CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-43802-6 - The Expansion of the Christian Church
P. Gardner-Smith and F. J. Foakes-Jackson
Excerpt
More information

CHAPTER ONE

THE ROMAN EMPIRE

IN the first volume of this series some account has been presented of the rise of the Christian Church, and of its early growth in Palestine and the lands of the eastern Mediterranean. It is the purpose of the present volume to look further afield and to trace the wider expansion of the Church, whereby Christianity became the religion of Europe, and in the course of centuries the situation was brought about with which we are to-day familiar. The third volume deals with the essentials of the Church's faith and looks towards the future.

At the time of our Lord's crucifixion Palestine was a part of the Roman Empire, and we must begin with a brief account of that imposing institution.

For centuries before the birth of Christ the irresistible armies of the Republic had been extending the power of Rome until it stretched from the Atlantic to the Euphrates, from the English Channel to the African desert. Then came a period of increasing disorganization, and the jealousies of rival commanders led to the Great Civil War of the first century B.C. From that grim contest the young Octavian emerged triumphant, master of the Roman world. He resigned his power into the hands of the Senate, with apologies for having played the tyrant; but the Senate, either recognizing their helplessness before the conqueror of the world, or genuinely convinced of the failure of the Republican system, entreated Octavian to retain his power as commander-in-chief of the army, and virtually supreme in all causes civil and military. Thus he became Augustus,

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-43802-6 - The Expansion of the Christian Church
P. Gardner-Smith and F. J. Foakes-Jackson
Excerpt
More information

Princeps et Imperator, nominally responsible to the Senate, but actually more powerful than any king. Henceforth the emperor was permanently what successful generals had sometimes been temporarily, a dictator who controlled the whole machinery of the State; and so long as he retained the loyal support of the legions, he could afford to ignore the Senate if he chose. Thus civil disturbance made way for military tyranny—a common sequence in history.

Under Augustus, and under some of his abler successors, the new system worked well. For a time great civil wars were avoided, and the provinces into which the Empire was divided benefited by a less corrupt administration. The world enjoyed the blessings of peace, for although the Empire was always at war in the frontier provinces, serious invasions were prevented, and the great mass of the population dwelt in security. The Roman peace made possible the developement of civilization; splendid roads were made from Rome to the remotest provinces, brigands and pirates were sternly suppressed, and commerce flourished exceedingly. The Romans lacked the original genius of the Greeks in the fields of art and literature, but they were great engineers and builders, and in the cities of the Empire luxury flourished to a degree hitherto unknown. In southern Europe many noble buildings have survived the devastation of the centuries and still remind us of the glory that has been.

The administration of the provinces was in the hands of Roman citizens of the higher classes, supported by military power. Judged by modern standards it left much to be desired, for the Romans were slow to outgrow the old idea that the provinces existed to enrich the capital. Thus taxation was often oppressive and methods of government violent and arbitrary. But on the whole there can be little

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-43802-6 - The Expansion of the Christian Church
P. Gardner-Smith and F. J. Foakes-Jackson
Excerpt
More information

doubt that the world profited by Roman supremacy, and in most of the provinces the lot of the average man would have been more unhappy if the legions had been withdrawn.

Roman military power was unchallenged, and the legions kept the peace, but there were other great forces at work in the world in the first century. The conquests of Alexander the Great had opened up the East, destroyed national barriers, and helped the spread of Hellenic culture. The Greek language was spoken by almost everyone in the eastern part of the Empire, and even in Rome it was heard as often as the Imperial Latin. Greek philosophy was widely studied, Greek customs were almost universally practised, and it was not without reason that the Jews of Palestine described all men who did not belong to the seed of Abraham as 'Greeks'.

