

The History of the Catholic Church

Part 1: Entering the 1st century

The greatest challenge in studying history, understanding the past, or watching ideas and events develop over time is seeing them in their context. Often when we study the life of Jesus or the earliest era of church history, we understand the events in light of our modern world or isolated from the historical context from which they originated. The first part of this series examines the political, social and religious issues that led to the 1st century and form the backdrop through which we understand Jesus and the developments of the Church.

Political:

The political scene that led to the 1st century is rather complex and must be seen as a series of developments spanning almost 600 years. The biblical timeline leaves us at the fall of Jerusalem at the of 2nd Chronicles, returns for the rebuilding of Jerusalem, then ends with the fall of Jerusalem at the time of the Greek conquest in 2 Maccabees. The mentality of the Jews leading up to the Greek conquest pervades the next four centuries of Jewish thought. The conquest of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 587 BC caused a major change in their understanding of God and the beginning of messianic prophesies and language. Having been exiled from their land, the people of Israel asked the question, “Is God punishing us or has he abandoned us?” The overwhelming conclusion is that God did not abandon his people but is punishing them for their breaches of the covenants and laws. Upon returning to Jerusalem under Persian rule 70 years later, the people of Israel understood the Persians as saviors and their freedom as divine forgiveness. The thought of returning to exile became the focal point through which all Jewish religious leaders understood the practice of their faith, the need to control the people, and led to the practices that we see in the New Testament.

The Jews were rather happy under Persian rule. Persia allowed the free exercise of religion without compromise, rebuilt the Temple in Jerusalem known as the 2nd temple, rebuilt the walls, and allowed the Jews to maintain their pre-exile way of life. Life was good for the average Jew and they were happy to comply with paying tribute to Persia, especially since they were seen as their liberator and savior. Many major developments happened within Judaism. The Sadducees took the role of the Levites and priesthood from the Mosaic Covenant and Law and the Sadducees became the only people to perform Temple rituals, sacrifices, and customs. The Pharisees developed out of the “book tradition” that was part of their experience while in exile. The Sadducees had the clearly defined role of Temple sacrifices and worship. The Pharisees on the other hand had to create a role for themselves centered on the following of the Mosaic Law. Thus the Pharisees controlled the average Jew’s understanding of Judaism and performed the central role of teaching in the synagogues. Basically every Jew learned how to be Jewish from the Pharisees and learned the proper practice of the Law from the Pharisees.

Just around the corner of the Mediterranean Sea a small group of cities states were emerging under Philip of Macedonia to become the land of Greece. Although Philip was strong, his main

power was political and his strength was in the union of Greece for the purpose of quelling internal struggles but also the wars with Persia. Philip reigned from 382 to 336 leaving the beginnings of an empire. His son, Alexander, later known as Alexander the Great, would continue his conquest of Europe including North Africa and Persia (modern day India). His conquest would consume his entire life and leave him dead during his final battle with Persia due to an illness. Thus Israel is conquered, once again, by another ruling power begging the question for the Jews, “what did we do this time?”

Alexander accomplished far more than simply uniting the Greek city states, building one of the largest empires until Rome, and conquering Persia. Through the conquest of Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East, Greek politics, culture, language, and philosophy spread throughout the world known as the Hellenization. The effects of Hellenization are covered in the section on the social situation of 1st century Israel. Greece was not friendly to the Jews. Whereas Persia allowed the free exercise of religion, rebuilt the Temple, and allowed the Jews to live as they had previously, Greece was the complete opposite. As we read in 1 and 2 Maccabees, the Greeks required the Jews to worship the Greek gods, pay tribute in their temples, stop of practice of the Jewish religion, pay tribute to Greece, and cover the mark of their circumcision. Some scholars debate the extent to which Greece forced these policies on the Jews. Some argue that the Jews overemphasized the political force of the Greeks and that they did have the free exercise of religion. To defend the Jews, under Roman rule another 200 years later, the Romans tried to placate and work with the Jews even to the point of giving them more religious freedom. If the Jews had more religious freedom under the Romans, whom they didn't like at all, then their freedom under the Greeks must have been much less. Another example of the Greek's control of religion during the Greek occupation is the man Antiochus Epiphanes IV. Antiochus Epiphanes is not just a Greek ruler and the one who controlled the Palestine/Israel region of Greece, he made himself a god. His name means “the great revealed.” In other words, he is a god revealed to the people. As a god he demanded that his statue and his person be worshiped by the people with dire consequences for those who refused. Regardless, once Alexander the Great died, the Greek empire was split into four units called the Tetrarchy based on the four military commanders under Alexander's reign. Each region was semi-autonomous. Ptolemy I reigned over Palestine/ Israel and inflicted the rule of Greece: worship of Greek gods, tribute to Greece, unification under Greek thought. The goal was to make one empire unified by one way of thinking and one way of being. The Jews, with the historical memory of the Babylonian exile, fought against the Greeks in a series of several skirmishes. Each skirmish ended more or less disastrously culminating in a war against the Jews. Anyone who did not cover the mark of their circumcision and agree to worship the Greek gods were killed. The Greeks did not exterminate the Jews but simply controlled them.

