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3/30/20 ***The Greco-Roman World* Book Interaction** Dr. Shellrude

James Jeffers' work, *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era*[1], is a comprehensive exploration of the world into and out of which the Christian New Testament (NT) canon came. For the historian and Bible scholar alike, the work brings the reader into a world of cultures quite different from the modern world. The responsible Bible reader will examine a work of this kind so as to guard against anachronistic hermeneutics and the supposition that supposed "literal" readings of English translations with one's twenty-first century Western worldview are fully informed. The contextual background to the NT documents found in works like Jeffers' does not merely add color and commentary; it brings the words to life closer to the way they were written- to real people in real times, places and circumstances. Here, we will first note similarities between first century ways and cultures as described by Jeffers and those of our twenty-first century. Then we will examine some of the noteworthy differences that help us read our New Testaments more accurately and insightfully. Third, we will analyze some of the more curious background details that Jeffers reveals that bear missiological significance. Fourth, we will let Jeffers' content catalyze our discovery of ways that the early church lived counter-culturally in its time. Finding these reference points brings us to the same timeless calling to be in touch with the world but not conformed to it (Mtt 28:19; Rom 12:1). Despite their differences with their society, early Christians let the Greco-Roman culture be a tool for Jesus' mission in ways that might inspire us to do the same today.

Similarities Between First and Twenty-First Centuries

If one could time-travel back to NT times he would find it radically different from the modern world. But there are some similarities, big and small, that warrant our attention. Jeffers

[1] All citations from James S. Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era: Exploring the Background of Early Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999).

notes, “The Greeks and Romans were like modern Westerners in that they took their leisure time seriously” (29). This included athletics, entertainment, and good food and good service (40). Like today, “open sexual expression was a widespread theme in plays, dances and art” (33). There was also “extensive travel…[unparalleled] until the nineteenth century” (34-5) like we find even more today in our globalized world. Both ancient and modern societies find the city to encapsulate all that “civilization” means, though proportions of residency inside cities is five times today what it was then (48). Like today, “the poor…congregate[d] in the cities, where they had a better chance of” making a living (188).

Though time brings changes to many external aspects of culture, the human spirit has many constants. According to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, people have a need to belong. The first century Romans found belonging in associations, “microcosms of the community” (77), that one could compare to athletic clubs and social groups including churches today. Surprisingly similar between the eras is the fact that, as associations, “many Christian churches owned property by the third century” (78). Also common among people of any era is worship, though the objects of worship differ. The ancient Greeks and Romans were pluralists like many today- “there was always room for one more god” (94). Different cities often thought about the same gods in different ways (94), an important missiological phenomenon that showcases the importance of contextualizing theology in cultures. Early Christians found some common concepts among the ubiquitous mystery religions in their day (e.g. afterlife, union with deity, gods’ returning to life after death) (96), just like today’s Christian will find common ground with non-Christians on a variety of subjects. The danger of these similarities is that they can lead to syncretistic or diluted doctrine. For example, one might compare typical American Christians’ prayers for getting what they want with the ancient pagans’ prayers “attempt[ing] to coerce the

forces of nature" (90). Considering a few more religious similarities between the eras reveals an alarming human tendency to commandeer religion for human ends. Roman emperors leveraged cult worship to rule the populace much like American politicians "gain the trust and respect of the citizens" by identifying with symbols of patriotic civil religion (103). Saints today must keep from making a political viewpoint synonymous with Christian orthodoxy just as they must not go through the motions of Christian traditions as a substitute for personal belief the way the Romans' performing symbolic religious rites did (100). Indeed, early Christians gained a reputation for taking their belief too seriously. Their faith was "carried to extravagant lengths," according to Pliny (106). Many modern believers face the same accusation. Pluralistic societies then and now tend to repugn Christian proselytization, but evangelism has historically marked devout saints. As Jesus said, true followers will obey his commands, and his final command to disciple the nations is tantamount to his command to love, since God demonstrates his love by saving sinners (Rom 5:8).

