

2.2. ENVIRONMENTAL CONDITIONS

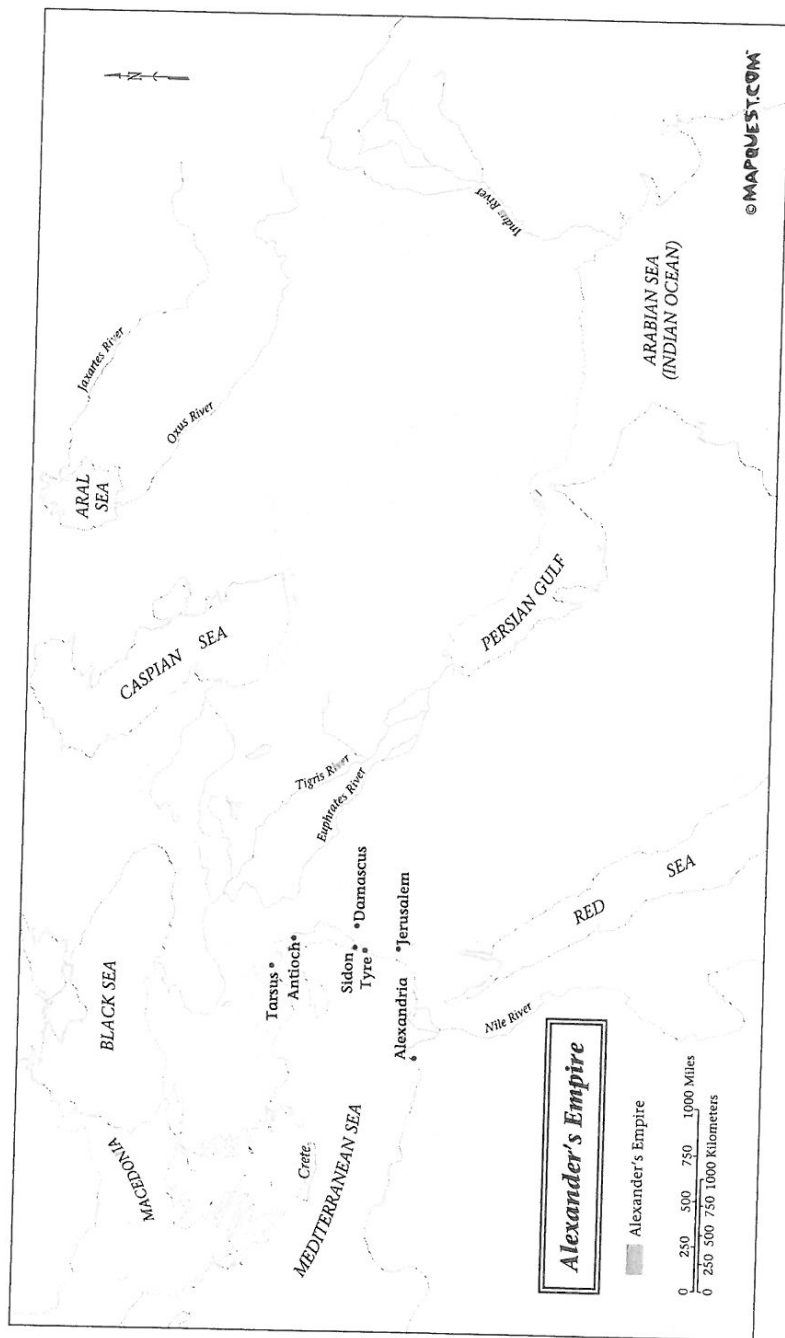
In exploring the social world in which the NT writings took shape, we will draw a general distinction between environmental conditions and institutional contexts. The former refers to the big picture of the NT world, the general cultural, political, and economic contours of the NT period.

2.2.1. Hellenism

Shaping the cultural map of the NT world in a far-reaching way were the cultural innovations and upheavals in the Near East following in the wake of the military successes of Alexander the Great (356-323 BCE). Earlier in the fourth century BCE, the Macedonians (located on the northern periphery of the Greek world) had not only made their bid to achieve recognition as Greeks, but under Philip II, Alexander's father, had extended Macedonian rule to the Greek city-states to the south and the Balkans to the east. Under Alexander, a vast expanse — including Asia Minor, Phoenicia, Palestine, Egypt, and Babylonia — was added to the empire. By the time of his death, he had opened up the Near East to the migration of Greek language and cultural expressions. Parochial societies with closely kept boundaries thus began to be shaped into a more cosmopolitan and interrelated culture. Separated by different ethnic origins and cultural histories, these peoples were nevertheless joined by increasing cultural intercourse, symbolized above all by the spread of Attic Greek as the *lingua franca*. "Hellenism" thus refers to the spread and embrace of the Greek language, but also to the way of life, business, education, and ethos mediated through the spread and use of that language.