Off to the west of the Greek empire a new force was emerging: Rome. Rome's tactic far exceeded anything else in the history of Europe. By focusing on combat and employing a battle tactic that led to almost complete success, Rome continued to spar against the nations of Europe, Africa, and the Middle East until they emerged with one of the largest empires the world has ever seen until the high Middle Ages when colonization would dwarf these earlier empires. At the height of the Roman Empire Rome stretched from Spain to India, Gaul to north Africa. The

Roman Empire was divided into smaller subsections that were continually divided into more subsections until a governor controlled a section small enough for him to control. This tactic was originally developed for the military where one person oversaw the group of a 1000 (legion), within that group a person oversaw a group of 100, then a person in that group oversaw a group of 10. This system worked decently well for controlling the population and the vast territory and groups of people controlled by the Roman Empire. Everything eventually ended at the top or the Caesar who controlled the Empire. Many political squabbles and maneuverings between the Roman elite families causes great instability within the high echelons of Rome. During the 1st and 2nd centuries AD some Caesars lasted only a few months to a few years whereas others could reign for 20 or more years depending on assassinations and the ability to control the royal elite of Rome.

The Roman citizens largely lived their day-to-day lives peacefully. The era from 150 to 15 BC is marked by heavy war as Rome conquered the lands that created its empire and squashed opposition from barbarian nations and other political powers that surrounded the Roman Empire. Each new conquest brought slaves to Rome who became the backbone of the Roman Empire. At its height the Roman Empire was 60% slaves. Slaves performed all the menial tasks that the Roman elite refused to do including farming, building, maintenance, and cleaning. Without slaves the Roman Empire would have dissolved almost instantaneously. Slaves were necessary for Rome to survive. Those who were citizens, however, enjoyed relative ease. Rome was more placid towards other religions encouraging them to pray for the good of the empire while not forcing compliance with the Roman pantheon and cultic religions. Jews were given a special dispensation from Rome to both practice their faith unhindered but also freedom from offering sacrifices to the Roman gods and performing ritual public works. The Sadducees enjoyed this new freedom that allowed them to perform the normal Temple sacrifices and rituals without challenge. The Pharisees saw the situation differently. With the Greek terror still lingering in the minds of many Jews, the Pharisees held that the Sadducees had defected from the faith by their complicity with the Roman rule. Therefore the Pharisees were always leery of Rome and encouraged the populace to keep Rome at a distance from religious and societal affairs.

From 14 BC to 20 AD was an era of unprecedented peace call the Pax Romana. Rome was not at war with any nation and the Empire had finished growing and expanding. The Roman elite was placid and society functioned well. Within this era begins the dawn of a new era, an era to bring a different kind of peace. The Jews were still awaiting a messiah. The Jews, still leery of the Roman rule of Jerusalem, were striving to find a way to remove Rome from the Holy Land and bring back the era of Jewish rule. The prophecies were clear that the Messiah would bring this new rule and restore the Land of Israel back to the proper practice of the worship of God as outlined in the Mosaic Law. As tensions brewed, so did small skirmishes and fights. The Jews tried several times over the next 70 years to expel the Romans from their land through military might. Each skirmish ended poorly. We will return to the effects of these skirmishes in the new session. Until then, we leave the 1st century BC with the sense that tensions are brewing between Rome and the Jews. The Romans are trying to placate the Jews by financing a new and bigger temple, give them special rights and privileges, and treat them as loyal subjects. How long will this last?

Social:

The Greek era and the transition to the Roman era are the only two time periods worth attention. Following the conquest of Israel by the Greeks an immense change happened within both the Jewish people but also in the land of Israel and throughout the world. Greece believed that its version of humanity and the advances that Greek learning brings is the best for all people. Thus during this era of Greek history we have some of the greatest advancements in learning and education. The Great Library of Alexandria was built during the time of Alexander the Great with the dream of housing Greek copies of every book in the Greek Empire. Alexander was a man of learning and love for culture and peoples. He wanted everyone to enjoy the developments of the Greeks as much as he did. He mandated the Greek language as the standard language for the empire. Greek philosophy and learning spread across the empire and took off at a rapid pace. The great minds of Socrates/Plato and Aristotle emerged on the scene 100 years before Greece became an empire but their thoughts spread with the growing empire. This process of turning the empire Greek is called Hellenization.

Only three forms of Greek philosophy are worth briefly mentioning since they become the dominant methods of understanding and expanding Christian thought in the centuries that follow Jesus' death and Resurrection. The first type of philosophy is called Stoic philosophy. The term stoic comes from the action of the stoic philosophers who would stand at the entrance the main buildings and do nothing (stoic – stand). Their main ideas are that the world is bad or evil and therefore true happiness and virtue comes from rejecting pleasure, the things of the world, and feelings. Socrates/Plato is the second form of philosophy. Socrates developed a method of thinking and a way of envisioning the world as “platonic forms.” Everything has a true form that is the most perfect expression of that thing. For instance there is a ideal image of the perfect tree. All trees share in this perfect image or form of the tree to greater and lesser degrees. A great degree means that the specific tree greatly resembles the tree whereas a less degree means that the specific tree only slightly resembles a tree. Everything in the universe has a form or an ideal form to which it shares its “thingness.” Aristotle developed the third branch of philosophy that has many parts. The first part he developed was virtue ethics. Every action has an ideal way of behaving. Our goal is to find the ideal way in which we should behave and act this way all the time. The part of his philosophy which will be more important for this discussion is his philosophy of the nature of things. Every object has substance and accidents. Substance answers the question, “what is it?” Accidents are the qualities that make up the object: color, size, shape, mass, special relations.

