

I
THE
GRECO-ROMAN
WORLD



We can begin to describe the world of the NT by indicating some of its limits. Geographically, it was the world of the Mediterranean, those territories embracing the inland sea that for the ancients made up the known and civilized world, the *oikoumenē*. What lay outside this world was both fascinating and frightening, and

all the more for being so little known. Those responsible for the security of the *oikoumenē* worried about the threat of invasion from the Parthians to the east and various tribes to the north, but the NT reveals nothing of such awareness or concern. Temporally, this world began with the conquests of Alexander the Great (356–323 B.C.E.) and continued at least

FIGURE 1.1. A Roman priest leads a bull prepared for sacrifice in this fresco from first-century Pompeii.

until the mid-second century of the Common Era. Although Hellenism is given a new frame by the Roman Empire, beginning with the accession of Augustus in 31 B.C.E., Hellenistic civilization continues well through the time of the early empire, so that we can accurately designate the most encompassing symbolic world of the NT as Greco-Roman culture.

Politically, it was a world shaped by empire. By his conquests, Alexander had created an empire but died before it could be stabilized. His successors fought for control of the pieces, and for two hundred years Antigonids (rulers of Achaia and Macedonia), Seleucids (masters of Asia and Syria), and Ptolemies (rulers of Egypt) battled for supremacy. The critical land bridge formed by Palestine made it, as always, a prime battleground. These internecine battles reflected disagreement not over the virtues of Hellenism or empire, but over who should rule the *oikoumenē*.

During these conflicts, another power slowly but steadily came to dominate the Mediterranean. Rome had begun its territorial conquests during the time of the late republic and accelerated them by the competition between Caesar and Pompey. From the middle of the second century B.C.E., Rome commanded the *oikoumenē*, and the explicit assumption of imperial prerogatives by Augustus only ratified that fact. Rome gave political stability to the ideals of Hellenization that had already been diffused by the conquests of Alexander.

Yet Greece and Rome built on a foundation that preceded and survived them both. The distinctive cultural patterns of the Mediterranean were not eliminated by these empires, only modulated. Among the features of this world we can include an economy based primarily in agriculture and villages, a taste for trade and for warfare, a delight in display and a love for language, a desire for honor and a

fear of shame. It was a world of large households run by patriarchs, a world of slaves and owners. It was a world whose severe disparities in status were negotiated by a subtle system of patronage shown by benefactors and of honor paid in return by those so assisted; a world in which the demands of *quid pro quo* were mollified by ideals of friendship and harmony. All these social realities were reflected in the pantheon, in the unruly households of the gods and in the intrigues and fratricidal jealousies that so often broke out among these deities. Their power was pervasive, but was distributed among a band of personalities as vivid and varied as those of the humans with whom they so frequently commingled.

HELLENISTIC IDEALS AND REALITIES

When the twenty-two-year-old Alexander crossed the Dardanelles to conquer the Persian East in 334 B.C.E., he intended more than military conquest; he was beginning a mission of cultural hegemony. To that end, he brought with him poets, philosophers, and historians. He had been a student of Aristotle and, considering the Greek way best for all, desired to create one Panhellenic world. He encouraged his soldiers to intermarry with native women to create one race, and set a good example by his marriage to the Indian princess Roxanne. He turned conquered cities into Greek city-states, and in strategic locations he established new cities. He made Greek the universal language and actively encouraged a religious syncretism whereby local deities might be identified, then merged with the gods of the Greek pantheon. His successors, and particularly the Seleucids, continued to cultivate his dream of a Hellenized world.

The city-state, the *polis*, was itself the first tool of Hellenization. It was the symbol of Greek culture

and its best expression: a place where citizens could meet, market, debate, and vote. The city was the center for culture (*paideia*), and played an integral role in the communication of that culture through education. The *gymnasion* offered an opportunity for the learning of both physical and intellectual virtue. Training in rhetoric was the staple of education; both letters and morals were learned through the imitation of textual and living exemplars. Such training imbued the young with common cultural values—for example, how friendship demanded the sharing of all things—even as it showed them how to manipulate those values in a life of public discourse and disputation. For young men destined for military careers, there was the *ephēbeion*.

In classical Greece, the *polis* was the center around which religious activity was organized. The rituals and liturgies of the city gave to its citizens a sense of personal and communal identity. One

was not Greek so much as one was Athenian or Spartan.

Alexander used the *polis* as a means for disseminating Greek culture. Old cities, such as Jerusalem under the Seleucid Antiochus IV, were made Hellenistic by a change of constitution. New cities, such as Alexandria in Egypt which was founded by Alexander himself, were Hellenistic from the start. The Hellenistic world, then, was conceived of as an *urban* world. Civilization and the city were conterminous.

Such was the ideal. The reality was somewhat harsher. In the first century, the major cities were not small; Rome had a million in population, Alexandria probably half that many. They were so big that the ideal of citizen participation was impossible to achieve. Worse, the cities were not really independent. They existed within an empire of complex bureaucracies, military installations, and sometimes oppressive taxation. The sense of local identity provided by the ancient *polis* declined, together with the protection offered by local deities and the responsibility demanded of citizens.

