

Introduction to the New Testament History and Literature

Lecture 3: The Greco-Roman World

Transcript

<https://oyc.yale.edu/religious-studies/rlst-152/lecture-3>

Overview

Knowledge of historical context is crucial to understanding the New Testament. Alexander the Great, in his conquests, spread Greek culture throughout the Mediterranean world. This would shape the structure of city-states, which would share characteristically Greek institutions, such as the gymnasium and the boule. This would also give rise to religious syncretism, that is, the mixing of different religions. The rise of the Romans would continue this trend of universalization of Greek ideals and religious tolerance, as well as implement the social structure of the Roman household. The Pax Romana, and the vast infrastructures of the Roman Empire, would facilitate the rapid spread of Christianity.

1. Alexander the Great and Hellenization

[1] *Professor Dale Martin:* Religion can't be divorced from social, political, and historical contexts and issues. And so what we're going to do today is do, one, the first of two lectures. Now these are going to be sort of dreary, boring, typical Martin lectures; dreary and boring historical surveys. And I just have to do this today on the Greco-Roman world, tell you everything you need to know about the Greco-Roman world, at least for this semester. And then next time, next Wednesday—because remember we're not meeting on Monday—next Wednesday, I'll do a similar kind of lecture for everything you need to know about Ancient Judaism, to put the New Testament into its historical context. So you'll just have to survive these two very historical survey lectures, because it's material that you need to know. I'll try to make it as interesting as I humanly can do.

[2] We now find the New Testament in the same book as the Old Testament, as Christians call it; and as Jews call it, the Hebrew Bible or the Tanakh. Clearly early Christianity has got to be studied in the context of Ancient Judaism, and so we'll do so next time. We'll look at the Jewish context, for example, for the development of the New Testament and early Christianity. But, to understand Judaism, of the time of Jesus and Paul, which is centuries

after the chronological end of the Hebrew Bible, we need to understand Judaism as a Greco-Roman cult; it is a Greco-Roman religion. And that means we need to understand at least a little bit about the Greco-Roman world. For us, we can start not so all the way back at Classical Greece, but with Alexander the Great, and the beginning of Hellenization; that is, the Grecization of the eastern part of the Ancient Mediterranean. That's all Hellenization means, making it Greek.

[3] Alexander the Great's father was Philip II, King of Macedonia, King of Macedon, and he conquered different Greek city-states by defeating Athens and its allies at Chaeronea in 338 BC. And I've got some of these names and some of these dates on the handout that you have before you [*handout is appended to this transcript*]. Alexander himself was born in 356, BCE of course. He was educated by Aristotle, beginning in 343. He was made king after the assassination of his father in 336 BCE. As your textbook points out, as Ehrman points out—and you probably already know, but for some of you this may sound like odd lingo—I'm using CE for the Common Era, which is exactly the same thing as AD, and I'm using BCE for Before the Common Era, which is the same dates as Before Christ. We in religious studies tend to like these terms, rather than BC, Before Christ, and AD, because AD

actually stands for Anno Domini, in the year of our Lord. And because we in religious studies include people in our departments who are in Judaic studies, Islam, Hinduism, all kinds of religions—you can imagine that people who are in other religions might not want to call things “in the year of our Lord,” since Jesus is not their Lord. So in simply the interests of reflecting the plurality of our own departments, we tend to use these terms, rather than BC and AD. But it means the same thing.

