

Hellenistic and Roman Religions

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In the Greco-Roman world in which Paul lived, numerous religious movements and philosophical systems had found popular acceptance. Most people were tolerant of other religions, and there was frequently a blending of various religious traditions.

I. Domestic gods and goddesses

A. Household deities were expected to protect the family from disaster and illness. They were also expected to provide for the economic welfare of the family.

B. Religious practices included the veneration of small statues of the gods and goddesses, sacrifices of grain or meat, or offerings of food and drink on the hearth. The hearth, where fire was kept burning, was the center of the domestic religion. Prayers were spoken at the hearth morning and evening and sacrifices were offered. Hestia was the goddess of the hearth who provided security and blessings for the family and home.

C. In homes, paintings of gods or niches where small statues of gods were kept. Sometimes small shrines in the homes.

II. Civic or state gods and goddesses

A. Cities often had a patron deity who protected them. Huge temples were built to the gods and goddesses. Compare the temple to Artemis at Ephesus; the altar of Zeus in Pergamum. Cities often had temples to many gods or goddesses. Priests served in the temples; sacrifices were offered; festivals were held. Individuals went to the temple to offer sacrifices, for celebrations, to pay homage to the god or goddess. Purity was required to enter the temple precincts. Meat that was sacrificed was sold in the market place.

B. Identification of Greek and Roman gods and goddesses.

Aphrodite/Venus – goddess of love/sex/beauty. Major temple on Acropolis at Corinth.

Artemis/Diana –goddess of the hunt and fertility. Temple at Ephesus.

One of seven wonders of ancient world. Worshipped throughout the empire.

Zeus/Jupiter. Temple of Zeus in Athens, still seen, was largest in ancient world. Also altar to Zeus at Pergamum.

Dionysus/Bacchus – God of wine and fertility.

III. Personal Religions

A. Asclepius – Cos, Epidauros, Pergamum, Corinth

B. Mystery Religions

1. Eleusinian Mysteries—Demeter, mother of grain. Her daughter, Kore-Persephone was carried off to the underworld by Hades.

Demeter is unable to find her and withdraws into a fast. As a result the grain does not grow and people are afraid of starving. Zeus intervenes and forces Hades to release Kore who spends two-thirds of the year with her mother and one-third in the underworld. (The dry summer was the time when wheat doesn't grow but must be stored underground in huge grain jars.) Pigs were the primary sacrificial animal for the cult of Demeter.

2. Mithraism

IV. Magic, Astrology, Divination

Gain control over life

Magic - Paul on Cyprus, the Jewish magician Bar-Jesus, also call Elymas, who opposed the work Paul was doing.

Astrology

Omens – stars, comets, strange occurrences

Divination – arrangement of organs of sacrificed animals

Oracles – temple of Apollo at Delphi, temple of Apollo at Didymas

V. Philosophies

VI. We tend to think of philosophy as a subject studied in school. In the ancient world, philosophy was a way to make sense of life, to order one's life, and to provide guidance on how to live. In those ways, ancient philosophies were close to certain religions.

VII. Stoicism – live in conformity with nature. Everyone has a place in the universe. Since one cannot change one's destiny but can only accept it and submit to it, one must learn not to be affected by external circumstances. The wise person will be indifferent to pain and pleasure, to wealth and poverty, to success and misfortune. Compare this attitude with Paul in Phil. 4:11-12: “Not that I complain of want; for I have learned, in whatever state I am, to be content. I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound; in any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and want.” Paul here even uses a favorite word of the Stoics autarkns—content, self-sufficient. The difference, however, is that the Stoic faced life and death with resources all found within himself. Paul found the secret of his life in his union with Christ.

