



CONTEXT FOR THE CHRIST EVENT:

Hellenism

THE JEWS AND GREEKS maintained frequent cultural and mercantile interaction from as early as the second millennium (2000 BCE). However, the term “Hellenistic era” (ca. 332-152 BCE) refers to the interrelation of Greeks and Jews throughout the suzerainty over Judah by Alexander the Great, his Diadochi (Successors), the Ptolemies (Egypt) and the Seleucids (Syria). For much of this period, Judah remained a theocracy. Nevertheless, the Jews adopted a number of Hellenistic beliefs and practices. These changes progressively weakened the role of their ancestral Mosaic laws.

Over the course of nearly two centuries, the Hellenistic rulers established at least 30 Greek cities (*poleis*) within the borders of Palestine. These *poleis* were settled by Greek immigrants, mercenary troops and local inhabitants. Each *polis* was constituted as an independent, walled city-state controlled by civilian government (*ecclesia* = general assembly; *boule* = city council). The citizens were educated in the *gymnasion* (elementary school) and *ephebeion* (advanced school). Each *polis* coined its own currency, levied its own taxes, governed its own territory, and conducted its own businesses. Such independence became attractive to the Jews, who began to incorporate Jerusalem itself as a *polis* (Antiocheia). For example, while the Jerusalem Temple remained a place of worship, it also became the central bank of Judah and of all Jews in the diaspora. In addition, it housed the Sanhedrin council in the pillared Royal Stoa on the Temple mount. At the southern boundary of the mount was the military fortress of Akra. Nearby, a *gymnasion* was established. And around the Temple precinct were numerous shops and stables for the exchange of animals and other produce.

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Meanwhile, the Greek language became increasingly attractive to the Jews — particularly to those in the western diaspora. In the third century BCE, Ptolemy II Philadelphus (287-247 BCE) invited 72 Jewish scholars to come to Alexandria, Egypt, and there translate the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek. This Greek translation, known as the Septuagint (“Seventy Elders”), became the accepted Hebrew Scriptures and remained so for centuries.

Thus, the cultural interaction of Jews and Greeks not only persisted at the political and linguistic levels, but also progressed to philosophy and religion. Both Jews and Greeks agreed that there were four basic earthly elements — air, water, earth and fire. Both agreed that there also was a fifth and heavenly element — the intangible ether. These five fundamental elements had their archetypal counterparts in human consciousness.

For the Jews, the mystical counterpart of the four earthly elements was knowledge of the Tetrateuch — Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers. The fifth or ethereal element was found in Deuteronomy. Together, these five books formed the Hebrew Pentateuch or Torah (instruction; from *Yarah* = to teach, to instruct). To truly know the first four books was to prevail in this world. To truly know all five books was to further prevail in heaven. Heaven itself consisted of three levels — the level of the Mosaic law, the angelic level of Lucifer, Michael, Gabriel, etc., and the highest level of Moses and YHWH. Together, all seven levels were signified by the seventh-day Sabbath and constituted the achievement of divinity.

For the Greeks, ultimate knowledge was pursued through their *paideia* (instruction). They believed that this instruction, which took place in the Greek institutions of the *gymnasion* and *ephebeion*, required five levels (metaphysics, epistemology, logic, ethics, aesthetics) to reach the status of the divine, indwelling “idea” or “word” (*logos*).

It was in this context that the manifestation of YHWH took place, overturning the Hellenistic presuppositions of both Jews and Greeks. For instead of progressing from the earthly human to the heavenly divine, “the [heavenly] Word [*Logos*] was made [earthly] flesh, and dwelt [*skenoō* = tabernacled] among us . . .” (John 1:14). Reversing the philosophy and religion of both Jews and Greeks, YHWH left the ethereal, divine realm and, metaphorically passing through the veil of the Temple, he adopted the air (incense), fire (menorah), earth (shewbread) and water (laver) to achieve embodied humanity. Thus, when Jesus — the human manifestation of YHWH — came up out of the Jordan after his baptism, John the Baptist looked at him and declared, “Behold the Lamb of God!” (John 1:36).

In his subsequent ministry Jesus met with and welcomed a group of Greeks (John 12:20). Later, he came to the Temple and was profoundly disturbed by

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its purported divinization of mankind and also by its divinized power structures. In effect, he declared that these elements had destroyed the Temple and its authentic metaphoric purpose to prefigure the human appearance of YHWH. Nevertheless, he promised that he would raise up the Temple in three days! (Matthew 26:61). And that he did. For as John the revelator later perceived, “. . . [T]he Lord God Almighty and the Lamb *are* the temple . . .” (Revelation 21:22, italics supplied).

Endnote

1. For further exposition of the changes during the Hellenistic era, see “Both Jews and Greeks,” *Outlook* (July/August 2003); “The Second Temple: Hellenistic Period,” *Outlook* (January/February 2004).

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