

THE HISTORICAL ERA OF PROVIDENTIAL PREPARATION OF THE WORLD FOR CHRIST AND THE CHURCH

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Abstract:

God did not determine by use rather than reason or by heavy-handedness make a decision one day: It is about time I think for Jesus Christ to go down to the world: God so designed the coming of Jesus Christ completely or in a perfect way that the small width time slot in which He came to this world was perfectly the most possible time for His coming to the world. Saint Paul called attention in Galatians chapter 4 verse 4 to the historic era of timely preparation that go before the advent of Jesus Christ to earth in human form: “But as soon as the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his son, born of woman, born under the law” (English Standard Version).

This showed that Jesus came to this world in the fullness of time. His birth was not just accidental that Jesus Christ was born in the world when He was born. Frankly speaking, it was the highly flawless period of time for such a history-shocking and upsetting an important or famous person to get to a place of the scene. When the Lord Jesus came, he declared “in Matthew 16:18: I will build my Church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it”. This shows that God in his infinite wisdom and sovereignty designed according to a plan to build the Church just at the very peculiar or suitable period in history. Certain things were supposed to begin to fight against the Church, even from its very beginning. The world was rather prepared in a special way before this great event could take place. One outstanding thing in the affairs of the world at this time was that it was united into one great community, having, as it were, one language, culture, and government (Ajah 7).

One must remember that the “Christ event includes far more than just the life and teachings and even the death of Christ. The life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus only set the stage for the spreading of the gospel and the building of the Church that Jesus promised would happen. Therefore, the climate of the period immediately after the ministry of Jesus is also very important because the ministry of Jesus actually prepared the way for the work of the early Christians in spreading the gospel (McCain 58). At time, when discussing on this subject matter, it is almost forgotten that it is not the Jew only that contributed to the process of getting ready for the advent of Christ but the Greek and the Roman did too. The Greek and the Roman contributions helped in conveying historical development to the juncture where Jesus Christ could produce the highest or greatest significant or strong influence on history in such a way that not capable of being done or achieved previous to or since the period of his birth.\

The Environment

Political Contributions of Romans

The political contribution to historical era preceding the coming of Jesus Christ to earth in human form was chiefly the Romans’ work. The Romans who are followers of mystery religions and worship emperor were used by God to bring about the fulfillment of his plan, though they were ignorant of him. Kelly explicits thus: “the stage had been set and planned by the almighty God who directed and prepared the world for these events” (1). Ajah adds his voice thus:

The age in which the church was founded in the world was specially prepared by God in that He raised one special government – the Roman government – for the entire then-known world. Thus, the entire world was under one law and judge. With this system, the gospel preachers could feel at home anywhere they went, and they had safety (9).

God used various instruments to prepare for the birth of Jesus Christ and the Church – Christianity. For instance, diverse institutions in the Roman Empire were timely and without being aware used in the birth, growth and spread of the New Faith.

The Roman Empire “had brought to the Mediterranean basin an unprecedented political unity. Although each region kept some of its ancient laws and customs, the general policy of the empire was to encourage as much uniformity as possible without doing unnecessary violence to the uses of each area. The political unity wrought by the Roman Empire allowed the early Christians to

travel without having to fear bandits or local wars” (Gonzalez 19). In this same vein, Kenneth Scott Latourette submits as follows:

At the time when Christianity came into being much in the basin of the Mediterranean favoured the spread of religions, either new or old. Jesus was born in the reign of Augustus. After a long period of wars which had racked the Mediterranean and its shores, political unity had been achieved and the Roman Empire had become roughly coterminous with the Mediterranean Basin. Building on the foundations laid by his uncle, Julius Caesar, he brought peace and under the guise of the chief citizen of a restored republic ruled the realm which for several generations Rome had been building (21).

