

## The Preparation of the Greco-Roman World for Christianity

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### A. A View of the World Coeval with Earliest Christianity

While the predominant peoples of the ancient world had reached an astonishing height of secular culture — the Greeks above all as poets, thinkers, and artists, the Romans as organizers, lawgivers, and world-rulers — their religious and moral limitations became more clearly apparent. The old polytheistic religions of the people and state cults, which formerly, as long as they were flourishing, had surely filled many a heart with reverence for the divine and stimulated them to strive for virtue, were disintegrating and losing credibility. Total atheism was no longer a rarity in the last times of the Roman republic. Caesar Augustus had attempted to renew the earnest piety and strict morals of the forefathers. He had decayed temples rebuilt and new ones erected; he recalled to life forgotten religious services and holy customs. But these attempts at restoration had scant success. Emperor worship arose as a substitute for belief in the gods since the beginning of the period of Caesars. This consisted in the worship of the dead and soon also of the living emperor. In the first case the emperor was received after his death into the number of the gods (apotheosis). In the latter case it was the genius of the emperor, which received divine honor, i.e., the divine power, which, as one assumed, inhered in his personality. The divine worship of a ruler was familiar to the eastern subjects of the Roman empire, since it had been practiced there, e.g., in the kingdom of the Pharaohs, from time immemorial. On his victorious march to the east Alexander the Great was greeted by the priests of the Egyptian god Amon as „son of Amon“, and the Ptolemies had simply taken over the practice of the Pharaohs. We nowadays may find it impossible that any living man could sincerely be thought to be divine. But we should remember that until quite recently the Japanese Mikado was „divine“, at least technically. Already beforehand the oriental religions and mystery cults had advanced victoriously to the west, and exerted on the masses a stronger and stronger power of attraction, so especially the cult of the Asia Minor mother goddess Cybele, of the Egyptian deities Isis and Osiris, and of the Persian god of light, Mithras. Beside that there flourished every kind of religious superstition: astrology, magic, and necromancy; the last was the sham art of conjuring up the spirits of the dead for the disclosure of the present and the future. Hand in hand with the decay of religion went, above all in the higher classes and larger cities, a frightful degeneration of morals. In his letter to the Romans the apostle Paul draws a dismal picture of this decline of morals, and his judgement is confirmed in essence by pagan writers like Seneca, Tacitus, Juvenal.

Also, philosophy, which had to replace religion for many educated people, was in a state of dissolution. The profound speculations of a Plato and Aristotle were largely displaced by other philosophic systems, which selected what was held to be true from different philosophic schools (eclectic philosophy). The philosophers despaired of being able to attain to the knowledge of the ultimate, supersensible reasons for things and laid the emphasis on practical wisdom for living. The most widespread philosophy in the time directly before and after Christ was the teaching of the Stoics. They viewed moral capacity as the purpose of all philosophy. Their doctrine of God was pantheistic. Pantheism is that erroneous world view, according to which God and world (matter) form a single substance, the world is only an appearance or modification of God or at least both are so commingled that an essential difference between God and the creature can no longer be conceived. According to the teaching of the Stoics, the development of the world is subject to the blind power of fate, operating unalterably. Many people surrendered to scepticism, and renounced the knowledge of the truth in general. We recall the question of the Roman governor Pontius Pilatus in the Gospel of St. John. Christ had declared to him: „To this end was I born, and for this cause I came into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth. Every one that is of the truth heareth my voice.“ Pilatus thereupon knew nothing else to answer except: „What is truth“ (John 18,37–38). Like many of his contemporaries the Roman governor was a sceptic, who disputed the possibility of certain knowledge. It is conceivable that at no time was the feeling of helplessness and the consciousness of general depravity more diffused and stronger than just then, when Christ entered into the world.

There were however, next to these negative elements in paganism, also to be sure a set of positive starting points for the doctrine of salvation of Christ and many positive outward circumstances, which proved useful to its rapid diffusion. We have already mentioned that in spite of the multitudinous polytheistic cults, a certain spiritualization of the conceptions of God and an unconscious pull toward monotheism was unmistakable there. Besides, the oriental religions and the mysteries contained, in addition to many wild and repulsive customs, many a grain of truth. The mysteries inspired intense feeling in contrast to the sober, legally disposed Roman religion; they spoke of sin and guilt, expiation and rebirth, immortality and blessed life in the next world. The goal after which they strove through secret rites was salvation of the soul and direct union with the deity. Their priests even practiced a kind of religious instruction and direction of the soul. The thought of a religion of universal revelation and redemption had won even more power and extension. Pious pagans struggled in painful longing for illumination and help from above. They expected a change of rule and renewal of the world, a „golden age“, a savior appearing historically in the form of a great prophet and wise leader of souls. This longing found an impressive expression in the fourth Eclogue of the Roman poet Vergil (70–19 B.C.). The resemblance between the language of the Eclogue and that of Isaiah, together with the mention of a child who was to be born, induced a definite belief among the early Christians that Vergil's lines are in some mysterious way a messianic prophecy; this