

# What is Hellenism, and how did it influence the early church?

Hellenism is the term used to describe the influence of Greek culture on the peoples the Greek and Roman Empires conquered or interacted with. Upon the Jews' return from exile in Babylon, they endeavored to protect their national identity by following the law closely. This led to the rise of the hyper-conservative Pharisees and their added, unnecessary laws. About one hundred years after the Jews returned, Alexander the Great swept across western Asia, extending his territory from his native Greece, down into Egypt, and east to the border of India. The influence of the Greek culture continued past the first century B.C., when the Roman Empire took control of Israel. The Pharisees' rival sect, the Sadducees, welcomed the Greek influence. The Sadducees were wealthy, powerful Jewish aristocrats who openly worked with their Gentile rulers to maintain peace and ensure a measure of political clout. All Jews were influenced by Greek culture, however. The Greek language was as well known as the native Aramaic, the Jewish leadership changed from the God-ordained priesthood to the Sadducee-controlled Sanhedrin, and the law of the land more closely reflected Grecian laws than those given through Moses. Hellenism also expressed itself in minor ways, such as Saul taking the name Paul. Hellenism had a great influence during the early years of Christianity. Sometimes the influence was felt indirectly (safe roads for the missionaries) and sometimes directly (theological synergism). Here are a few ways Hellenism affected Christianity:

Gnosticism. One of the most dangerous influences of Greek thought on Christianity concerned Greek beliefs about the physical and the spiritual realms. Greek philosophy taught that the earth was created not by the Most High God, but by an underling, several levels below, who imbued the physical nature of his creation with imperfection. The

physical was seen as evil. Only the spirit was good. These beliefs manifested in several ways. If the physical is evil, then Jesus cannot be fully man and fully God; He either only appears to be physical, or He cannot be the Son of God. Similarly, if the physical is evil, there is no resurrection from the dead. Instead, "salvation" is reuniting in spirit with the High God.

Apatheia. Stoicism was a school of Greek thought that taught the best way to live was to understand nature and be in tune with it, reacting to it organically, instead of fighting against it. When nature is seen as an unstoppable force, personal desires melt away and a state of apathy—apatheia—is reached. Faced with misunderstanding and the constant threat of state-sanctioned persecution, the early church found comfort in this way of thinking. Steadfastness, courage, and self-control, even to the point of martyrdom, were highly valued virtues and gave Christians strength when their faith clashed with the world. Closely related to Stoicism is the concept of providence—the natural, unstoppable will of God. As we cannot change it, the only recourse is to understand it and work within it, as Augustine's City of God asserts.

Rejection of Monotheism. The Christian-Judeo belief in one God was completely foreign to the Greeks. They were fairly accepting of other religions, however, wishing not to destroy nations, like the Assyrians did, but incorporate them. The Jewish, and later Christian, insistence on keeping their religion pure amused and sometimes angered the Greeks. It was the cause of the Maccabean Revolts, the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, and the martyrdom of many Christians. Hellenism did not infiltrate the Christian belief of monotheism, but it did reject it, and Christians (and Jews) paid a heavy price for their faithfulness.

The Septuagint. During the time Jews were dispersed to Babylon and points farther, many lost the ability to speak and read Hebrew and thus could not read the Scriptures. With the establishment of Greek as the universal language, a solution presented itself. From the 3rd century B.C. to 132 B.C., Jewish scholars translated the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek. The resulting text, called the Septuagint, is what most of the New Testament writers quote. It also introduced the Greek word Christ for the Hebrew Messiah.

Apologetics. Even the word apologetics comes from Greek. It means "the practice of defending a belief through a logical speech or explanation." The actual word is found in Paul's explanation to Festus and Agrippa (Acts 26:2), his defense of the gospel to the Philippians (Philippians 1:7, 16), and Peter's admonition to always have an answer ready (1 Peter 3:15). Paul and later Christian apologists used several Greek methods to argue for the validity of Christianity:

- Cosmological argument. Although his deity bore no resemblance to the God of the Bible, Plato did discuss the existence of an "unmoved mover." If the universe had a beginning, then there must have been something outside of the universe to initiate creation. Thomas Aquinas reworked this Greek philosophy to point to God.

- Teleological argument. Physicists are discovering more and more how finely tuned the universe is. There appear to be several universal constants that are so precise that a minute change in any of them would make the existence of the universe impossible. It appears that the universe has been specially designed for the existence of human life. This observation was first reported by Socrates, who considered the usefulness of eyelids. Plato also deduced that the creator must have had an idea of natural order before creation in order to make such an ordered world. This philosophy was later picked

up by Christian writers such as Marcus Minucius Felix, Augustine, and Aquinas.

- Debate. In addition to specific argumentative styles, Paul was able to use the Greek culture of philosophical argument to the advantage of Christianity. Although his missionary journeys took him to many synagogues and other Jewish meeting places, he also addressed Roman citizens in venues especially designed for debate. Acts 17:16-34 speaks of his time in the Areopagus in Athens.

Logos. John 1:1 is one of the many examples in which Christian Scriptures use Greek concepts to explain a truth: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." This "Word," referring to Jesus, is the Greek *logos*. *Logos* originally meant "an opinion, word, speech, or reason," but the Stoics came to affiliate it with the spiritual creative force in the universe—reason within the physical. This is related to Plato's "form," which he defined as the ultimate, perfect model held in the mind or realm of the Creator on which earthly things are based. Jesus' identification as the *logos* means that His teachings directly reflect the universal truths of creation.

Although Greek culture exerted influence on the spread, language, and culture of Christianity, and even spawned unbiblical cults, it did not affect the orthodox theology. The story of a single, triune God, and the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ remain absolutely untouched by Hellenism. Martyrs went to their graves in order to ensure the gospel message stayed true. Hellenism in the days of the early church remains an example of how to use a culture to spread the message while not allowing the culture to change the message.