Hellenic culture, in spreading from Greece to the cities of the world, changed its character to some extent, becoming less aristocratic and intensive, and incorporating various foreign elements; yet for many centuries it provided the ideals of education, set the standards of art and literature, and provided the principles on which a wise man would shape his conduct. Thus the seething mass of people who inhabited Asia, Syria, Egypt, Africa and Gaul were constantly subjected in varying degrees to two powerful influences, Roman discipline and Greek culture, and the two combined to make possible a safer, richer and more varied life than any they had known before.

The religions of the Empire present a fascinating field of study. Roman religion consisted almost entirely in the due performance of traditional rites and ceremonies. In public life the officers of the State were expected to do honour to the gods who protected the city and gave victory to the Roman arms; in private life every family had its household

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-43802-6 - The Expansion of the Christian Church
P. Gardner-Smith and F. J. Foakes-Jackson
Excerpt
More information

gods who were supposed to interest themselves in domestic concerns. But in the first century religion of this kind was on the decline, and although Augustus built many temples and took pains to revive the ancient ceremonies, the Romans of the first century were probably less concerned with religion than any people in history. They believed in a decent and proper respect for the gods, but in daily life religion counted for little. Perhaps for this reason the Romans were not missionaries. Conquest brought them into touch with many peoples and many religions, but they never attempted to plant the Roman cultus among the subject races. They were more inclined to borrow than to give. Thus the Greek gods were freely identified with those of Rome, and Jupiter took on the character of Zeus; other foreign gods were imported, and their names added to the Roman pantheon. Polytheism is a tolerant creed and a few gods more or less made very little difference. In the provinces the Romans interfered as little as possible with the established religions, only suppressing a few which were grossly immoral or in some other way constituted a danger to the State.

In the eastern part of the Empire the situation was somewhat different from that in the west. The old Greek gods, originally poetic personifications of the forces of nature, were still worshipped throughout the Hellenic world. Not that their existence was taken very seriously by the educated classes, but religion among the Greeks was closely bound up with daily life, and at least in the cities many social functions were connected with the temples of the gods. Philosophers might smile and Jews blaspheme, but the common people enjoyed their religion; it was not morally exacting, and whatever gods there might be were supposed to be gratified by its due performance.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

Cambridge
Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-43802-6 - The Expansion of the Christian Church
P. Gardner-Smith and F. J. Foakes-Jackson
Excerpt
More information

At the Christian era the old gods of Greece and Rome were by no means the only objects of veneration. New religions were spreading from the East which claimed many votaries. Thus Isis, the Egyptian goddess, was worshipped in Rome and in many other parts of the Empire; Cybele, the 'Great Mother' of Phrygian religion, was widely revered; the name of Mithras, the Persian sun-god, was beginning to be heard; and even Judaism, though it was the faith of a despised and detested race, made many proselytes and was for a time fashionable in some circles in Rome. These foreign religions were to be taken seriously. A convert to Judaism had to face a complete change in his manner of life, and the devotees of the other gods were admitted into societies with definite rules and obligations. They were initiated by a solemn ceremony, and thus became members of a brotherhood. They believed themselves mystically united to the god, and thus assured of a happy immortality. They had a regular hierarchy, they joined in secret and mysterious rites, and in some cases they were required to submit to a moral discipline.

The popularity of the mystery cults in the Roman Empire is a testimony to the widespread desire for something more spiritually satisfying than the worship of the old gods. The mysteries were open to men and women of all classes, and they provided some kind of personal religion. Weak as they were on the moral side, they held out a hope of personal immortality, and they claimed to bring their devotees into direct touch with spiritual forces in a way the old religions had never attempted. In the days of the Empire the government did not often interfere with the mystery cults, although for a time the introduction of Isis-worship into Rome itself was resisted, and even in the second century a conservative like Tacitus could speak of Rome as the city where every filthy shame became fashionable.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-43802-6 - The Expansion of the Christian Church
P. Gardner-Smith and F. J. Foakes-Jackson
Excerpt
More information

The authorities were more concerned to encourage the new cult of the genius of the emperor which became popular in certain provinces during the first century, and later grew to be virtually the official religion of the Empire. The deification of great men did not seem so strange in those days as it does to us. In the provinces temples had been raised to Augustus even during his life-time; he and his successors were supposed to pass at death into the company of the immortals; and, granted that the emperors were at least potentially divine beings, their worship seemed a natural way of expressing loyalty to the government.[1] The unification of the Empire was a pressing problem, and in devotion to the genius of the emperor a bond of union was found to unite peoples widely separated by history and culture. Emperor-worship in no way interfered or competed with the worship of the other gods, and it provided an equivalent to patriotism. It was most popular in the army.

