

IN THE FULLNESS OF TIME...



WHEN THE FULLNESS OF TIME WAS
COME, GOD SENT FORTH HIS SON.
GALATIANS 4:4, KJV

From the first century, Christians have claimed that the world was uniquely prepared for the first Advent of Jesus Christ and the beginning of the New Covenant and the Church. Perhaps it was the phenomenal spread of the new faith that sparked these claims. Indeed, it is estimated that by 312 A.D. one in ten people in the Roman world called themselves Christians.

What kind of world would allow for such a rapid spread of this new faith? What was the historical context for the first advent of the Jesus Christ? There are at least three sources of influence that came together in the Roman Empire that encouraged its early success: the political influence of the Romans, the cultural and intellectual influence of the Greeks, and the religious influence of the Jews.

Roman influence – political

Unity and diversity

As the Romans moved out from their great city in ever-widening circles of conquest, the empire came to encompass hundreds of different peoples. Rome's general policy of accommodation meant that most of these conquered peoples retained their cultural identity even while they were politically united under the rule of Rome. By the early third century, all freemen in the empire had been granted Roman citizenship. This provided a common point of reference, a kind of unity, for people from a wide variety of cultural backgrounds.

Pax Romana

The reign of Caesar Augustus inaugurated the pax romana, or 'Roman peace,' two centuries of economic and cultural growth and stability marked by the near absence of military conflict within the empire. This era of peace allowed for freedom of movement and relative safety throughout the Roman world. And where people travel, ideas follow. The conditions of the pax romana facilitated the rapid spread of the Christian Faith in the Roman Empire.

Roman Roads

The quality and extent of roads in the Roman Empire is legendary. Thousands of miles of roads connected major cities as well as outlying areas of the Roman Empire, facilitating and encouraging travel throughout the Mediterranean world and beyond. Both the New Testament and the literature of the second century simply take for granted journeys of enormous length which would scarcely have been possible after the fall of the Empire until modern times.

Roman Army

Of course, the Roman army was the instrument of maintaining peace within the empire, but it also became a major venue for spreading ideas. The ranks of the Roman legions were increasingly filled by recruiting provincials, bringing distant regions of the empire into contact with the culture and ideas at its center, including Christianity. In addition, by the fourth century, there were increasing numbers of Christians among the Roman soldiers. And they carried their

beliefs and faith wherever they were stationed.

Greek Influence – intellectual and cultural

Language

In the process of conquering the Hellenistic world, the Romans absorbed and adapted many facets of that civilization. Language was one of the most important. Alexander the Great had made vernacular Greek, koine, the common tongue of the East. Under the Roman Empire, it became the common tongue of the West. Of course, the presence of a nearly universal language meant the Christian Faith could spread quickly, especially since the followers of Christ used this language for their writings.

This rapid dissemination of ideas was further enhanced by the nature of the language. Koine was the language of the conquered rather than the conquerors, and so would not have been associated with imperialism and domination. In addition, the language was already equipped with a large philosophical and theological vocabulary which made it especially suited to the spread of a religious message.

Philosophy

The development of Greek philosophy over the preceding centuries pointed to a rejection of polytheism. Philosophers beginning with Plato had ridiculed the gods and attacked the crude anthropomorphic polytheism of the masses. Another tendency in Greek thought was a subtle move toward monotheism. Plato's highest idea was Goodness which some identified as a personal, creator-God. Aristotle had identified a single Prime Mover that is above change and decay, an immaterial Final Cause. As early as the sixth century B.C.,

Xenophanes declared that "there are many gods according to custom, but only one according to nature" and "there is one God, the greatest among gods and men, unlike mortals in appearance, unlike in thought."

Perhaps the most important form of Greek philosophy adopted in the Roman Empire was that of Stoicism. This system of thought taught the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man and held to a high code of ethics, shadows of the truths revealed by God in the Scriptures and taught by Christians.

Jewish influence – religious

The contribution of the Jews in the early years of Christianity was more than that of the Romans and Greeks together. And by the first century, Jewish religious ideas had spread throughout the Mediterranean world. In fact, the Jewish faith proved influential enough to attract a significant number of Gentile followers, some of whom adopted the Jewish religion completely.

Monotheism

The strict monotheism of the Jewish faith was a striking contrast to polytheism of the other religions of the Roman world. The Jews confidently worshiped the one true God, Creator of the universe, with whom they had a unique covenantal relationship.

Messianic hope

A central feature of the Old Testament was the prophecies of the coming of the Messiah. It was in this context that the followers of Jesus claimed that He was the expected Messiah.

Ethical system

The Jewish faith was founded on a strict moral code based on the standard of the Ten

Commandments and the law given by God to Moses. Failure to meet the requirements of the law called for a sacrifice of atonement. Christians claimed that the crucifixion of Jesus fulfilled this requirement for all time.

Jewish scriptures

The God of the Jews had not left his people to search aimlessly for the truth, but had revealed Himself to them through the written word of the Scriptures. The Jewish holy writings were available not only in Hebrew, but in the common language of Greek as well.

Philosophy of history

The prophets of the Old Testament had introduced a linear view of history, showing that God was accomplishing His purpose in the world. Christians, of course, claim that Jesus had fulfilled the ancient prophecies, thus proving that He was the end and goal toward which history had been moving.

Synagogue worship

The Jews had instituted synagogue worship during the Babylonian captivity when they were no longer permitted to worship at the temple. Their regular worship included singing and reading from Scripture, activities that were interesting as well as relevant. The Jewish synagogue became the preaching house of early Christianity.

Conclusion

Of course, the new religion was not universally accepted at any time and it was not until the reign of Constantine that it enjoyed full legal protection. Christians, like other marginal sects, were subjected to persecution and martyrdom. In spite of these obstacles, however, the Christian faith spread rapidly in the Roman Empire. Part of the reason for its rapid proliferation was the historical context into which it was born, including the political influence of the

Romans, the intellectual and cultural influence of the Greeks and the religious influence of the Jews.

Fullness of Time

This well-known phrase from Galatians 4:4 that conveys the Apostolic teaching of salvation. In his letter to the churches of Galatia, Paul defends the gospel and his ministry. The climax of the letter is in 3:23-4:7. Before faith, we were under the law awaiting the coming of faith (3:23). It is the justification of faith (3:24) that was promised to Abraham and anticipated throughout history that has now come in the fullness of time.

The result is that we are all children of God through faith, the actual seed of Abraham and heirs of the promise (3:26-27). After an illustrative analogy about a minor son come of age (4:1-2), Paul boldly declares that we too were once "minors, " but that in the "fullness of time" God sent his Son to redeem us and to make us his sons (4:3-5). By talking about a "time that had fully come, " Paul focuses on the coming of Christ and his bestowal of the Spirit in contrast to the former period of the law, which only pointed forward to Christ.

God planned the redemption of mankind. At just the right time, God sent his Son into the world. The time of the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection is the time of completeness, a time when God fulfilled the promises of the Old Testament. This redemption will, of course, be ultimately completed at the second coming of Christ. The salvation that Jesus inaugurated in the church at his first coming will then be consummated for all the world to see.