus and Hermes and the priest of Zeus, whose temple was before the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates to make sacrifice to them.⁴² The Athenians are described by Paul as 'uncommonly scrupulous in everything that concerns religion'.⁴³ Of outward ceremonial there was enough and to spare, but its effect on conduct and values was small. At its best, the old religion had been a matter for the state or the family rather than for the individual. A man shared the worship as a member of a group and there was little idea of personal communion

³⁹ Gal. iii. 28: Col. iii. 11. So Paul appeals to Philemon to receive back the runaway, Onesimus 'no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, a brother beloved', Philemon 16.

⁴⁰ Horace, *Epp.* II, i. 156.

⁴¹ 'Assem habes, assem valeas'. Petronius, *Satyricon*, 77. See S. Dill, *op. cit.*, pp. 128 ff

⁴² Acts xiv. 11-13.

⁴³ Acts xvii. 22 (N.E.B.).

with the deity. Now, in the wider world, separated often from his native city and his family, he was without spiritual roots, like the African today who leaves his tribe and goes to work in some great city. For such a man it is easy to conclude that life holds nothing beyond this world and its goods. 'I was not, I was, I am not, I don't care' runs a common form of Roman epitaph, and many an epigram in the Greek anthology says the same thing in less laconic language.

It has been said⁴⁴ that ancient paganism failed ultimately for two reasons: its moral laxity and its intellectual muddle. Although the ancient gods punished murder and perjury, their own characters, as depicted in the myths from Homer to Ovid, were essentially immoral; they could not be taken as models either for the individual or for society. In the East particularly, their worship was carried on, as we have seen, with grossly immoral rites. This was as revolting to the best thought of paganism as it is to us. In the world in which Christianity grew up, there was a growing feeling that the gods should be worshipped not merely with ceremonial ablutions, but with a pure heart. The oath (*sacramentum*) which the Christians took at their meetings to abstain from theft, robbery and adultery and from breaking faith, can be paralleled from pagan sources.⁴⁵ On the intellectual side, it was impossible to make sense of the 'gods many and lords many' of polytheism. In the later empire, an attempt was made to do this by syncretism, the merging of the various deities in one and the

[p.16]

assimilation of their rites. Thus worshippers of Isis claimed that she was worshipped under many names in many lands, but 'the Egyptians call her by her right name, the queen Isis'.⁴⁶ Similarly, various Baals worshipped in the East were identified with Jupiter or with the Sun-God, *Sol Invictus*. But neither syncretism nor the monotheistic tendency which, as we shall see, was fostered by Stoicism, could in the end make polytheism acceptable to thoughtful men.

(c) *Demonology*⁴⁷

If the Olympian gods seemed too remote to have much practical bearing on men's lives, demons were very near and very real. The belief in daemones who were intermediaries between gods and men, was developed by Xenocrates on the basis of some utterances of his master, Plato. God is absolute and transcendent; he can only be brought into relation with an imperfect and changing world by subordinate and intermediate spiritual agents. These daemones were responsible for the creation of the phenomenal world. They lived in the air beneath the moon, but also wandered about the earth, particularly in the neighbourhood of tombs. They had human defects and passions; some were good, others bad. Plutarch, who thought that the doctrine of daemones was one of the greatest advances made by philosophy, ascribed to them oracles that turned out to be lies and all the revolting features in pagan ritual. 'I will never think', he says, 'that those things were done on any of the gods' account, but rather to avert, mollify and appease the wrath and fury of some bad demon.'⁴⁸ In the first

⁴⁴ H. Mattingly, *op cit.*, p. 218.

⁴⁵ Pliny, *Epp.* x. 96, 7. A. D. Nock, *Classical Review*, xxxviii (1924), pp. 58-59 and the same author's *Conversion* (1933), pp. 215-217.

⁴⁶ Apuleius, *Metam.* xi. 5.

⁴⁷ See M. P. Nilsson, *Greek Piety* (1948), pp. 170-173.

