

UNIT 1C: CHURCH HISTORY

21: New Testament Background

“Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king”. (Matthew 2:1)

Before we examine the New Testament texts or grapple with the teachings of Jesus Christ we need to consider the lands and cultures, the political and religious debates that form a backdrop to this entire era. We should recognise that the Holy Land, a narrow rectangle along the Mediterranean coast, squeezed between Egypt and the Near East, was as troubled then as now. We have to realise that the New Testament is, correctly, Christ-centred and that many of the issues of the day, originally all too apparent to contemporaries, now have to be teased out from between the lines or reconstructed from other sources (not least archaeological). We have to recognise that since the ministry of Jesus Christ was directed mainly toward the Jews, this overshadows the reality of how multicultural and religiously diverse the region was at the time, (again, as it is now). We have to shed the legacy of many decades of novels, films and popular portrayals and receive the Holy Land in the 1st century as being at the heart of a cosmopolitan Mediterranean, full of prominent Greek cities, rather than the conventional back-water inhabited by picturesque nomads. As today, the Holy Land was focusing the minds and sharpening the appetites of politicians as far away as Rome and Persia.

Herod the Great

Above all we have to rethink the roles of some of the villains – and others or at least look at them from another perspective. In 40 BC Herod the Great, an associate of Cleopatra and Egypt, had been appointed King of Judea by Marc Antony in Rome. An astute politician, he was confirmed as client ruler by Octavian (Augustus) in Rhodes (Greece) in 30 BC. Herod was an Idumaeon (or Edomite) by background, an ally of Rome and promoter of Hellenistic culture –

and therefore resented by many of his Jewish subjects. He ruled over a troubled land that included much of what is considered the “Holy Land” by Christians and Jews - but was already known as “Palestine” to Greeks, Romans and Barbarians. Herod not only walked a tight-rope between different factions, at home and in Rome, but inaugurated a “Cool Palestina”. Herod rebuilt the Temple on a grand scale to appease the Jews, founded cities for Greek/Roman settlers (including a new capital- Caesarea, named after Caesar) and stimulated the economy by building castles (like Masada) and attacking his Arab neighbours (the Nabataeans).

Palestine – Geography and Culture

Ancient Palestine was an ill-defined unit and included both lands covered by modern Israel/Palestine and regions of modern Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. Greek and Roman writers tended to view Palestine and Phoenicia (mainly Lebanon) as subdivisions of Greater Syria or “Oriens”. The name “Palestine” is directly derived from Philistia – the coastal homeland of the Philistians.

The Philistians had migrated to the Holy Land from the island of Crete in the era of Abraham and Isaac and had continued to contend for supremacy with the ancient Israelites up to the era of Kings David and Solomon (1000 – 925 BC). After the conquests of Alexander the Great (323 BC) the Philistians were assimilated to new settlers from Greece and Macedonia. They no longer represented a distinct group in the time of Jesus.

Contact between the Greeks and the peoples of Palestine goes back to Minoan and Mycenaean times. However, we must assume that this was primarily between Crete and the Philistians - as it was not till the end of the 4th century BC that Jews were first noticed by Greek writers. In this early context they were praised as brave, self-disciplined and philosophical. In the Hellenistic

period around 29 new Greek cities were founded in Palestine. The administration, economy, legal system and religion of these new foundations was entirely based on the Greek model.

The Hellenization of Palestine was reinforced by a number of pro-Greek kings from the 3rd century BC onwards and later by the Roman administration. The dynasty of Herod was crucial in promoting Greek culture and manners – not least through the foundation of Greco-Roman cities like Caesarea Maritima. This was soon the major city of Palestine, the most important centre of Christianity in the apostolic era onwards and the administrative centre - up to the 8th century AD when the Arabs moved the capital inland.