- [4] Alexander defeated the Persian Army, which at that time controlled all of Asia Minor, Modern Turkey, and had even threatened to control Greece. He defeated the Persian Army in Asia Minor at Granicus, the Battle of Granicus, in 334. That put Alexander and his Macedonian Army in charge of both Greece and Asia Minor. When Darius II died, who was the king of the Persians, Alexander himself took on Darius’s title, which was Great King. After defeating the Persians again, he pushed his army all the way to the Indus River in India, to the western part of what’s now India, and what was then called India also by Greeks. He wanted to go all the way to the Ganges River, but his army forced him to turn back. He died in 323, when he was not yet 33-years-old, and he died in Babylon of a fever, that is, of course, modern day Iraq.
- [5] After his death, his empire was divided up among his generals, and after some fighting and maneuvering and negotiations, four successors to Alexander the Great finally ended up splitting up his large empire into four smaller empires. And we call these four successors simply the Diadochi. And I think that’s actually not on your handout, so I’ll write it out for you. This is a Greek word that simply means the successors. So the Diadokhoi, the Greek plural of Diadochi, as we often refer to it, ended up splitting his army into four parts and four dynasties descending from the four successors. They were four generals of Alexander.
- [6] Now next time, in my lecture on introducing you to Judaism, I’ll talk about the importance of at least two of these empires, because they’re very important for the history of Palestine and Israel at this time. But for now all you need to know is that these four different kingdoms—one was where we now have Greece, another one was where Syria is,

another was Egypt, and then there was another further north, but that’s not as important for us. The Syrian-Greek Empire and the Egyptian-Greek Empire will become very important for the history of Judaism, and Jesus himself also. But for right now, all you need to know is that all of these generals, although they were Macedonians and spoke Macedonian and not themselves Greek, but they had, just like Alexander, they had adopted Greek language, Greek culture. They educated their children in Greek ways. Alexander, of course, had been educated by Aristotle, when he was young, and so he had adopted Greek language and Greek literature and a lot of other Greek ways.

- [7] What Alexander had wanted to do was to take all these different peoples, who spoke different languages and had different customs, and use a Greek layer to sort of unite his empire overall. Now he didn’t really care about the lower class people so much. So they could just still live in their villages and out in the country and do their farming and speak their own local language. But if you were going to be elite—he wanted to establish cities throughout his empire that would be actually Greek cities, and he wanted to have the elite people all be able, at least, to speak Greek. You have therefore one world, and in fact this whole dream of Alexander—and it was a very self-conscious, propaganda campaign and a cultural campaign on Alexander’s part. He wanted to make one world.
- [8] You really have, therefore, for in some way the first time in history, a dream of making all of his empire basically universal, a dream of a universal vision, for one world, under one kind of culture, one kind of language. This really hadn’t been attempted. You see, in the previous empires, like the Assyrian Empire, or these kinds of—the Egyptian Empire, when people conquered other peoples, often all they wanted was tribute. They just wanted taxes and food and money and that sort of thing. They didn’t really care about turning those people into Egyptians or into Assyrians. And Alexander didn’t really care that much about the lower classes doing that, but he still wanted the elites.
- [9] And so he would plant Greek cities and settle his veterans in different parts of his empire in Egypt, in Syria, all the way over, and sometimes in the western part of India, and he

would take his veterans of his army, and he would drum them out of the army, when they retired, and he would give them land and they'd build a city there, and that city would be just like a Greek city back home. And they all would speak what developed to be a common form of Greek, slightly different from Classical Greek, and we call that Koine Greek; and koine is just a Greek word that means common, or shared. So the Bible is actually written in Koine Greek, because this was the form of Greek that had become spread around the eastern Mediterranean by the time the Hebrew Scriptures were translated themselves, and by the time the New Testament writings were themselves written.

2. *The Greek City-State*

[10] The Greek polis, which is simply the Greek word for city, had several institutions that are very important, and they'll become important for early Christianity and for Judaism. So you need to know what some of those are. The polis itself is just a Greek word for city. But you can't think of this as in huge cities like we have now. What they would call a polis might only be 1000 citizens or 5000. So it wasn't like millions of people. It wasn't nearly as big as Rome, which would consist of a million inhabitants fairly quickly around this time. The poleis—that's plural for a Greek city—the poleis or the polises, they were much smaller than that, but they would have several things. The city center, the town, would be the center of this, and that's where the institutions would be, that's where the government would be, that's where the different buildings would be that I'm going to explain later. But the polis also included the surrounding farmland, and the villages. So Athens was the polis for Attica, but it was also the polis for all of Attica, all that region around Athens, including villages and farms and other small towns too. So there was a rural dependency on these Greek cities.

