

No.2, Conditions in NT Background

NT Christianity appeared in this world at a definite point in history. Note Gal 4: 4 – it was when “the fulness of time was come” that God sent forth His Son. It was at the incarnation of Christ and all that His birth ushered in that NT Christianity was introduced into this world; but as this text shows it was at a particular point that it occurred. The sense of the words is that Christ arrived upon the scene of human history at the time that had been previously fixed in the eternal counsels of God.

Concerning this phrase “the fulness of time” others see in it the concept or idea of *ripeness of opportunity* in the sense that the opportune time had arrived for the establishment of NT Christianity – and this certainly is a correct assessment. A study of the history of that time shows that a number of conditions prevailed that meant that the time was right for the introduction, establishment and dissemination of the Gospel in the world of that time. These prevailing conditions can only be attributed to the wonderful providence of God so that in a number of ways the stage was set for the miraculous work that the Lord did in sending His Son into this world and in planting the Christian religion and the NT Church in a dark, sinful and needy world.

There were three particular conditions that are important to note with regard to the background and appearance of NT Christianity in this world. Let us note them.

I. FIRST THERE HAD BEEN THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE

The ruling empire in NT times was the Roman Empire with its imperial form of government. Originally the form of government in Rome had been that of a monarchy but its kings were expelled and it became a republic. Then, in 48BC at the end of a civil war, Julius Caesar became supreme ruler – an emperor. He was then assassinated, more civil wars occurred and in 31BC Octavius became sole ruler, assuming the name of Augustus. This date is regarded as the beginning of the Roman Empire.

The existence and presence of the Empire is certainly noted in the NT Scriptures. There are various references to the Roman form of government and its authority; to the names of Emperors and Roman governors; to the system of colonies that Rome established under her jurisdiction, (Acts 16: 12); to the matter of Roman citizenship with its special privileges which Paul enjoyed, Acts 16: 37 & Acts 22: 25-28; to the Roman legal system and its very terms & expressions as is seen especially in the writings of the Apostle Paul as he deals with the great doctrine of justification. These are just a few evidences of the fact that in the providence of God NT Christianity was born, survived and existed under the Roman system of that era.

The point is that it is not by chance that Christ was born at a time when the entire world of that day was unified. Prior to 31BC chaos reigned throughout the Roman world; but with the advent of the reign of the Caesars, relative peace was established. It is known in history as ‘Roman peace’ and it embraced the entire world of that day that was conquered & ruled by the Roman Empire. Thus, it is clear that God, the Ruler of history, sovereignly chose and appointed that very time to be the time for the birth of NT Christianity. It was born under a system that in God’s providence afforded it many advantages. For example, one of the various benefits of Roman rule is that its prosperous commercial system resulted in the introduction of a marvellous road system that enhanced travel and also made it much safer to travel. Therefore, NT Christianity, which originated in an obscure corner of the empire, could and did spread rapidly to its farthest corners.

II. SECOND THERE HAD BEEN THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE GREEK LANGUAGE AS THE SPOKEN LANGUAGE OF THE EMPIRE

The empire that preceded the Roman was the Greek Empire, founded by Philip of Macedonia and mastered by his son Alexander the Great – it extended from Greece to the borders of India. After Alexander’s death his empire fell apart being carved up into four sections, see Daniel 8: 8. However, though his empire did not last, Alexander’s efforts resulted in Greek culture and the Greek language becoming extended over the entire eastern world of his time.

The language of Greece was comprised of a number of dialects; but gradually what was known as the *Attic* dialect became dominant. The *Attic* dialect was the language of Athens, and when the Greek Empire came to its height *Attic* was the dialect that was adopted as the spoken language of the empire. It became a world language – the world of those times.

Moreover, it was still the spoken language of the peoples when the Roman Empire came to power. When the Romans conquered they found Greek the dominant tongue and they allowed it to continue. Thus, from about 300BC to 500 AD this Attic Greek was the spoken language of the nations. Due to modification of this Attic dialect over time and because it was the language of the empire it required a new name; and the name that was usually applied to it was *Koine Greek* – common Greek.

Now, since NT Christianity was a revealed religion, it was a religion with a book – it was based on and employed the OT Scriptures which were, of course, written in Hebrew. But how could a Hebrew book be used in a Greek world? That would have been a serious problem but for the fact that in the providence of God it was

overcome – before the Christian era even dawned, the OT Hebrew Scriptures had been translated into the Koine Greek of the empire; the translation known as the *Septuagint*. Therefore, from its very beginning, NT Christianity was provided with a Greek Bible.

The Greek world was lost in deep sin and in desperate need of the Gospel, see Romans 1. The picture portrayed by Paul there is actually verified by pagan writers – the world of the 1<sup>st</sup> century was lost in sin; but God had prepared the way for its salvation through the availability of the Gospel in the language of the people. Moreover, when the Gospel came it was given a hearing because God had shaped the course of history to prepare the way for it. All that the Greek & Roman empires had ushered as already noted meant that for the first time in history the whole world was open; the world of that day was one great community ready to be evangelised by the Gospel of grace & power.

### III. THIRD, THERE HAD BEEN THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE JEWISH SYNAGOGUE SYSTEM

At the time when NT Christianity originated the temple worship of the Jews was still in vogue, following the form prescribed in the Old Testament. In the temple worship Christ & the Gospel were typified; and then all was fulfilled through Christ. Later, of course, in 70AD, the temple was destroyed by the Romans and it and its system finally disappeared.

However, there was another great religious institution of the Jews – the synagogue system. The difference from the temple was that while the temple was in Jerusalem only, there were synagogues scattered throughout the land and in many other lands as well. Moreover, the synagogues were places of instruction, where the word of God was read and expounded each Sabbath, Acts 15: 21. Indeed this was the main feature of the synagogue worship service – all was centred on the Scriptures, so that the synagogue service was simple and unadorned.

Consequently, there was already in place for NT ministers and preachers of the Gospel, a system of worship in Palestine and in many other nations that was a means by which they had a spring-board for their own ministry of the Gospel. See Acts 9: 20 – this was the apostolic pattern; see also Acts 13: 14-16a – a marvellous example of the Gospel minister making use of the platform that was already in place.

Rev. John Greer