The ruling Jewish elite was open to Hellenism to an amazing degree – and this invariably provoked a reaction from conservative Jews. We note that the Apocryphal writer Jesus ben Sirach denounced “excessive” Hellenisers in Jerusalem around 180 BC. In the years 175-172 BC the High Priest Jason represented this extreme Hellenizing faction. Further measures taken by his successor, Menelaus (162 BC), provoked both the Maccabee revolt and the famed war with Antiochus IV Epiphanes of Syria. However, even the Maccabees signed treaties with Sparta and adopted Greek titles. Therefore, it has been argued that had the High Priests Jason and Menelaus proceeded more cautiously Hellenization would have progressed unopposed.

Languages

The mother tongue of Jesus was Aramaic, known as Syriac to the Greeks. Related to both Hebrew and Arabic, this Semitic language spread outwards from the Syrian Desert from the 7th century BC onwards. After being adopted as the administrative language of the Persian Empire it replaced most other languages of the Near East and competed with Greek throughout the Hellenistic and Byzantine centuries. At least in Judaea, Hebrew survived alongside Aramaic as a spoken language up to the first half of the second century AD.

From inscriptions and other evidence from Palestine it is clear that Greek was widely used alongside Aramaic and Hebrew – certainly where government and trade were concerned. It should be noted that relations with Jews living outside Palestine required a command of Greek. We know that in Egypt, for example, the Jewish population were almost entirely Greek speaking. In this context, it is easy to understand how Greek so readily became the vehicle of early Christian preaching and ministry across the Mediterranean.

Minorities

In the time of Jesus, the Samaritans remained a distinct ethnic/religious group alongside Jews, Greeks and others. With the variant Samaritan Torah, the Samaritans argued that their worship was the true religion of the ancient Israelites prior to the Babylonian Exile. They considered themselves the faithful remnant of Israel who were indigenous to the Holy Land. Opposing this tradition to Judaism, they attacked the Jews as bringing back an altered and amended religion from Babylonian exile. Thus, they were regularly and unsurprisingly in conflict with the Jews. The Samaritans were not an obscure sect, even in late Roman times they still numbered over a million faithful. Today there are fewer than a thousand Samaritans in Israel/Palestine.

Although referred to favourably in the New Testament, the Samaritans were regularly in conflict with their Christian neighbours in the Byzantine period and virtually outlawed by the Emperor Zeno after a series of revolts in the 5th century AD. Interestingly, the differences and conflict between Samaritanism and Judaism can be seen to parallel and prefigure many of the issues that divide Christianity and Islam. If this parallel is taken seriously then we have to revisit the texts relating to the Samaritans in the Christian Scriptures and perhaps rethink our view of non-Christian monotheists.

Mention of the Canaanites in a discussion of the Palestine of the New Testament era may seem anachronistic. Nevertheless, the Syro-Phoenician woman is also called a Canaanite. It is clear that the Canaanites were still around and we must reflect that “Phoenician” is the Greek term for a people whose self-designation was Canaanite (both terms mean red or purple). St Augustine noticed that the people of Carthage in Africa called themselves Chanani or Canaanite – as did the people of Laodicea (now Latakia towards the Turkish border).

We might reflect on both the significance of King Solomon granting “the land of Cabul” (region of Nazareth) to the Canaanite Hiram of Tyre and the Prophet Isaiah naming this province “Galilee” which simply means “the land of the Nations”. Keeping this in mind, although Jesus is apparently scornful of the Canaanite woman, as a Galilean himself he cannot have been unfamiliar with this people – the indigenous population of the Holy Land.

Antioch and Christianity

Antioch was the capital of the Hellenistic and Roman East, overshadowing both Jerusalem and Damascus. It was the third city of the Roman Empire after Rome and Alexandria – and later held the same rank in the Byzantine Empire. From a cluster of modest Greek settlements (around Iopolis, Meroe and Antigonía) it grew relentlessly under Seleucid/Macedonian rule. Antioch Tetrapolis (quadrupled city) came to number over 500,000 citizens in the Roman era. Interestingly, the Jews of the Kerateion quarter were amongst the original settlers of the city, had a governor of their own and played an important role in the politics of the Seleucid court – regardless of conflict between Antiochenes and the Palestinian Jews. Apparently, there was far less tension between Greeks and Jews here – at least when compared to Alexandria.

