

Section 9 – Patriarchal Monotheism

Hellenistic influence

Alexander the Great and his successors, the Ptolemies of Egypt and the Seleucids of Damascus, had long since begun the process of Hellenising the eastern Mediterranean hinterlands. They had established Greek cities at Alexandria, Antioch, Tarsus and elsewhere, and imported their culture to many more. The Romans took this insertion of Hellenistic culture into the region even further. They adopted the entire Greek pantheon as their own and employed Greeks – or enslaved them – as clerks, business managers and scribes. Everywhere the Romans went, one might say, the Greeks were sure to go, and Judah was no exception.

The Hellenes were the product of a successful and rich culture. Hellenistic ideas became the basis of philosophy throughout the Roman Empire and beyond. The Hellenes, not all of whom were Greek but who shared their culture, were open-minded and receptive to new ideas. They were also profoundly superstitious. As a result of these factors, Hellenistic culture had become a hotbed of competing religious cults, and many of these were very wealthy and powerful.¹

Whatever the reality of Jesus' life, the mythology surrounding him is of two sorts. One is an appeal to the conservative Jewish people by arranging to have the hero fulfil Hebrew Scriptural prophecies, and the other is an appeal to Hellenised people, whose gods and religious ideals were very different. Since the Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – are heavily laden with fulfilments of Hebrew prophecies and Hellenistic miracles, we can see that conservative Jews, as well as more secular Jews and Hellenised Gentiles, were being targeted by the writers.

In the patriarchy, the qualities and powers of the Goddess were appropriated and given to male god-figures and Jesus is an extension of that process. Judaism had no trace left, at this time, of the Goddess. It was a religion based on fear, but fear can only hold people's hearts and minds when they believe there is no escape.

For Hellenised people living in the region, Jahweh must have seemed an uncouth and violent brute, quite unworthy of devotion. Zeus may have been fickle, tricky, unfaithful, vengeful and prone to bouts of temper, but Jahweh was far more harsh. While Zeus' wife Hera was

¹ 'Hellenistic' refers to Greek culture after 323 BCE. It is generally confident, flamboyant, celebrates the individual and is given to spectacle and grandeur. The earlier phase of Greek culture is called 'Hellenic' and was more reserved, formalised, and stylistically simple. This is the culture of Homer that was once generally known as 'Classical'. 'Hellenes' refers to people who were part of Hellenistic culture but who may not themselves have been Greek. 'To Hellenise' describes the process by which the culture spread. Generally, peoples were Hellenised not by coercion but because of the attractiveness of the culture.

subordinate, she often rebuked him for his excesses and was a powerful counterbalance. Hellenistic culture, though by that time thoroughly patriarchal, was based in Goddess culture; the Hellenes had kept many goddesses, and they were not about to do away with concepts like forgiveness and love. The stark, bitter, jealous and angry Jahweh may have come from the same source as Zeus via El and An, but without a female consort to temper his harshness, all that was left was grim, stony judgementalism, condemning and repeatedly punishing the only people loyal to him.

Since the Jewish religion is not evangelist and it does not proselytise, there was never any need for the Jahwists to soften the harshness of Judaism to attract more followers. It is arguable that the opposite is true, that Judaism was kept as rigid as it was in order to ensure its uniqueness and the unsullied bloodlines of the Jews. The result was that Judaism was a non-runner in the evangelical race that was taking place all over the Hellenised world, where religions and cults were springing up everywhere.

Christianity, from its inception, was a religion that one joined. Adherence was a matter of choice and in this Christianity was like many other cults that appeared in the Hellenised world around the same time. Since joining these cults was voluntary, people had to be persuaded. Their leaders had to evangelise, and this is one reason why we see so many parallels between the stories of Jesus and other god-men, most of whom were preaching a very similar message.²

The territories that had been Judah and Israel were no longer the sole property of the Jews, if they ever had been. The influx of peoples from different cultural backgrounds had been ongoing for many hundreds of years, which stiffened up the already rigid cult of Judaism. The Jews were not even prepared to accept those who had been left behind in Judah during the Babylonian Exile as Jews.³ They detested the Romans and their idolatrous ways, and resented the fact that the Romans held dominion over the Temple. The Herodian Dynasty of client kings of Rome who ruled in Galilee was also hated, but at least it was Jewish; it was against the Romans that hard-liners railed the most.

² These included the cults of Mithras, Dionysus, Simon Magus and others.

³ It is more likely that the exiled Jews had changed than those who stayed, but as it was the exiles who were writing and redacting the Hebrew Scripture, their opinion persists.