

The Political and Cultural World of Paul

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The political and cultural world of Paul had been shaped in significant ways by the lives of two major individuals—Alexander the Great and the emperor Augustus. We can begin the story of Alexander with that of his father, Philip II, king of Macedonia, a region in the northern part of Greece. In the fourth century B.C.E., Philip succeeded in gaining control of most of Greece. Concerned about the Persians' empire-building, and especially their activities in Asia Minor (modern Turkey), Philip planned to liberate the cities of Asia Minor from Persian control. He was assassinated, however, before he could carry-out his invasion. When his son Alexander III, later known as Alexander the Great, succeeded him as the ruler of the Greeks, Alexander carried out his father's plans, not only driving the Persians out of Asia Minor, but eventually defeating them completely. Not content with those conquests, Alexander expanded his success, eventually becoming the ruler over much of the ancient Near Eastern world. He marched his army all the way to northwestern India, at which point his men, homesick and weary, refused to go any further. Alexander then headed back westward. He died during this return journey in 323 in Babylon at the age of 32. The cause of death is unknown, but malaria, typhoid fever, and even alcohol poisoning from too much drinking and partying have been suggested causes. At the time of his death, his kingdom reached from Macedonia in the west to the Egypt, in the south, to India in the east. The area of Palestine, or Israel, came under his control in 332. Alexander had made no arrangements for someone to succeed him at his death, so as result, struggles broke out over who would control his empire. When the dust settled, his empire was divided up (and continually fought over) by his generals. Only two of those are significant for our concerns—Seleucus and Ptolemy. Seleucus and his descendants eventually gained control of most of Asia Minor, parts of Syria, and Mesopotamia. Ptolemy controlled Egypt and Palestine.

In 198 B.C.E., a battle took place between the Seleucids and the Ptolemies at Pnias, later known as Caesarea Philippi, that resulted in Palestine being ruled by the Seleucids. During the approximately 100 years that the Ptolemies ruled Palestine, they were rather benign rulers as far as the Jews were concerned. In fact, during this period, a significant number of Jews settled in Alexandria, Egypt. After the Seleucids gained control of Palestine in 198 B.C.E., the situation for the Jews initially remained acceptable. That changed, however, in 175 B.C.E. with the accession to the Seleucid throne by Antiochus IV Epiphanes, who for various reasons eventually outlawed the practice of Judaism. The temple in Jerusalem was turned into a temple to Zeus, with pigs being sacrificed on the temple altar to the Greek god Zeus. One of the results of Antiochus's oppressive measures against the Jews was an uprising in 167 B.C.E. to regain religious freedom, led by Judas Maccabeus, that came to be known as the Maccabean Revolt. In 164 Judas and his followers were able to retake the temple precinct in Jerusalem, tear down the desecrated altar in the temple, replace it with a new altar, and rededicate the temple to the worship of the god of the Jews. This event is commemorated by the Jewish holiday of Hannukkah. Judas and his brothers continued the struggle against the Hellenistic rulers and eventually were able to gain political independence in 141. For the first time since the Babylonians had destroyed Jerusalem in 587 B.C.E., the land of Israel became an independent state with autonomous rulers. The descendants of the Maccabees, known as the Hasmoneans, ruled over Palestine until 63 B.C.E., when Rome took control. Thus from the sixth century until the first century B.C.E., large portions of Asia Minor, Mesopotamia, Syria, Palestine, and Egypt had been controlled at various times by the Persians, the Greeks, and the Hellenistic rulers.