For some, the fact of a worldwide empire created the possibility of a new and more cosmopolitan identity. Now one could be a citizen of the world. For others, the picture was bleaker; the loss of local roots meant alienation and despair. If one is equally at home everywhere, does one really have a home anywhere? Both reactions colored the religious symbols of the age.

A second tool of Hellenization was language. This was the most powerful tool, for a language bears with it all the symbols of a culture. Greek became the common language (*koinē*) of the *oikoumenē* and remained



FIGURE 1.2. The philosopher Socrates depicted in a first-century fresco from Ephesus.

so even under Rome, with Latin only much later becoming the official imperial language. Greek was the language of trade and government, of philosophy and religion. Even the Hebrew Scriptures were translated into Greek by the mid-second century B.C.E. in Alexandria. This translation, the Septuagint (LXX), became, quite literally, Scripture—for Hellenistic Jews, and later also for the first Christians. The LXX, indeed, formed the basis for an entire corpus of Jewish literature, illustrating the pervasive influence of Greek language and rhetoric.

The use of a single language was of obvious importance for communication; it enabled the rapid diffusion of new ideas and old. In such transmission, symbols both gained and lost resonances through their being clothed in Greek. Still, from the time of Alexander, even the refutation of Greek ways usually demanded the use of the Greek tongue. Not always, however, and not by everyone. Local languages such as Aramaic and Coptic continued to be spoken. The preservation of sacred writings in these tongues enabled local identities to continue and sometimes to become the focal point for resistance to the empire.

The third tool of Hellenization was religious syncretism. Local gods, such as Baal ha Shemaim, the high god of ancient Canaanite mythology, were systematically identified with their Greek counterparts, such as Zeus Olympus. The idea was to reduce local allegiances in favor of more universal ones. Here we recognize a classic case of using religion as a societal glue. The results were various and multiple. The old Greek pantheon was not strengthened by being stretched so violently, and the Greek myths seemed to lose rather than gain credibility by being universalized. On the one hand, syncretism may have hastened a movement toward monotheism—it is not a big step from equating divine powers to deciding there is one divine power diversely manifested. So

philosophers could use the language of polytheism, but also speak of a single divine providence.

Less happily, the loss of prestige suffered by the traditional gods together with the alienation fostered by the empire helped create a perception of the world as governed alternatively by fickle chance (*tychē*) or inexorable fate (*heimarmenē*). Such perception gave impetus to the search for religious experiences more profound and personal than were available in the official cults. It is important, however, not to exaggerate this emerging religious spirit.

The impact of empire was felt less dramatically by people at either extreme of the social scale. Those at the upper end were buffered from dramatic change by wealth and power; those at the lower end were equally insulated by poverty and ignorance. Typically, those whose fortunes were most precarious and unpredictable—the traders and scholars, the merchants and travelers, who moved in and out of the empire's great cities—were the ones who most felt the effects of displacement and the threat of cruel fortune.

The goal of Hellenization was somewhat self-contradictory from the outset. The genius of classical Greece lay in the vibrancy of its local traditions. Trying to universalize that genius meant inevitably to distort it. The results of Hellenization were therefore mixed and ambiguous. Certainly, something new came into being. Whether the East had been made Greek, or whether Greece had been orientalized, Hellenistic culture was very different from that of classical Greece. The ideals may have been the same, but they were diffused and subtly altered by the new realities of life. Chief among these realities was the fact of empire. It changed everything. Above all, empire established a world in which the individual person had little direct control over his or her life. In response, both religion and philosophy

in the Hellenistic period gave increased attention to the individual.

ROMAN RULE

Rome was preoccupied with power and used it with unprecedented efficiency. The Roman version of empire provided both security and the framework of legal legitimization for the force it required. Emperors after Augustus may have been bizarre in their behavior and increasingly desirous of accolades due the divine, but they maintained a remarkably long-lasting peace through a complex system of governance. The empire ruled the relatively safe areas, like Africa and Asia, as senatorial provinces—run, at least ostensibly, by the senate through its governors. Territories like Palestine that were refractory or threatened with invasion, however, were under the explicitly military governance of prefects or procurators. There were, in fact, military colonies and installations throughout the empire, and their troops were used to quell local disturbances. But Rome did not rely entirely on violence to enhance its power.

It extended the right of citizenship ever more widely, so that by the middle of the first century members of military colonies, former soldiers, even local personages like the Jews of some provincial cities, could enjoy citizenship.

The empire grew by conquest, however, and two significant aspects of life within it were shaped by that fact. First, an already stratified society had its lower levels swelled by large numbers of slaves and other persons displaced by wars. They congregated



FIGURE 1.3. The emperor Augustus prepares to make sacrifice to the Roman gods; marble statue from the first century.

in the cities and dangerously distended their populations. Such uprooted peoples were often ready for rebellion or religion or both, and tested the toleration of the empire for deviance. They also placed extreme pressure on the empire's ability to feed them. The public dole was a fact of life. Rome was fed at the expense of the provinces, especially of Egypt, the breadbasket of the empire. Rome experienced periodic crises caused by the delay of shipments or the failure of crops.