Differences Between First and Twenty-First Centuries

We can present three categories of differences between these worlds: those of a wide-scale social organizational nature, those related to the household and private life, and those related to Christianity specifically. First-century society was organized differently from today's in some commercial and socioeconomic ways. Businesses in cities were grouped together, allowing for cooperation through shared resources and marketing (e.g. customers "knew to go to the booksellers' street to find books") (54). This practice is not uncommon in international markets, but Western shops tend to seek a corner on the local market by *not* being in proximity to other similar vendors. Formal agreements did not require written contracts but, instead, only the honor of one's word as a guarantee (58)- a practice that would be utterly trounced in today's litigious society. Socioeconomic classes were so disparate "that their members had virtually

nothing in common" (181). They were not nearly as non-partisan as ours today and there was no sizable "middle class" (called the "respectable populace" then) as we know it today (188). The vast majority- perhaps some eighty-five percent- were poor (181). And the poor were not trusted since they were thought to do anything to survive (189). Wealth was associated with virtue, while poverty with ignominy (189). The lower class was intentionally disadvantaged in order to preserve class boundaries (191). This flies in the face of the dignity modern politics and justice strive to bring to every citizen. And as for citizenship in the Roman world, "only about five million of the over fifty million inhabitants of the Empire…were free and full Roman citizens" (197), compared to the USA where over ninety percent of the population are citizens.[2] Furthermore, unlike today's democracy that is "by the people, for the people," Rome's government, which was often neither predictable nor just (111), "was designed to support the interests of the leaders back in Rome" (110). The average citizen was seen as a servant to the Empire, not as a beneficiary of the state's resources the way Americans think. Curiously, the ancient Greco-Roman society appreciated art like modern American society does, but the latter lauds artists while the former considered creation of art as "beneath them" since Greek slaves produced much of the art (193). In all, Greco-Roman society was very slow-changing (249) and stagnant with little social class mobility (191), unlike the fast-paced and dramatically more egalitarian American society.

Household and private lives of the Greco-Roman world also differ from ours. Americans are highly sensitive to privacy. Those in the first century could find little privacy, especially in tightly packed cities (69). One must here acknowledge that much of what we know from the ancient record of the Greco-Roman world reflects an urban, not rural, point of view (49). The

[2] "Selected Characteristics of the Native and Foreign-Born Populations," US Census Bureau, https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS_14_5YR_S0501&prodType=table. Accessed March 28, 2020.

NT's anecdotes of village life inform historians of a lesser known world. In the basic unit of society, the family, the father (*pater familias*) was head of the household and legal owner of everything until his death (83), while at eighteen, male and female Americans are legal, autonomous adults. Also, duty to family is much lower today than it was long ago (239). The ancient patron-client relationships (192-3) differ greatly from relationships today where Americans tend toward feelings of entitlement from the state but indebtedness to no one. Finally, Jeffers comments that Roman households were situated such that it was "impossible to focus home life on the children" (248), which is quite opposite the situation in many an American child-centric home.

While we affirm that the Christian message "was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3), we must note several differences between NT age Christians and American Christians. For one, baptism "meant a total resocialization, in which loyalty to the Christian group was supposed to replace every other loyalty" (80). Baptism in American churches is significant but often lacks such stark ramifications. Early saints "put more emphasis on identifying with the group, and less on individual preferences, than does the average American Christian" (90-1). The ubiquitous cross symbol displayed in almost every Christian circle today did not appear in believing circles until the third century (158). Today's Christian and church would benefit from emphasizing the inter-relatedness of believers at least as much as they emphasize forms such as crosses.

Missiological Insights from the First Century Context

When reading the NT, one must realize aspects of the political, ecclesial, and social world that Jeffers keenly unearths to shade one's missiology. By "politics" we mean both state and interpersonal organizations. Now, Jeffers offers a helpful note about the political situation: "In the Gospel, Rome appears as an oppressing overlord, hovering behind the scenes. It is never