The influence of Alexander the Great was not limited to the political sphere, however. Equally as important, was the spread of Greek culture, a phenomenon referred to as Hellenization, from the Greek word for Greece, Hellas. To be sure, Greek thought and practices had already infiltrated much of the ancient Near Eastern world, but with the conquests of Alexander that spread increased greatly. Greek theaters were built, Greek dress was adopted, Greek religion and Greek philosophy became popular, Greek gymnasiums and stadiums were constructed, children were given Greek names, and eventually the Greek language became the common language of commerce and politics. Even after the Romans dominated these areas, they too, were shaped by Greek culture, with the intertwined Greek and Roman cultures often referred to as simply the Greco-Roman culture. As you travel throughout the Mediterranean world, take note of the evidence that still exists of the influence of the spread of Greek culture. For example, you can see in Miletus an impressive theater from the Hellenistic period, later expanded by the Romans; in Pergamum, the remains of a large gymnasium complex; in Ephesus the impressive Library of Celsus, built during Roman times but in an architectural style indebted to the Greeks. Plus, in almost every ancient site you will visit, you will see numerous inscriptions written Greek carved on temples, walls, and monuments.

Three specific examples can be mentioned in which Paul was directly influenced by the spread of Greek culture, spurred by the conquests of Alexander the Great. First, Paul wrote and spoke in Greek. A native of Tarsus on the northern Mediterranean coast of modern Turkey, Paul grew up with Greek as his native language. It's primarily because of Alexander's influence that the entire New Testament, including Paul's letters, was written in Greek. Second, Paul's scripture, his Bible, was the Jewish Bible, what Christians refer to as the Old Testament. But even Paul had been trained to read the Jewish scriptures in Hebrew, the version that he used and quoted in his letters was the Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures, a translation known as the Septuagint. That translation was made in the second century B.C.E. because Greek had become so widely used after the conquests of Alexander that a translation into Greek was needed. Third, in several places in Paul's writings, the terminology he uses and some of the ideas he expresses point to Paul's being familiar with several of the Greek philosophical systems of his day, philosophies such as Stoicism, Cynicism, and Epicureanism.

Although Hellenistic culture continued to shape the ancient world, a new political power emerged and soon dominated—the Romans. Founded in the 8th century B.C.E., Rome expanded its territory, bringing all of Italy under its control and eventually much of the Mediterranean world, along with parts of Africa, Europe, and Asia. By the middle of the second century B.C.E., almost all of Greece was under Roman rule, and Rome was beginning to increase its presence and control in Asia Minor. In the midst of Rome's expansion, however, it also suffered through a period of extensive fighting, sometimes called the Roman Civil Wars, lasting approximately one hundred years, from about 133 B.C.E. to 30 B.C.E. One of the major victims of this internal strife was Julius Caesar, whose assassination in 44 B.C.E. caused a final round of civil wars that brought the Roman Republic to an end. In his will, Caesar adopted his grand nephew, Octavian, to be his successor. After Caesar's death, Octavian formed an alliance with Marc Antony and Lepidus to fight against Caesar's assassins Brutus and Cassius. In 42, Octavian, Marc Antony and Lepidus defeated Brutus and Cassius at Philippi in northern Greece (and later a city important for Paul's mission work). The victors divided up the territory, with Marc Antony ruling the eastern provinces, Lepidus getting southern Europe and northern African, and Octavian control of Italy and Spain. Soon, however, Lepidus was forced out, and the struggle for control erupted between Octavian and Marc Antony, who had joined forces with the beautiful and powerful Cleopatra, a descendant of the Hellenistic ruler Ptolemy, and now the

queen of Egypt. At a major battle fought on sea and land at Actium on the Adriatic coast of Greece, Octavian's forces defeated the army and naval fleet of Marc Antony and Cleopatra, who were barely able to escape and fled by ship back to Alexandria in Egypt. The following summer, Octavian arrived in Alexandria to finish his conquest. Separately, both Marc Antony and Cleopatra committed suicide rather than being captured by Octavian. Returning to Rome the following year, Octavian was hailed as hero, and savior, and bringer of peace. In 27 B.C.E., the Senate honored Octavian by voting to bestow on him the title Augustus Caesar. (Augustus was an ancient, sacred title.) Augustus's reign as the leader of the Roman Empire continued until his death in 14 C.E. It was almost certainly during the reign of Augustus as emperor that Paul was born, although we can only guess at the approximate year when Paul was born. Following Augustus, the other Roman emperors who ruled during Paul's lifetime were Tiberius (14-37), Gaius, better known by his nickname of Caligula (37-41), Claudius (41-54), who would have been emperor during the major part of Paul's missionary work. He is mentioned in the book of Acts as having expelled Jews from Rome, an event that likely occurred in 49 C.E. According to Acts, it was because of this edict by Claudius that two Jewish Christians, Aquilla and Priscilla were forced to leave Rome and went to Corinth where they Paul met them. Because Paul was a tentmaker by trade as they were, Paul stayed with them and worked with them while in Corinth. The last emperor during Paul's life was, Nero (54-68), whom later traditions credited with having Paul executed.

