PARALLEL GUIDE 5

The World to Which the Word Came:

The Roman Empire; Language; Control; Roads and Seaways; The Hellenistic City; Philosophies; Religions; The Empire and Israel

Summary

No faith develops in a vacuum. This chapter presents various aspects of the Roman Empire: its language, competing philosophical movements, religions, and the conflict between Rome and the Jews.

Learning Objectives

• Learn the significant linguistic contributions we have received from Rome

• Explore the most important aspects of Greek philosophy that affected Christian theology as it developed

• Discover other religions that were developing even as Christianity grew—their names and how they may have differed from Christianity

• Learn how the conflict between Judaism and Rome affected the development of the Christian community

Assignment to Deepen Your Understanding

1. Think about what it means to be a Platonist. Think of ways that Plato's philosophy affects us today. Try to identify religious groups that seem to follow a Platonic philosophy.

2. Aristotle was a scientist. Explore how his pattern of thought may have affected the way we think today, especially the course of "scientific" thinking. How might this affect our Christian faith?

Preparing for Your Seminar

Be ready to explore the thought of Plato and Aristotle in depth. This topic was introduced in Year One and we will return to it in Year Three. Try doing a role play with one of you taking the position of Plato and another the position of Aristotle. What are the most important questions you face? How can you resolve differences? How does this affect problems in today's world?

Works Cited

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Chapter 5

THE WORLD TO WHICH THE WORD CAME:

The Roman Empire; Language; Control; Roads and Seaways; The Hellenistic City; Philosophies; Religions; The Empire and Israel

For the first fourteen chapters of the Gospel According to Mark we might be listening to a purely Jewish story—Jewish, certainly, with a Greek accent and in a Greek world, but Jewish nonetheless. Then at 15:1, without explanation or apology, the evangelist introduces a new factor:

As soon as it was morning, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council. They bound Jesus, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate.

Without warning, Rome has entered the scene. No explanation or apology was needed. In Mark's world and Mark's day no one would doubt where political and administrative power lay.

Mark's portrait of Pilate is no more flattering than that given by the other evangelists. At best Pilate is a weakling, unable or unwilling to do what he knows is right and failing to do the very justice, the Roman justice, that as procurator he was appointed to uphold. Whatever Mark may see as the part played in Jesus' death by the machinations of chief priests and others, he leaves us in no doubt that, under God, the final responsibility for Jesus' death is Roman. Jesus dies on a Roman cross, at the hands of Roman soldiers, and under the forms of Roman law. Mark makes that as clear, in his own way, as does John in his: the Fourth Evangelist has Pilate manipulate from the priests the humiliating confession, "We have no king but the emperor" (John 19:15).

In the century or so before Jesus, the power of Rome had increased. Julius Caesar (100-44 BCE) was among those who extended Rome's control over new territories. This same period was also one of strife. When Octavian, later to be known as Augustus Caesar, began his rule in 27 BCE, many said that the greatest gift he brought was peace. Certainly he, and the best of the emperors who followed him, devoted their energies to maintaining the stability and peace of the empire rather than extending its borders. To a remarkable extent they were successful. There were occasional attempts to throw off the Roman yoke, such as that led by the British warrior-queen Boudicca ("Boadicea") in 60 CE. There were occasional assaults by groups such as the Parthians, who occupied the northeastern region of Iran. Yet the borders of the empire remained substantially intact from the accession of Augustus to the death of Marcus Aurelius in 180 CE. What came to be known as the "Roman peace" (pax Romana) was maintained. Various factors contributed toward sustaining it.

Language

Latin was the language of imperial administration and the predominant language of the empire in the west. By the first century CE, however, Greek in its koinē (pronounced "koy-nay") or "common" form had spread westward to such an extent that it was spoken almost everywhere by the educated and was understood to some extent even by the less-educated. The description koinē is used to distinguish this form of popular Greek from other kinds of Greek, such as the "Attic" Greek spoken in Athens (Attica) during its period of literary greatness, about 500 to 300 BCE. Koinē Greek is a development from Attic Greek. The Hebrew Bible had already been translated into Greek for the sake of many Jews throughout the empire who spoke no other language (the version is known as the "Septuagint" or "LXX"). Soon Greek became the most widely used language of the Christians, too. The New Testament is written entirely in koinē.