The significance for the NT of the cultural machinery set in motion by Hellenism is, in one sense, immediately obvious. Though its documents originated from various sites throughout the Mediterranean world, they are all in Greek. Their authors were all more or less at home in the Greek language and wrote to audiences that could read Greek or at least understand spoken Greek. Jesus and his Galilean disciples would have been able to communicate in Greek, even if their first and more common language of daily discourse was Aramaic.

The NT evidences additional Hellenistic influence of an obvious nature. Most of its citations of the Jewish Scriptures are from the Greek translation, the Septuagint (abbreviated LXX), rather than from the Hebrew text. The forms of the NT writings are also indebted to the traditions of writing known in wider Hellenistic circles. Note, for example, the close relationship between Greco-Roman biography and historiography and the Gospels and Acts, or the epistolary style of the Pauline writings. In his form of argumentation, too, Paul has been influenced — whether directly or indirectly — by the conventions of ancient rhetoric.



In another sense, the influence of Hellenism on the NT is less transparent. To a significant degree, the diversity within the Judaism of Jesus' day was a corollary of the range of Jewish responses to the challenges of Hellenism. To take two extremes, Philo was willing to dress the law of Moses in Hellenistic clothing, but the Jewish community at Qumran stripped itself as fully as possible from such alien vestiges. Growing out of Judaism, initially as a renewal movement within Judaism, the Jesus movement was located at the intersection of potentially opposing challenges represented by Hellenistic and Jewish lifestyles. As the literature of this movement, the NT embodies the ongoing struggle with issues of faithfulness to God in a Hellenistic world.

Because of his early death, Alexander the Great was able to do little more than set in motion the wheels of progress toward the Hellenization of the Mediterranean world. Soon after his success in the Near East, he was dead and his empire was divided among his generals. In a military and political tug-of-war, Judea was first ruled along with Egypt by the Ptolemies, then by the Seleucids to the north. Throughout this period, until the early second century BCE, the Jewish people largely acquiesced to their foreign overlords; after all, the hand of foreign rule was not heavy during this period, and the Jewish people enjoyed relative freedom, not least in things religious. At the same time, however, the tentacles of Hellenism were reaching slowly, almost imperceptibly into the Jewish mainstream.

In 168-167 BCE, the Seleucid king Antiochus IV (Epiphanes) moved forcibly to make the Jewish people Hellenists. Even if he seems to have had support from some among the Jewish leadership, his agenda for Hellenistic inculturation far exceeded the openness of most of the Jewish population. He profaned the temple by erecting an altar to Zeus. And he compelled the Jewish people to violate the law of Moses and to transgress their ancestral faith. Jewish resistance to this forced inculturation gave rise to legends of faithful heroism, including some



A silver tetradrachma from the time of Ptolemy I (ca. 300 BCE) depicting Athena Promachos and Alexander the Great (Richard Cleave)



**A Tale of Faithful Heroism
from the Period of Antiochus IV**

Eleazar, one of the scribes in high position, a man now advanced in age and of noble presence, was being forced to open his mouth to eat swine's flesh. But he, welcoming death with honor rather than life with pollution, went up to the rack of his own accord, spitting out the flesh, as all ought to go who have the courage to refuse things that it is not right to taste, even for the natural love of life. Those who were in charge of that unlawful sacrifice took the man aside because of their long acquaintance with him, and privately urged him to bring meat of his own providing, proper for him to use, and to pretend that he was eating the flesh of the sacrificial meal that had been commanded by the king, so that by doing this he might be saved from death, and be treated kindly on account of his old friendship with them. But making a high resolve, worthy of his years and the dignity of his old age and the gray hairs that he had reached with distinction and his excellent life even from childhood, and moreover according to the holy God-given law, he declared himself quickly, telling them to send him to Hades. "Such pretense is not worthy of our time of life," he said, "for many of the young might suppose that Eleazar in his ninetieth year had gone over to an alien religion, and through my pretense, for the sake of living a brief moment longer, they would be led astray because of me, while I defile and disgrace my old age. Even if for the present I would avoid the punishment of mortals, yet whether I live or die I shall not escape the hands of the Almighty. Therefore, by bravely giving up my life now, I will show myself worthy of my old age and leave to the young a noble example of how to die a good death willingly and nobly for the revered and holy laws." When he had said this, he went at once to the rack. Those who a little before had acted toward him with goodwill now changed to ill will, because the words he had uttered were in their opinion sheer madness. When he was about to die under the blows, he groaned aloud and said: "It is clear to the Lord in his holy knowledge that, though I might have been saved from death, I am enduring terrible sufferings in my body under this beating, but in my soul I am glad to suffer these things because I fear him." So in this way he died, leaving in his death an example of nobility and a memorial of courage, not only to the young but to the great body of his nation. (2 Maccabees 6:18-31, NRSV)