Christians, dispersed by the persecution in which Stephen was put to death (c. 31 AD), brought Christianity to Antioch at an early date. It was at Antioch where the disciples were most

welcomed and where the new faith was most successfully preached. It was here that the Antiochenes, famous for their wit, coined the term Christian. This Christian connection caused the citizens problems with Julian the Apostate and gave rise to the title “Theopolis” (replacing Tetrapolis) in the Byzantine era. Antioch remained a largely Christian city with a balanced Greek/Armenian/Jacobite population until 1268 when the Mamluks massacred and enslaved all non-Muslims (under orders from Sultan Baibars). Today known as Antakya it is a sleepy town in Turkey with little to remind the tourist of either the rich Christian heritage or the days when it was the capital of the East. Archaeologists are still unable to locate the most important monuments – whether Roman or Byzantine.

Jewish Politics and Religion

In the time of Jesus a number of issues convulsed Palestinian Jewish communities. Some were entirely theological and others reflected the problems of the day – the establishment of the Herodian dynasty, encroaching Hellenization and the expansion of Roman hegemony.

The Pharisees are regarded as the fathers of modern Judaism. Their main distinguishing characteristic was a belief in an Oral Law that God gave the Prophet Moses at Mount Sinai along with the Torah. Thus, the Pharisees believed that God blessed the Prophet Moses with the understanding of what these laws meant and how they should be applied (this was eventually codified as the Talmud). The Pharisees, almost certainly influenced by Zoroastrianism/Mazdaism (hence their title – the “Persians) taught that the afterlife existed and that God punished the wicked and rewarded the righteous in the world to come. They expected a Messiah who would fulfil God’s promises to the people of Israel (with echoes of the Persian Saviour). The Pharisees upheld individual prayer and assembly in synagogues.

The Sadducees were an intellectual elite who wanted to maintain the priestly caste but were also surprisingly liberal in their promotion of Hellenic values. The Pharisees resolutely opposed them on both fronts. The Sadducees rejected the idea of the Oral Law and insisted on a literal interpretation of the Written Law. Consequently, they did not believe in an afterlife, since it was not clearly proclaimed in the Tanakh (Jewish Scriptures). The main focus of Sadducee life was rituals associated with the Temple. Therefore, the Sadducees disappeared after 70 AD following the destruction of the Second Temple. None of the writings of the Sadducees survive, so the little we know of them comes from their opponents and may be neither fair nor accurate.

Pharisees and Sadducees maintained the status quo in the time of Jesus, serving on the Great Sanhedrin. This was a Council (from the Greek Synedrion) made up of 71 members whose responsibility was to issue rulings on religious, community and related issues.

Amongst other groups the Scribes or “soferim” emerged in opposition to the priests and the oppressive rule of the Sanhedrin. They were largely an urban/professional fraternity who based their interpretation of and instruction in the Torah on oral traditions (linking them primarily to the Pharisees). The Herodians consisted of groups supporting the Herodian dynasty and the Zealots comprised all those Jewish elements hostile to the expansion of Roman rule and Greek cultural influence.

The Essenes are not mentioned in the Christian writings. They reacted to both Pharisees and Sadducees, feeling that these parties had corrupted the life of the Temple. They moved out of Jerusalem and lived a quasi-monastic life in the desert, adopting strict dietary laws and a commitment to celibacy. The Essenes differed from the Therapeutae, a Jewish religious group that had flourished in Egypt two centuries earlier. The Essenes and related groups actively sought “wisdom” whereas the Therapeutae were anti-intellectual. The Essenes have been characterized as Jewish Gnostics and were connected to the community that produced the

Qumran texts. It is possible that the distant origins of the Jewish Kabbala are to be sought in an Essene revival.

Alexandria, Philo and the Gnostics

Alexandria was founded by Alexander the Great in 332 BC on the site of Rhacotis in Egypt. As the capital of the Ptolemies/Macedonians the city grew in less than a generation to be larger than Carthage, the earlier metropolis of Africa. Within a century Alexandria had become the largest city in the world, and for some centuries more, was second only to Rome - and later to Constantinople.