The second aspect was the constant pressure of taxation on the provinces. Taxes levied on subject peoples were especially severe. In Galilee under Julius Caesar, as much as a quarter of a year's harvest could go as taxes to Rome. Add to that the amount skimmed by local chieftains like Herod and the agents hired to do the collecting—the publicans—and the amount gouged from local populations was even greater. Small wonder the agents of Rome were hated.

Governance and trade required efficient transportation and communication. The Roman roads were extensive—about fifty thousand miles paved by the year 100 C.E.—and well maintained. Between May and October (after which weather made passage perilous), the Mediterranean could quickly and easily be crossed. The travels of Paul and his companions show that frequent and relatively safe travel was common, though still arduous and very expensive. Hostels were often also brothels, so a mobile and separatist group such as the first Christians needed to make hospitality a prime virtue. The availability and security of travel also encouraged communication. An efficient postal system made letter writing commonplace for commerce, friendship, and literary exercise, as we can see in the correspondence of Cicero, Seneca, and Pliny the Younger. Letters were also written for mutual encouragement and support between philosophical communities.

Everyday life in the empire could be harsh. Away from the wide public spaces—and for those not enjoying aristocratic privileges—life even in the capital was difficult (see Juvenal *Satires* III.190–320). Streets were narrow, crowded, and dirty; food was simple when not scarce, with meat considered a luxury item. The security offered by the totalitarian state, moreover, exacted a price in freedom.

But on balance, the Roman Empire was a significant and positive force in the spread of the Christian movement. One universally used language enabled the preaching and acceptance of the message. Great urban centers, filled with mobile and often disaffected populations, encouraged the rapid diffusion of new cults and teachings. Rapid, safe, and frequent travel and letter writing were available. All of these were enabled by the freedom from war and internal danger that marked the *Pax Romana*.

THE PAGAN WORLD

The NT cannot be trusted to provide a fair and accurate picture either of Jews or of pagans. It was written by converts seeking to demonstrate the superiority of their new life by contrast to both groups. The NT is preoccupied with community concerns and addresses the outside world only insofar as it has impact on the movement. We find in it, for example, no interest in the threat of Parthian invasion that so affected Roman policy in Palestine, demanding the settlement of disturbance at any cost. We discover no sensitivity to the threat the movement itself posed to a hierarchical and patriarchal society through its offer of communal egalitarianism to slaves and women.

The NT treatment of pagan society is overwhelmingly negative, here showing its roots in Judaism. The gentile world is considered morally degenerate and

spiritually benighted. The Gospels (see Matt. 6:7, 32; 15:26) and the letters (see Rom. 1:18-32; 1 Pet. 1:14-18) agree that pagan life was “lived in the passions of our flesh,” a matter of “following the desires of body and mind” and being “by nature children of wrath” (Eph. 2:3). Pagan satirists and moralists are even more condemning in their descriptions of the general moral decay of their day.

The reality was probably not so dismal. A. D. Nock notes,

It is . . . a grave error to think of the ordinary man in the Roman empire as a depraved and cruel fiend, dividing his hours between the brothel and intoxication, torturing a slave from time to time when he felt bored, and indifferent to the suffering and poverty of others.

The picture of total depravity, after all, comes to us not only from Christians interested in distancing themselves from their former life but from moralists who themselves embodied the highest standards within “pagan” society. Like all moralists, they delighted in exaggerating vices in order to make their appeal to virtue more dramatic, and they found their most vivid examples in those classes of society that could afford the more colorful sins. In fact, Roman law imposed a rather somber standard of morality, at least in public, and Hellenistic culture in general was profoundly, albeit unevenly, religious in its outlook.

Of course, not every religious expression was of the highest order. Rootlessness and resentment, the loss of a personal sense of worth, the lack of community, the sense of passivity before overarching and impersonal forces—these arouse powerful and often primitive religious responses. Magic and astrology were enormously popular even among the educated; they offered direct control, or at least foreknowl-

edge, of the future. Wearing protective amulets was common, as was the casting of curses.

Credulity and superstition could be found among both the simple and the sophisticated (see Lucian of Samosata *The Lover of Lies*). Such religiosity was easily exploited by spiritual frauds and flimflammers. The Hellenistic world was well acquainted with the charlatan (*goēs*), who might appear in the guise of a sophist, rhetorician, philosopher, thaumaturge, or priest—but in every costume was the first-century equivalent of the snake-oil salesman, seducing the fearful crowd for personal profit and prestige. The satirist Lucian of Samosata gives us two sharply drawn portraits of such charlatans and the way they fed on the crowd’s credulity (see *Alexander the False Prophet* and *The Passing of Peregrinus*). On the other hand, Philostratus’ completely admiring account of another wandering preacher, Apollonius of Tyana, indicates that a fine line separated the fake from the sincere in the realm of popular religion and philosophy.

All was not superstition and magic, however. The development of moral and religious sensitivity in religion and philosophy prepared a soil in which the seed of the Christian message could grow.