mentioned in Heb 11:32-38. As the king worked to remove the peculiarities of Judaism (food laws, Sabbath keeping, etc.), a longstanding policy of religious tolerance came to an end. Jewish groups rebelled against Antiochus and established a short-lived interval of self-rule under Hasmonean leadership. Even self-rule proved to be unsatisfying, however, since the character of Hasmonean rule did not so much reflect the original impetus toward religious liberty as an emerging desire for political independence and dynastic power. The resulting instability set the stage for the invasion of Judea by Rome in the mid-first century BCE.

Some Important Dates

336-323 BCE	Palestine Conquered/Ruled by Alexander the Great
175	Onset of Rule of Palestine under Antiochus IV (Epiphanes)
167-164	The Maccabean Revolt
150-100	Essene Community Founded at Qumran
37-4	Palestine under Herod the Great
ca. 6-4	Birth of Jesus
26-36 CE	Pilate Governs Judea
30 (or 33?)	Death of Jesus
ca. 33-35	Paul's Experience on the Damascus Road
66-70	Jewish War

The extent of Hellenism in Palestine and its influence on Jews scattered throughout the ancient Mediterranean world remains a matter of speculation. Two points are clear, however. First, the degree of Hellenistic influence depends in large part on location. Urban areas encountered more traffic and thus experienced more cultural exchange. It is clear that some urban Jews, because they followed intellectual hunger or sought acceptance and honor in the changing world or for other reasons, embraced these cultural innovations quite deliberately. Elsewhere, though, especially in more remote, rural areas, evidence of the reach of Hellenism was less pronounced and certainly less welcomed. Second, and at the same time, it must be recognized that we are dealing here with a continuum from more to less Hellenistic encroachment. Refusal to adapt to the changing world, at least minimally, was not an option. Even this way of putting things may require further nu-

ance, however. The question may not be how thoroughly the Jewish people were Hellenized but rather how strongly they — as a whole or in different localities — resisted the intrusion of Hellenism.

2.2.2. The Roman Empire

Of the emperor Augustus (63 BCE–14 CE), the Roman historian Tacitus (born *ca.* 56 CE) wrote,

He organized the state, not by instituting a monarchy or a dictatorship, but by creating the title of First Citizen. The empire had been fenced by the ocean or distant rivers. The legions, the provinces, the fleets, the whole administration, had been centralized. There had been law for the Roman citizen, respect for the allied communities; and the capital itself had been embellished with remarkable splendor. (*Annales* 1.9, LCL)

With such words Tacitus drew attention to the general accolades enjoyed by the emperor following his success in the civil wars that had ravaged the Roman republic. The words of the historian are temperate, however, when compared with the acclaim elsewhere. Adopted as the son of Julius Caesar, Octavian took for himself the name Augustus (“venerable, revered”) following his military and political triumphs. The Myrian inscription refers to him as “Divine Augustus Caesar, son of a god, imperator of land and sea, the benefactor and savior of the whole world . . .,” and similar sentiments are not hard to find in this period. This marriage of political accomplishment and divine benefaction was integral to the larger Roman world, even though the notion of the emperor’s divinity was more loosely held in the west of the empire than in the east. This provided an implicit legitimization of the extension of Roman power and the Roman system of governance throughout the empire.

The world of the NT is of course the world of Rome, an empire that would eventually comprise the lands bordering the Mediterranean, from the coasts to far into the interior, as well as into Europe as far north as the southern tip of Scotland and into Germany. The stretch of the empire was fortunate for Roman Italy, incapable of feeding its own population of some two million, half of whom lived in the environs of the capital itself. Rome enjoyed a parasitic relationship with its provinces, and Tacitus’s affirmation of the “remarkable splendor” of the capital stands uneasily alongside his assertion of Roman “respect for the allied communities.” The primary aims of the imperial government were, first, the maintenance of Roman peace within its borders and the occasional extension or protection of those borders and, second, the maintenance of a system whereby food and revenues from taxes made their way to the center of the Roman world, Rome itself.

