

Module: HI 101 Lecture 1

**HISTORY OF CHURCH AND PENTECOSTAL THEOLOGY:
FROM THE BEGINNING TO THE REFORMATION**

The Influences of Hellenization in First Century Christianity

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I am in the group of NT scholarship and early Christian studies who believe that Hellenization is a VERY important aspect of the first 2-3 centuries.

It is not easy for us...living almost 2,000 years later to fully grasp the importance of this without a bit of explanation.

When God spoke to Moses about leading the children of Israel out of Egypt, He instructed them to stay away from the foreigners who were living in the land He would give them.

The ancient world was VERY different from our modern world...and God had reasons for wanting the Israelites to remain separate.

I could go into the hideous practices of the ancient people in Canaan... modern-day Palestine, but I do not want to go there today.

God wanted a tribe of people who would be DIFFERENT.

The Israelites were somewhat consistent in this call by God to separate themselves from the world...

although they also had some serious breaks from this:

- Samson marries outside the tribe
- the beautiful story of Ruth
- King David and his son Solomon [both seemed to have a weakness for women...and for non-Israelite women...and concubines]

To this day Jewish people get criticized for their tribal mentality.

Yet there is tribalism in every culture...being a tribe is what makes a distinct culture.

...so, while I understand why the Jews get a bad rap, I do not agree with that view.

[in the US we are now openly tolerating anti-Semitism...]

I am about to give you THE MAIN historical context for the 1st century, the New Testament period.

Some of you have heard **some** of this before, but others have not...

We learn these things:

Flavius Josephus, 37 – 100 AD cir.

- *History of the Jews*
- *History of the War [against Rome]*

1-2 Maccabees – circa 100BC

(in what we call *The Apocrypha* which sits between the Old and New Testaments in some versions of the Bible.)

After Alexander son of Philip, the Macedonian...had defeated King Darius of the Persians...he succeeded him as king. (He had previously become king of Greece.)

2 He fought many battles, conquered strongholds, and slaughtered the kings of the earth. 3 He advanced to the ends of the earth and plundered many nations.

5 After this he fell sick and perceived that he was dying. 6 So he summoned his most honored officers...and divided his kingdom among them while he was still alive. 7 ...Alexander reigned twelve years...

8 Then his officers began to rule, each in his own place.

When Alexander the Great came to Judea something unusual happened....

Josephus gives us a fantastic story...
[Many historians do not believe this account...or think it is highly exaggerated.]

The High Priest...received news that the Macedonian general had conquered other regions and was coming through Judea.

he committed himself to prayer and in a dream had been encouraged by God to have his priests dressed in white linens and go out to meet Alexander in formation.

...for Alexander, when he saw the multitude at a distance, in white garments, while the priests stood clothed with fine linen, and the high priest in purple and scarlet clothing, with his miter on his head...he approached by himself, and adored that name, and first saluted the high priest. The Jews also did all together, with one voice, salute Alexander, and encompass him about; whereupon the

kings of Syria and the rest were surprised at what Alexander had done, and supposed him disordered in his mind.

Antiquities Book 11.8.4-5

Alexander had been given a dream
- he saw this man in white linens with a miter hat, the priest of a "god".

This "god" had urged Alexander to come to Asia and conquer.

- the High Priest took him to the Temple
- and offer a sacrifice for him
- he was shown the book of *Daniel* in which it was proclaimed that a Greek would defeat the Persians.

Alexander asked what he could do for the Jews: they asked for some concessions -

- they be allowed to govern themselves
- continue their system of worship

Alexander granted all they asked for.

- he asked that the priests continue to offer sacrifices for him and pray for him
- any Jewish man who wanted could join his army...many did so

Around 150 years later the Romans granted Israel with the same self-rule. This may have been in honor of what Alexander the Great had done.

The Jews would offer the same sacrifices and prayers for the Roman Caesar.

As he conquered, Alexander imposed the Greek language and culture on every nation.

ALEXANDER'S EMPIRE, C. 323 BCE



When he died his generals basically declared themselves "King" over the region they were leading.

For our purpose we are only looking at the kingdoms that were in Egypt and in Syria...around 180 BC.



You can see that Israel sits right in between two much larger kingdoms.

These two kingdoms were consistently at odds and both wanted Israel to side with them.

The leadership of Israel tried to stay neutral.

In 168BC The King Antiochus Epiphanes decided to take over Israel.

[Some of the Jews believed that the Samaritans sided with the Seleucids. Most scholars do not think this happened, but many Jews certainly believed it. It seems likely that *some* Samaritans fought with the Seleucids.]

Antiochus tried to force the Jews to become "Greek." [*hellenia*]

- banned Sabbath worship
- banned the Temple sacrifices
- sacrificed a pig on the altar
- set up a statute of Zeus

Thousands of Jews died during this first phase of persecution.

Finally, a significant family, the Maccabees, rose up in rebellion to fight against the King.

This led to the famous Maccabean Wars against the Seleucid Empire... and the Maccabees were successful.