⁴⁸ Plutarch, *de def. orac.*, 14, 417c, quoted by W. R. Halliday, *The Pagan Background of Early Christianity* (1925), p. 180.

century of our era belief in evil demons was widespread. They were thought of as the cause of plagues and mental disorders. The superstitious lived in dread of their evil activities. In the New Testament they are evil powers really existing in the spiritual world and often having their abode in human beings. For the Jews they are under subjection to Satan, the prince of the demons.⁴⁹ Paul identifies them with the recipients of heathen sacrifices. 'But I say that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice they sacrifice to demons and not to God.'⁵⁰

(d) Astrology

Astrology was another powerful force in this age. Originating in Babylonia, the teaching that the stars determine human fortunes had entered the Hellenistic world from the East. Alexandria, the meeting place of East and West, was also the centre of the study of astronomy, and the more accurate knowledge of the stars gained by the Alexandrian astronomers helped astrology to pose as a pseudo-science. To work out the position of the stars at a person's birth, which was supposed to determine his life and destiny, was a very complicated astronomical and mathematical problem.⁵¹ Tacitus has much to say about mathematics, as the Romans called astrologers, 'a class of men who deceive the ambitious, although those in power distrust them,—a class that in our state will always be forbidden and always kept among us'.⁵² He tells us how the emperor Tiberius had his own private astrologer, Thrasyllus, whom he trusted implicitly and kept among his intimate friends.⁵³ Vespasian, when in command against the Jews, had been encouraged by astrologers to make a bid for the throne, and later kept an astrologer, Seleucus, to help him by his advice and prophecy.⁵⁴

[p.17]

Astrology led logically to atheism, as Tiberius saw, but most of the unlearned thought of the planets as gods, who could be appeased by prayer or sacrifice, or mastered by magic.

(e) Magic

Alone and adrift in a frightening world, surrounded by demonic activity, oppressed by the weight of inevitable necessity, controlled by the movement of the planets, what was the ordinary man or woman to do?

On the lowest level, the answer was magic. Magic differs from religion in that, while religion approaches the higher power with humble petition, the magician professes to be able, by the use of certain formulas or rites, to compel the higher power to do his will; sometimes the magician identifies himself with the particular god or spirit concerned. Magic was commonly used to compel the affection of a loved one or procure the destruction of an enemy. Readers of the classics will remember the second idyll of Theocritus in which the girl, Simaetha, madly in love with Delphis, who has forsaken her, goes out into the moon-lit night with her magic wheel and endeavours to subdue him by spells and by invoking the moon-goddess. Magic might also be used to exorcize a demon. We meet magicians in the Acts of the

⁴⁹ Matt. ix. 34.

⁵⁰ I Cor. x. 20.

⁵¹ For a fragment of a 'technical' astrological work from an Egyptian papyrus, see C. K. Barrett: *The New Testament Background: Select Documents* (1956), p. 35.

⁵² Tacitus, *Histories* i. 22, 2.

⁵³ Tacitus, *Annals*, vi. 21, 4.

⁵⁴ Tacitus, *Histories*, ii. 78.

Apostles: Simon Magus in Samaria, of whom the people said: 'This man is that power of God which is called Great', and Elymas, the 'pet' magician of Sergius Paulus, who withstood Paul and Barnabas when they were invited to speak before the governor.⁵⁵ At Ephesus 'those who had become believers came and openly confessed that they had been using magic spells. A good many of those who formerly practised magic collected their books and burnt them publicly. The total value was reckoned up and came to fifty thousand pieces of silver.'⁵⁶ Ephesus was famous in antiquity for books of magic, which are sometimes called 'Ephesian writings'. In Egypt numbers of magical papyri have been discovered, dating from the early centuries of the Christian era. They contain 'magical recipes, conjurations, descriptions of sorceries, and methods for procuring appearances of gods and daemones and predictions of the future'.⁵⁷ Amid much unintelligible mumbo jumbo, they contain invocations of Egyptian gods, of Jao (the Egyptian form of Yahweh) and of Jesus. 'Those in particular who practised magic were willing to accept from any source names and formulas which sounded impressive and effective.'⁵⁸