forgotten, but it is simply not an issue in the daily life of the average Galilean and Judean" (140). In fact, "the virtual absence of Greco-Roman influences" attests to the Gospels' accuracy (141). Still, we must note how political some ramifications of the gospel would have been in its original context. For example, the NT's treatment of taxation is complexified by issues foreign to us today. Some Jewish leaders opposed paying taxes to pagan, autocratic Rome on theological grounds (129, 146; cf. Mt 22:17). After A.D. 70, Jews paid taxes that supported "the temple of Jupiter built on the former site of Herod's temple" (144). Tax collectors (*publicani*, "tax farmers") inflated the tax rates to pocket their own salary before sending money on to Rome (144-5). Does one enable a corrupt system by paying into it? Are there any alternatives? These are questions missionaries living in unstable political environments still ask. The political topic of citizenship appears in the NT also. Though Paul is a rarer example of a Jew having Roman citizenship by birth (202), he was reticent about such civil status in environments antagonistic toward Rome (199). Again, missiologically, the issue of citizenship is intricate, raising the question of nouns and adjectives: Is one a Christian American or an American Christian? Paul emphatically subjugated his Roman roots to his new identity in Christ. Jeffers offers some pragmatic reasons for Paul's invoking or remaining silent about his citizenship (209-10), such as avoiding corporal punishment or navigating legal proceedings. This is likely, but one must recall Paul's strong words about his central motivation: to preach the gospel despite hardship or cost (Php 1:15-23; 2 Cor 12:10). So citizenship for Paul is merely a tool to spread the gospel.

Jeffers observes innumerable historical details with a bearing on modern church planting. One specific and one broad observation work together to give a potent counterpoint to American church models. Specifically, the conversion of Cornelius (Ac 10) depicts the gospel's redemption of Rome's imperial clout and social plutarchy to become an instrumental catalyst for gospel

advance. As a centurion, Cornelius enjoyed wealth and status which he had garnered through the imperial machine of Rome. Yet far from being vilified, he is championed as a God-fearer and one of God's hand-picked converts to open up the Caesarean church to Gentiles. It is as if God, by saving Cornelius, was telling the early church, "I am going to use someone who enjoys what many of you do not have (i.e. status, power, citizenship, wealth) to forge something Roman society does not have: unity and equality (182; cf. Col 3:11; Gal 3:28). On a broader level, we must note that, while churches included wealthier citizens, the majority were unlike Cornelius and other aristocrats; most "could do little more financially than to provide a living for their families" (194). Yet today, many of the most celebrated American churches operate with huge budgets and their pastors enjoy great acclaim and remuneration. When we observe that four-fifths of the finances in the global church belong to American Christians but only one-fifth of the world's Christians live in America, we see the gross disparity between churches not only in our times, but also as compared to NT times. This flies in the face of many a church supposedly modeled after Acts 2:42-47. Could the modern American praxis and ecclesiology be more *un*biblical than biblical? A simple observation of the biblical world and our own demands that church leaders at least implement church models that are less gentrified and dollar-dependent, and more socially unified and benevolent with resources like early churches were (195; cf. 2 Cor 8:2).

The social world of the NT age is very different from American society in many ways, but one subject, slavery, is as significant a piece of first century history as the theology that incorporates its language (Jn 8:34ff.; Rom 6:16ff.). Consequently, Jeffers devotes a chapter to it. As a slave society (defined as "one in which slaves make up at least 30 percent of the population," 221), the Roman Empire viewed slaves as property but not inferior by nature, only

status (226-7). So, that "Jesus considered himself a slave of his heavenly father…to do God's will" (227) should shape our view of ourselves in relation to God. Common verbiage and confessional theology in songs today exalts the Christian as an adopted child of God who bears a new name and is boundlessly, even recklessly, loved by God. This is not wrong. However, considering the experience of many NT Christians who had been or were slaves (or even owned slaves), we should humble our Christian ego to include also the picture of God as our master, who is unrivaled in kindness and forgiveness but is master nonetheless. Similarly, Jeffers' discussion of patron-client relationships (192-3) makes one wonder if early saints also thought of God as their patron and they his clients. It bears further investigation, for these relationships certainly colored their daily lives (cf. Jas 2:6-7; 1 Tim 6:17-19).

Early Christians' Counter-Cultural Ways

The missiological and theological reason for examining Christian history is not simply to learn more about the biblical world and, consequently, the biblical text. The reason for God's special revelation in Scripture is to know and worship God in relationship as he desires (1 Pet 1; Jn 1). Today, in America's religiously unaffiliated society, people freely practice any religion they choose often with little or no social cost or state infringement. This is unlike the urban Roman world's environment. On the whole, in fact, Christianity was "un-Roman" (162), it "simply did not fit any of Rome's categories" (109). The saints often sacrificed much to worship Jesus as the only God, and their Christocentric worldview and behaviors contrasted with the majority populace. Let us examine three ways the early Christians lived counter-culturally.