HELLENISTIC RELIGION

Little attention will be given here to traditional Greek or Roman religion, either in the official forms of public liturgies and the taking of auspices in temples or in domestic manifestations such as the burning of incense before household gods and the decorating of country shrines. Neither does the imperial cult require much consideration. Although the NT may contain some implicit polemic against it, as when the title “Lord of lords” is used with reference to Jesus, it

remained a minor irritant during the period when the NT was being written. From the first genuflection before Alexander the Great to the deification of Claudius, the imperial cult was for the most part a political form of religious manipulation, never pretending to express the longing of human hearts. Particularly in Asia Minor, however, local enthusiasm for the imperial cult shows that it was by no means entirely a manifestation of Roman megalomania, but functioned positively as a social adhesive. It first became important to Christianity as the test case for the choice between monotheism and idolatry.

Of far greater importance for the NT are the popular developments within Hellenistic religion that responded to the grimmer religious mood created by empire, a mood in which the classical sense of order, which saw the world as cosmos, turned chaotic. Sometimes by renewing older elements of the tradition and sometimes by fusing them with other traditions, these developments shared an emphasis on personal religious experience and the esoteric rather than exoteric. The religious spirit of Hellenism in the early Roman Empire was one hungry for revelation, for transformation, and for a personal allegiance that would give a sense of identity in an alienating world.

Prophecy was held in high honor; not only the official variety, which involved the discernment of entrails, but especially the mantic type. It could be found at ancient oracle sites such as Delphi and Dodonna, and among the priests of foreign mystery cults. It was characterized by ecstasy and speaking in tongues. Frequently it was accompanied by physical rapture and even self-mutilation. Mantic prophecy was held in reverence from ancient times since it was regarded as a literal possession of the human psyche by the divine spirit (*pneuma*), an indwelling of the god (*enthusiasmos*; see Plato *Phaedrus* 244A).

The revelations uttered may have been difficult to interpret but they were received as divine oracles (Plutarch *The E at Delphi* 387B).

Transcendent power (*dynamis*) was also manifested in miracles such as healings and exorcisms. Wandering charismatics like Apollonius of Tyana performed wonders and were sometimes regarded as divine men (*theioi andres*; see, e.g., Philostratus *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* IV.45). Healings were regularly accomplished by the savior gods Serapis and Asklepios. At the shrine of Asklepios, sick petitioners received the visitation of the god in their sleep and were healed. Like a first-century Lourdes, the walls of the shrine were adorned with the relics of the limbs and organs that had been restored, as well as plaques attesting the powers (*arētai*) of the god. Devotion to Asklepios could be both deep and personal, and the ritual meals held at the shrines of gods like Serapis offered a sense of community to their devotees.

Mystery cults were a feature of Greek religion for centuries, but their appeal had remained limited to a particular locality or clientele. In the early Roman Empire, the mystery cults gained a far wider appeal. This was partly due to the influx of new deities from the East such as Isis and her consort Osiris from Egypt, and the mother goddess Cybele from Phrygia in Asia Minor, who offered the double attraction of being both exotic and ancient. The wider appeal of the mysteries may have owed as much, though, to the needs of the age, for these cults offered divine revelation, transformation, and a sense of community. We know little about the actual rituals involved, but we do know that the initiates saw themselves as being saved from the inimical powers at work in the structures of the world, and dedicated to the god or goddess who had accomplished their transformation (Plutarch *Isis and Osiris* 382 E).



FIGURE 1.4. Terra cotta statues of organs and limbs were left as votives at the temple of Asklepios, the god of healing, in Corinth.

A similar attraction was at work in that pervasive but indefinable religious response called *gnosis*. We find elements of this response in the hermetic literature of paganism, the Merkabah mysticism of Judaism, and the gnostic writings of Christianity. At the birth of the NT, *gnosis* lacked a fully structured form and appears to have become a fully identifiable phenomenon only as the Christian heresy called Gnosticism. In the NT period, though, it was definitely present as a mood and as a variety of inchoate responses to a particular perception of the world.

Beneath all its variations, some elements of *gnosis* are consistent: a profoundly pessimistic worldview; human life seen as alienated from its true source and imprisoned in materiality; worldly existence seen as captive to cosmic forces inimical to God and to humans (see *Poimandres* 15). The religious response is to seek, through esoteric knowledge and ritual, escape from the power of materiality and the forces of fate at work in the social and political structures of the world. Such an escape cannot be complete until

death, when the soul can shed its garments of flesh in its ascent to a heavenly, spiritual home (see *Poimandres* 22–25). But even in life, ecstatic visions can send the soul on a heavenly journey to discover the mysteries of transcendence.

A sense of both the lowest and the highest in Hellenistic religious responses can be found in the *Golden Ass* by Apuleius. On the surface, this is a dazzling romance, filled with fantastic and some-

times bawdy tales. At a deeper level, it is a story of a spiritual journey from alienation to restoration. The protagonist, Lucius, is a curious and cunning young man, fascinated by the possibility of using magic to control Chance (*fortuna*). He drinks a magical potion, thinking thereby to trick Chance, but of course finds himself tricked by her: he drinks the wrong potion and turns into an ass.