Rome ruled its vast empire through a mixture of local client kings, such as Herod the Great in Palestine, or in some places directly by Roman governors, such as was the case later in Palestine when Roman governors such as Pilate, Festus, and then Felix governed the area for Rome. Although Rome allowed a certain degree of self-rule and was rather tolerant of native customs and religions, Rome expected loyalty from its subjects, expressed through the payment of tribute and taxes and recognition of Roman authority. Any acts of rebellion or resistance were handled swiftly and punitively, as seen when the Jews in Judea revolted in 66 C.E., resulting in Rome's destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 C.E.

The book of Acts mentions several occasions when Paul had encounters with Roman officials or those who exercised authority on their behalf. The book of Acts says that when Paul and Barnabas were traveling across the island of Cyprus, they were invited to share their message with the Roman proconsul (or governor) of Cyprus, Sergius Paulus, who became a believer. Later, in Corinth, Paul is brought before Gallio, the proconsul of Achaia, the Roman province in southern Greece, after charges are leveled against him by some of the Jewish residents of the city. At the end of Acts, Paul is arrested when a disturbance breaks out in the temple, is imprisoned in Caesarea and his case is heard before Festus, and Felix. When Paul appeals to have his case heard before the emperor, he is put aboard a ship and sent as a prisoner to Rome. The book of Acts ends with Paul in chains, awaiting the verdict from Roman authority.

Rome's power and influence held sway throughout the empire, not just through political or military might, but also by means of Roman imperial propaganda. The period of peace ushered in by the rule of Augustus—what came to be known as the *pax Romana*, or the Roman peace—was to last for nearly two hundred years. The term *pax Romana* does not mean that all wars had ceased for the empire. Rome was still engaged in securing and even expanding its borders. However, the period of the disastrous civil wars came to an end and the empire enjoyed a period of peace and prosperity that it had not known for a while. Roman writers heaped accolades onto Augustus, proclaiming him the savior of the empire, the maintainer of justice, the bringer of peace, the benefactor of the people, the lord or master of the world. For

example, an inscription from 9 B.C.E. found at the city of Priene, near the Aegean coast of Turkey, reads, "Since the Providence which has ordered all things and is deeply interested in our life has set in most perfect order by giving us Augustus, whom she filled with virtue that he might benefit mankind, sending him as a savior, both for us and our descendants, that he might end war and arrange all things, and since he, Caesar, by his appearance excelled even our anticipations, surpassing all previous benefactors, and not even leaving to posterity any hope of surpassing what he has done, and since the birthday of the god Augustus was the beginning for the world of the good tidings that came by reason of him." Augustus recognized the value of such lofty praise and used it to his advantage, promoting not only his qualities and virtues but also the power and sovereignty of the Roman Empire. Soon after Julius Caesar had died, Augustus (or Octavian at the time) ordered that games planned by Caesar to honor the god Venus still be carried out. During the games, a brilliant comet appeared in the sky, which the common people interpreted as both as a sign of divine approval of the games and a sign that Julius Caesar himself had now been transformed into a god. He was given the title of "the divine Julius," meaning he had gone to be with the gods and become one of the gods. Augustus made good use of this idea. He had a statue erected in the Roman Forum depicting Caesar with a star on his head, indicating Caesar's divinity. A few years later a temple to the "the divine Julius" was constructed in Rome next to the burial place of Caesar. If Caesar was now one of the gods, then what did that make Augustus? Nothing less than a son of god. Inscriptions on coins proclaimed Augustus as a son of God, as did inscriptions throughout the empire.