Cairns agreeing with the above scholars posits thus: “The Romans, as no other people up to their time, developed a sense of the unity of mankind under a universal law. This sense of the solidarity of man within the empire created an environment favourable to the reception of a gospel that proclaimed the unity of the human race in the fact that all men are under the penalty of sin and in the fact that all are offered a salvation that makes them a part of a universal organism, the Christian Church, Christ body”(35). There was no empire of the ancient Near East even not that of Alexander had ever achieved in providing to men a sense of unity in a political organization. Political unity hence, was strange or unusual talk to be that of Rome. The Romans also conceded citizenship to some of the people conquered. This citizenship of Roman guaranteed those who possessed it great honour and many privileges. Submitting his opinion in this vein, Cairns posits that “a further step in the fostering of the idea of unity was the granting of Roman citizenship to non-Romans. This process was started in the period preceding the birth of Christ and was completed when Caracalla in 212 admitted all freemen in the Roman Empire to Roman citizenship. Because the Roman Empire included all the Mediterranean world that counted in the history of that day, for all practical purposes, all men were under one system of law and citizens of one kingdom” (36). Some of the preachers of the gospel, even at the apostolic age, possessed this freedom. This gave them boldness to go anywhere they went, and could settle down at any place as nobody could molest them with impunity. These all were what the Church just needed in order to survive.

Contributions of Road Network

When the Roman government was “constructing their roads usually called Apian Way, they had no knowledge or plans it was going to pave the way for the spread of Christianity. The Apian Way was the forerunner of what we call

Express Road or Motor Way in modern times. They were both made of four lanes on each side and straight” (Ekeke 19). The free and secure passage in this Motor Way was to allow individuals to move from place to place without being hurt and this provided Christianity new converts. Speaking about the Roman system of road network, Cairns asserts that “the Romans developed an excellent system of roads radiating out from the golden milestone in the Roman forum to all parts of the empire. The main roads were built of concrete to serve for ages. They went straight over hill and dale to the farthest point of the empire” (36). An elaborate system of roads between the major cities was used by the early missionaries. A careful study of the Paul’s journeys shows that he greatly used the excellent road system to move or travel from one tactical center to another strategic center of the Roman Empire. Christian artisans and traders saw this excellent road network system as an opportunity to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ wherever they went. Lica in the light of this holds that these Christians, “while they bought and sold the things that perish, they did not lose an opportunity of spreading the gospel. The state of the Roman Empire linguistically was in the highest degree, favourable to the spread of Christianity. And that the road network were of equal service to the early missionaries, and when Churches began to spring up over the empire, these roads greatly facilitated the Church organization and brotherhood which strengthened the Church to overcome the empire” (3). Cities located strategically on these Roman roads were an essential help in the achievement of Paul’s mission.

Contribution of Free Movement

Gratis movement about and around the “Mediterranean world would have been very or highly difficult for any of the gospel messengers before the reign of Caesar Augustus (27 B.C. – 14 A.D.). The division of the ancient world into small envious units, city state, or tribes hampered travel and the spread of ideas. With the extension of Roman Imperial power during the period of empire building, a period of peaceful development occurred in the countries surrounding the Mediterranean. The pirates from the Mediterranean swept by Pompey and the Roman soldiers kept the peace on the roads of Asia, Africa and Europe” (Cairns 36). Proportionally or somewhat, this peace world made the movement from place to place easy for the early Christians to preach the gospel everywhere to all men.

The Role and Contribution of Roman Military Garrison

The Roman army likewise provided its own contribution to the providential preparation of the world for Christ and the Church. According to McCain, “the Roman government developed a policy of using local people to fill the ranks of

the army” (61). Thompson and Combee assert that “Augustus recruited Roman soldiers from every section of the empire and instituted a massive building program” (131).

The function of Roman armed forces in the advancement of the most suitable of a universal organization in addition to the spread of the gospel should not be ignored. “Christian converts in the Roman army took the Gospel to the borders of the Empire in the first century. There is evidence that the Gospel came to Britain by 43 AD in this way” (Downing 39). The Romans army garrisons were built all over the place. Therefore the Romans soldiers were stationed everywhere to maintain the peace. Roads were built to connect these military bases. The Roman navy practically annihilated piracy in the waterways which before this period, was controlled by the pirates who looted sea travelers. Thus, the Mediterranean sea became more safer for the early Christian missionaries to use in propagating the gospel.

