

A review of the Greco-Roman world the New Testament Era by Jeffers, James S

The world of the Bible is very different from the world we know today. Many scholars have explored the culture, people, language, and history of early Christianity. However, James S. Jeffers; *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era*: examines Greco-Roman societies and cultures of the time. This book was written for the average reader who seeks to understand the New Testament as it relates to the Greco-Roman world. According to Jeffers, this book is written with the nonscholar in mind. Hence his use of technical terms is used only when necessary for making a point. However, the text is clear and straightforward enough for the inexpert to understand.

Despite the growing popularity of Christianity, it was very complex and complicated for those living during that time. After Jesus' death, his command to go into the world and preach the gospel came with many challenges. Christians were regarded with suspicion; their rituals were mistaken for cannibalism, and others for incest. This made them an easy target for those seeking to eliminate the movement. Chapter one of Jeffers book introduces the culture of the first-century Jews and a growing Christian population that would later challenge the powers of the elite parties. The first century Jerusalem was at the center of the Jewish ruling class who spoke either Greek, Latin, or Aramaic. They were dressed in Hellenistic clothing and were citizens of Rome. According to the book of Acts, Paul was a Pharisee who was also a citizen of Rome and participated in the early church's persecution. In addition, these diaspora Jews were possibly converted to Christianity in Jerusalem, where they practiced their newly found faith. However, not all Jews continued to practice Judaism but were heavily influenced by the Mediterranean world. This led some to compromise their faith for the cultic practices of the Greco-Roman period.

Moreover, the Jews who lived during the New Testament Era were also influenced by the politics of the Jewish Sanhedrin. Although they were a very influential party, the threat of Roman power was looming. The desire for independence was still the theme for those living during this period. Judea was once a prosperous and independent kingdom under King David and his successors. However, the conquests of the Assyrians and the Babylonians brought the Jews to a place where they gradually adopted some of their customs and ideas. But under Persian rule, they were allowed to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple that the Babylonians destroyed. Nevertheless, Alexander the Great and the Greeks were on the scene to divide and conquer. The Seleucid Kingdom in the Near East took control of Egypt, where Ptolemy ruled Judea for many years (Jeffers, 15). According to Jeffers, the Hellenistic rulers in Palestine built cities in Decapolis where they allowed the Hellenistic to impose their culture by doing business with the Jews, which forced them to speak their language. Also, it was not only the Greek language that was encouraged but education as well. As a result, the Jews were under their control for nearly two centuries.

After being under the control of the Seleucid, the Jews revolted and won back their independence for the first time in centuries. The weakening state of the Seleucids gave the Jews the benefit of practicing their faith once again. Judea pursued its own course for the next century but not without difficulties or infighting. However, the old Hellenistic Kingdoms in the Eastern Mediterranean were becoming obsolete. So General Pompey went to Judea, but the Romans were too strong to resist, and voluntarily Pompey became an ally of Rome, becoming semi-independent. This protected Judea from domination by the more powerful states around it, like the Seleucid and Ptolemaic empires and Parthian Empire to the east. As a result, Judea

remained a part of the Roman Empire, although they were not entirely free, which allowed Rome to impose Greek culture on the Jews.

Although Kings first ruled Rome, the wealthy and powerful got rid of the kings and established their ideas which were influenced by Greek culture. Much of the true power lay with the senate, although the citizens of Rome elected the various officials of the Republic (Jeffers, 16). However, as Rome expanded, they gradually conquered the people around it and incorporated them into its society. The Romans had to learn from dealing with their people how to deal with the people they conquered. This presented a challenge as they tried to convince the upper classes of conquered people to buy into their system. Rome promised extraordinary benefits for those who supported them. Rome was a rising power that could protect the people they had conquered. They demonstrated their ability through wars where they took control of the Italian Peninsula and the land of their rival in West and North Africa. Hence, their dominance was seen throughout the Western Mediterranean world. Rome was now the superpower during this era. They were known for their resilience and strength as they pursued their rivals until they conquered them. They first defeated the kingdom of Macedonia, took control of Greece, and defeated the Seleucids. According to Jeffers, by 143 B.C., Judea volunteered to become an ally in fear of being conquered. As a result, Judea gained some necessary rights, allowing them to pay their annual tax to support the Jewish temple. But after centuries of civil wars and revolts, Rome had become an empire no longer governed by the aristocrats, so Julius Caesar emerged as a single leader. This would be the first time Rome would be governed by a single leader and not a group, but his fellow senators killed Julius Caesar while he was on his way to declare himself King of Rome (Jeffers, 18).