[11] They all practiced a certain kind of Greek education. The Greek word paideia, which is right there on your handout, means education, but it also means more than simply rote learning or memorization or learning to read, like we think. Paideia is the Greek word that means the formation of the young man. And I say young man because throughout all this it was mainly young men and boys who were

educated. Girls could be given some education, if their families were wealthy enough, but the cities didn't really concern themselves so much with girls' education. Their family might, but the cities concerned themselves with the education of their boys. So paideia referred to the education of the young man, both mentally, but militarily—so you were taught to fight—and culturally; you might be taught other things about culture. You might even have some music training or something like that.

[12] The place where this took place was the gymnasium. Now a gymnasium doesn't mean what it means to in English, the gymnasium, like Payne Whitney over there. It actually comes from the Greek word for naked, gymnos. And the reason it was called 'the naked place' is because, of course, young Greek men always exercised in the nude and played sports in the nude. And so this is where you did it. So where did you do this? That came to be called "the naked place," the gymnasium. But this also became the place where you would do other kinds of learning. So if you were learning rhetoric, for example, you might practice giving speeches at the gymnasium. But also men in town would just kind of gather there. It was kind of a place where men gathered, and they had gone to school at the same place. You would meet your friends. You might play some games, you might play like checkers and these kinds of—bones, bone knuckle bones games, that you can still see. If you travel around in Greek cities throughout the Ancient Mediterranean, you can see where they've carved little game boards into flagstones of different temples or buildings, in Greek cities. So this would all take place in the gymnasium.

[13] You also had what they called the ephebeia. When you were a young boy, you would've studied just reading and writing Homer. When you got to be about the age of what you guys are here, you might enter the ephebate; you'd become an ephebe, and that just meant that you were past your sort of early secondary training and now you were being really in training to be a warrior and a citizen. So the ephebes were those boys who were between the age of maybe 16 or 17 and 20 or 22. You would march together in a parade in town. You would go on military training perhaps together. You would also engage in sports together, and you

would develop a camaraderie because you were expected then to be the fighting force for your city, your city-state. So the ephebate, or the ephebeia, was this institution that every boy had to go through in order then to be a full citizen of a city.

[14] You also had these political structures that are in your handout. The first political structure is the demos. Demos just means the “people,” it’s just a Greek word for “the people.” But it actually referred more politically to all of the male citizens, and in Greek cities, by tradition, only men were citizens of a city. This will change in Rome, because in Rome women were citizens also, although that didn’t mean they were equal to men. But in Greek cities men were citizens and women weren’t citizens. But with the revolution of democracy in Athens, which also spread then to other Greek cities, partly because Athens did what George Bush tried to do in Iraq, they tried to force democracy on other Greek cities around the Eastern Mediterranean also. So democracies of some sort existed in different places. And a democracy—the demos meant all the men of adult citizenship; that is, it excluded men who lived there who came from elsewhere. It excluded foreigners, it excluded some laborers, it excluded slaves, and it excluded women. But all the men who were citizens had a vote, and the demos referred to that political body of voting men. Now democracies collapsed, obviously, later, and Philip of Macedon, and Alexander, did not promote democracies. But they kept this idea that the demos—that is, the adult citizen males of a city—were a political body. And that’s when, if you had everybody come to the theater for a big debate about something, you could still have people voting on certain things that the city might decide to do, although they couldn’t rule themselves completely by themselves.

[15] Then you had a smaller council that might be 50 people. It varied, the size, according to the city. The council was called the boule, which is also in your handout, and that referred to a smaller council of older men, usually, who made decisions that they then would put before the whole, the demos, the whole voting population.

[16] And then you had the term called the ekklesia, which is on your handout. That really did refer

to the voting body of the citizens, or the gathered citizens together. Ekklesia is a Greek word, it just means “the calling out.” Ekklesia therefore is what you would call the assembly, the Athenian Assembly, who would debate things and vote on things that the boule, the council, would put forward for a debate or a vote. That was called the ekklesia. This is very important because ekklesia, then, in our bible, gets translated as—

[17] *Student:* Ecclesiastes.

