

---

## Hellenism

Hellenism is a term that may be used in various senses: it has sometimes been applied to the whole of distinctively Greek culture, including that of the days before Alexander the Great (336–323 B.C.); it is more commonly employed, however, of the civilization that spread through much of the ancient world in the wake of Alexander's conquests. We shall here use it in this latter sense.

### I. Introduction

Alexander's conquests covered an immense area and brought him sovereignty over many nations. He proposed to solve the problems of ruling so heterogeneous a group of people and bringing coherence into his empire by eschewing a narrow nationalism and imposing a culture that would transcend national boundaries, in which all people could be at home. Basically, this meant that the Greek way of life would be extended to the non-Greeks, but in the process there ensued an amalgam of Greek and non-Greek ideas, so that the resulting Hellenism was far from being purely Greek. Nevertheless, Greek culture dominated the whole, and the result is not unjustly called Hellenism.

Sometimes Greek influence concerned more or less surface matters like the wearing of Greek dress, or athletic contests modeled after the Greek games. Sometimes it penetrated deeply into the realms of religion and philosophy. Hellenism was all-embracing. Alexander encouraged a thorough mixing of the conquerors and the conquered by intermarriage. He himself set the example and many of his officers and men likewise married women from the conquered peoples. Alexander died too soon to be able to accomplish his aim, but the policy of hellenization lived on after him.

We should not understand this as an unwelcome policy ruthlessly enforced from above. Doubtless it was this in some cases, and it was in this way that the Jews, for example, encountered it. Yet even they used the language and accepted some of the ideas, although many of them rejected the religion and the immorality. On the whole, people eagerly welcomed Hellenism. The Greeks had notable scholars, artists, and scientists, and many were impressed by the superiority of the Greek

achievement. Thus people everywhere were ready to learn the language and adopt the culture of the conquering Greeks. It became fashionable to adopt the latest Greek fads.

The small city-state of earlier days seems to have been at the basis of the greatest Greek achievements. At their highest and best, Greek art and thought have never been surpassed in the minds of many. Names like Plato and Phidias conjure up thoughts of an excellence of which any civilization might well be proud. The little city-states of ancient Greece produced a notable group of outstanding men. Curiously, this did not persist when Greece became one nation and developed into a mighty empire. But although the city-state produced the men and the ideas, it was by means of the empire that the ideas were effectively spread abroad among the greatest number of people. Many factors were involved, but we shall concentrate only on the following.

### II. Greek Language

This was a potent force in the whole process. It became known in most places, with the result that it became a kind of *lingua franca*. It was a great convenience for the first Christian missionaries that when they went abroad with the gospel they did not have to learn another language. All over the known world people were brought in contact with one another by the medium of the Greek tongue; a further advantage was that with Greek they had access to the treasures of Greek literature.

### III. Cosmopolitanism

To a questioner who asked to what country he belonged, Socrates is said to have replied, "I am a citizen of the world"; and Diogenes gave his adherence to the same concept when he called himself *kosmopolitex* "world-citizen." In the days of the city-state, people had tended to confine themselves largely to local affairs; but with the stirring of the pulses brought about by Alexander's conquests and the consequent contact with new lands and peoples, people began to look down on narrow nationalism and to cultivate an outlook on life that deserved the name "cosmopolitan." This did not mean that on occasion there might not be a concentration on

---

purely local issues, but it did mean that merely local concerns were never allowed to dominate.

This caused trouble for “provincials” like the Jews and later the Christians. When people of every nation other than the Jewish found it quite possible to subject local customs and ideas to cosmopolitan ones, it was a mystery to cultured people why the Jews could not. Specifically, the Jewish and Christian refusal to conform to custom by accepting a mild form of idolatry did not make sense to the Hellenists, who did not take the gods very seriously and could not see why these provincials did. When we read of Jews or Christians who came into conflict with those who embodied the Hellenistic spirit we should not understand this as a purely local clash. Nor, at least as far as the Hellenists were concerned, was it a purely religious issue. For them it represented a conflict between a small group with a provincial outlook and many others who had a worldwide outlook. The cosmopolitans never could understand the obstinacy with which the provincials clung to their narrow outlook.