Nevertheless, Octavian, Julius Caesar's nephew, used his uncle's influence and became emperor, but his reign was short-lived. Although Rome experienced leadership struggles, it remained a mighty empire in the Mediterranean. Thus, no other nation could challenge them. Therefore, according to Jeffers, life in the first century had many challenges, and Israel during the New Testament era was no different. Israel was primarily an agricultural society where the wealthy were agriculturalists. Ninety percent of the Empire workers engaged in farming and herding, leaving a small group who were wealthy. Private farms were family-owned and considered independent farmers working about ten days a year. The gospels mentioned these farmers as very productive. However, significant landowners in Italy used enslaved people to work their land. This was a more efficient way to cultivate olives and grapes or to tend large flocks of sheep, goats, or pigs (Jeffers, 21). In addition, enslaved people could work twice as many days as tenant farmers normally would. Once the enslaved people finished their work in one field, they were sent to another. Farming was a big business in the first century, and the more enslaved people one had, the bigger the profit. However, farmers with small holdings typically brought their surplus to market.

Moreover, only some people in Judea were farmers. Others were herders who had sheep, goats, pigs, or cattle. Like the farmers, the herders who had large livestock would entrust the work to slaves as well. In John 10:12a, Jesus states the hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So it was customary in Palestine for shepherds to hire help, but it was also crucial for a shepherd to lead their flock. Jesus in John 10 states that because the hired hand is not the shepherd, he abandons the sheep and runs away when he sees the wolf coming. Thus, a Shepherd leads the flock and protects it from predators. The Bible speaks of Christ as the Good Shepherd, whose sheep know and will one day shepherd them. Leaders in the New Testament

churches were also compared to shepherds in that they should feed and protect their human flock (Acts 20:28-31). Although 90 percent acquire their wealth through agriculture, 2 Corinthians 8:9 states, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake, he became poor, so his poverty might become rich." However, in the Greco-Roman world, shepherds were not a popular profession. They were considered dirty and smelly since they spent most of their time outdoors with the animals (Jeffers, 21). According to Aristotle, "among men, the laziest are shepherds, who lead idle lives, and get their subsistence without trouble from tame animals; their flocks having to wander from place to place in search of pasture, they are compelled to follow them, cultivation a sort of living farm" (Politics 1.8). I'm sure many Shepherds would disagree with Aristotle's claim on shepherding because it was far from laziness but was a lot of work to care for and tend the sheep. Although the profession of a shepherd was not respected, some of the most remarkable men in the Bible were shepherds: Able, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and David. Christianity would have made no sense to the Greco-Romans apart from understanding Old Testament images of God and King David as loving, responsible shepherds (Jeffers, 22).

Although farming and herders were not as crucial in the Greco-Roman World of the New Testament, commercial fishing was a common trade where Jesus carried out most of his ministry. Independent fishermen made their living from selling fish; however, maintaining the nets, boats, and other equipment was expensive. The nets used in Palestine were cast and dragnets. The cast nets were fifteen feet in diameter, made of fine mesh, and weighted with leaden sinkers. On the other hand, Dragnets was a giant net used with two boats. Matthew 13:47 describes the kingdom of heaven as a net thrown into the sea and gathering fish of every kind. In the New Testament

Era, Fishermen were an essential part of the Galilean economy that was not part of an independent system but participated in free markets and free trade.

Yet those with money to invest and willing to risk made large fortunes in commerce (Jeffers, 22). Nevertheless, Roman aristocrats considered trade to be a dirty business. They believed the old-fashioned source of income was farming. Thus many aristocrats did not engage in trade. Jesus' parable of a master who went on a long journey and expected his servants to make a profit by trading in Matthew 25:14-16 depicts the risk of trading but the rewards one can receive if engaged. Thus, after conquering Italy, Rome built roads and fostered trading, establishing colonies of merchants. Trading for the Romans became extensive, where international trading provided grains from North Africa and luxurious items. As a result, cities such as Athens grew wealthy from trading.