Control

Generally the Roman Empire respected local custom and law, but it established Roman control at the top either by appointing governors or by recognizing local rulers. In either case the collection of Roman taxes and the presence of Roman garrisons were constant signs of Roman presence. We cannot pretend that Roman administration was not at times brutal, inefficient, and corrupt. Ubi solitudinem faciunt, pacem appellant —"Where they have made a desolation, they call it peace," said the British leader Calgacus, according to the

Roman historian Tacitus (Agricola 30). Such sentiments were undoubtedly felt by many throughout the empire, and probably by some intellectuals (like Tacitus) in Rome. That was the cost of pax Romana. On the other hand, for many in the subject nations of the empire, Roman peace provided stability and kept local and regional disputes under control. It gave ordinary people a framework in which they could live peaceable lives, bring up their children, and even, perhaps, widen their horizons. That was the reward. Clearly, many felt the bargain was worth it.

Rome further increased its control, albeit indirectly, by granting the privilege of Roman citizenship. Ever larger numbers of individuals and even whole groups were given citizenship. Citizenship was a gift that could open the way to high office in the service of the empire. It also provided special kinds of legal protection, including in certain cases the right to be tried in Rome rather than by provincial courts.

Roads and Seaways

Travel in the empire became speedier and safer than it had been earlier. Gradually the seas were cleared of pirates, and navigation was extended. On land a system of paved roads with Rome at its center connected the most remote parts of the empire. On these roads pedestrians could cover as many as fifteen miles a day, a carriage, twenty-five, a courier, fifty. The roads were protected. Those who traveled them could find both lodging and entertainment. All this made possible a rapid exchange of goods and ideas. Without Roman roads and Roman protection of the seaways the story Luke tells in the Book of Acts would have been impossible even to imagine, as would the network of communication between urban churches implied by Paul's letters.

The Hellenistic City

Although the golden age of the Greek city-states was past, Hellenistic cities throughout the empire still had some of the beauty and excitement of the classical age. Temples bore witness to the holy presence that had once consecrated cities. Theaters were still open. There were games in the stadia (cf. 1 Cor. 9:24). Even under the empire the assembly (Greek: ekklēsia; cf. Acts 19:41, NRSV "assembly") was still a place where there could be a degree of freedom in debate and discussion. The cities were populated by citizens and also by "metics" and slaves. Metics were aliens who could live in a city provided they had a citizen sponsor. They had few legal rights and paid high taxes, yet they came eagerly for the opportunities the cities provided. Slaves were occasionally persons of great talent and learning who, by reason of war or poverty, had come into bondage. Undoubtedly the presence of metics and slaves contributed greatly to the life of the city. Just such a cross section of people—rich and poor, citizens, metics, slaves—can be seen forming the Christian communities Paul addresses, such as the uppity, bumptious congregation at Corinth, of whom he observes pointedly, "consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth" (1 Cor. 1:26).

The great age of philosophy, like the great age of the city-states, was past. Ancient Athens had been marked by confidence in the power of the mind to pursue truth and the ideal good, to see nature and the universe as a whole. By the first century of the Christian era such confidence seems largely to have gone. Instead the age was marked, as Gilbert Murray, the British classical scholar, put it, by a "failure of nerve." Nevertheless, certain systems and ideas from the past continued to be influential. Platonism, Aristotelianism, Stoicism, Epicureanism, and Neo-Pythagoreanism all continued to have their adherents. (See Note A., p. 44) Early in the second century Pliny the Younger, a civil servant in Bithynia, wrote a memorandum to the Emperor Trajan. In it he spoke of "temples that have been almost deserted" (Letters 10.96). He was obviously referring to a situation that had been developing for some time. The gods of ancient Greece and Rome still held the allegiance of many but that allegiance was waning, perhaps as a result of that "failure of nerve" of which we have already spoken. Among thinking men and women the teachings of Plato and Aristotle undermined the old religion, for though neither was irreligious, their arguments upheld monotheism and reason rather than a pantheon of deities. The imperial cult and the mystery cults also had their devotees. (See Note B., p. 46)

One further observation is worth making. In general, Greco-Roman society associated philosophy with lifestyle, and religion with cult. Philosophers invited one to change one's whole manner of life; religions offered the experience of the numinous, the divine. Therefore both Judaism and Christianity were for the ancients somewhat puzzling phenomena, since they each seemed to be something of both.