Romans Law Contribution

Prior to the coming of Christianity in the Empire, there was a firm legal preparation toward its coming. Ajah submits that during this period: “the Romans were the policeman of the world and made sure there was no uprising, lawlessness or bloodshed anywhere. Not even the local governments or the native laws and customs of any people could exert capital punishment, all cases affecting human lives had to be sanctioned by Rome” (10). The historical era in which the Church was found in the world for a particular purpose or more than usual prepared in advance by God by establishing a unique government like the Roman government so that the then known world could have one law. In this course, Ajah concludes thus: “the entire world was under one law and one judge” (9). This system aided the preachers of the gospel to feel at home anywhere they went as their safety was sure. Speaking on the Roman Laws, McCain observes thus:

The Roman government had also developed a very sophisticated system of laws. (This legal system is the same basic system of jurisprudence used in most democratic countries today, including the USA, England and Nigeria). These laws, which gave citizens an opportunity for fair treatment under the law and an impartial trial, enabled Paul and others to take the gospel all over the world (61-62).

Pax Romana: Roman Peace

During the first century, the entire Mediterranean world was under the control of the Roman government. The Roman Empire spanned Europe, North Africa and into Asia. This had some wonderful advantages. For example, the supremacy of the Roman army insured a period of peace known as the Pax Romana, which was unparalleled for centuries (McCain 61). Concerning the Pax Romana, Dowley holds that “the two hundred years of peace and general prosperity prevailed throughout the Roman Empire from the time of Augustus, with notable exceptions. This has become known as the Pax Romana (Roman Peace). It allowed great freedom of travel throughout the Mediterranean world” (68). Speaking on the Roman Peace, Thompson and Combee posit thus:

Under Caesar Augustus began the famed Pax Romana “Roman Peace”, 200 years (30 B.C. and A.D. 180) of peace and prosperity in the Mediterranean world during which Commerce flourished and law and order generally prevailed. Augustus extended the empire to the Danube River in Central and Eastern Europe; organized a permanent, professional army to garrison the provinces and guard the frontiers; and established an official bureaucracy to manage the affairs of the widespread empire (130-131).

Peace has always been the outstanding feature of Roman Empire. Peaceful lifestyle was one of the characteristic of the Roman Empire. The military garrison which were stationed in various locations help to kill or subdue any uprising before it could intensify or setup into a full blown war; hence, Roman Empire never experience any kind of war during this period. The policy of Pax Romana or Roman Peace was launched at some stage in the reign of Caesar Augustus. Frankly speaking, this policy brought unparalleled stability which was marked by general prosperity, commerce flourishing, and the prevailing of peace and order which never before seen or experienced in the human history. Roman Empire was a peace empire and its peace nature helped greatly in the spread of the gospel. It makes future development easier for Christian missionary activities that had to stretch out to the end of the world. The young Church grew and spread all over the empire because Peace was the tool that watered its ground.

Religious Contribution

Roman invasions led to “a loss of belief by many peoples in their gods because the gods had not been able to keep them from defeat by the Romans. Such people were left with a spiritual vacuum that could not be filled satisfactorily

by the religion of the day” (Cairns 37). In addition, “the substitutes that Rome had to offer for the lost religions could do no more than make people realize their need of a more spiritual religion. The cult of Roman Emperor worship, which made its appearance early in the Christian Era, made an appeal to people only as a means of making the concept of the Roman Empire tangible” (Cairns 37). Dowley posits that “the pagan world was experiencing certain insecurity. Local political independence had disappeared, old loyalties and traditions were losing their hold, and sensitive people felt their age was morally and religiously bankrupt. Many sought security in the intimate fellowship provided by the newly-popular Eastern religious cult, while others found escape in the excitement of the ever more brutal public games and entertainments. Such an atmosphere of dissatisfaction and unease prepared people to listen to the Christian gospel (69-70).