Jeffers turns our attention to the Ancient Greek and Roman societies that were organized around their cities. City life for the farmers and shepherds became a means of financial gain where they bought manufactured items and specialty goods. The town was also a place where Christianity shifted rapidly from the religion of the uneducated to a faith of more educated people (Jeffers, 49). This shift resulted from a heavy Roman influence where these cities were the most prominent, wealthiest, and powerful. But some other towns and villages were established by the Jews of Palestine. However, both Greeks and Romans ignored towns they considered inconsequential. The Jews in these cities continued to flourish, allowing them to keep their language, religions, customs, and values void of the Greco-Roman influence. This was a blessing in disguise for those who wanted to continue practicing their faith. Although the impact of the Greco-Roman world presented many challenges, having their towns made it possible to worship the God they believed in and served. As a result, a majority of Jews and Christians in

these towns lived in small apartments and homes of their former masters, where they were able to gather for worship. According to Jeffers, the Jews who converted to Christianity would have found their apartment building a natural place to spread their beliefs. Other times Christians would hold services in the catacomb, their underground cemeteries where it was large enough to hold the assembly. The Romans neither encouraged nor discouraged these meetings but allowed them to meet freely, collect funds, and hold various rituals.

The first Christians were Jewish converts and Gentiles who were attracted to Judaism. As a result, the forms from the synagogue showed up in the early church. Like the synagogue, the early churches were overseen by elders, who regularly met for scripture reading, prayer, and singing. The Christian churches provided a place of belonging for visitors and teachers who were invited to teach. In addition, the churches added unique practices such as communion and baptism (Jeffers, 72). Jeffers said the synagogue was not the only model influencing early Christians but the home setting. Since the homes in the Greco-Roman time served as meeting places for guests, the Christian churches took advantage of this model and made their homes essential cells for worship. In the New Testament, the disciples assembled in an upper room (Acts 1:13); in the same house, Mathias was chosen to replace Judas, and Pentecost occurred. When Peter was released from prison, he went to the home of Mary, the mother of John Mark. Since Judaism was a recognized religion within Rome, the Roman authorities allowed them to practice their faith without disruptions until Nero, who persecuted the Christians, came on the scene. As a result, the Jews were banished from Rome in 49, leaving Gentile Christians without the cover of Judaism for some years (Jeffers, 75). Acts 18:2 states, "Claudius commanded all the Jews to leave Rome."

Moreover, this further accelerated the dislike for the Christians. Thus Rome prohibited Christian congregations from congregating. However, by the third century, Christian churches owned their property, making gathering easier. Religions in the Greco-Roman World were contract religions based on mutual trust between gods and humankind. In other words, their religion was to gain the cooperation of the gods. As a result, they had a body of rules that told them what had to be done to avoid the disapproval of the gods. Greeks and Romans could believe whatever they liked if they performed the rituals correctly (Jeffers, 90). In contrast with the early Christian religion, the emphasis was on identity with one God, who they believed was the creator of all things. However, the Greek and Roman gods were worshiped mainly as defenders of the empire nation or city (Jeffers, 91). For example, Zeus was a sky god who sent the rain, Demeter brought the grain from the earth, and Dionysus caused the grapes to grow and the sap to flow in trees and woods. But other gods presided over urban activities; Athena was connected with politics, war, and industry; Hephaestus was god of the blacksmith and artisan; Hermes was the patron god of the merchant and messenger, and Ares was the sponsor of war. However, the early Christians saw these gods as spirits of the antichrist rather than creatures of the true God (Jeffers, 92). During Paul's ministry, the Greek god Apollo, the son of Zeus, was worshiped in some places he visited. In classical Greek mythology, Artemis was the sister of Apollo, equated by the Romans with Diana, the moon goddess, huntress, and protector of womanhood (Jeffers, 93). Despite all the gods of the Greco-Roman world, Christianity became the new state religion in which men, women, and children were allowed to participate.

The family, women, and education were also vital during the Greco-Roman era. Jeffers' study on this subject answers the questions: what did marriage mean to them? How did husbands and wives relate to each other and their children? Finally, he explored the educational attitudes

and practices among Greeks and Romans. Marriage, according to Jeffers, under Roman rule, was a legal marriage in which the wife did not come under her husband's complete authority. Instead, her father remained her legal guardian. Roman women were more independent than Greek women. Other marriages were informal and were not governed by Roman law. These marriages took place among enslaved people. Hence the children born into an informal marriage were considered illegitimate and accepted the status from the mother. Therefore the father had no legal rights. Despite this, many slave marriages lasted a long time.