VIII. Epicurus- Pleasure—pleasure – freedom from disturbance, whereby one achieved inner harmony, happiness and peace. Not concerned with the gods. The book of Acts describes Paul in Athens having an

IX. Cynicism -- Attempted to live a life free from society constraints or legal constrictions. Rather, live a life of freedom according to nature. A life of asceticism, begging, Diatribe

VI. Judaism

Jews, Gentiles, God-fearers

Institutions – temple, synagogue, Sanhedrin

Scriptures

Groups – Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes

Persecution

For the first few decades of the Christian movement, the conflicts it faced were internal disputes or struggles with Judaism. The Roman government took no action against Christians, who seemed to them to be only another sect within Judaism. In fact the power and stability of the Roman government were great assets for the early Christians. Good roads, safer land and sea travel, and relative peace throughout the empire contributed to the rapid spread of the Christian message throughout the Mediterranean world. Paul, writing in Romans 13:1-7, urged his readers to respect and obey the government authorities because they have been appointed by God and act as God's servants to punish wrongdoers.

Peaceful relations between the church and Rome were not to continue for long, however. Although no concerted, empire-wide persecution of Christians by

the government occurred during the first two centuries, sporadic, isolated incidents of persecution did endanger the church.

Suetonius, a Roman historian, writing around 120 C.E. about the action of the Roman emperor Claudius around 49 C.E., says, “Since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he expelled them from Rome.” The Chrestus is usually understood as a misspelling of Christus, the Latin word for Christ. The situation described by Suetonius was apparently disturbances in the Jewish section of Rome due to the presence and spread of Christianity among the Jews. Acts 18:2 refers to this expulsion of Jews from Rome in Corinth. Paul meets Aquila and Priscilla, who have recently come from Italy “because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome.” This incident should not be viewed as government action against Christians, however. Claudius’s edict was directed at Jews. Any Christians who were expelled were expelled as Jews, not as Christians. The Roman government does not seem to have made a distinction at this time between Jews and Christians. That step first occurred under Nero.

The earliest evidence for Roman persecution directed specifically at Christians comes from the time of the emperor Nero, who was remembered in Christian tradition as responsible for the deaths of both Peter and Paul in Rome. Writing in the second century, Tacitus stated that when a massive fire destroyed a large portion of the city of Rome in 64 C.E. Nero blamed the conflagration on the Christians, “a class of men loathed for their vices.” Tacitus described the incident

as follows: “First, then, the confessed members of the sect were arrested; next, on their disclosures, vast numbers were convicted, not so much on the count of arson as for hatred of the human race. And derision accompanied their end: they were covered with wild beasts’ skins and torn to death by dogs; or they were fastened on crosses, and, when daylight failed were burned to serve as lamps by night.”

Suetonius also mentioned the persecution of Christians by Nero, but did not connect their treatment with the fire, giving only the explanation that they were “a class of men given to a new and mischievous superstition.” The extent of Nero’s persecution of Christians is not known. Tacitus’s statement that “vast numbers were convicted” is not too helpful. Whereas Nero’s reputation as the first persecutor of the church is well-founded, his actions against the Christians were likely limited only to Rome and to a short period of time.

Christian tradition remembered Domitian, who was emperor from 81-96 C.E., as the next great enemy of the church. During his reign he alienated the senate, executing several senators on supposedly false or trivial charges. At his death, the senate issued a *damnatio memoriae* against him, thus obliterating his memory by melting down his coins, destroying his statues, and erasing his name from public records. Other than the book of Revelation, however, little evidence can be garnered to support the idea of Domitian as a major persecutor of Christians. The few isolated incidents mentioned by ancient writers that are

sometimes pointed to as evidence of Domitian's hostile actions towards Christians are open to various interpretations.