The Empire and Israel

The history of Israel's relationship with the rest of the empire was not a happy one. By 135 CE Jews of the land of Israel had tried twice to throw off the Roman yoke, each time with disastrous results. In addition we know of at least two other major disturbances involving the Jews against Roman authority. Why was this so? Let us consider the four occasions of strife between the Jews and Rome to which we refer.

Disturbances at Rome 49 CE

The Roman historian Suetonius refers to Jewish "disturbances" at Rome in 49 CE. "Since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he [the emperor Claudius] expelled them from Rome . . ." (Life of Claudius 25.4). Because of this edict Paul's friends Priscilla and Aquila moved to Corinth (Acts 18:1-2). The cause of the disturbances is uncertain. The words "at the instigation of Chrestus" might refer to trouble caused by Christian preaching among the Jews. Probably "Chrestus" is a garbled form of "Christus" ("Christ"), taken by the authorities as the name of a contemporary person. This would be an easy mistake for them to make, since no doubt the followers of Jesus insisted that he was alive.

The Jewish Rebellion of 66 CE

With what is sometimes called "the first Jewish War" (66-70 CE) we are on firmer ground. Among a number of contributing factors we can distinguish at least four: poor Roman administration, serious economic problems, strife between Jews and their pagan neighbors in the cities, and religious zeal.

First, Roman administration was deficient. Judea received a succession of unsatisfactory administrators. The first-century Jewish historian Josephus is notorious for his pro-Roman sympathies. But even he does not fail to mention bad Roman government and asserts plainly that a major factor in the final outbreak of the rebellion was the avarice and incompetence of the procurator Florus (War 2.285-296). A previous Roman procurator, Pontius Pilate (26-36 CE), a familiar name to those who recite the Christian creeds, seems to have been about as bad as any of those who were sent by Rome to govern Judea. Josephus tells how on one occasion Pilate sent Roman soldiers into Jerusalem carrying standards inscribed with the imperial images. The action was a deliberate and senseless violation of the Jewish prohibition of images (Exod. 20:4-6). Such was the uproar that, on this occasion, Pilate was obliged to withdraw (War 2.174). Later he further angered the Jews by taking money from the Temple treasury to build an aqueduct. Probably this should be regarded not so much as an act of theft as of gross insensitivity. In the protest that followed, a number of Jews were killed (War 2.175-177). Eventually Pilate was recalled to Rome after he had ordered a massacre of unarmed Samaritan pilgrims to Mount Gerizim. Second, there were serious economic problems. A hundred and twenty years earlier Pompey had reorganized the land, causing considerable land shortage and making many people poor. In addition, from the time of Herod the Great taxes were high. Josephus makes plain that large numbers of people in the period before the revolt were impoverished. Galilee, which had considerable natural resources, seems in general to have fared rather better economically than Judea. Even so it is noticeable that Jesus' parables reflect a society in which groups of unemployed are a part of normal experience, the amount of a day's pay is decided by the whim of a rich landowner (Matt. 20:1-16), and the loss of work poses a well-understood threat (Luke 16:1-8). It was not coincidence that, when the revolt started, one of the first acts of the rebels on taking control of Jerusalem was to burn the record of debts kept in the public archives (War 2.427).

Third, there was strife between Jews and Gentiles in the cities of Palestine and Syria. Josephus describes such

strife in Caesarea (together with Florus' mishandling of the situation) as among the immediate causes of the war (e.g., War 2.285-332).

