

The Church Heads West an Introduction to the Issues (Part I)

by Robert Wurtz II

The sermon explores the impact of Hellenism on the Church, including the adaptation of Greek holidays and practices, and the carry over of Greek Pagan ideas and practices.

Scripture: Exodus 20:3

Topics: "Hellenistic Influence", "Early Christianity"

Description

Robert Wurtz II delves into the impact of Hellenism on the Jewish culture, particularly focusing on the challenges posed by Greek paganism, Emperor Worship, and the influence of Greek ideas and practices. The rise of Emperor Worship, where leaders were treated as gods, led to conflicts with Jewish beliefs, sparking revolts and societal unrest. Josephus' writings highlight the consequences of these clashes, including wars, robberies, and the destruction of the temple. The sermon also explores the significance of the Septuagint (LXX), the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, in bridging language barriers and spreading the Word of God among Hellenistic Jews.

Transcript

Hellenism (A Few Issues)

When Alexander the Great conquered the then known world the language of Greek spread throughout. This was convenient for the spread of the Gospel and was prophesied through Nebuchadnezzar's dream centuries before. Jews from the Diaspora were living in a Greek culture and were speaking the Greek language. This gave rise to a new term that we must concern ourselves with at this time called Hellenism. Hellenists are Greek speaking Jews. Hellenism is a blanket term to describe Greek ideas, style, and culture.

The Greeks were pagan and very superstitious (Acts 17). It was actually a culture of paganism. They had many gods and mythologies too numerous to even begin to discuss. One thing stands out about the Greeks as it pertains to the Jews that made for a great concern among those who followed scripture; and it was that of "Emperor Worship." A major change came with Alexander the Great. He seems to have wished to be treated as a god in his lifetime, and the Hellenistic monarchies followed suit.

Certain leaders received what are called *isotheoi timai* (honors equal to the gods¹): priests, sacrifices, an image among those of the gods. Political tribes named after them, their birthday and day of ascension are celebrated like religious holidays. The kings assumed titles associated with their godlike actions: *ktistes* (founder), *euergetes* (benefactor), *soter* (savior). To what extent they were really considered gods is unclear, but the Jewish Freedom Movement participants would view this as a breach of the 1st commandment. From a Jewish standpoint, this is totally unacceptable. The Galileans rose up over the census- likely because it would be for tax purposes. This led to one revolt after another over the next centuries. Those zealous Jews (see previous teachings on the Jewish Freedom Movement) refused to be under Roman dominion in a fashion that made the emperor out to be a god. Taxes in their minds equaled paying tithe and to pay tithe is to give homage to someone or something.

Josephus writes concerning these things saying:

All sorts of misfortunes sprang from these men, and the nation was infected with this doctrine to an incredible degree. One violent war came upon us after another, and we lost our friends, which used to alleviate our pains. There were also very great robberies and murder of our principal men. This was done in pretense indeed for the public welfare, but in reality for the hopes of gain to themselves; whence arose seditions, and from them murders of men, which sometimes fell on those of their own people (by the madness of these men towards one another, while their desire was that none of the adverse party might be left), and sometimes on their enemies. Famine also came upon us, and reduced us to the last degree of despair, as did also the taking and demolishing of cities; nay, the sedition at last increased so high, that the very temple of God was burnt down by their enemies' fire. Such were the consequences of this, that the customs of our fathers were altered, and such a change was made, as added a mighty weight toward bringing all to destruction. [Antiquities 18.7-9]

Josephus seemed to blame the Zealots and called them robbers. But there is something underneath these ideas on Jewish Freedom that carried over for centuries and to this day. If the Jews viewed the Romans as being pagan- and revolted against them, what would come of the Church when it began move toward Rome and a trend for adaptation of Greek holidays, etc. (Hellenism) began to greatly influence the Church? What would happen when there seemed to be a carry over of many Greek Pagan ideas and practices into the Church?

The Septuagint (LXX)

Septuagint (sometimes abbreviated LXX which means "70") is the name given to the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament. The Septuagint was completed in Alexandria, Egypt between 300-200 BC. Many Jews spread throughout the empire were beginning to lose their Hebrew language so the Septuagint became widely used among Hellenistic Jews.

The process of translating the Hebrew to Greek gave many non-Jews their first look at the Word of God. According to an ancient document called the Letter of Aristeas, 70 to 72 Jewish scholars were commissioned during the reign of Ptolemy Philadelphus to carry out the task of translation. The term "Septuagint" means seventy in Latin, and the text is so named to the credit of these 70 scholars. According to Ptolemy II Philadelphus, King of Egypt (287-47 BC) had recently established a valuable library at Alexandria. He was persuaded by Demetrius of Phalarus, chief librarian, to translate a copy of the sacred scriptures of the Jews.

To win the grace of this people, Ptolemy, by the advice of Aristeas, an officer of the royal guard, an Egyptian by birth and a pagan by religion, emancipated 100,000 slaves in different parts of his kingdom. He then sent delegates, among whom was Aristeas, to Jerusalem, to ask Eleazar, the Jewish high-priest, to provide him with a copy of the Law, and Jews capable of translating it into Greek. The embassy was successful: a richly ornamented copy of the Law was sent to him and seventy-two Israelites, six from each tribe, were deputed to go to Egypt and carry out the wish of the king. They were received with great honor and during seven days astonished everyone by the wisdom they displayed in answering seventy-two questions which they were asked; then they were led into the solitary Island of Pharos, where they began their work, translating the Law, helping one another and comparing translations in proportion as they finished them. At the end of seventy-two days, their work was completed and agreed in remarkable fashion (Adaptation from New Advent; See footnote).

**** Notes****

http://www.ualberta.ca/~csmackay/CLASS_378/Emperor.Worship.html

"The Life and Epistles of St. Paul" by W. J. Conybeare and J. S. Howson, Eerdmans

<http://www.septuagint.net/>

<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/13722a.htm>

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/robert-wurtz-ii/the-church-heads-west-an-introduction-to-the-issues-part-i/>

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