

The Roman-Grecian World

by Harris Franklin Rall

The Roman-Grecian world provided a fertile ground for the spread of Christianity, breaking down old barriers and preparing the way for the concept of one brotherhood and one Father.

Scripture: Acts 17:26, Romans 1:16, 1 Corinthians 1:22, Galatians 3:28, Colossians 3:11

Topics: "Early Christianity", "Roman Empire"

Description

Harris Franklin Rall delves into the historical context of Christianity, emphasizing the convergence of the Roman, Grecian, and Jewish worlds during the time of Jesus and Paul. The Roman world under Augustus's reign was marked by peace, prosperity, and extensive travel, yet the common people suffered under the weight of slavery and exploitation. The Grecian world contributed language, philosophy, and culture to the Roman empire, providing a fertile ground for the spread of Christianity. Additionally, the mystery religions from the east, with their stories of life, death, and resurrection of gods, emerged as competitors to Christianity, but lacked the ethical salvation and historic foundation that Christianity offered.

Transcript

We cannot understand even the beginnings of Christianity without knowing something of the world to which it came. Jesus' life seems quiet enough in its little corner of the world; but Roman soldiers are present when he dies, Greek and Latin and Hebrew stand over his cross, and the story of his life goes forth to the world not in Hebrew but in Greek. Paul's case is even more suggestive. He was a Hebrew of the Hebrews, and he bore the message of a Jewish Messiah; but he spoke in Greek, he himself was a Roman citizen, and his field was the Roman empire.

These three worlds must be studied separately: (1) the Roman world, political and social; (2) the Grecian world of language and culture and religion; (3) the Jewish world which we study for its religion alone.

When Jesus was born in the reign of Augustus, Rome had fully entered upon her great career as a world empire. The nations about the Mediterranean had been merged under her rule. Great roads stretched everywhere for the Roman soldier. The sea had been swept free of pirates. Everywhere was safety and quiet. As a result trade and travel of all kinds increased enormously. The Mediterranean was one great highway. Travel was almost as general in the empire as it is with us today. Paul with his long and constant journeyings, was not an isolated instance. We can imagine some of those whom he must have met upon the road: the wealthy merchant with his shipload of corn bound from Alexandria to Rome; a company of recruits traveling to join the army; university students bound for Athens or Alexandria; travelers for

pleasure, numerous then as now; wealthy Romans journeying in search of health to baths, or to cooler climes; some throng bound for the Isthmian games, or a company of Jews of the dispersion on the way to a feast at Jerusalem; everywhere the representatives of Rome, officials of administration or officers and soldiers; and finally the common folks, merchants like Aquila and Priscilla, or artisans seeking for work.

But the peace and increase of wealth meant little to the common people. Rome was never a democracy, nor had Greece ever been such. There was no great middle class, prosperous and intelligent, to form the strength of the nation, as with England or America. Of the fifty millions or more in the Roman world the wealth and power belonged to but very few. Rome was a constant drain upon the provinces. Augustus declares that he gave eight gladiatorial exhibits in which ten thousand men fought, and twenty-six exhibits of conflicts with wild beasts in which thirty-five hundred African beasts were slain. At the same time he was making his donations of food and money to scores of thousands of Roman citizens at one time. All this had to come from the toil of the poor. There was also the support of Roman armies. The temple of Janus was closed three times in Augustus's reign as a sign of universal peace, but the cost of that peace was an armed host ready to be hurled east or west or north at the first sign of uprising. In addition to all this was the procession of governors and officers of all kinds moving out to the provinces, amassing wealth in their brief term of office, and then giving way to others. No wonder the people compared themselves to the beggar, who would not chase away the flies that fed at his sores since to do so would only be to make room for others unfed and more hungry.

Slavery is another side of this picture. Roman wars brought in captives by the scores of thousands. They were not necessarily of inferior race, and yet the power of the Roman master was absolute. He could feed a slave to the fishes if he would. And the Roman law provided that in case any slave killed his master, the whole household of slaves, young and old, innocent and guilty, might be put to death.

These common folks and slaves composed the mass of the members of the early church. To them Christianity's message of deliverance was indeed gospel--"good news." It showed them that their souls might be free though their bodies were in bondage. It introduced them into a fellowship where all men were brothers. And it gave them the sustaining hope of the new kingdom that was coming, which their Master would speedily establish upon earth.

Despite all this, Roman rule wrought great results for the spread of Christianity. It broke down the old barriers that divided race from race. The oneness of the empire prepared the way for that great conception of one brotherhood and one Father that Paul proclaimed. Peace and unity of the empire made possible that active intercourse and travel which did so much for the spread of the new faith. It gave broad and safe highways on land and sea, little dreaming that they would be remembered longest not for the tread of proud armies, but for the journeys of a humble Jewish preacher whose message was to lay the foundations of a new and greater realm.