Finally, we must not discount religious zeal. The contrast between God's glorious promises to Israel in scripture, and life as Israel experienced it, is not hard to see. Josephus clearly does not approve of Judah the Galilean, one of the founding figures of Jewish resistance to Rome, yet he admits the religious element in Judah's patriotism. Judah and his followers have "a passion for liberty that is almost unconquerable, since they are convinced that God alone is their leader and master" (Antiquities 18.23). Whatever the Jews had done, one suspects that their rebellion would in the end have failed. Undoubtedly they made things easier for the Romans by their own failure to maintain a united front. Indeed, they spent a good deal of energy trying to kill one another rather than the enemy. In addition to that, there were doubtless also many people who endorsed the view reflected in Josephus' history, that despite maladministration and the economic strain, Rome had not done enough to justify the rebellion. The war was foolish, if not sinful. According to rabbinic tradition that was the opinion of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, the Jewish leader and sage who was to be in some respects the refounder of Judaism after the war. He is said to have left Jerusalem while it was still under siege and to have hailed the Roman general Vespasian as one destined to overthrow the Temple and become emperor.

The fall of Jerusalem in 70 had a shattering impact, leaving its abiding mark on the history of both Judaism and Christianity. When the war was over, the Temple was in ruins, many thousands of Jews had died, and the land was desolate. Yochanan ben Zakkai so impressed the Roman conquerors that he obtained permission from them to found a rabbinic school at Yavneh (also known by its Latin name, Jamnia). Under the circumstances, to obtain permission was an extraordinary achievement. Apart from the Christian movement, which would gradually come to tread its own path, the spiritual and intellectual future of Judaism now lay, under God, with ben Zakkai and his fellow scholars.

The Rebellion in Egypt

During the years 115-117 CE the Jews of Egypt, Cyprus, and Libya (then "Cyrenaica") rebelled against Rome. The reasons for this outbreak and its course are very uncertain. Apparently Jews of the land of Israel did not involve themselves in it to any great extent. The burst of hostilities resulted, however, in the decimation of Egyptian Jewry, hitherto the largest community of the Roman diaspora or "dispersion" (that is, Jews not living in the land of Israel).

The Second Jewish Rebellion

In 132 Jews of the land of Israel rebelled again. This rebellion is often called "the second Jewish war" (132-135 CE). It seems to have been mainly a revolt by Judea (not Galilee). The rebels were led by Simeon Bar Kosiba, better known as Bar Kokhba ("Son of a Star"—a name apparently given him by those who held him to be the Messiah).

The immediate causes of the second war are uncertain and the evidence conflicting. Among reasons most commonly suggested are (a) a Roman decision to transform Jerusalem into a pagan city, as is claimed by one ancient historian; (b) a Roman ban on circumcision, as is claimed by another; or (c) both of the above. The only available comment by the rebels themselves about their objective is the legend on the coins they issued: "Jerusalem" and "For the freedom of Jerusalem." Perhaps that is evidence in favor of (a). The timing of the rebellion is also suggestive. It was drawing near to seventy years after the former destruction. Had not Solomon's Temple been rebuilt seventy years after its fall, in fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy (Jer. 25:1-12; 29:10)? Would not God again restore Israel?

From the Jewish viewpoint the second war was as disastrous as the first. Bar Kokhba was defeated. Jerusalem was rebuilt as a pagan city under the name Aelia Capitolina, and Judea was renamed Palestina (Palestine). The Jews of that day, like Daniel before them, were no doubt driven yet again to pray and

meditate on the obscure words of Jeremiah the prophet (Dan. 9:2-27).

We have not been able to answer our question about Israel's relationship to Rome with any great clarity. We have seen a mixture of motives and causes leading to the repeated strife. One thing, however, is clear. It is against a background of present disappointment and passionately held hope that we must understand, and understand sympathetically, the question that even the disciples of Jesus, according to Luke, continued to ask: "Lord, is this time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6)

Additional Notes

Note A: Philosophies of the Greco-Roman World

Platonism

Plato (427-347 BCE) taught that behind the material world which we see lie certain primary realities, the "Forms" or "Ideas." These are perfect, eternal, and alone completely real, transcending time and space. Material things (for example, an actual circle that one might draw) are only imperfect approximations to the Forms (such as the Ideal Circle that exists eternally). They are, as Plato described in his famous "Allegory of the Cave" (Republic 7, 514A-517A), like shadows cast by people we cannot see: it is the unseen people who are real, and the shadows draw near to reality only insofar as they represent the unseen.