What began with the Greeks, continued with the Romans. The Greeks successfully created an empire whose main language was Greek, main philosophy and type of education was Greek, and whose religion was largely Greek. The Romans were not intellectuals like the Greeks. They focused on construction and commerce. Thus under Roman rule trade vastly increased across the entire empire starting trade routes into India and China. With the influx of people and new goods, Rome became immensely wealthy. Even with such prosperity, many aspects of the Empire didn't change. The dominant language of the Empire was still Greek. Only the elite and educated spoke Latin forming a rift between the wealthy and the peasants. This is not by

accident. By creating a language barrier between the ruling, educated elite and the peasant and slave farmers, Rome could further control the people and solidify their power. As I mentioned before, Rome allowed the pseudo-free exercise of religion within the parameters of the Roman government. Namely, you must worship the emperor and any statue or image of the emperor and the cultic deities of that city. Although people could worship their own gods, they must also worship any gods prescribed by the Romans. Other than tensions between the immensely poor peasants who funded the wars and the very wealthy elite of Rome, peace reigned and the people lived well.

Religion:

Most people assume that the Jewish faith has not changed throughout the centuries but remained the same faith that Moses founded when the people wandered through the desert. This could not be further from the truth. Not only was the Temple an innovation during the time of King David but Judaism underwent many innovations through the Persian, Greek, and Roman occupations. The first major development occurred during the Babylonian captivity when the Jews lost their Temple sacrifices which almost nullified the Law. Without the sacrifices, the Law could not be followed further angering God. The Jewish elite in Babylon found a new way of practicing their faith through the written word of the Law known as midrash or interpretation of law. Through commenting and expanding upon the written law, the Jews figured out how to properly practice the law and live as God has commanded them. Upon returning to the land of Israel, this new form of interpreting law and focusing on the written word would come to dominate the lives of the faithful Jews. Synagogues emerged following their return and Pharisees became the dominant group who would interpret the law for the people. Now the people didn't need to figure out God's desires or simply perform Temple sacrifices, they were also required to follow the legal interpretations given by the Pharisees. The second major development that occurred during their time in Babylon was the desire for a savior: a military leader who would conquer the Babylonians and set everyone free. They found their first savior in Cyrus II of Persian or Cyrus the Great. As the conqueror of the Babylonian Empire and the person who set the Jews free and financed the rebuilding of the Israelite Kingdom, he was considered their savior. As we head into the Greek and Roman occupations, the desire for a savior will reemerge with new characteristics.

During the Greek age the Jews developed many new ways of expressing their faith brought by the Greek language. Many assume Hebrew is the only language of the Old Testament. Hebrew has a series of challenges as a language. It is not precise. Hebrew is a story telling language in which it can describe in great detail the scene of an event and the emotions tied to it but it struggles to be precise. Greek is a much more precise language and Latin is even more precise. As the Jews grappled with the issue from Babylon to now Greece, new thoughts emerged: is there an afterlife (the Book of Maccabees)? Does God punish the good and the evil (Job)? What is the nature of God (Wisdom)? All of these questions are best expressed in Greek not Hebrew. Thus emerges what is commonly (and poorly) called the Deuterocanonical books which were all written in Greek. This new wave in thought allowed the Jews to express their understanding of God in more precise terms and to explain and expound their beliefs. From a religion focused on laws and sacrifices to the beginnings of philosophical imagination and musings is a huge step.

Very few developments happened under Roman rule. The most prominent and important for this study is the quest to find the messiah. Now under occupation for 600 years, the Jews are ready for their kingdom to return to them. But who will conquer the Romans? What is God's desire? Since the time of the Maccabees the Jews have been developing the standard image of the Messiah: a military and religious leader who would conquer the Romans, restore the Land, become king, and restore the proper worship of God. These characteristics are found throughout the Scriptures and alluded to on many occasions throughout their history. Who will it be? Throughout the 1st century BC and into the 1st century AD, many men will emerge claiming to be the messiah. Some historians estimate that over 20 different men claimed to be the messiah. Each new emergent claimant to the title was put under scrutiny. If one was false and everyone followed him, they would anger the Romans who would then conquer them and destroy the nation. Finding the true messiah meant survival. Not just survival from Rome destroying them but also from God's wrath which would be fueled by false prophets and messiahs. Who or what are they expecting? What qualities make a messiah? What will the messiah do? When will we know when he arrives? These questions plagued many of the Jewish elite and the minds of the people. As tensions continue to rise between the Jews and Rome and people increasingly desire freedom and the beginning of the new Jewish era, we leave the age of the 1st century BC with the quest for the messiah unfulfilled but full of hope.