#### IV. Greek Science

The Greek spirit of free inquiry found outlet in many directions, and the scientific contributions of the age were impressive. In astronomy, the Ptolemaic geocentric picture of the universe is noteworthy. In the pre-Ptolemaic period many Greeks had quite different ideas, some thinking of the earth as a sphere moving around the sun. R. H. Pfeiffer draws attention to the work of Aristarchus of Samos, who gauged the sun’s volume to be three hundred times that of the earth. He concluded from this and other considerations that the earth rotates on its axis and moves around the sun (HNTT, p. 112). With the acceptance of the Ptolemaic system, people came to think of the earth as central to the universe and of the sun, moon, and planets as moving around it. Another notable scientific feat was that of Eratosthenes of Cyrene, who calculated the circumference of the earth at 252,000 stadia. This has been worked out as 39,681 km (24,662 mi), not so very far from modern measurements. The mathematical studies of Euclid and the discoveries of Archimedes in the physical sciences are so well known they hardly need mentioning. It was a period when people

were discovering a great variety of things about their environment.

#### V. Literature

People were not interested only in scientific endeavor, for the humanities thrived as well and literature was popular. Poets like Callimachus of Cyrene and Theocritus of Syracuse flourished, and some poets wrote on more or less scientific themes. Menander wrote widely acclaimed comedies.

Special mention should be made of the historians. Hellenistic historians did not understand their task in quite the same way as does the modern scientific historian, being more concerned with the dramatic and the sensational. The abbreviator of Jason of Cyrene, who produced 2 Maccabees, tells us in well-known words: “We have aimed to please those who wish to read, to make it easy for those who are inclined to memorize, and to profit all readers” (2 Macc. 2:25). This was the kind of thing at which many historians aimed, and the results were varied. Some were too concerned with the pleasant and let the claims of literary form override respect for the facts; others were too didactic. But the best of them produced valuable histories, e.g., Polybius, who is normally regarded as first-rate. Josephus is another whose history is both well known and valuable. We owe a good deal to the historiographers of the Hellenistic period, even if we must be on our guard against attaching too much weight to the propagandizing and the striving for dramatic effect that characterizes some of them.

#### VI. Philosophy

Philosophy was, of course, a prime interest of cultured Greeks. The great traditions of Plato and Aristotle were continued, although perhaps the best-known school was that of the Stoics. Many were attracted by its solutions of metaphysical problems and by its offer of peace of mind. Others were followers of Epicurus, though one should bear in mind that in modern times his teaching has often been misrepresented. He taught that pleasure is the aim of life, but he did not conceive of pleasure in merely sensual terms, since he held that it is virtue that enables one to enjoy true pleasure. Other schools also flourished and

philosophical views varied greatly, including some that were highly skeptical. It is clear that the Greeks of this age took great delight in wrestling with profound problems and in examining critically the solutions others put forward.

They were not, however, concerned with only purely theoretical issues. Many of them were profoundly interested in ethics and made every effort to promote virtue. One reason why some philosophers were not interested in religion was that the religions they knew did little to promote morality. It is true that the philosophers found it difficult to achieve the ethical standards they advocated, but at least they were concerned with getting people to lead good lives.

They taught people not to be dominated by their passions. Detachment was a necessary characteristic of the wise person, and it enabled him to rise above the promptings of his own lower nature. Many saw mankind as nothing but the plaything of a blind fate. But the philosopher did not allow himself to yield to despair, aspiring, rather, to a freedom of spirit that would enable him to rise above the circumstances of life.

## VII. Religion

The Hellenistic world had many religions, though some of the variety was mitigated by the tendency to regard a god worshiped in one place under one name as identical with another god worshiped elsewhere under another name. Thus the Greek Zeus was identified with the Roman Jupiter. Hellenistic religion is of perennial interest to the Christian, for some maintain that certain features of Christianity are derived from the Hellenistic religious environment. Traditional Greek religion, centering on the gods of Olympus, had little influence at this time, for the development of Greek thought had deprived the earlier myths of their credibility. This does not mean that nobody took the Olympian deities seriously; some people undoubtedly did, although for most people there was no dynamic, no conviction in the official cultus.

