

The Unlikely Kingdom 1-12-2014

What follows is a snapshot of 1st century reality. While it is true that in many ways the 1st century provided some advantages to the birth of the Jesus movement, there were disadvantages as well.

Jesus

Jesus was a Jew. Jews were an often unpopular and persecuted group in the empire. They were a defeated minority group and were allowed no government of their own, in contrast with “free cities” like Athens. They set themselves apart from other peoples and were often despised by their pagan neighbors.

Jesus was a no body from nowhere. He comes out of Galilee, the “hillbilly” region of the inconsequential province of Judea. He never left the narrow confines of His own land and spoke Aramaic, a language that only Jews could understand. He was a poor itinerant preacher, lacking any proper formal training. His whole following consisted of a little uneducated rabble; a ragtag group, blue-collar, without worldly means, privilege or power. This is in sharp contrast to the rise of Islam six centuries later.

Jesus was opposed at every turn by the existing religious establishment and was finally executed, seemingly for good reason, by the civil government as a common criminal with the full approval of His own rulers and people.

Jesus the “messiah-king”

He appeared just another lunatic fringe “messiah” like so many others. He made claims to be a Messiah, but who didn’t in the 1st century AD? There were many “messiahs” to believe in.¹

- Judas the Galilean was crucified for the census revolt in AD 6 as were his two sons.
- The prophetic figure of Theudas, ministered near the Jordan river. He claimed he would part the Jordan and lead his followers across. He was beheaded.
- Eleazar, a revolutionary leader, was executed by Felix.
- An Egyptian Jew, another messianic liberator, rallied his followers, numbering in the thousands; he claimed he would destroy the walls of Jerusalem with a shout. He managed to escape to the desert.

In the mid-first century, a militant messiah-ism was rampant among the Jews of the dispersion.² “Christianity was not the only messianic movement abroad among the Jews in this period...”³ Therefore, a religious leader with messianic claims was nothing new in the 1st century.

Jesus’ Claims

Jesus offered eternal life to His followers, but so did many other first century groups and sects who promised their adherents immortal life as well as freedom from the powers of fate. The popular “mystery religions” of the time were typical in this regard.

Jesus called for total worship and allegiance and gave people Someone to believe in. Yet, so did Caesar. Even the Jews in denying Jesus claimed to have “no king but Caesar.” There were many other gods to worship or engage. The first century was extraordinarily religious and religiously pluralistic. Jesus didn’t make it easy: he required unconditional allegiance and this to a criminal and a crucified Jew! “Christianity is the only major religion to have as its central event the humiliation of its God.”⁴ While we understand the cross to be central to our faith, those in the first century would have laughed at the absurdity of such a claim.⁵

Jesus claimed to be a King and to have a kingdom. Such a proclamation was seditious and illegal; there was only one Caesar in the Empire and it wasn’t a crucified Jew.⁶

He offered peace and salvation. So did Artemis of the Ephesians, “To those who called upon Artemis, she was savior, lord and queen of the cosmos.”⁷ And she had missionaries as well. Rome and her emperors offered peace, “Caesar has procured us a profound sense of peace; there are neither wars nor battles nor great robberies, nor piracies; but we may travel at all hours, and sail from east to west.”⁸

Jesus offered power, *dunamis*, to deal with the insecurities of life and the rampant fear of astral powers and the spirit realm. Yet so did others; power was “...one of the most common and characteristic terms...in pagan devotion.”⁹

The Jesus Movement

After His death, Jesus’ followers continued His itinerant ministry, working miracles and displaying power, but there were many itinerant preachers with supposed miracle working powers who made claims to heal and deliver. The world of the 1st century was very supernatural; the practice of magic and the spirit-ism abounded.¹⁰

His movement was actively resisted by Jews, Gentiles, and finally when the Romans wised up, by the Empire. They were spoken against everywhere (Acts 28:22). The only non-Christian records of this movement in its first 150 years were “police reports.”

YET!

The 120 persons at Pentecost in Judea by AD 200 had grown to *ten million* scattered throughout the whole Empire, comprising 10% of the Empire’s total population. The movement grew rapidly in the cities; e.g., Antioch Syria in the late AD 300s total population of 500,000 was *half* Christian. So significant was the Jesus movement in Ephesus that “In the next century Asia Minor was the stronghold of Christianity, the heathen temples were deserted, the animals of sacrifice remained unsold and it seemed that all the people were turned Christian.”¹¹ The worship of Ephesian Artemis was perhaps the most significant worship system in the Empire in the first century. In AD 262 the Artemis temple in Ephesus burned, never to be rebuilt.¹² Artemis worship was dead because of the gospel. Within seven generations the Jesus movement proved so powerful that the even the emperor swore allegiance to this King and His kingdom.

Only One Explanation

How is that Christianity thrived in such a difficult environment? Because it was *true!* Jesus proved by His resurrection that His claims were true and the Holy Spirit’s *power* overcame all rivals, obstacles and difficulties - human and supernatural. Jesus’ gospel brought people into a relationship of true internal peace and liberty and His kingdom fired a hope and vision for a future radically different than the present. The 30 years accounted for in Acts show the fact of this reality expressed in history and reveal its true power and value. Perhaps we should not be so surprised at its rapid advance and impact!

“It was a small group of eleven men whom Jesus commissioned to carry on his work, and bring the gospel to the whole world. They were not distinguished; they were not well educated; they had no influential backers. In their own nation they were nobodies and, in any case, their own nation was a mere second-class province on the eastern extremity of the Roman map. If they had stopped to weigh up the probabilities of succeeding in their mission, even granted their conviction that Jesus was alive and that his Spirit went with them to equip them for their task, their hearts must surely have sunk, so heavily were the odds weighted against them. How could they possibly succeed? And yet they did.” Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, 13.

¹ See Witherington, *New Testament History*, 275.

² FF Bruce, *Paul*, 225.

³ FF Bruce, *New Testament History*, 296.

⁴ Bruce, Shelley, *Christian History in Plain Language*, 3.

⁵ 1 Cor. 1:22-23.

⁶ Acts 17:1-7.

⁷ Clinton Arnold, *Power and Magic*, 21.

⁸ Epictetus, quoted in Fisher, *The Beginnings of Christianity*, 61.

⁹ Clinton Arnold, *Power and Magic*, 34.

¹⁰ “So many wandering charlatans made their way about the Greek world, peddling their religious or philosophical nostrums, and living at the expense of their devotees (like Lucian’s false prophet Alexander), that it was necessary for Paul and his friends to emphasize the purity of their motives and actions by contrast with these...The normal heathen ‘missionaries’ . . . were itinerant apostles and miracle-workers of the most varied persuasions, heralds of heathen gods, and dispensers of salvation, adroit and eloquent, ardent and evoking ardor, but also smart and conceited in extolling the mighty acts of their gods and fooling the masses. . . There can be no doubt that they constituted dangerous rivals of the gospel and that general popular opinion expected the Christian missionaries to be able to vie with them.” (Bornkamm quoted in FF Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 26.)

“Most interesting of all from our point of view, heralds were thought of as in some way inheriting the role of Hermes as messengers of the gods: the philosophers, accordingly, were quick to call themselves heralds and to think of themselves as purveying divine revelation. Set apart from the ties of home, possessions and family they offered a peace which was supposed to surpass the *pax Romana*. It is easy to see the parallels with Christian missionaries: it is easy, too, to see why Paul was anxious not to be confused with teachers of this type (1 Thessalonians 2.3ff.)” Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, 292.

¹¹ Peloubet, *Acts*.

¹² It was considered a wonder of the ancient world. It took the resources of Asia Minor and 120 years to complete.