(f) Mystery religions

To pass from magic to the mystery religions is to move from rank superstition to worship. There were many in this age who were sincerely seeking 'a way of salvation' through initiation into the mysteries. For them 'salvation' meant deliverance from the grip of Destiny or Fate, personal communion with the deity in this life and assurance of immortality beyond death. The person to be initiated prepared by ceremonial purification and fasting for the actual rites of initiation which were kept strictly secret. Some of the myths on which the mysteries were based told of the death and resurrection of a god and it would seem that in his initiation a person passed through a great and terrible darkness and emerged into a dazzling light; this typified death and resurrection and the one who passed through this experience felt himself united with the deity he

[p.18]

worshipped. Sometimes he partook of a sacred meal, through which it was supposed that he received a share of the divine power.

The fullest account we have of such an initiation is the story of the initiation into the mysteries of Isis of Lucius, the hero of Apuleius' romance *The Golden Ass*. The account is deeply moving and probably in part autobiographical. After long waiting, Isis appears to Lucius in a vision and tells him that the day he had wished for so long is at hand; she has appointed her principal priest to prepare him. The priest instructs him from sacred books, washes and purifies his body and bids him fast for ten days eating no flesh and drinking no wine; then, clothing him in a new linen robe, he takes him to the most secret part of the temple. What he sees there he is not allowed to tell, but he summarizes his experience thus: 'I drew near to the borders of death; when I had set my foot upon the threshold of Prosperine, I returned, carried through all the elements; in the middle of the night I beheld the clear radiance of the sun; I approached the gods both infernal and celestial and worshipped them face to face.' The next morning, ceremonially dressed and carrying a lighted torch, he is shown to a crowd of worshippers, and with them celebrates a feast and addresses a prayer to

⁵⁵ Acts viii. 10; xiii. 8.

⁵⁶ Acts xix. 18, 19 (N.E.B.).

⁵⁷ M. P. Nilsson, *op. cit.*, p. 174.

⁵⁸ C. K. Barrett, *op. cit.*, p. 31, where a translation of part of the Paris Magical Papyrus will be found.

Isis which ends thus: 'I will always keep thy divine appearance in remembrance and close the imagination of thy most holy god-head within my breast.'⁵⁹

The appeal of the mysteries was to the emotions, not the intelligence. Aristotle said of the mysteries of his time that those who are initiated into them learn nothing but are put into a certain receptive disposition.⁶⁰ We do not know the means by which the sights they saw and the sounds they heard were produced, but they were carefully designed to give an impression of contact with the supernatural. Of the sincerity and devotion of many of the worshippers there can be no doubt.

Some writers have held that Paul's thought was deeply influenced by the mystery religions and that Christianity borrowed much from them. Paul certainly used terms which were familiar to the adherents of the mystery religions among his readers. He used the language of his day, but he gave it a content of his own. The cults from which the mystery religions were derived differed so much among themselves that no 'mystery theology' can be constructed from our knowledge of them. As an eminent Swedish writer on Greek religion has said: 'For its victorious religious power Christianity need not thank the circumstances that it moved along lines travelled by the mystery religions.'⁶¹

(g) Gnosis

Another way in which men attempted to escape from the grip of Fate and attain 'salvation' was by gnosis, secret knowledge communicated by revelation. Those who followed this way believed that the material world was evil. The soul of man had fallen from the transcendent world of light, where God dwells, through the seven spheres controlled by the world-rulers (κοσμοκράτορες), and was imprisoned in the material sphere; yet it contained a divine element, and by 'knowledge' might free itself and win its way back to the sphere from which it came. This 'salvation' was attained by intellectual illumination, assisted by abstinence and asceticism. In these beliefs there were elements derived from

[p.19]

the teaching of Zoroaster, from Babylonian astrology and from the account of the fall of man in the Old Testament. These ideas were widespread in the Hellenistic world of the first century before and after Christ. It is possible that they are represented in the knowledge (*gnōsis*) on which Paul's opponents at Corinth prided themselves and in the heresy which he had to combat at Colossae. When amalgamated with Christianity they produced the Gnostic sects of the second century. In a pagan context they form the background of the Hermetic documents later current in Egypt.⁶²

