

The preparation for the Gospel

Introduction

I have, many times, explained that God prepared the world for the transmission of the Gospel in the most marvellous ways. However, it strikes me that a very concise paper summarising these events would be useful.

Jewish matters

The Diaspora

The Jewish Diaspora had spread throughout the Roman Empire. This gave Gentiles some knowledge of OT truth. It also gave the apostles some foundation as a base for missionary activity. The activity of missionaries often began in a synagogue until forced out.

The Diaspora also produced a mingling of ideas as educated Jews in Gentile regions (such as Saul of Tarsus) absorbed Greek philosophy, poetry and plays. This enabled Christian missionaries to better understand Gentiles and to utilise their own art and customs as an aid to preach the Gospel. For example, while the word 'elder' was better suited to Jews for a church leader, the Greeks preferred the word 'overseer' ('bishop').

The Septuagint Translation

The OT had been recently translated into Greek, which also allowed Gentiles to understand something of God's word. This is why the apostles quoted the OT from the Septuagint version, in the main.

Fashionable Greek customs

After Alexander the Great, Greek culture became extremely fashionable amongst affluent Jews, even in Judaea. Jews wore Greek style clothes and built Greek style houses. There was a strong Grecian (Hellenic)¹ influence even in Jerusalem.

This greatly aided the transmission of ideas across cultures and much helped the transmission of the Gospel. In the early church there was a strong Hellenic contingent in Jerusalem (Acts 6:1).

The synagogue

The synagogue had developed at some unknown point prior to the exile of Judea and then proliferated in Babylon. On the return of the exiles, local worship centres were established for meeting away from the rebuilt temple; this was especially vital in the Diaspora. This became a model for the meetings of the early church.

Philo

Philo was a Jewish philosopher living in the time of Christ. He blended OT monotheism with Greek philosophy; particularly an amalgam of Stoicism and Platonism. This anticipated much of apostolic thought, especially regarding the doctrine of the Logos and

¹ Classical Greek culture and language.

moral law. He even used the term 'paraclete'.² He also linked the Pentateuch to Greek philosophy through the use of allegory. He greatly influenced Origen and Ambrose.

Philo thus prepared the intellectual world for the coming teachings of the apostles, which emphasised similar themes, such as spirituality, law, ethics, monotheism, creation etc.

The Messianic hope

After many years of prophetic silence after the close of the OT, the Jewish world eagerly anticipated the coming of the Messiah, even though most people had the wrong idea, expecting a warlike prince conquering the Romans. People were ready to hear about the Messiah.

The Essenes

This was an important sect of Judaism that proliferated from the 2nd century BC to the 2nd Century AD. It was ascetic in discipline and highly organised (such as at Qumran, e.g. the *Dead Sea Scrolls*) outside of mainstream Judaism.

They demonstrate the inherent distrust of traditional Judaism led by corrupt Pharisees, Sadducees and Scribes. Their communes helped form a model for the early church, especially in their search for truth and purity of faith in a community of brethren.

Greek matters

The Greek language

After the conquests of Alexander the Great, Greek became the lingua franca of the known world. This enabled a much better transfer of ideas.

The development of Common (*Koine*) Greek, the Greek used for business transactions and everyday life, was greatly suited to the writing of the NT. It contained far more nuance and subtlety than Hebrew or Aramaic and was used everywhere.

The philosophical vacuum

Greek philosophy had dwindled into scepticism.³ This meant that philosophy offered no hope to the meaning of life or offered any wisdom to improve the ancient world.

Mystery religions

Various mystery religions and holy clubs began to develop in Greece that did not meet in temples. This set the scene for the concept of the local church meeting in homes.

Open air preaching and debate

Before the time of Christ it had become popular in Greek city centres to watch individuals preaching this or that or to watch a furious debate between two philosophers. This would usually occur in the *agora*, a central space for markets and entertainment.

This became a useful platform for the apostles to preach the Gospel in a way that was acceptable to a ready audience. It was polite to let individuals have their say in such speeches.

² See *parakletos* in Jn 14:16, 26, 15:26, 16:7.

³ The philosophical position maintaining that our beliefs about a certain subject matter cannot be justified. We can have no knowledge of the way that the world really is or what the meaning of life is.

The ekklesia

‘Ekklesia’ means, ‘a body called out’ or ‘an assembly of citizens’ and derives from the Greek institution thus called which was the gathering of representative citizens to discuss political matters on behalf of the city. Jesus coined this word for his people, which we translate as ‘church’ (Matt 16:18, 18:17).

The word emphasises people gathered for a higher purpose and its derogation to just mean a dedicated material building, or worse a building of a certain style, is a great shame. The church consists of elect people; it has no reference to a building.

Roman matters

Peace

The Roman Empire had settled into a time of relative peace, the *Pax Romana*, after much turbulence and war. This peace stretched from the borders of Scotland in the west to the borders of Persia in the East.

