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2. Jerusalem: Religion in the Hellenistic World

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2. Jerusalem: Religion in the Hellenistic World

Abstract

During the last three or four centuries of the pre-Christian era, the world of the Mediterranean and the Ancient Near East underwent a tremendous religious upheaval, While the later prophets and the scribes were reinterpreting Judaism in the light of world developments, the polytheism of Athens, Sparta, and Rome, which made religion part of the total life of the community and identified it closely with patriotism, gave way before pressures that were exceedingly complex and that we can identify only partially. These pressures were well under way in Athens before the conquests of Philip and Alexander. They can be seen in Rome soon after she made her first firm contacts with the Hellenistic world. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Contemporary Civilization, Jerusalem, Hebrew, Judaism, polytheism, Hellenistic Era

Disciplines

Ancient History, Greek and Roman through Late Antiquity | Classics | History | Jewish Studies

Comments

This is a part of [Section I: Athens, Rome, and Jerusalem: Background of Western Civilization](#). The [Contemporary Civilization](#) page lists all additional sections of *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, as well as the [Table of Contents](#) for both volumes.

More About Contemporary Civilization:

From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of "introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages."

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called *An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems*. A second edition, retitled *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker '66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

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2. Religion in the Hellenistic World

During the last three or four centuries of the pre-Christian era, the world of the Mediterranean and the Ancient Near East underwent a tremendous religious upheaval. While the later prophets and the scribes were reinterpreting Judaism in the light of world developments, the polytheism of Athens, Sparta, and Rome, which made religion part of the total life of the community and identified it closely with patriotism, gave way before pressures that were exceedingly complex and that we can identify only partially. These pressures were well under way in Athens before the conquests of Philip and Alexander. They can be seen in Rome soon after she made her first firm contacts with the Hellenistic world.

If we can accept the premise asserted earlier in this chapter, that the work of Alexander the Great had a fundamental, far-reaching impact on Mediterranean culture, then we should be able to find evidence of that impact on religion. If the Hellenistic world did cut men loose from their ancient city-state moorings, which were themselves interwoven with religious

commitments, without at once attaching them to new loyalties, then we should be able to detect here attitudes of anxiety, bewilderment, and uncertainty. We have already observed these phenomena in philosophy and in politics. They are equally discernible in religion.

It was against this very same background that we followed the rise of Epicureanism and Stoicism. Both of these were ethical philosophies. Their main tenets were such that they appealed almost exclusively to the upper classes. Perhaps it is not too much to say that only the upper classes were considered eligible to hold them. At no previous period in history would it be crucial to an understanding of an era to consider what the lower classes believed. That it is crucial to consider what they believed now is indicative of the ultimate importance of the Hellenistic period for the Western World.

For some people in the Hellenistic world and for more later in the Roman Empire, the answers to their religious questions were provided by a number of cults, most of which came out of the Ancient Near East and which, because of their emphasis, are often called the mystery religions. Actually, we know but little about most of them and that must be sifted from scattered references here and there or deduced from archaeological finds. Some of the cults were very old, having been followed for many centuries as nature or fertility rites connected with the sequence of the seasons. Whether old or new, they appealed to those who wanted to identify their lives with something that could give meaning to an otherwise drab and purposeless existence.

The mystery religions took ancient myths and transformed them into dogma. They were characterized by elaborate, colorful, and secret rituals -- mysteries -- conducted by priests. The objective of these rituals was twofold: first, to identify the initiate personally with the life of the god, perhaps one who had died and then returned to life or one who had lived for a time on earth; and second, to purify the initiate, perhaps by a symbolic washing in the blood of a freshly slain animal. This was made necessary for full membership in the cult, without which personal salvation, the desired end, was impossible. The stress was definitely otherworldly and little attempt was made to relate this religion to morality. There was no compulsion. Apparently, there were no barriers of race or class. Individuals were treated as equals. And the promise of immortality provided a way in which many unexplained and perhaps otherwise unbearable facts of life would be made clear and in which many unimportant persons would at last find assurance of the recognition in another world which was denied to them in this world.

Greece contributed to the mystery religions the Dionysiac mysteries, which predated but were scarcely typical of the Golden Age. The worship of Isis was originally Egyptian. Mithra worship was introduced into the Roman Empire from Persia. There was considerable borrowing from one another among these

*at first Christianity belonged to the Jews
mysteries universal*

cults, since none pretended to be unique or laid claim to the sole devotion of its followers. It was possible for one who felt the need for additional insurance to belong to more than one of the mysteries.]

[There was one group singularly unaffected by the mystery religions. Although divided among themselves on other questions, the Jews still thought of themselves as God's chosen people, set apart by promises and obligations. Their exclusiveness was reinforced by the strong priestly emphasis on adherence to the Jewish law. It was threatened by those both within and without Palestine who welcomed Hellenistic and Roman influences. The Jews of the Diaspora were obviously more likely than those living in Palestine to be influenced by Hellenistic culture. One of them, Philo, who spent his life in Alexandria and who died about the year 50, was a student of Greek philosophy who compared Moses and Plato and attempted to state orthodox Hebrew beliefs in Platonic terms.]

[The Romans found it difficult to understand the Jews. Unlike other peoples in the empire, they stubbornly refused to go through the formalities of the state religion, after performing which they would have been perfectly free to worship their God as they pleased. But the Jews were a small group, and not generally a proselyting people. Convinced that they were not dangerous to the state, the Romans made them register and pay a special tax, forbidding them to convert Roman citizens to Judaism. Beyond that they were not ordinarily pressed.]

When Caesar Augustus became emperor in 27 B. C. he was fully aware of the religious upheaval going on in the Mediterranean world. He was convinced that one of the reasons for the collapse of the republic was the decline of public and private morality which he believed had accompanied the decline of the old Roman religion. It occurred to him that a revival of this religion would add moral strength to his imperial experiment. Augustus rebuilt temples, enlarged the state priesthood, and revived celebrations that had been allowed to lapse. But he was tapping a well that had nearly gone dry. [More successful for a time was the cult of the emperor. During his lifetime, Augustus was worshiped in the East, which had grown accustomed to look upon its rulers as gods, and, in line with old Roman belief, his Genius (or guiding spirit) was worshiped in Italy. After his death the Senate added his name to a list of gods that included Julius Caesar and which later included other emperors. Emperor worship was a blend of the patriotic and the religious which during the Pax Romana came forth easily and willingly from all imperial subjects -- all, that is, save the Jews and the Christians. When the day came on which it was necessary to require everyone to worship the emperor or suffer the penalties of treason, it had to be admitted that this source too had run dry.]

The day belonged to a new religion, whose founder was born in Judea about the middle of the reign of the first Roman emperor.