(h) Philosophy

The philosophy to which many thoughtful men turned for guidance in the first century of our era was not the philosophy of Plato or Aristotle, a disinterested attempt to solve by pure reason the problems of mind and matter. The emphasis had shifted from metaphysics to ethics, from the nature of reality to the conduct of the individual. Moreover, philosophy had

⁵⁹ Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* ('The Golden Ass'), xi. 22-26. Translated in C. K. Barrett, *op. cit.*, pp. 97-100. See also A. D. Nock, *Conversion*, chapter ix.

⁶⁰ Aristotle, *fragment 45*, quoted by Nilsson.

⁶¹ M. P. Nilsson, *op. cit.*, p. 156.

⁶² See R. M. Grant: *Gnosticism and Early Christianity* (1959), and *Gnosticism: An Anthology* (1961).

been popularized; it was no longer taught in the lecture-room only, but at the street-corners. We have already met the philosophic missionary on the roads of the empire.

In the account of Paul's visit to Athens, we read that 'certain philosophers of the Epicureans and of the Stoics encountered him'.⁶³ The founders of both these schools of philosophy had taught at Athens in the closing years of the fourth century before Christ. Zeno, the founder of the Stoics, came from Citium in Cyprus and was probably of Semitic origin. The aim of both Epicureanism and Stoicism was to formulate a way of life based on a rational and consistent explanation of the universe.⁶⁴

(i) Epicureanism

Epicurus taught that happiness consists in freedom from disturbance (*ἀταραξία*); all that disturbs body or mind is to be shunned. Physical pain must be endured, as Epicurus himself endured it; when acute, it does not last long; when protracted, it is less severe. The violent passions, love, hatred, ambition, are to be avoided; the philosopher will take no part in public life; he will withdraw from the world and 'live hidden'. One of Epicurus' main aims was to free man from fear of the gods and of punishment after death. This he did by explaining that the soul, like everything else, consists of atoms, which fly apart at death, so that the soul ceases to exist. Lucretius, who sets forth the Epicurean doctrine in language of the highest poetry, after putting forward twenty-eight proofs of the soul's mortality, breaks out triumphantly: 'Death, therefore, is nothing to us, nor does it concern us one whit, in as much as the soul is but a mortal possession.'⁶⁵

Epicurus did not deny the existence of the gods, but taught that they were entirely unconcerned with human affairs and lived a life of perfect detachment in the 'spaces between the worlds' (*intermundia*). It was therefore foolish to fear them or to address petitions to them; but man might contemplate them as embodying the perfect ideal of happiness after which he was himself imperfectly striving. 'All the nature of the gods enjoys life everlasting in perfect peace, sundered and separate far away from our world. For free from all grief, free from danger, mighty in its own resources, never lacking aught of us, it is not won by virtuous service nor touched by wrath.'⁶⁶ Religion, for Epicurus, is adoration, by which a man may be helped 'to live a life worthy of the gods'.⁶⁷

[p.20]

Epicureanism, however, was never a widely held philosophy in the Roman world. Its rejection of the popular religion was too radical—Epicureans were classed with Christians as 'atheists'—and its moral ideal was too quietistic for the active Roman temperament.

(ii) Stoicism

Stoicism adapted itself more successfully to the ideas of the age. It rested on a religious basis and made a strong appeal to the Roman character.

⁶³ Acts xvii. 18.

⁶⁴ On Epicureanism and Stoicism in the Roman period, see C. Bailey, *Phases in the Religion of Ancient Rome* (1933), Chapter vii. On Epicureanism see A. J. Festugière, *Epicurus and his Gods* (translated by C. W. Chilton [1955]).

⁶⁵ Lucretius, *de rerum natura*, iii. 830 (tr. Bailey).

⁶⁶ *Id.* ii. 646-651.

⁶⁷ *Id.* iii. 322.