As an animal, in a condition symbolizing his spiritual alienation, Lucius is harried by Chance from one stage of degradation to another. At one point, he is sold as a pack animal to an old eunuch priest, “one of the scum that turns the Great Goddess of Syria into a beggar woman, hawking her along the road from town to town to the accompaniment of cymbals and castanets” (*Golden Ass* VIII.24). These priests include a form of mantic prophecy in their show (VIII.27):

They would throw their heads forward so that their long hair fell down over their faces, then rotate them so

rapidly that it wheeled about in a circle . . . they would bite themselves savagely, and as a climax cut their arms with the sharp knives they carried. One of them let himself go more ecstatically than the rest. Heaving deep sighs . . . as if filled with the spirit of the goddess, he pretended to go stark mad.

Chance seems bent on keeping Lucius imprisoned as an animal. His lowest point is reached when he becomes a performer in a sexual sideshow. Then, while at the port of Cenchræ (near Corinth), he has a sudden vision of the goddess Isis: “. . . fortune seemed at last to have made up her mind that I had suffered enough and to be offering me a hope of release.”

Lucius prays to the goddess, and she responds with a long recitation of her names and attributes. We see in this scene how syncretism could move toward monotheism and how a mystery could demand an exclusive allegiance. Isis tells him (XI.5):

You see me here, Lucius, in answer to your prayer. I am nature, the universal mother, mistress of all the elements . . . though I am worshipped in many aspects, known by countless names, and propitiated with all manner of different rites, yet the whole world venerates me. The primeval Phrygians call me the Goddess of Pessinus . . . the Athenians call me . . . the Minerva of Cecrops' citadel . . . and the Egyptians, who excel in ancient learning . . . call me by my true name, namely Queen Isis. I have come in pity of your plight, I have come to favor and aid you. Weep no more, lament no longer; the hour of deliverance, shone over by my watchful light, is at hand. Listen attentively to my orders . . .

She demands from Lucius faith and complete devotion (XI.6):

. . . from now on until the very last day of your life, you are dedicated to my service. It is only right that you should devote your whole life to the goddess who made you a man again . . . I alone have the power to prolong your life beyond the limits appointed by destiny.

Isis saves him from captivity to Chance, and even from inexorable Fate. She restores him to full humanity, promising him immortality. Being transformed back into his human form, Lucius is initiated into her mystery and that of her consort Osiris. He enjoys the company of fellow initiates. He proudly wears the distinctive garb and hairdress of the initiate as he pursues his now worthwhile life as a lawyer and priest of Osiris (XI.20–30). In short, he has found new life.

The *Golden Ass* reveals the craving of ordinary people for some power over their life and some sense of identity in an alienating world. Those desires could be met only imperfectly by magic and astrology. The mysteries offered much more. The case of Lucius indicates that we can add conversion to the list of Hellenistic religious experiences. The commitment of Lucius to Isis did not preclude his honoring other gods, but it did reverse the direction of his life in a fundamental way, and in return for his lifelong commitment to her he could expect to receive eternal life.

HELLENISTIC PHILOSOPHY

Philosophy had changed since the days of Plato and Aristotle. The philosophical schools continued to compete for adherents and attacked each other polemically. But the “love of wisdom” (*philosophia*) was now equated less with metaphysics and politics

and more with the art of living; there was a definite shift from theory to therapy. Philosophy was a way of life. For some, it was a religious calling.

Among the great schools, Stoicism had the most obvious influence. This was surely due in part to the way its concentration on the virtues and duties of the individual fit the societal situation. If Fate, Chance, and the power of the state are beyond our control, then what can we do? We can focus on things in our control: our mind, our desires. Stoicism had an officially positive view of reality: the universe was rational, and divine providence (*pronoia*) governed events (see Epictetus *Discourses* I.6). The person who sought to live according to nature, that is, reasonably, would be virtuous and therefore happy. One could be at home anywhere; the ideal was to be a citizen of the world. Nothing could prevent a person from being a fully realized human being—reasonable, self-controlled, and content—not even slavery or exile. Even death was not to be feared, for it too was natural (Epictetus *Discourses* III.5.8–11). Stoics like Musonius Rufus and Epictetus taught a severe form of virtue, with an extraordinarily strict sexual code and inner-directed morality. The tightness of the Stoic focus, however, was itself an indication that much of life could not be controlled. And the ethics of self-control was a desperate accommodation to a world in which the structures of state and family were often not according to reason.