Law and order

The Romans established law and order policed by troops. This meant that people could travel over most areas without fear of bandits or pirates. The change in secure transportation was very significant, allowing the apostles to travel widely even as far as India.⁴

Communications

The Romans had established good quality roads over most of its empire. This enabled people and letters to travel with far greater ease and security. The Roman civil service could get a courier letter from Rome across the Mediterranean to Carthage in 24 hours. [It would be a stretch to achieve this today.]

Religious toleration

Before the period of ten persecutions beginning with Nero in 64 AD, Christians were tolerated as a whimsical sect of Judaism for decades. This was due to the Roman policy of allowing religious toleration and a certain amount of autonomous government under favoured kings (e.g. Herod). This policy enabled the church to survive its earliest days without being stamped out.

The Silk Road (also, the Silk Route)

This was an ancient caravan route linking Xian in central China with the eastern Mediterranean. It was established during the period of Roman rule in Europe, and took its name from the silk which was brought to the west from China.

This meant that a relatively safe route developed between the Mediterranean and China just before the apostles spread out across the world.

Pagan matters

Ethics

The pagan world in general had sunk into a moral abyss. People all over the known world were desperate for some kind of guidance and hope.

⁴ It is said that Thomas and Bartholomew ministered in India.

Religion

In general, the various religions had failed over time to fulfil their promised peace and salvation. New faiths were rising up to try to meet this demand (e.g. Mithraism),⁵ but were not universally successful. Mithraism, for example, had no place for women and was only popular on Rome's borders: the frontiers along the Danube and Rhine and in Britain.

Innovations

Papyrus

For centuries writing materials had included cumbersome things like clay tablets using Cuneiform letters or vellum / parchment, the prepared skin of certain animals. The former was impractical and easily broken while the latter was very expensive and difficult to form into books, hence scrolls were mostly utilised.

This all changed with the development of papyrus, an early form of paper made from crushed reeds. This was much more affordable, plentiful, cheap and much easier to collate into books (codices), though scrolls were still used as well. It was prepared in ancient Egypt from the pithy stem of the aquatic plant *Cyperus papyrus*, from which paper takes its name.

This development occurred in ancient times and was much improved just before the time of Christ. The importance of this cannot be exaggerated. It enabled copies of the Lord's speeches to be published very early on, followed by the Gospels and the various apostolic letters. It enabled the apostles to give counsel to distant churches via letters carried by couriers. It enabled local church members to copy important documents, such as a letter from Paul, so that every member had their own copy.

As the invention of printing by moveable type was critical to the success of the Reformation, so also the invention of basic paper was critical to the success of apostolic ministry.

Ships

For centuries ocean-going ships were quite small and nimble; even the much later Viking longship was a relatively small galley which managed to travel to America under Leif Erickson. Trade between Britain and Phoenicia for tin had a long history utilising reasonable small, single-sail ships. [Tin was vital to make bronze, an alloy of copper and tin. The Bronze Age (the late 4th and early 3rd millennium BC) superseded the Stone Age.]

But it was the various wars between superpowers that led to the development of much larger warships, such as the Greek trireme. Hannibal [247–182 BC] was able to transport elephants from Africa to Europe to serve his campaign against Rome. An offshoot of warships was the development of larger trading ships with better sails and rudders. By the time of the apostles such ships were quite sophisticated and aided the transport of the apostles across the known world. Sea travel was very important to the missionary travels of Paul who was planning to travel to Spain just before he died (Rm 15:24, 28).

⁵ A religion popular with Roman soldiers. It may have developed from Hinduism or Zoroastrianism.

Conclusion

All these things working together gave an added impetus to the proclamation of the Gospel, which generated growth that would not have been possible centuries before.

The timing of all these items shows the providence of God ordering things according to his purpose.

Within the space of 30 years after the death of Christ the gospel had been carried to all parts of the civilised and to no small portion of the uncivilised world. Its progress and its triumphs were not concealed. Its great transactions were not “done in a corner.” It had been preached in the most splendid, powerful, and enlightened cities; churches were already founded in Jerusalem, Antioch, Corinth, Ephesus, Philippi, and at Rome. The gospel had spread in Arabia, Asia Minor, Greece, Macedon, Italy, and Africa. It had assailed the most mighty existing institutions. It had made its way over the most formidable barriers. It had encountered the most deadly and malignant opposition. It had travelled to the capital (Rome), and had secured such a hold even in the imperial city as to make it certain that it would finally overturn the established religion and seat itself upon the ruins of paganism.

Within 30 years, it had settled the point that it would overturn every bloody altar, close every pagan temple, bring under its influence everywhere the men of office, rank, and power, and that “the banners of the faith would soon stream from the palaces of the Caesars.”

Albert Barnes, *Commentary on Acts*, Introduction.

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