For the Stoic, the universe itself was God. The ultimate substance of the universe was a 'fiery breath' or 'spirit' (πνεῦμα πυρῶδες) which was distributed throughout its parts in varying degrees of tension. This 'spirit' was alive and rational. It manifested itself as reason (λόγος) and it was this that introduced order into the world; the matter of which the world was composed was itself mind. This 'fiery spirit' was also god; it was divine, the Stoics argued, because nothing could be more excellent. Moreover, man had in himself 'a particle of the divine breath', manifesting itself as reason, and he was therefore capable of adoring and entering into communion with the supreme reason.

The Stoics identified their god with the supreme deity of the Greeks and Romans, Zeus or Jupiter. Cleanthes, who succeeded Zeno as head of the Stoic school in Athens, wrote a Hymn to Zeus, beginning:

Most glorious of immortals, Zeus all powerful,
Author of nature, named of many names, all hail!
Thy law rules all, and the voice of the world may cry to thee,
For from thee we are born, and alone of living things
That move on earth are we created in God's image.⁶⁸

In the same poem, Cleanthes couples Zeus with Fate:

Lead me, O Zeus, and thou, my Destiny,
To that one place which you will have me fill.
I follow gladly. Should I strive with thee,
A recreant, I needs must follow still.⁶⁹

For the Stoic, Fate was not a blind mechanistic process, as it was for the Epicurean, but the Providence of the god who is the universal reason. In later Stoicism, especially in Epictetus, we find a communion between this supreme deity and the philosopher, which leads to prayer: 'Deal with me hereafter as thou wilt, I am as one with thee. I am thine. I flinch from nothing so long as thou thinkest it good.'⁷⁰

Stoicism set before its followers a high standard of conduct 'to live according to nature', that is, according to man's own nature and the nature of the universe, in harmony with the divine reason. This might seem an impossibly high ideal to be reached only by the sage to whom all mundane matters are indifferent. But the later Stoic teachers, beginning with Panaetius, who lived at Rome in the second half of the second century before Christ, tried to adapt Stoic ethics to the needs of the Roman nobility. They emphasized the active virtues of benevolence and magnanimity and taught that a man must do his duty to his family and to the State. The Stoic was encouraged to play his part 'as a man and as a Roman'⁷¹ in the affairs of his day and to regard the world of action as

⁶⁸ *Collectanea Alexandrina*, ed. J. U. Powell, p. 227, No. 1. Oxford Book of Greek Verse (1930), No. 483. Translation by Michael Balkwill in *The Oxford Book of Greek Verse in translation*. A similar address to Zeus forms the poem of Aratus' *Phaenomena* (Oxford Book of Greek Verse, No. 505) from which Paul quoted at Athens, Acts xvii. 28.

⁶⁹ *Collectanea Alexandrina*, p. 229, No. 2. Oxford Book of Greek Verse, No. 484. Translation by C. C. Martindale in *The Oxford Book of Greek Verse in translation*.

⁷⁰ Epictetus, *Discourses*, ii. 16, translated by P. E. Matheson.

⁷¹ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, ii. 5.

[p.21]

the arena in which God's athlete shows how he has been trained for the conflict.⁷² So Stoicism produced men like Brutus and Cato in the last days of the Republic, and Seneca and Thrasea Paetus in the reign of Nero, and, in the next century, the emperor Marcus Aurelius.

Stoicism, at least in its stricter form, offered no hope of personal immortality. At death, the soul was liberated to be united with the divine fiery essence of which it was a part. Nevertheless, some Stoics held that while bad souls, in whom the divine spark had been quenched, perished quickly after death, the souls of the good might survive till the general conflagration, which, they held, would destroy the whole of the sensible world and resume its fiery elements into the great central fire. There is also found a doctrine of purgatory, derived from Plato, which taught that the souls of the good are gradually purified and made fit to rejoin the divine fire.⁷³ This doctrine, however, finds no place in Epictetus or Marcus Aurelius, who hesitate to dogmatize about the survival of the individual soul.