Philosophy was also syncretistic in the Hellenistic period. All philosophers agreed that theoretical differences were less significant than practical results. And no tradition was more practical and nontheoretical than Cynicism, which especially affected Stoicism during the early empire. Cynicism represented a wholly individualistic approach. It eschewed doctrine in favor of freedom and free speech. Freedom meant living just as one pleased, even when—as was

often the case—this meant contravening society's standards. Free speech meant the willingness to revile those who conformed to those same standards. The Cynic responded to an alienating social structure by celebrating an untrammelled individualism. The Cynic hero was Diogenes, and many were the stories that told of his snubs of the great and that demonstrated the excellence of "the free, the open-air, life" (see Lucian *Dialogues of the Dead* and Dio Chrysostom *Oration* 6). The Stoicism of Epictetus was particularly influenced by this Cynic tendency, so much so that his description of the ideal philosopher is really one of the ideal Cynic: Diogenes is for him as important a model as Socrates (Epictetus *Discourses* III.22). Although Stoicism domesticated Cynicism, there remained tensions between the traditions. For the Stoics, perfection was difficult if not impossible to attain; for the Cynics, it was simply defined and easily accomplished: freedom and free speech summed it up.

Small wonder, then, that the Cynics, in particular, attracted people who wanted to be called philosophers but did not want to work at it. Satirists have left us wonderful portraits of these would-be philosophers who had all the right equipment (rough cloak, bag, staff, long hair, and beard) and right speech (reviling the hypocrisy of others) but all the while sought to fulfill their own appetites, thus enjoying the reputation for virtue without paying its price (Lucian *Timon* 54). Many times these charlatans hit the road; from town to town they would go, reviling passersby at street corners and preaching in the marketplace. Apollonius of Tyana was one such wandering wise man (see Philostratus *Life of Apollonius* IV.2). Even more impressive was Dio of Prusa, called Chrysostom, who began as a traveling rhetorician but after a conversion experience (Dio *Oration* 13) became a philosopher. Though he

continued to travel and speak, now it was “to aid everyone” (Dio *Oration* 77/78).

Not all philosophers were so mobile. Some, like Seneca, were court counselors. Others, like Musonius and Epictetus, were schoolteachers whose “diatribes” were lively pedagogical exercises. Whatever their social setting, philosophers agreed that the good life was the virtuous life. Much of their energy went into the description and dissection of vice and virtue. Sometimes this was by way of acute psychological analysis: a saying attributed to Socrates ran, “Envy is the ulcer of the soul” (Stobaeus, *Greek Anthology* III.38.48). Sometimes social obligations were systematically displayed, as in the tables of household ethics (see Plutarch *Advice to Bride and Groom* 142E). And at other times the sheer cataloguing of vices made the point that all vice is illness and all virtue is health. Few vice lists were as extravagant as that of Philo Judaeus, who declared that the pleasure lover would also be “unscrupulous, impudent, cross-tempered, unsociable, intractable, lawless, troublesome, passionate, headstrong, coarse, impatient of rebuke, reckless, evil planning,” and, some 130 vices later, “a scoffer, a glutton, a simpleton, a mass of misery and misfortune without relief” (Philo *Sacrifice of Cain and Abel* 32).

Vice as illness, virtue as health: medicine was one of the governing metaphors for philosophy in this age. The philosopher was a physician, able to diagnose spiritual illness and prescribe the appropriate remedy (Dio *Oration* 32.14–30). The philosophical school, in turn, was a hospital, and the first step toward getting better was recognizing that one was sick: “The lecture room of the philosopher is a hospital; you ought not to walk out of it in pleasure but in pain” (Epictetus *Discourses* III.23.30).

From healing to salvation is not a large leap, and some philosophers had a deeply religious perception

of their calling. Epictetus is the most obvious example—though not the only one (see also Dio *Oration* 32.12). He frequently quotes the Hymn of Cleanthes, “Lead me thou on, O Zeus and Destiny” (*Discourses* II.23.42), sees his own life as one of service to God (I.16.21), and uses explicitly religious terminology in his description of the ideal Cynic: he is called by God and “has been sent by Zeus to men, partly as a messenger . . . partly as a scout” (III.22.2, and 23).

Not all philosophers were as pious as Epictetus, but all conceived of philosophy as more than a course of study; it was a way of life. Philosophers dressed and acted differently from most people. Becoming a philosopher meant turning from one way of life to another; the term “conversion” is an appropriate one. Even the satirist Lucian was aware of this convention. At the end of the *Wisdom of Nigrinus*, a description of one of the few philosophers he admired, Lucian portrays a young man, transformed by Nigrinus’ words, relating them to a friend. Both conclude that they should return to join the one who had first wounded them so that they might also be healed by him (*Nigrinus* 38).

The religious dimensions of philosophy are even more evident in those schools that brought their students into a full community life, like the Pythagoreans and Epicureans. Both based their communal life on the ideal of spiritual friendship. The Pythagoreans made literal application of the ancient proverb “friends hold all things in common” and pooled their material goods (Iamblichus *Life of Pythagoras* 18). The Epicureans had no organized sharing of possessions but were generous in their expressions of friendship (Epicurus *Fragments* 23, 34, 39, 42). Both schools regarded their founders as virtually divine. Some even paid homage to Epicurus during his lifetime (Plutarch *Against Colotes* 1117 A–D). Both groups

saw doctrine as a means of ensuring the soul's bliss and emphasized tradition: the maxims of Pythagoras and Epicurus were memorized by members of the school (Diogenes Laertius *Life of Epicurus* X.12). The Epicureans also used letter writing as a means of maintaining support among their communities.