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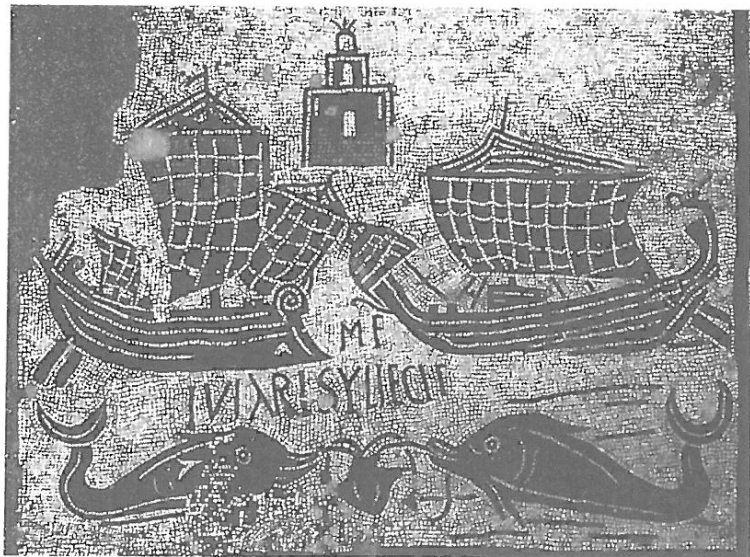
Military maneuvers and the trade and taxation on which the empire was dependent required efficient means of transportation and communication. One finds literary and archaeological evidence of Roman merchant ships, for travel on both inland waterways, including Roman canals, and the Mediterranean. The larger of these would have served the grain supply; presumably this is the sort of ship boarded at the Lycian port of Myra by Paul and his military escort according to Acts 27:6, Myra being an important stopping point for grain shipments from Egypt. Although Rome's control of the water routes made such travel relatively safe, the weather presented its own peril, particularly in the winter months. Roman rule also supported an extensive network of roads — useful for trade and the military, but also for easier communication. With no "postal service" in place, letters would be placed in the hands of travelers — and better roads meant there were more travelers. These advances in transportation would have been a boon for the early Christian movement.

The Roman system throughout the rule of Augustus and, indeed, throughout most of the first century CE, supported little bureaucracy. Military installations were spread throughout the empire but, except in troubled areas (like Galilee and Judea), direct Roman intrusion into daily affairs was minimal. For the maintenance of law and order Rome depended largely on the administrative function of cities — some of which it founded, others of which were already present — which were largely self-governing.

Nor did the various forms of Roman taxation result in increased layers of bureaucracy. This was due in part to the fact that taxes were collected primarily for wages and military expenses, not to provide what we might today call social services. Although Rome had a visible and direct presence in the conquered provinces through its military, it was present to collect taxes indirectly. Tribute — in two forms, a percentage of land production and an assessment (probably) for each adult male — was collected annually by cities, in Palestine by Jewish councils, acting as agents of the state. Tolls on the movement of goods from one urban area to another were collected at tollbooths in each town or city by the "toll collectors" known to us in the Gospels. These were persons to whom the business of collecting duty had been contracted by the empire. They represented the primary form of entrepreneurial, private enterprise of the Roman world and served as the front line of a system little regulated and open to gross abuse throughout the first century. Roman Italy was itself exempted from taxes, except in unusual cases where immediate and increased revenues were needed to fund a military operation. Outside Italy, the urban wealthy were also capable of avoiding taxation, with the consequence that the burden for financing the empire fell above all on the mass of the population that lived at or near the subsistence level.

What was the tax burden? Accurate figures are notoriously difficult to determine; our sources are not only ambiguous but also leave unclear how long certain

A floor mosaic from Ostia depicting Roman ships (Ostia Museum)



tax rates were enforced. Estimates fix Roman tribute, in both of its forms, at approximately sixteen percent of gross income annually. However, the aggregate tribute for an area was fixed in advance of the farming year, with the result that, in cases of agricultural disaster, the overall tax burden was not thereby diminished. Jewish farmers were also expected to pay tithes and taxes to support the temple system in Jerusalem, conservatively estimated as adding an additional fifteen to twenty percent to the overall tax burden. Tolls on trade transported from town to town would be calculated and collected separately. Other taxes were levied, too: an inheritance tax, a tax on the manumission of slaves, and so on.

If the Roman government was not active in the provision of social services, how did municipalities meet their collective needs? The emperor himself modeled what was expected of the wealthy elite in every locale — namely, generous benefaction. Rather than pay taxes, the wealthy contributed time and money in the service of the cities and towns. This form of benefaction was not managed centrally, in which case wealth might have been distributed where needed most. Instead, gifts were made at the whim of givers. What is more, though private involvement of this kind was required by deficiencies in the city treasury, it was to the advantage of the wealthy that the city's finances be kept in a weakened condition. Private benefaction was the primary means by which the wealthy were recognized as those