Paul and the other early Christians lived in a world in which imperial propaganda was widespread. Parades and games were held in honor of the emperors. Festivities were held to celebrate their birthdays. Sacrifices were given in their honor in the various temples to a variety of gods throughout the empire. Eventually, a system, a cult, of emperor worship developed. The earlier emperors, including Augustus, however, were rather hesitant to promote the idea that they were divine during their lifetimes. Augustus readily made use of the idea that he was the son of god, but he stopped short of claiming divine status for himself. In many of the Roman provinces outside Rome, particularly in Greece, Egypt and the east, there was already a tradition that earthly rulers were divine or semi-divine. The pharaohs of Egypt, for example, were viewed as gods. The Romans, however, made a distinction between the gods and mortals, and as a result, the cult of the emperor developed more slowly in the certain parts of the Roman Empire. Emperor worship involved the offering of divine honors, including sacrifices, to the emperors, either living or dead. The emperors were revered as superior to ordinary humans, but not fully divine. In the Hellenistic east, these same emperors were more accepting of such worship and adulation because in the east the rulers were often viewed as the earthly manifestations of the gods. (The Hellenistic ruler Antiochus IV, e.g., had proclaimed himself Antiochus Epiphanes, meaning the "manifest one." He asserted that he was the earthly manifestation of the god Zeus.)

Even in Rome, however, the understanding of the status of the emperor began to change. Although during his lifetime, the emperor Augustus had tried to retain the old Roman distinction between human and divine, after his death he was officially declared divine by the Roman Senate and a temple with its attendant priests was erected in Rome. Tiberius, his successor, attempted to follow the lead of Augustus, resisting divine honors for himself. In contrast, the next emperor, Caligula, demanded that his statue be set up in temples of other gods throughout the empire. He was apparently the first Roman emperor to claim during his lifetime that he was a god, stating that he was the incarnation of the god Jupiter. He even ordered that his statue be placed in the temple in Jerusalem. Fortunately, he died before this order was carried out.

The situation with the emperors during the rest of the first century varied. Claudius, successor to his nephew Caligula, followed the practice of Augustus and Tiberius of discouraging divine accolades. Nero, his step-son who became emperor after Claudius was poisoned by his own wife (the mother of Nero), was more willing to accept and believe the divine praises and honors bestowed on him by the public. Vespasian, on the other hand, joked about the belief in the divine status of the emperors. Poking fun at the practice of declaring the emperors divine after their death, Vespasian reportedly remarked on his death bed, "Woe is me. I think I'm turning into a god."

As Paul traveled around throughout the Mediterranean world, he would certainly have been surrounded by constant reminders of the divine or semi-divine claims being made about the emperors. The imperial cult was particularly strong in Asia Minor, where Ephesus was located, a city in which Paul apparently spent at least two years. Augustus had allowed the people of Ephesus to build a temple to the goddess Roma (the divine embodiment of Rome) and to the Divine Julius. Archaeological remains at Ephesus include an inscription mentioning the construction of a sacred precinct for the worship of Augustus. The veneration of the emperors in Ephesus continued long after the time of Paul, with temples or other structures erected to Domitian, Trajan, and Hadrian.

The language about Jesus used by Paul and other early Christians may at times have been deliberately in contrast to some of the imperial claims that were being made. Augustus may have claimed to be a son of a god, but Paul knew who the true Son of God was. The birth of Augustus might be seen by some as the "good news," as mentioned in the Priene inscription, but the early church proclaimed that the supreme good news or gospel was that associated with the birth of Jesus. Augustus may have been the ruler who brought the Pax Romana, peace to the world, but the church proclaimed that real peace on earth came through Jesus, the Prince of Peace. Temples, festivals, and parades promoted the idea that the emperor was lord and savior, but Paul proclaimed Jesus as the Lord and Savior.