Greek Contribution to World Preparation for Jesus Christ and Christianity

Before the coming of the Romans, the Hellenistic culture had spread around the world by Alexander the Great. Hellenic culture, during this period had penetrated or affected every part of what Alexander’s empire had been, mixing with but to a great extent or mostly control or have a lot of influence over the cultures of Egypt, the Middle East and the Persian Empire. This culture had contributed immensely to the world preparation for Christ and the Christianity and its expansion.

Intellectual Contributions of Greeks

Through his military expeditions, Alexander the Great without being aware though constantly brought the then world Hellenization, This Hellenization was Alexander the Great policy in disseminating Grecian culture around the then world as well as guiding of all the peoples of the then world into the Greek’s life style. The intellectual environment provided by the Greek mind make the great preparation for the coming of Christianity by Rome seems less important. Christianity’s political environment may be connected to the city of Rome, but the Greek were the one that provided the intellectual environment that the gospel to be propagated. The Romans though may have been the political conquerors of the Athens, but, as Horace showed or mentioned in his poetry, the Greek culturally take control of the Romans (Cairns 37-38). There were some special men who came up with such serious thoughts and great ideas as to influence the thoughts and ideas, not only of the men of their own time, but also of those of subsequent generations (Ajah 14). Most of the ideas were of

great importance in preparing people's minds for the reception and propagation of the gospel.

The philosophy of Greek "permeated the thought of the ancient world. Many pagans had turned from their irrational and superstitious polytheism to philosophy. It questioned the religious, called attention to the transcendent and the eternal, and explored the nature of moral and ethical issues. But philosophy by its very nature was inherently incapable of enabling the human mind to apprehend the self-revealing triune God of Scripture. It did create an intellectual void that only the truth of the Gospel could fill. It also provided in part a vocabulary and thought structure for Christianity" (Downing 38).

Xenophanes, a Greek philosopher of sixth century B.C. declares that "many gods exist according to custom but only one true God exist according to nature" (Ekeke 23). This thought of Xenophanes aids Christianity and its teachings of one true God who is omnipresent, omnipotent and omniscient. Another aspect that the great Greek philosophers helped Christianity was the Greeks attention they call to a actuality that surpassed the secular and relative world in which they lived. "Both Socrates and Plato in the fifth century B.C. taught that this present temporal world of the senses is but a shadow of the real world in which the highest ideals are such intellectual abstractions as the good, the beautiful, and the true. They insisted that reality was not temporal and material but spiritual and eternal" (Cairns 39-40). Those who accepted Plato's and Socrates' philosophy, Christianity then proffered or present to them the historical revelation of the beautiful, the true and the good in the person of Christ, the God-man. Plato's philosophy also taught the immortality of the soul.

People came to realize in the period when Jesus came the level of the insufficiency of human polytheism and reason as it has never been. The individualistic philosophies of Zoro and Epicurus and the mystery religions all give evidence or bear witness for man's wish for a more individual relationship to God. This personal relationship is what Christianity came with to proffer and found out that the Greek culture had created many hungry hearts due to its own inadequacy to offer it. "While stoicism taught the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man and held to a highly desirable code of ethics, it left man by rational processes to work out his own obedience to the natural laws that he was to discover with his unaided reason" (Cairns 40). The Greek and Roman systems of philosophy and religion have made remarkable gift to world preparation for the coming of Christianity by putting down or annihilating the system of the old polytheistic religion as well as showcasing the incapability of human motive or thought to reach God. Thus people within the Roman Empire

when Christianity appeared were more ready to receive new ideas from a religion that appeared to put forth or offer a spiritual approach to life.

Language and Cultural Contribution

Alexander the Great who conquered the then world in about 333 B.C. was a disciple of Greek language and culture everywhere he went. Although the world was under the Roman government during the first century, the culture of that time was still basically the Greek culture (McCain 59). Maybe the very important development of the Hellenistic Age, according to Thompson and Combee:

was the spread of the Greek language over all the known world. The alphabet, which made possible the wide-spread dissemination of the written word in Greek, had been invented by the Semites a millennium earlier and spread to the Greeks by the Phoenicians. The Greeks adapted it to their speech and added vowels (117).