Platonism maintained the supremacy of the things that are not seen over the things that are. Plato's Forms are the thoughts of God (noémata theou). They are a world of transcendent models or archetypes that finally and truly correspond to those human dreams of perfection that are never fulfilled in this world. The Forms are "present to" individual beings. By taking hold of the Forms and participating in them the soul is raised above the flux of "becoming" and reaches its true well-being. The final object of the truly moral life is to seek the good that the soul perceives but does not possess—ultimately, that Form of the Good (to idaon tou agathou) that underlies and sustains all the transient and particular facts of existence.

A**ristotelianism**

Plato's pupil Aristotle (384-322 BCE) held rather different views. Whereas Plato set out from the world of "Forms," Aristotle claimed that "forms" exist only as expressed in individual objects. Rather than there being an "ideal" circle existing in its own right, it is the union of the "form" of the circle with "matter" that makes the real individual circle. Aristotle's view required a theory of causation to explain the union of "form" and "matter." According to Aristotle the word "cause" may be used in four senses:

• "formal"—referring to the form that in conjunction with matter makes the individual object;
• "material"—referring to the matter on which the form is imposed;
• "efficient"—referring to the motive power that produces the event;
• "final"—referring to the end that, in the processes of alteration or growth, determines the course of the development.

For the universe as a whole Aristotle held the efficient, formal, and final causes to be in God, the "First Cause" and "Unmoved Mover" of all things. He did not, however, hold this supreme cause to be personal in the Judeo-Christian sense.

Aristotle's work in logic, physics, and ethics has had enormous influence. In ethics he held that virtue is always the mean between two extremes. Courage, for example, is the mean between foolhardiness and cowardice. The ideal life is one of moderation: "nothing too much."

Such were the kinds of teaching that had a major influence on philosophic and religious thinking throughout the period. Certain other philosophical teachers also continued to be influential. These turned their attention

to the more directly personal problems of human existence. The two most important were Zeno (335-263 BCE) and Epicurus (342-270 BCE).

Stoicism

Zeno's teachings became known as Stoicism, from the Greek word for the porch (stoa) in which he used to teach. Zeno held that nature (physis) is identical with reason (logos). By "reason" he meant a harmony that pervades the universe and is basic to it. To be good is to be wise, and to be wise is to live in accordance with nature and reason, unmoved by the sufferings or joys of any particular moment—hence our word "stoic."

Since reason (logos) runs through the universe, the universe is one. Everyone participates in the logos, which is the divine spark in us all. Race, nationality, and class are accidents: to be human is not the special property of any group or class. In some respects Stoicism had a truly cosmopolitan view of human possibilities. "Life according to nature" was open to all, even slaves. In theory Stoics even claimed equality for women, holding that "virtue is the same for man and for woman." In practice, however, women are notably absent among Stoic pupils.

Epicureanism

Epicurus taught that the universe resulted from the clash of atoms. The entire physical world and humanity itself sprang from this collision. Epicurus explained the universe without reference to the gods. He did not deny their existence, but he did not believe they concerned themselves with the small affairs of humanity.

For Epicurus our purpose in life can be only to follow as best we may our natural instincts and impulses as they arise. Pain is to be avoided and pleasure sought. That might sound like hedonism, but for Epicurus it was not. What gives us pleasure?

Ultimately, he would claim, the only real pleasure comes from acting virtuously and avoiding the pains of conscience.

Neo-Pythagoreanism

Pythagorean schools developed in Rome and Alexandria during the first century BCE. They were a group with considerable appeal. Neo-Pythagorean thinkers were chiefly interested in speculating about the divine. They combined elements from Platonic, Aristotelian, and Stoic sources with early Pythagorean tradition. They tried to develop sensitivity to the divine spark within the self. On the principle that "like seeks like" they held that the divine spark in everyone was always seeking to go back to its divine origin. By taking vows of poverty, silence, obedience, and chastity they sought to free themselves from the flesh and to enable the divine spark within them to advance on that quest.

The Neo-Pythagoreans were profoundly mystical. They regarded all existing things as bound together in a universal harmony. Since in their view a part of the divine resides in everything that lives, they cared for all life. They would not eat flesh, and they wore neither wool nor leather. They also saw divine order in the regular movements of the heavens, which they studied carefully. They found harmony and proportion in geometry, in the musical scale, and in astronomy.