The Maccabees became national heroes for the Jews.

[21 min] - QUESTIONS?

The popularity of Maccabean names in the first century, during the time of Jesus illustrates how much influence this time period had...

41% of men had 9 names
50% of women - 9 names

6 of the 9 male names...
3 of the 9 female names...

Are names of the Maccabees
(or their children) or the Hasmoneans
who ruled after the War.

Interestingly,
22% of the male names...
17% of the female names...
were Greek.

[Bauckham, Richard, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* (Eerdmans 2006), pp.71-74]

This is an indication of the influence of Hellenization (and those against it).

THIS is the environment for Jesus and the NT.

1. The Maccabees were like the founding fathers in the US.

These names show the patriotism of first century Jews.

[what is the analogy in the EU?]

2. Jesus, who we often think of as something of a pacifist, NEVER says anything negative about the Maccabean War.

In fact, we have an allusion in the "Faith Hall of Fame" in *Heb 11*

3. After the Maccabean War the Pharisees became a dominant force. Their approach to the Laws was in response to the *Hellenization* that brought the *abomination of desolation* - the desecration of the Temple.

They decided that they would keep the Law *like nobody had ever done*.

We will see as we move forward into the NT era, how this struggle against "Greek" influence and conflict was part of early Christianity.

There was an ongoing struggle in Israel with the changing of the world around them.

Traditionalists - Jews who spoke Aramaic and tried to keep the Law of Moses (mostly Judea, southern Israel).
Hellenists [Greek] - Jews that lived around the Roman Empire.

- spoke Greek
- did not speak Hebrew/Aramaic
- dressed more like Greeks/Romans

Due to the prior exiles and wars Jews were spread all around the Roman Empire.

At least 1/2 million Jews lived in Egypt in the first century.

At least 100,000 Jews lived in Rome.

These "Hellenistic" Jews could NOT speak Aramaic...or read the Hebrew texts.

The Septuagint

Translation of the 70

The OT was translated into Greek so these *Hellenistic* Jews could understand the Law of Moses read in their synagogues around the Roman Empire.

This Greek translation was done cir. 280-240BC.

The tradition is that it had been translated by 70 of the greatest Jewish scholars of the day.

THIS is the OT that all the NT writers quote from...

NOT from the Hebrew text.

Even though the LXX was done so Jews could continue to worship the LORD God...

the Judean Jews...those who kept the Hebrew culture alive... did not like these Hellenized Jews.

This divide in the Jewish population was most apparent during Holy Days and Festivals when Jews from all over the Empire would come to Jerusalem.

You would have a huge influx of Greek-speaking Jews:

- dressed a bit differently...
- unable to speak Aramaic...
- with accents that made it clear they were Hellenized.

[*these are my ideas/opinions*]

The Hebrew speaking Jews did not want the Hellenists to even come into the Temple.

They had synagogues built for these Greek speaking Jews...probably in part, to keep them out of the Temple.

We will see the issue of Hellenization and the problems it brought to the primitive Church... as we move into the NT.

[42 min] - QUESTIONS?

We run into Hellenization in the ministry of Jesus...
mainly with the Pharisees.

The Pharisees had created so many "laws" in their oral tradition.
THIS is where they butted heads with Jesus so often.

Jesus made positive statements about Gentiles - this did not go over well.

He quotes OT texts about the Gentiles coming into the kingdom.

Then the Great Commission seems to clearly point to the inclusion of Gentiles.

Then we get *Acts 6*.

In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.

On the Day of Pentecost thousands of Hellenistic Jews had come from all over the Roman Empire for the festival....

then many heard the gospel and believed.

Like visiting a HS Revival, these new believers did not want to leave.

[There were probably rumors and "feelings" that Jesus might return soon.]

They stayed in Jerusalem with the new "Jesus people," but needed some help with daily food.

This is the first signal in a NT text that alerts us to the tension over this "Greek" issue.

[and given by the only Gentile NT writer.]

The next clear example of tension is *Acts* 10 when Peter goes into the house of Cornelius, a Roman soldier, to share the gospel.

This would be a good text for you to exegete, but I will simply point out:

1. Peter had to be told 3 times in his "vision" - "do not call unclean what I have made clean."

2. After the group conversion:

the circumcised believers criticized him, "You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them."

Acts 11:1

In Acts 15 we have believers from Judea going to the church in Antioch (where Gentiles were first being fully integrated into the church) and teaching:

"Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved." *Acts 15:1*

This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed...to go to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question. v2

After the council gets underway,

5 Then some of **the believers** who belonged to **the party of the Pharisees** stood up and said, "The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses."

This issue follows the apostle Paul. His entire ministry it impacted by a constant struggle with the impact of

Hellenization and prejudice against both Hellenistic Jews and Gentiles.

Finally, I would point you to the letter to the *Galatians* where Paul says,

"...if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all."

Galatians 5:2

I cannot go further into this, but you can clearly see how *Hellenism* influenced the primitive church.

[51min] - QUESTIONS?