Equally extensive with the Roman rule was the world of thought and culture which we call Grecian. Greek was the language of the West; the Roman conquerors had gone to school to their captives and taken from them language and philosophy and art. Greek was the language of the East; Alexander's empire had not lasted long politically, but he had carried Grecian culture wherever he went and this had remained. The east coast of the Mediterranean was dotted with Hellenistic cities, and they were found in the interior as far as Persia and India. One language could thus be used throughout the length and breadth of the Roman world. Into that language the Old Testament had been translated, and this Greek Old Testament was the Bible of the Jews outside of Palestine. It was in Greek that Paul preached from Damascus and Antioch to

Rome, and in the same language our New Testament was written. The language was thus like another Roman road, and even more important. Along this road of the mind ideals and influences of the greatest power could travel: the great conceptions of Greek philosophy, the great religious ideals of the Greek Old Testament, and finally the religious conceptions that came from the farther east. To the consideration of these we now turn.

Christianity did not come to a world without faith, or to a time of religious decadence. It was a period of the most active and eager religious thought and life. In the number of religions and religious societies the situation was not unlike that with us today, except that our societies are mostly Christian. These religions were not all darkness and error, while even their failures helped prepare the way for Christianity. They may be studied under three headings: 1. The old national faiths and their decay. 2. Grecian philosophy and its religious meaning. 3. The new religions.

1. The National Religions. In ancient times religion was the concern primarily of the tribe or the state, not of the individual. It included all the life of a people. The founding of a city, the making of war, the planting of grain and gathering of harvests, the feasts and the mournings were all accompanied and directed by religious rites; and the welfare of state and people was held to depend upon a proper regard for such observances.

With Greece and Rome this religion was polytheistic. It was not a religion that could last. (1) It could not stand the test of reason. The mind always seeks to find one cause and one meaning back of all things. Men could not rest in the thought of many gods. (2) It could not stand the test of the growing moral sense. It was a Greek philosopher, Anaxagoras, who wrote long before Christianity: "Everything that men count as disgraceful and immoral--theft, adultery, and deceit--that Homer and Hesiod have ascribed to the gods." (3) It could not meet the needs of men, and that was the chief reason for its passing. It was more the religion of a race in its childhood. It concerned itself with the simpler needs of life: harvests, health, safety, success in war. But men were asking deeper questions, about deliverance from sorrow and sin and death, about the hope of a life to come. The time of individualism was coming; men wanted a life for themselves, and not simply as part of a city or nation. The old faiths had no answer for these questions.

2. Grecian Philosophy. The story of Grecian philosophy is a noble chapter in human history. It has its great characters like Socrates, the man of whom Xenophon could write, "He was so devout that he never did anything without the counsel of the gods, so just that he never injured anyone even in the least, so truly master of himself that he never chose the agreeable instead of the good." In a later development, which we call Stoicism, this philosophy could show such spirits as Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius. So closely do some of the thoughts of Seneca resemble those of Paul that some writers used to hold that the former had borrowed from the latter. The Greek philosophy in the main was deeply religious. It was monotheistic; though the gods are often spoken of, it is one Divine Being that is meant. It was ethical. Plato sets forth a noble ideal of righteousness, of the just man who shows good to foe as well as friend. The Stoic picture of the wise man is even nobler, the man who is strong, self-contained, unmoved by outward conditions of good or evil, showing the same spirit toward the evil and the good.

But Grecian philosophy too failed to meet the needs of the day. It had nothing for the common man. It was a religion for the strong and the wise. The common man needs more than a high ideal, he needs some power to help him reach it.

There was no message here of any God who cared for men, or who could redeem them. The world was waiting for a religion of redemption, a religion of hope and help. The Stoic God was like the Stoic wise man, serene and calm and self-sufficient, but unmoved by the needs of men.

3. The mystery religions professed to meet this very need. We may call them the new religions, for about this time they began to pour into the Roman world from the east. We do not know much about these religions, for the classical writers of Greece and Rome looked down upon these cults as beneath their notice. It was for the very same reason that these writers did not mention Christianity. Like Christianity, these were the religions of the "lower classes." But the real religious life of the empire was in these faiths. These, and not the old polytheism or the noble philosophies, became the real competitors of Christianity.

Of these mystery religions there were many kinds, and yet they had certain aspects in common. (1) They were usually founded upon some story, the mystery, the tale of some god and of his life and death and coming to life again. Such is the story of Osiris coming from Egypt, the story of Mithra brought from Persia, and that of Dionysius in Greece. (2) These religions are no longer national. They come to men individually and unite them in societies, just as the believers were joined together in the Christian churches. (3) These religions were marked by ceremonies and sacraments. The members were initiated into the myth, or secret story of the god. There were sacred meals and washings and other rites, sometimes bloody and barbarous, sometimes involving gross excesses. (4) The great thought was that of redemption. The great "end was deliverance from evil, especially death, by means of union with the god.

Looked at superficially, there is much here that suggests the new Christian religion, and men have not been wanting who held that Paul, for example, was deeply influenced in his thought by these faiths. Here are societies like the churches, with sacraments of supper and baptism and the story of a dying and risen god. And these religions, like Christianity, appeal as religions of redemption, offering to save men. A very little study shows how deep the differences are. It is enough to point out two. (1) The salvation which Christianity offered was ethical. While these religions relied upon rites and magic, Christianity put at the center a new spirit and a new life. It met the final problem: not how to save men from, sorrow, or even from death, but how to save them from sin, to make character. (2) These religions built upon a myth, a tale; Christianity came with a great historic fact--Christ as the revelation of the will of God, as the bearer of the mercy and help of God.

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