Because the motions of the heavens could be reduced to number, the Neo-Pythagoreans attributed to number an almost magical quality. The equipoise of singular and plural, odd and even, finite and infinite had something of that sacred power that guided life on earth and the paths of the stars. Number took to itself something of the holiness of the entities it defined.

There can be no doubt that for many who felt themselves enmeshed in a chaos of war and upheaval, Neo-Pythagoreanism provided meaning and purpose. It gave a promise of release from the tyranny of capricious

and mindless forces. It offered a way of overcoming loneliness and alienation by stressing kinship with the eternal. It provided a means of resolving human grief by union with the divine harmony.

Modern Misunderstandings

"Every Englishman," observed Bernard Shaw on one occasion, "imagines he's read Freud." It is certainly true that many people (and not only the English) use Freudian terms—talking, for example, of "ego" and "id" without any precise idea of what Freud meant by them, and certainly with only the vaguest notion of his theory of personality. In the same way many in the first century used terms from one philosophical system or another, talking, for example, of the logos with only the vaguest idea what lay behind that term in the works of particular philosophers. In this respect the first century was like our own.

Note B: Religions of the Greco-Roman World

The Emperor Cult

For whatever reasons, the expression of religious emotion found new forms. One was the cult of the emperor. It is perhaps not surprising that in a war-torn world many should have thought the bringers of peace to be godlike. The idea that rulers were divine had a long history in the East, and Augustus, while perhaps not encouraging the idea as regards himself, did not discourage it either. He permitted a temple to be built in his honor. No doubt there were many political advantages in such a religion, but it seems doubtful that it could do much to meet the longings of the human soul. Among the most striking religious phenomena of the period were the mystery religions. There is a good reason why the early imperial period has been called the age of the mysteries. By the first century CE mystery religions were practiced widely in the eastern part of the empire (whence they came) and also in the West. There were mysteries of Adonis (from Syria), of Cybele and Attis (from Phrygia), of Mithras (from Persia—this became particularly popular with the army), and of Osiris (from Egypt). The Eleusinian mysteries (from Eleusis near Athens) attracted no less a devotee than the philosopher-emperor Marcus Aurelius (121-180).

Mystery Religions

The mysteries were, of course, mysterious. In general devotees were pledged to secrecy, and in general they kept their pledge. In discussing the contents of the mysteries we must be cautious. Our sources of information are few and often late. Nonetheless we can glean enough to discern certain patterns of belief and practice. Primarily the mysteries were concerned with deification and redemption. After a period of preparation and purification neophytes took part in a sacred drama in which the story of the god was recalled. By sharing in this they entered into the experience of the god and so became divine, freed from the limitations of this life and heirs of a blessed immortality.

To the twentieth century much in the rites of the mysteries, so far as we know them, appears crude or violent; but then the twentieth century would doubtless also have been shocked by the ritual of the Jerusalem Temple. Be that as it may, none can doubt the genuine religious fervor reflected, for example, in the prayer with which Apuleius celebrated his initiation into the rites of Isis:

Holiest of the holy, the perpetual comfort of humankind, who by thy great bounty and grace nourishest all the world, and bearest a great affection to the adversities of the miserable as a loving mother, thou askest no rest either night or day, neither art thou idle at any time in giving benefits and succouring all, as well on land as on the sea. . . . By thy means the stars give answer, the seasons return, the gods rejoice, the elements serve: at thy commandment the winds do blow, the clouds nourish the earth, the seeds prosper, and the fruits do grow. The birds of the air, the beasts of the hill, the serpents of the den, and the fishes of the sea do tremble at thy majesty: but my spirit is not able to give thee sufficient praise . . . . (The Golden Ass, 19)

Defenders of patriarchal order in society often blamed the growth of eastern religions on emancipated

women. There may be some truth in this. Another prayer to Isis says: “You have made the power of women equal to that of men” (Oxyrynnchus Papyri 1380.214-6). On the other hand the critics of oriental religion undoubtedly exaggerated this aspect. Other evidence does not suggest that women were leaders in the spread of the new faiths. The Isis cult stressed the equality of women, but priests still outnumbered priestesses and in most cases probably outranked them. Perhaps the new religions were initially somewhat feminist, but as they became more established and “respectable,” they responded to traditionalist patriarchal pressures by placing less emphasis on their feminist leanings.