During the Hellenistic Age, the Greek that became the common (Koine) language of the then world was different from the classical Greek used by the great philosophers and poets but, was the everyday common (Koine) language of the cultures people in every part of the Mediterranean world from 300 B. C. up to 400 A.D., when Europe was overran by the Barbarians. The whole of the Old Testament was as early as the third century B.C. translated in Egypt into Greek from Hebrew and Aramaic by the Alexandria's Jews. Hence, the gospel was readily obtainable and proclaimed in a language that both the proclaimers and their audiences spoke and understood in the then world. Later, the New Testament was written in Common (Koine) Greek during the first century A.D. which make able or activate the masses to hear and understand the power of the saving gospel of Jesus Christ and Churches were established as Christians went about proclaiming the gospel.

Greek language, according to Dana, "is without doubt the most richly and accurately expressive language which human history has known. Its possibilities of subtle distinctions in the expression of thought are vast, and the writers of the New Testament were remarkably adapted at using the finer capacities of the language (180). Most of the Christians teachings were favoured by Greek culture which converted the masses to faith in Christ, thereby making Christianity a popular religion in the Mediterranean world. Greek culture and Christianity suited their environment as they complement each other without conflict. Greek language was one of the very important elements of the Greek culture that was helpful to the new faith. The friendly,

hospitable and peaceful disposition of Greek culture aided the missionaries to almost have unlimited access to the masses of the people through Greek language.

Jewish Contribution to the Fullness of the Time

Just like the Greek and Roman had contributed to the preparation of the world for the coming of Christianity, Judaism had likewise made its eminent contribution. Paul in the book of Galatians writes “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons” (4:4-5, English Standard Version). This is why the Jewish nation became a real tool in the hand of God to bring the birth His son and in the end the Church-Christianity. At this point, it is important to examine the diverse contribution of the Jewish nation to the development and the growth of the Church-Christianity.

Religious Contributions of the Jews

Religious contributions to the establishment and growth of Christianity include those of the Roman and Greek just as certain as those of the Jewish nation. No matter however, great contributions of Greek and Roman have been to Christianity by way of environment, the Jewish nation contributions is remarkable and stand forward as the heredity of Christianity. Christianity relationship to Judaism was much more closely acquainted. In fact, Judaism could be seen as the stem on which Christianity rose to flourish. Unlike the Greeks, Jewish people never seek to find God through human reasoning, but however authenticated by means of belief His existence and without unwillingness or hesitation given to Him, His due worship. They were really influenced via the truth that God sought after them and showed and displayed Himself to them in times past by His manifestations to Abraham and other great leaders of their race. It would be of great interest to note that Jerusalem became the positive symbol of religious preparation for the coming of Christianity. Of a truth, the heredity of Christianity was provided by Judaism and who also gave its shelter or a time (Cairns 41).

Monotheism

One of the greatest contributions of the Jews to the coming of Christ and the growth of Christianity was their uncompromising monotheism. Monotheism simply means the belief in and worship of one God as opposed to many gods. The orthodox Jew recited daily the shema found in Deuteronomy 6:4, “Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord”. One will also remember that the first

two of the Ten Commandments emphasized that there was only one God and one must worship Him and Him only (McCain 63).

Judaism have being marked or making a strong contrast to the general principles or issues of pagan religions in then Roman world by its stress on a sound spiritual monotheism. It is in this light that Duke argues that the “Jewish religion was not a flexible one. They practiced strict monotheism, with no interference of any sort. But Christianity adopted their style of worshipping one true God but practice a rather flexible monotheism giving room for the accommodation of the Trinity” (67). Though at diverse occasions, Israelites fell into idolatry throughout their history, but however they were cure of that tendency by the Babylonian captivity. After that traumatic experience, Israel never again as a nation or as a people lapse into idolatry nor become weak or hesitate in their commitment to monotheism. God’s message to them through Moses was loyalty to the one true universal God of all the earth. The pagan’s gods were idols which were condemned in no uncertain terms by the Jewish prophets. An important backdrop that laid out the way for Christianity was this monotheistic attitude of the Jewish people.