On the other hand, Roman law made the minimum marriage age twelve for girls and fourteen for boys. The males in Roman households were the headship. According to Roman law, the men were the only ones that could own property. His power in the home was unbroken only in death. Jeffers moved on to state in the Greco-Roman world, where the Jews typically adopted the marriage practices of the larger culture. Christian families looked much like Jewish and pagan families (Jeffers, 240). However, the patriarchies in Jewish and Christian households were weakened. Hence, Roman law served to reinforce the patriarchy. The parents of the spouses arranged marriages among the Jews. Children in poorer families went to work. They took their status from their father at the time of conception. Children in this time were to honor their parents and care for them when they got older. Both Greek and Roman traditions expected women to be unproductive. They were seen as incapable and unintellectual in contrast to their male counterparts. According to the Greeks and Romans, the only use of a woman was the duty of childbearing. Although their traditions opposed changes in the status of women, women were given the opportunities to excel in the New Testament era during the time of Jesus' ministry. Several women supported Jesus' ministry financially. Jesus taught both men and women. After Jesus rose from the tomb, a group of women was there to anoint his body, and Jesus sent a

woman to tell his disciples he was risen, making her the first woman to declare the good news of the gospel. In addition, women served in the ministry of Paul as well. They were leaders and carriers of the gospel throughout the New Testament era.

Now we'll turn our attention to education in Greco-Roman Culture, which was formal and was considered to be an essential part of life in the upper classes, at least for males. Among the Jews, education was of great importance. Throughout the Bible, instructions are given to teach and train the children in the law of God. However, in Greek education, discipline was stressed. According to Hubbard, the typical school day would start at dawn and continue with sports breaks at the gymnasium until evening. A household enslaved person known as a paedagogus (child guide) would accompany the student to and from class to ensure he arrived on time and got into no mischief. As a result, instruction relied heavily on copying and memorizing certain pieces of literature. However, in Rome, only the upper classes studied the language and literature in Greek. They also sent their children to learn Greek. According to Jeffers, Rome offered no formal technical education or vocational schools. Children only attended school during the summer, from July to October, or during several holidays (Jeffers, 256). However, the New Testament demonstrates respect for education, but it was mainly emphasized in spiritual matters. One of the most critical responsibilities of Christians expressed in the New Testament was the obligation to teach the church's beliefs. 1 Timothy 4:11 Paul tells Timothy to command and teach the people everything he had learned in the Christian faith. Education on spiritual matters in the Christian faith was essential because it was the center of development for children in the home. Proverbs 22:6 states, "Direct your children onto the right path, and when they are older, they will not leave it." This was extremely important for the development of the family and the community in which they lived and served.

In the final chapter, Jeffers states, "at some point, we must know something about the unique nature of each province". The provinces were administrative and territorial places in the Romans empire. Various emperors established these provinces as revenue to generate income throughout Italy and the rest of their expanded empire. The governors of these provinces were often selected from men who had been consuls of the Roman magistrates. In Judaea, the lower-ranking governors were appointed. Nevertheless, the regions provided a source of income for the governor and resources for Rome. However, they also served as conduits where the gospel message was shared, and many converted to the Christian faith. The Roman province of Achaia consisted of southern Greece, just south of the region of Macedonia, where Paul's first visit was the dawning of a new era in the development of the Christian church. Cenchrea was the seaport of Corinth, where Paul took a ship from Cenchrea at the end of his visit to Corinth. Corinth, the classical- era, was established in 1000 B.C after rising in propensity through trade and local industry. Still, it was also home to a troubled Corinthian church where Paul sent letters. The number of provinces under Roman rule changed nearly constantly as conditions altered in various locations, but the Christian movement continued to grow, and these provinces contained the most enthusiastic supporters of cultic practices as well (Jeffers, 70). Colossae, twelve miles southwest of Laodicea in the south of the province of Asia, adopted the Hellenistic philosophy, observed rituals, festivals of the new moons, worship of angels, and mysticism. Paul's letter to the church in Colossae states, "Beware lest any man spoils you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world and not after Christ (Colossians 2:8). Despite the early presence of a Christian community in the Roman provinces, John omitted Colossae among the seven churches.

Jeffers's book on the Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era gave tremendous insight into the world of the New Testament. Those seeking to understand the Bible must explore the people, culture, and society in which they lived. We make a significant mistake if we seek to understand it from a Western culture that is very different from the culture of the Greco-Romans. Jeffers takes the reader on a scenic journey of the historical background of the New Testament era, religion in the Greco-Roman world, family, women, education, and provinces and cities of the New Testament Era, to name a few. This book has advanced my understanding of early Christianity and enriched my reading and application of the Bible.