It is evident that these philosophical schools offered a sense of identity and a real experience of community that was deeper than any offered by the clubs and associations so common in the Roman Empire. The Epicureans, in fact, concentrated so exclusively on the inner life of the group, advocating the quiet life removed from political activity, that they were sometimes attacked for being misanthropic (Plutarch *Against Colotes* 1125 C–F).

Misunderstanding was not the worst thing philosophers had to suffer. Though often admired by the common people, they were held in suspicion by authorities (Dio Cassius *Roman History* 52.36.4) and exile was a common fate (Philostratus *Life of Apollonius* IV.35). Rome had a complex attitude toward voluntary groups. It was surprisingly tolerant of cults and allowed many other forms of association, from funerary societies to trade guilds. But it was deeply suspicious of any gathering that from Rome's point of view might foment rebellion. Since philosophers were notorious for challenging the social order, they were possible sources of subversion. Hence, they were more generally suspected and more harshly treated than other groups.

THE REINTERPRETATION OF SYMBOLS

The Hellenistic period was one of ferment in both religion and philosophy. Religion took many forms, and philosophy was as variegated as its adherents.

The causes of change were multiple as well. But if one cause were to be isolated as most pivotal, it would unquestionably be the fact of empire, which fundamentally altered traditional Greek values by changing the social context for their expression. The manifold developments in religion and philosophy were responses to the collapse of traditional norms and symbols caused by an alienating societal structure.

It is important to recognize, however, that these developments did not lead to the invention of new symbols. Rather, they reflect the use and reinterpretation of the traditional symbols that were still available. This new use of the traditional past is most pertinent to our investigation. The religious leaders and philosophers of first-century Hellenism did not conceive of themselves as creating new and better ways. To the contrary, they never questioned the notion held by all that antiquity was far superior to novelty. Their task, therefore, was to establish and demonstrate continuity with the traditions of the past as new challenges were met. Religious leaders, practicing rituals as ancient as their people, would accept gods from abroad when these gods were perceived to be even more ancient than their own, and consequently all the more powerful and worthy of veneration. In fact, openness to barbarian wisdom during this time was rationalized as receptivity to a knowledge older than that available to the Greeks. Philosophers, in turn, saw their own concentration on virtue and self-control as continuing what Socrates had done long ago. This search for ancient precedent and the reinterpretation of symbols can be demonstrated by two features of Hellenistic philosophy: the employment and rereading of authoritative texts, and the use of models from the past.

The Hellenistic world had its sacred texts. Greek culture, in fact, was shaped throughout its long

history by the constant reading and rereading of texts from its remote past. It found the ideal of culture (*paideia*) as the noble expression of virtue (*arētē*) first and best expressed in the heroic poems of Homer. In the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and to some extent also in Hesiod and the classical dramatists, the Greeks found tales of great deeds and, as well, the involvement of gods in human affairs. The reading and appropriate use of these texts were basic to the education of rhetors and philosophers alike. The texts carried with them self-evident and weighty authority.

Since the writing of the Homeric poems, however, much had changed in society and in the understanding of nobility. No longer was virtue the rustic sort that is valued by warriors. The myths of the gods found in Homer and Hesiod were regarded as offensive in light of greater moral sensitivity and scientific knowledge. Tales that spoke of gods lusting after each other, mating with humans, and engaging in feuds were scandalous. They attributed to gods qualities unacceptable even in humans (see Josephus *Against Apion* II.34.242–49). In other words, the classical texts that had provided Hellenism with its fundamental symbolic framework were at risk of becoming dysfunctional because of new experiences.

The reaction of some was to abandon the texts altogether. Plato admired the poetry of Homer but mistrusted the tales (*Republic* 378 B–E, 595 B–C) and finally denied poetry a place in his ideal state (*Republic* 398A). The Epicureans, who denied the existence of gods anyway, saw all myths as blinding people to a scientific view of the world (Philodemus *On Piety* 18). But those more committed to the ethical and religious values implicit in possessing such normative texts—their antiquity, their divine inspiration—found it important to reclaim the texts by reinterpreting them. How? Precisely in the light of the new scientific and ethical developments

that had caused them to be questioned in the first place.

Antisthenes may have been the first to claim that Homer said “some things in accord with fancy and some in accord with reality” (Dio *Oration* 53.5), but it is with the Stoics that we find systematic use of allegory as a way of reclaiming sacred texts. Simply stated, allegorical interpretation claims that the surface (literal) meaning of the text is only a cipher pointing to another meaning. The text says one thing but means another, and the “real” truth can be reached by knowing the system of meaning (scientific or ethical) that will unlock the text. One such system was etymology; Plutarch passes on a common way of using it: “Cronos is but a figurative name for Chronos (time), Hera for air, and . . . the birth of Hephaestus symbolizes the change of air into fire” (*Isis and Osiris* 363D).