It was otherwise with the mystery religions. Some, like the Eleusinian mysteries, were Greek and ancient. But more typically, they were comparatively recent arrivals from the East that flourished when transplanted to the West. Not a

great deal is known about the details of these cults, for the devotees vowed to keep secret what went on and the vows must have been quite well kept. It is known, however, that the members were put through a horrifying initiation, which led to an experience of peace. The adherents were given the promise of immortality. These cults had an enthusiasm and a vitality that was lacking in the official Olympian religion. Thus they made a wide appeal and were a witness to the unsatisfied longings of the human heart.

The Eleusinian mysteries go back to great antiquity and, while not strictly Hellenistic, are typical of much Hellenistic religion. They center on the spring rites with the thought of the deity dying and rising again. The ritual was accompanied by the myth that told of Persephone, the daughter of Demeter, being carried off to the underworld by Hades, and of how eventually she was released for more than half of each year. Some of the other mysteries seem to have been of essentially the same type, such as those of Dionysus, Adonis, and Osiris, though each had its own variations. Thus the Dionysian rites were characterized by a wild ecstasy. Female devotees (the maenads) would be caught up in a supposedly divine frenzy in which they tore apart living animals and ate their bloody flesh.

Orphism was another religion with an air of wildness about it, though we should also notice that it had some interesting ideas about both heaven and hell. Probably the only other such religion we should notice is Mithraism. The worship of Mithras was of great antiquity in the East, but it did not become important in the Roman world until the 2nd cent A.D. Mithras underwent many transformations during his long history, but at the time of his popularity in the West he appears to have been a sun god especially beloved by soldiers. It was the Roman legions who carried his worship everywhere. Associated with it was the taurobolium, a rite in which the initiate was placed in a pit covered with boards on which a bull was slain in such a manner that the blood flowed through and drenched the worshiper below. He believed that he thereby was filled with the strength and other qualities of the beast. Mithraism spread widely during the early centuries of our era and some scholars have seen it as a serious threat to Christianity. But it faded

---

away before the reality and the vitality of the Christian faith.

Various Hellenistic religions contain parallels to Christian rites and teachings, which some of the Apostolic Fathers explained as parodies inspired by the devil. There is no reason for holding, as do some, that the Christians borrowed from the Hellenistic cults. While there is no reason why Christianity should not have taken over what was good from any source, the facts seem to show that Christianity was not inspired by the mysteries. It arose, rather, from the revelation made in the OT followed by the coming of the Son of God. Christianity brought people a real salvation, one accomplished by the Son of God Himself. The Hellenistic religions witness to the deep longings and needs of the human soul, but they cannot satisfy them. God in Christ does.

### Bibliography

- E. Bevan, *Hellenism and Christianity* (1921)  
R. Bultmann, *Primitive Christianity in Its Contemporary Setting* (1956);  
J. Daniélou, *Gospel Message and Hellenistic Culture* (Engtr 1973);

F. C. Grant, *Roman Hellenism and the New Testament* (1962);

E. Hatch, *Influence of Greek Ideas on Christianity* (1957); HNTT pp. 93-165;

M. Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism* (Engtr 1974);

A. D. Nock, *Early Gentile Christianity and Its Hellenistic Background* (1964).

---

Grace Notes is a ministry of Austin Bible Church, Austin, Texas

<http://www.austinbiblechurch.com>

For an index of topics, or information about regular Bible studies, write to:

Warren Doud

**Grace Notes**

1705 Aggie Lane

Austin, Texas 78757

E-Mail: [wdoud@gracenotes.info](mailto:wdoud@gracenotes.info)

URL: <http://www.gracenotes.info>

There is no charge for Grace Notes materials. The work is supported by Christians who pray for the ministry and share in the expenses.

---