Messianic Hope

Another important development among the Jews at the time of Christ was their Messianic Hope. The Jews, in their history, had gone through a time of much suffering and difficulties. They had therefore become very anxious and desirous for the coming of their Christ (Ajah 13). Perhaps the greatest contribution of the Jews was the messianic hope that was such an important part of their culture. The Old Testament was filled with promises and prophecies of a Messiah or king who was going to come and deliver the oppressed Jews. This hope kept them going. It produced a positive outlook on the future. Regardless of the darkness and oppression that came upon the Jews from time to time, they always could look to a brighter day, the day when the Messiah would come (McCain 64).

The most important contribution of the Jews to the world was the offering of the hope of the Messiah coming that would bring to the earth righteousness. This hope of Messiah was in clear difference with the nationalist strong desire as depicted in the poem where Virgil portrayed a son who was to come and be born to an ideal Rome ruler – Augustus in the then Roman world, the hope of Messiah had steadily been announced or declared by the Jewish people. The early Christian missionaries like St. Paul and others met with both interest and skepticism as they went through the Mediterranean world proclaiming and declaring the Messiah had come. These missionaries were without fail or every

time asked to speak on this powerful message that the Messiah had come in the synagogues which enter into and convicted the hearts of many.

Old Testament Scriptures

The Jewish people by way of preparing for the coming of Christianity provided the infant church with its powerful message, the Old Testament. According to Duke, the “Jews held the view that their God never keeps the truth away from them. He has always revealed the truth in every circumstance they face. They do not search aimlessly for this truth, it has been revealed to them through the help of the scriptures, ‘Torah’. This Holy sacred writings are made available in Greek and Hebrew languages which were very common” (16). The Jews in the dispersion since most of them had forgotten their mother tongue – Hebrew language, it was of a necessity from the translation of Hebrew Old Testament into Greek; this was known as Septuagint. It was very important that the scriptures – the Old Testament which was the only Bible the infant church had, to be translated into the common language of the people. Hence, the greatest inheritance Christianity possessed from Judaism was the Hebrew Old Testament which was translated into Greek language. Josephus, the Jewish historian affirms this when he wrote thus:

How firmly we have given credit to these books of our own nation is evident by what we do; for during so many ages as have already passed, no one has been so bold as either to add anything to them or take anything from them, or to make any change in them; but it becomes natural to all Jews, immediately and from their very birth, to esteem those books to contain divine doctrines, and to persist in them, and, if occasion be, willingly to die for them (398).

Thus, the Jewish people had no doubt at all about the divine inspiration of their scriptures which they highly value and preserved.

The Synagogue

An institution was also provided by the Jews which was very useful to the rise and advancement of early Christianity. This institution was the Jewish Synagogue. “By the time of the birth of Christianity, Judaism had developed an institution, the synagogue, which was to have a profound effect upon the nascent Christian Church. The synagogue had arisen between the revival of Judaism after the fall of the Northern and Southern kingdoms and the time of Jesus. Synagogues were the chief centres of Jewish worship (Latourette 13). Cairns depicts thus:

The Jews' enforced absence from the temple at Jerusalem during the Babylonian captivity gave rise to the synagogue, and it became an integral part of Jewish life. It was also the place to which Paul first went to preach in all the cities he reached in the course of his missionary journeys. It became the preaching house of early Christianity. Judaism was indeed the paidagogos to lead men to Christ (Gal. 3:23-25) (42).

CONCLUSION

In the same light, McCain posits thus: After the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities during the Old Testament period, only a small percentage of the Jews actually returned to Palestine. The rest were scattered all over the Mediterranean world. These Jews took with them their religion and erected synagogues practically everywhere they went. Wherever there were ten Jewish men, a synagogue was built (63). He also adds that in addition to helping the Jews maintain their identity, these buildings also provided excellent preaching points for Peter and Paul and the other early Christian missionaries. They acted as incubators – keeping the early Christians alive long enough to survive on their own (64). Synagogue of the Jews thus became the house of preaching of the early Christian missionaries and it helped in spreading the gospel in the Mediterranean world. It also became regular place for early Christian worship, and teaching from the Holy Scriptures.

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