Christians in the ancient Roman world demonstrated an uncanny social equality in their circles. For example, Roman elites looked down on laborers such as tanners (193), whom, as a trade, the Jews also held in disrepute (28). But Christians welcomed tanners eagerly (e.g. Peter with Simon the tanner (Ac 9-10) and Paul who, as a tentmaker, also would have close

associations with tanners to acquire his materials). Christians saw laborers of all kinds as dignified children of God occupied with worthy vocations (cf. 1 Ths 4:11). Indeed, some saints are described as God's and the apostles' "co-workers" (*synergon*, Rom 16:9; Php 2:25; 1 Ths 3:2). Noting this equality is not to say the Christians formed a completely contradictory social order. Despite believing in gender equality under the cross, they still made gender distinctions (85). But they did greatly reform typical relationships. Unlike their society, the church made "no connection between financial patronage and congregational authority" (83), and it held to Jesus' beatification of and association with the poor and broken (188, cf. Mt 5:2-12) instead of the contempt that the Roman rich had for the poor (193). In fact, Jesus and his followers gave stern warnings about one's wealth jeopardizing one's spiritual health (Mt 19:24; Jas 2:1-7). Unlike their Roman peers who evaluated a person's status based on several criteria (182), namely "by family and wealth" (190), Christians preached an equal *dignitas* among all in a way that seemed to turn the social order upside-down (cf. Lk 14:12-14). Even compared to typical voluntary associations, "Christian congregations were more inclusive socially" and "exhibited [an] equality of roles" and "an unusual sense of connectedness" with believers everywhere (80), perhaps even those today (cf. Heb 12:1; Jn 17:20). Says Jeffers: "Christians were a mysterious combination of Jews, Greeks and Romans. They acted like a single people," which was "unnatural" to the Romans (108). How disappointing that, two millennia later, the church has not matured far past its strong starting point of unity. Sunday mornings may still be the most segregated time in America.

In addition to their unique reputation for inclusivity of people, Christians were notorious for their religious exclusivity. They rejected all other gods, which were numerous in their pagan society (92ff.). Rome's tolerance toward religions gave the Christian movement space, but

Christians' beliefs about Jesus were seen as anti-state (e.g. Jesus, not Caesar, is Lord and Savior), unpatriotic, atheistic, and unnecessarily stubborn about certain behaviors (e.g. burning incense to the emperor) (106-9). Christians bucked the religious status quo and their gatherings were suspicious to some Roman rulers paranoid about uprisings (163, 214). Christians' personal style of prayer and less ritualistic worship also contrasted their pagan peers' practices (90). Christians were eventually careful to separate themselves from their Jewish counterparts also. For one thing, Jeffers notes the vehemence with which some Jews held to political aspirations of revolution against Rome to regain an independent earthly kingdom (139). Yet Christians believe(d) their King and kingdom are not of this world (cf. 101). Finally, the church offered Gentiles a more welcoming conversion experience sans circumcision, Jewish law observance, and ethnocentrism (218).

Christian ethics caught the Greco-Roman world's attention. For one thing, Roman cult worshipers formally observed cult rituals without necessarily personally believing in the god(s) they worshiped (100). Therefore, one need not conform one's behavior to satisfy the gods so long as he properly performed the rituals (90). Christians embraced lifestyle holiness. One specific ethic that distinguished Christians from their contemporaries is their strict sexual ethic (242). Sexual promiscuity was expected and allowed among pagan Romans and was part of some cult worship (e.g. Aphrodite's cult in Corinth employed hundreds of prostitutes, 263). It was intolerable to Christians (242). Female followers of Jesus were faced with especially difficult circumstances since they would normally be subject to their husbands' wishes, which would often include objectionable practices (243-4). Some Christian women even opted to remain single and, thus, singly devoted to Jesus, which was a very strange decision to the Roman mind (251).

In all, early Christians were like rogue agents of a foreign God living a lifestyle that preached a countercultural message. Whether it meant using the amenities of the day such as widespread travel routes (116) along key urban centers that acted as outposts for gospel transmission (69ff.), or using elements of popular culture such as athletics (32) or philosophy (191), Christians transformed their world within three centuries. Jeffers offers no challenge for the modern church based on his historical survey, but a wise reader will consider some. How will the American church live counter-culturally for Jesus? What aspects of culture can be redeemed for the gospel? May we count the cost and learn from our spiritual ancestors.