In allegorical interpretation, gods were not really fornicating or fighting; rather, the myths were expressing cosmological, psychological, or ethical truths. Thus, in the *Odyssey*, we read of “the loves of Ares and Aphrodite and how they first began their affair in the house of Hephaestus” (VIII.266–366). It is manifestly a tale of adultery. But in the *Homeric Questions* of Heraclitus (no. 69), we see that the union of Ares and Aphrodite is really the combination of strife and love in harmony. The explanation of Cornutus is very similar (*Compendium of Greek Theology* 19). The texts, in short, are still “true” and still authoritative, but only if understood in the proper way.

Allegorical interpretation was not practiced by all who cited these texts, but the principles involved won wide approval. We even see other myths interpreted allegorically, as when Plutarch says of the Egyptian myths (*Isis and Osiris* 355 B–D), “You must not think that any of these tales happened in the manner in which they are related,” and goes on to advise:

if, then, you listen to the stories about the gods in this way, accepting them from those who interpret the story reverently and philosophically [*hosiōs kai philosophikōs*], and if you always perform and observe the established rites of worship . . . you may avoid superstition which is no less an evil than atheism.

This way of rereading sacred texts provided a precedent that was eagerly followed by Hellenistic Jews. They also had ancient, venerable, and sometimes troublesome Scriptures, which were in need of reverent and philosophical interpretation. Allegory came into its own in the scriptural exegesis of Hellenistic Judaism.

One reason classical texts needed to be maintained was that they provided models for life. To an extent that we can scarcely appreciate, Greek culture was built on the imitation of models from the past. The arts of writing and speaking were based on explicit imitation of examples (*paradeigmata*) found in classical sources. The style of the present copied, so far as possible, that of the past. Novelty was not a value.

Imitating models was essential to the learning of virtue as well. The Greeks were convinced that virtue could not be taught by command, but had to be learned from observation of its living expression in parent or teacher. The teacher was to be a living textbook of the virtuous life. That is why charlatans who professed virtue but did not live it were so dangerous: they presented false examples to others.

The classical texts needed to be reinterpreted so that the models might continue to function positively. The ideals of virtue were no longer those of the archaic nobles who fought for honor. Allegory helped the Hellenistic reader discover contemporary virtues beneath those simpler, ruder ones. And in moral discourse, figures from the myths, like

Odysseus, took on new dimensions in line with contemporary perceptions. The figure of Heracles, in particular, was developed in a manner that the simple recitals in Hesiod's *Theogony* (450–470) would not lead one to suspect. His labors now were seen as acts of great virtue, and Heracles was the model of the philosopher. The myth had it that Heracles abandoned his children. Epictetus, however, makes this act of neglect a positive virtue. It showed how Heracles saw Zeus as the father of all and how the philosopher could be happy in any place, even apart from his children (Epictetus *Discourses* III.24.13–17). As the philosopher was a physician and king, so Heracles (III.26.32; see also Dio *Oration* 1.84)

was ruler and leader of all the land and sea, purging them of injustice and lawlessness, and introducing justice and righteousness, and all this naked and by himself.

Heracles became a “son of God” (II.16.44) and the model of those who achieved immortality and divine status by their virtue. One who imitated Heracles could hope for the same divine elevation (Pseudo-Heraclitus *Epistle* 4).

Not only mythical figures but also philosophers from the past functioned as models. Socrates and Diogenes were the preeminent examples of the philosophic life. For Epictetus, Socrates was a citizen of the world and kin to the gods (I.9.22); he was free in every respect (I.12.23) and the example that others imitated (I.19.6); he held rank next to Heracles (II.18.22). As for Diogenes, Epictetus measured a potential Cynic this way: “Is he a man worthy to carry the staff of Diogenes?” (III.22.57; cf. Dio *Oration* 4.12–39). Even contemporary philosophers could be models for their students (Lucian *Demonax*

and Nigrinus). The writing of biographies of philosophical founders—by Diogenes Laertius, for example—enabled students to learn their doctrines and imitate their virtues. The ultimate relationship in which the imitation of a model was demonstrated, of course, was that between father and son (Pseudo-Isocrates *To Demonicus* 9).

These developments were complex and often colored by religious perceptions. The lines between hero, demigod, immortal, prophet, sage, and divine man were often obscure. The ambiguity and obscurity indicate that both philosophy and religion were, in that day, open to the transcendent and eager for the experience of transformation.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What were the main tools of Hellenization used by Alexander and his successors?
2. What impact did empire have on Greek culture?
3. What is meant by the statement that Hellenistic philosophy turned “from theory to therapy”?
4. What were the importance and roles of prophecy and healing in Hellenistic religion?
5. What was the significance of the “network of communication” (roads and letter-writing) in the Roman Empire for the earliest churches?
6. In what ways would an ordinary citizen be consistently cognizant of the strength and power of the Roman Empire?
7. What about Hellenistic philosophy would justify the statement that New Testament Christianity is best understood as a philosophy?

Bibliographic Note

Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Greek and Latin authors are found in the Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann). The sections of Apuleius in this chapter come from *The Golden Ass*, trans. R. Graves (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1951), 187, 190, 262, 264–66. The quotation of A. D. Nock is from *Conversion* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 218.

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