Stoicism showed a remarkable ability to assimilate or come to terms with popular religious beliefs. For instance, though it was essentially monotheistic, it made room for the gods of polytheism by explaining them as allegorical representations of various aspects of the activity of the supreme deity, 'the gifts of God called by the names of gods'.⁷⁴ Later, the Stoics, borrowing from Neo-Platonism, explained the gods of mythology as good and evil daemones subordinate to the supreme god. Again, the interest of the Stoics in the stars, in whose regular movements they saw a confirmation of their belief in the reason inherent in the universe, led them to countenance the popular belief in astrology. Posidonius even sought to justify divination from the entrails of animals, as practised at Rome, by the 'sympathy' which exists between all parts of the universe, because of the presence in them of the 'fiery breath' which is god.⁷⁵ The ability of Stoicism to adapt itself to the beliefs of the age proved in the end a weakness, for it gave popular superstitions a spurious respectability.

Conclusion

We have tried to sketch the world into which Christianity was born. It was a prepared world. In the *pax Romana*, in the Roman roads and the common language of the Hellenistic East, we have seen the way made ready for the spread of the Gospel. In the failure of the old religion, in the prevailing fear of demons, in the attempts to escape from Fate by magic and astrology, in the craving for communion with God and personal immortality to which the mystery religions bear witness, in the attempts of philosophy to solve the problems of the universe and of man, we have seen the deep need of the Greco-Roman world for the Good News.

'When the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth His Son.' The Christian Gospel met the needs of the age, as it has met the needs of men in every age. We may notice, in closing, some ways in which Christianity differed from the religions and philosophies we have been considering.

⁷² Epictetus, *Discourses*, iv. 4.

⁷³ See Virgil, *Aeneid*, vi. 730 ff.

⁷⁴ Cicero, *de natura deorum*, ii. 23, 60.

⁷⁵ Cicero, *de divinatione*, i. 3, 6, 55, 125; 57, 130.

First, Christianity was rooted in history, not in myth, like the mystery religions, or in some theory of the constitution of the universe, like current philosophies. It spoke of One whose birth, life, death and resurrection were historic facts, to which its first preachers bore personal testimony, with a certainty that carried conviction.

[p.22]

Secondly, Christianity, like Judaism, refused to compromise with polytheism. No doubt there was a tendency to monotheism both in the popular religion and in the philosophy of the age; but the pagan who was at heart a monotheist was prepared to give lip service to other gods or to explain them away as the Stoics did. The Christian's refusal to sacrifice to the gods, including the emperor, exposed him to the charge of 'pertinacity and unbending obstinacy' which in the eyes of good men like Pliny the Younger and Marcus Aurelius, was a crime worthy of death.⁷⁶ But the Christian could not compromise on this issue and therein lay his strength.

Thirdly, Christianity demanded repentance for past sins and gave the assurance of forgiveness through the atoning death of Jesus and power through the Spirit to overcome sin in the future. This was a new message. The pagan myths told of gods who died and rose again, but not to redeem their worshippers from sin. The initiate in the mysteries felt himself for a moment united with the deity, but that union held no promise of a permanent indwelling of the deity resulting in a changed life.

Finally, Christianity was unique in its emphasis on the motive power of love. In Stoicism the appeal was ultimately to self-respect, the good man must act worthily of the divine spark within him. Hence there was a distrust of the emotions. 'Sympathy is allowable, but only if it does not disturb the soul's serenity. You may sigh with your friend, but your inner being must remain unmoved. Similarly, pity is viewed with suspicion and affection must be kept within strict limits.'⁷⁷ In strong contrast, the love of God in Christ awoke in the Christian an answering love of God and of his neighbour, which was the mainspring of his conduct. 'Love is the fulfilling of the law.'

© 1962 *London School of Theology* (<http://www.lst.ac.uk/>). Reproduced by permission.

Prepared for the Web in December 2006 by Robert I. Bradshaw.

<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>

⁷⁶ Pliny, *Epp.* x. 96, 3 (*pertinacia et inflexibilis obstinatio*); Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* xi. 3 (ψιλὴ παράταξις).

⁷⁷ P. E. Matheson, *Introduction to Epictetus: The Discourses and Manual* (1916), Vol. i. p. 20.