The educated classes, who were generally sceptical about religion, found consolation in the study of philosophy. The golden age of Greek philosophy was long past, but philosophical schools still survived in the great cities, and ideas derived from the thinkers of the past were widely held and keenly debated. Thus, in Alexandria the teaching of Plato was held in great esteem, and there were many Stoics at Rome. In the first century a Roman school of Stoic philosophers, less speculative and more practical than Zeno and Cleanthes, commanded a considerable following. There was much that was noble in Stoicism, many of its precepts

[1] There were some protests. 'No honour was left to the gods when Augustus chose to be himself worshipped with temples and statues, like those of the deities, and with flamens and priests.' Tacitus, *Annals* I. 10.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-43802-6 - The Expansion of the Christian Church
P. Gardner-Smith and F. J. Foakes-Jackson
Excerpt
More information

were not unlike those of Christianity, and in the Emperor Marcus Aurelius it produced at least one saint; but its appeal was limited to the few, and although it helped a man to brave the misfortunes of life by suppressing all emotion, it tended to make him proud, hard, and self-sufficient. Stoicism taught the unity of the human race, and thus provided a foundation in philosophy for a world-wide Empire, and later for a Catholic Church.

The ancient world was the more in need of philosophy because ancient religion had little connexion with morals. We are so used to associate religion with morality, that we find it hard to conceive a time when religion was not an affair of morals at all. But the ancient gods were not conceived as having any strict moral character, and their worshippers could not be expected to rise to a higher level than the divinities whom they worshipped. In earlier times morality had been mainly determined and enforced by national custom, but under the disintegrating influence of imperialism custom had lost much of its force, and at the time of the Christian era there was a general loosening of moral ties. It is easy to exaggerate the immorality of the age, and we must not suppose that the crazy viciousness of Nero's court was typical of the life of the people. Yet although there was still much sober virtue among the Romans, and many happy, decent homes throughout the provinces, on the whole it is true that moral standards were low, and cities such as Antioch, Alexandria, Corinth and Rome were sinks of iniquity. Some of the popular religions helped rather than checked the general demoralization, and although the philosophers claimed to expound the art of right-living, many of them neither deserved nor enjoyed esteem.

Certain institutions in the Roman world were definitely

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-43802-6 - The Expansion of the Christian Church
P. Gardner-Smith and F. J. Foakes-Jackson
Excerpt
More information

degrading. One was the institution of slavery. In the wars of the Republic the Romans had taken captive many thousands of foreign enemies, and these captives had been reduced to slavery. Being a form of property they were encouraged to multiply, so that in the days of the Empire their numbers were enormous. In some provinces they were said to outnumber the free men. Wealthy Romans owned not a few household slaves, like the Greeks of old, but hundreds, and even thousands, who worked in great gangs on the land, and who were kept in the necessary state of subjection by the harshest discipline and the most ruthless punishments. Until the second century a slave had no protection whatever from the law, and his owner could beat him to death or crucify him in accordance with his lightest whim. Women slaves were equally unprotected, and marriage among slaves was not recognized by law.

Slavery produced much misery among the slaves, and much demoralization among the non-servile classes. Slave owners became cruel and callous, as they always do; and the mass of the population were content to live in idleness while the slaves did the manual labour. Conditions varied in different parts of the Empire, but most of the great cities, and particularly Rome, maintained a vast population who were permanently unemployed, and who, by their numbers and unruly habits, constituted a perpetual danger to the public peace. The government endeavoured to keep them quiet by bribes and amusements; doles of corn were regularly distributed, and from time to time 'spectacles' were provided, chiefly to give the proletariat something to do.