Alexandria was not only the major Greek city, with an extraordinary mix of Greeks from across the Mediterranean, but home to the largest Jewish community anywhere. The city was divided into distinct Greek, Jewish and Egyptian quarters – originally intended as a measure to safeguard peace but in fact leading to bitter inter-communal conflict down many centuries. Inter-communal conflict between Greeks and Jews, Pagans and Christians and Christian denominations (Greeks/Copts/Armenians) became a permanent feature of city life – and an inauspicious omen for inter-communal strife in the Near East for many centuries to come.

The Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, was completed in Alexandria – and it was here, rather than Jerusalem, that we find an ongoing and meaningful interface between Greek and Jewish thought. Philo of Alexandria (20 BC – 50 AD) lived through the years that proved formative of the New Testament. He was the outstanding Jewish teacher who fused and harmonised Greek Philosophy and Jewish Theology. His works were enthusiastically received by the early Christians and he came to be viewed as an honorary Church Father. This is unsurprising

because his thought is Logos centred and he viewed the Logos as God's underlying plan for the universe.

According to Christian tradition St Mark the Evangelist brought Christianity to the city and the Egyptian hinterland – and according to St John Chrysostom it was here that he composed the Gospel (written before 70 AD). The strong Jewish flavours of Coptic and Ethiopic Christianity surely owe much to the rich contribution of the Alexandrian Jews and, possibly, to a desire (or habit?) for the maintenance of the Alexandrian balance, a fusion of Greek, Jewish and Egyptian traditions and cultures.

As the great centre of ancient learning, Alexandria proved the forum for interaction and exchanges between Greek philosophy, Pagan religions, Judaism and Christianity. Inevitably, on the religious front this allowed for syncretistic tendencies and gave sustenance to a number of Gnostic movements. These latter presented a perennial challenge to Christian Orthodoxy – Eastern and Western.

Although, the Gnostic movements of the Roman Empire are called Syrian-Egyptian, to distinguish them from Persian Gnostic movements, most of the early Gnostic teachers were from Alexandria. Valentinus (100-180) was an influential Christian bishop from Alexandria who was almost elected Pope of Rome. Basilides (d. 132) enjoyed great prestige as the disciple of recognized associates of St Peter and the author of a Gospel (the Gospel of Basilides). Of course, Gnostic systems can be traced back some centuries before the Christian era – nevertheless, Alexandrian learning appears to be a unifying factor where the Syrian-Egyptian traditions are concerned.

Alexandria remained the capital of Egypt until the Muslim conquest in 641 AD when a new capital was founded at Fustat near Cairo.

Conclusion

Looking at Palestine and the wider Near East in the era of the New Testament we have to wonder at the almost immediate impact of the ministry of Jesus Christ and the emergence of early, distinctly Christian witness. These were troubled years of inter-communal strife (not least in Alexandria) and wars – both of Roman expansion and local (between Herod and the growing Nabataean Commonwealth in Arabia, for instance). The New Testament texts are not Chronicles and therefore far from focusing on the wider national or international picture. In fact the New Testament texts are quite unlike any others from the ancient world. The nearest parallels are to be found in the “Life of Apollonius of Tyana”¹ a pagan healer and worker of wonders but even here the differences are far more striking than any marginal similarities.

Nevertheless, to understand the world that produced the New Testament and the early Christian movement we need to be informed of the events, conditions, debates and influences that shaped this world. Attention needs to be paid to the many the fault-lines that divided the Jews from the Greco-Roman world. We need to appreciate the impact that Zoroastrian/Mazdaism had on the Pharisees. We should grasp the significance of the thought and works of Philo of Alexandria and how he was absolutely the precursor of Orthodox Patristics.

We can sense how early Christianity was able to bridge the gap between the Jewish and Greek/Roman worlds and feel a degree of empathy with the Jewish community leaders who must have felt that this involved all the compromises that they had resisted in the previous centuries. Above all we must discuss why Jesus Christ and the Apostolic teaching proved ultimately more enduring (or attractive?) than either the established, venerable religions or the radical, exciting new religious movements of the day.

¹ <https://www.livius.org/sources/content/philostratus-life-of-apollonius/>

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