The most interesting mention of persecution of Christians comes from the correspondence between Pliny the Younger, governor of the Roman province of Bithynia and Pontus in northern Asia Minor, and Trajan, Roman emperor from 98-117 C.E. In one of his letters, Pliny wrote to Trajan asking for advice on how to handle Christians who were brought to his attention. He was unsure of the proper procedure because he had never been present at any trial of Christians. Pliny wondered "whether it is the mere name of Christian which is punishable, even if innocent of crime, or rather the crimes associated with the name." He then described what his course of action had been for those brought before him accused of being Christians: "I have asked them in person if they are Christians, and if they admit it, I repeat the question a second and third time, with a warning of the punishment awaiting them. If they persist, I order them to be led away for execution; for, whatever the nature of their admission, I am convinced that their stubbornness and unshakeable obstinacy ought not to go unpunished." Once he started dealing with the problem, the number of cases multiplied as a result both of informers and of an anonymous pamphlet with names of people accused of being Christians. Pliny dismissed the charges against anyone who recanted and made offerings to a statue of the emperor and images of the gods.

After investigating the Christians, Pliny could find no specific crime of which they were guilty, stating, “I found nothing but a degenerate sort of cult carried to extravagant lengths.” Even so, he found the group worrisome “in view of the number of persons endangered: for a great many individuals of every age and class, both men and women, are being brought to trial, and this is likely to continue. It is not only the towns, but villages and rural districts too which are infected through contact with this wretched cult.” In his reply to Pliny, Trajan affirmed that the governor had followed the proper procedure. He added, however, that Christians were not to be sought out, that anyone who recanted by making offerings to the gods was to be pardoned, and that anonymous accusations should not be allowed.

Since persecution of Christians was sporadic and localized, no general law against Christianity likely existed during this period. Furthermore, that Pliny did not know the grounds for investigating Christians or the crime for which they were guilty indicates that he was unaware of any official edict against Christianity. In some cases, Christian groups might have run into trouble with the authorities because they were thought to be subversive or illegal. Associations, called *collegia* in Latin, were widespread and numerous in the Roman Empire. These *collegia* were of various types—religious associations, trade and professional guilds, and burial societies. The Roman authorities were often suspicious of these organizations and on several occasions attempted to control or even banish them

because they were afraid the groups might become politically active and subversive.

The situations reflected in the letter to Pliny, and perhaps even in Revelation, were possibly instances in which Christians first experienced hostility from their non-Christian neighbors who then accused them before the authorities of various “crimes.” Writings from the late second century and afterwards mention Christians being accused of atheism, cannibalism, incest, infanticide, and magic. Some of these charges were likely due to misunderstandings of Christian practices. Mistaken ideas of the Lord’s Supper (eating the body and drinking the blood) led to charges of cannibalism, while misperceptions of Christian “love-feasts” (or *agape* meals) and the custom of calling each other “brother” and “sister” led to accusations of incest. The refusal of the Christians to participate in the worship of the various gods and goddesses commonly worshipped by their neighbors led to charges of atheism, while their failure to participate in the imperial cult and other social activities would have labeled them as anti-social at best, and traitors at worst. These accusations are perhaps what Tacitus had in mind when he referred to the Christians as a people “loathed for their vices.” Even if these charges against them proved false, the Christians’ obstinate refusal to renounce their faith when given the opportunity would have been reason enough for punishment, as the letter from Pliny makes clear.

Hostilities against the early Christians were apparently isolated and few in number. In most places Christians likely lived quietly and peaceably with their neighbors. Occasionally, persecution did occur. Trajan's response to Pliny indicates the precarious situation in which some Christians found themselves. They were not to be sought out, and, as long as they kept a low profile, they were safe. If brought to the attention of the authorities, however, they might be faced with the ultimate test of faith—recant or be killed.

Thus Paul and the other early Christians lived in a world that had many religious and philosophical options. There was no shortage of gods and belief systems. Their challenge was to find a way to present their message. The book of Acts describes one way they met that challenge when it tells of Paul in Athens at the Aeropagus, or Mars Hill, proclaiming to the people, "As I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things." By adapting their message to the world in which they lived, Paul and the other early Christians, contributed to the growth of this new faith, from Jerusalem to Athens, to Rome, and throughout the Mediterranean basin.