The spectacles were in themselves demoralizing. In Greece of old the stage had provided the medium through which the poets had expressed their greatest thoughts, but

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

Cambridge
Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-43802-6 - The Expansion of the Christian Church
P. Gardner-Smith and F. J. Foakes-Jackson
Excerpt
More information

under the Empire the theatre degenerated, and the shows presented were often obscene. Still worse was the influence of the circus and the amphitheatre. The populace developed a lust for blood which could only be satisfied by beast-fights and gladiatorial combats, and the fact that in Rome it was worth while to build the Colosseum, an amphitheatre which accommodated about 80,000 spectators, shews the scale on which such entertainments were provided in the first century. Similar amphitheatres may still be seen in the Roman cities of southern France.

Such was the world into which the first missionaries of Christ went forth. To the outward eye it was a splendid world, in which the arts of life had been developed to minister to the luxury of the few, and the safety, if not the welfare, of the many. Wealth abounded, great buildings arose on every side, fine roads secured commercial prosperity, and, thanks to the legions on the frontiers, the provinces enjoyed peace. A large proportion of mankind were in some degree educated, and if the creative genius of Greece was no longer active, there was enough intellectual interest abroad to ensure that the treasures of the past would not be lost. Yet all was not well with the world. By their interest in oriental religions men were revealing their spiritual hunger, and the reckless extravagance of the rich, no less than the brutal irresponsibility of the poor, betrayed deep-seated social disease. Paganism was morally bankrupt, but the decay of the old religions prepared the way for something better, and conditions were in many ways favourable to the spread of a new religion. The successive conquests of Alexander and Rome had made the world one to a degree unknown before or since. There was regular and rapid communication between all parts of the Empire. Greek was almost a *lingua franca*. And, last but not least,

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-43802-6 - The Expansion of the Christian Church
P. Gardner-Smith and F. J. Foakes-Jackson
Excerpt
More information

society had become a democracy, so that although the great barrier between bond and free remained, social cleavages were not otherwise deep, and the preacher of a new doctrine could obtain a hearing without presenting his social credentials. St Paul was a man of culture, but he was not ashamed of practising a trade, and Epictetus was a slave.

Humanly speaking it was the Roman Empire which made possible the developement of the Christian Church. Yet the victory of Christianity was not won without a struggle, and in the next chapter we shall see something of the opposition which the Church had to meet and overcome.

BOOKS FOR FURTHER REFERENCE

There are many books dealing with General Church History in this period. Among them may be mentioned:

H. M. GWATKIN. *Early Church History to* 313. (2 vols. Macmillan.)
DUCHESNE. *Early History of the Church.* (3 vols. John Murray.)
B. J. KIDD. *A History of the Church to* A.D. 461. (3 vols. Oxford.)
F. J. FOAKES JACKSON. *History of the Christian Church to* A.D. 461. (J. Hall and Son.)
C. BIGG. *The Origins of Christianity.* (Oxford.)
L. PULLAN. *The Church of the Fathers.* (Rivingtons.)
W. BRIGHT. *The Age of the Fathers.* (Longmans.)
D. ARMYTAGE. *Christianity in the Roman World.* (Bell.)

GIBBON. *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire.* Chaps. i–iii.
M. P. NILSSON. *Imperial Rome.* (G. Bell and Sons.)
H. STOBART. *The Grandeur that was Rome.* (Sidgwick and Jackson.)
H. STUART JONES. *The Roman Empire,* 29 B.C.–A.D. 476. (Fisher Unwin.)
T. R. GLOVER. *The World of the New Testament.* (Cambridge.) *The Conflict of Religions in the Early Roman Empire.* (Methuen.)

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org