[18] *Professor Dale Martin:* Ecclesiastes does, but it’s called Ecclesiastes because that means “the preacher,” that’s the translation from the Hebrew word, “the preacher,” qoheleth, for the book. So Ecclesiastes means the preacher. But ekklesia is a term for the church. So this’ll be odd, when we get to early Christian groups. Why did these early Christian groups decide to call themselves the town assembly? Because by that time it’s the basic meaning of this term, ekklesia.

[19] And then you have other social structures of any city-state. For example, you have a theater. The theater was a place where you had performances. By the first century, when Christianity was coming around, it was not so much the place where you’d go to see necessarily high theater, like Sophocles or Euripides or something like that. What you’d often do is go to see farces or comedies. Or sometimes the Romans liked to take a big theater and fill the central part of the theater, the cavea, with water and then stage naval battles and that kind of thing. So people have all kinds of entertainments in the theater. But it was also where often the demos or the ekklesia would meet to have meetings and holler at each other and have big debates. So the ekklesia was the city place, and it would often meet in a theater.

[20] You also had games. So you had the gymnasium where games would take place, but also you had the hippodrome, which is in Greek, which basically just means “the horse running place.” This was when you had this big track, and if you have wandered around different Greek cities that are dug up, some of them will have the hippodrome there, and you can see how huge they were. They had these huge stands, and it was sort of like a football stadium, except it was longer and narrower

than what our football stadium would be. But it had rows of seats like that, usually made over a hill or dug into the ground in some way. And the hippodrome, which becomes the circus in Latin—that's just the Latin translation of hippodrome, because as you'll see, Romans started adopting a lot of these, which were originally Greek institutions, into their society also. So the hippodrome is the circus in Latin. And eventually, for the Romans, this would be very popular for big chariot races. That's the big thing for the Romans later.

[21] And you'd also have baths; that is, public places, sometimes where only men could go, or sometimes women could go, or sometimes they would be mixed in some places. Or sometimes they might have men one day, women another time, and mixed at other times. So different cities had their baths differently. But the bath would be a place where at least especially the men would go, after they'd been working out in the gymnasium, and you go and—this is where the public toilets were too. You can't wander around any Greek city, or Roman city of the Ancient World, without seeing the latrine. You can always find the latrine. And they always had latrines and baths, and you'd have the cold room where you'd have cold water, you'd have the tepid room where you'd have kind of lukewarm water, and you'd have the hot room where you'd have hot water. So this is where you'd go to relax, to make a business deal, to meet your friends, to chat, to try to have sex, try to meet somebody. All kinds of things go on in these baths.

[22] But those basic structures are part of any kind of Greek city in the Ancient World. And what Alexander and his successors did was they took that basic Greek structure, and they transplanted it all over the Eastern Mediterranean, whether they were in Egypt or Syria or Asia Minor or anyplace else. Which is why you can travel right now to Turkey or Syria or Israel or Jordan or Egypt, and you can see excavations of towns, and it's remarkable how they all look so much alike, because they're all inspired by this originally Greek model of the city. So that's one of the most important things about Alexander and his successors is they Hellenized the entire eastern Mediterranean, and that meant every major city would have a certain commonality to it. It would have a certain koine to it; that is, a

Greek overlay, over what may be also be there, the original indigenous kind of cultures and languages.

3. Religious Syncretism

[23] The other thing you have is religious syncretism. I didn't put that down, so just in case [writes on board]. The Greek word *synkresis* means "a mixing together." When Alexander gets to Persia, or let's say when he gets to Egypt, he knows that there is this god Isis, this female god Isis, that's very important. You see statues of her all over the place. Well, Alexander just followed a custom that had been taught by philosophy and other kinds of things that, "Oh well, they worship Isis." But Isis is sort of like Artemis. So sometimes you'd see they'd make statues of Isis look like statues of Artemis back home. Artemis is the Greek goddess of—anybody know?

[24] *Student:* The hunt.

[25] *Professor Dale Martin:* The hunt. See all you guys really know your Greek and Roman mythology. That shows that you did well on your SATs I bet, didn't you? So, we'll talk a bit about what that means, with the different gods and goddesses, and how you learned all this in mythological courses and English in high school. But we'll get back to that. But Artemis is the Goddess of the Hunt. So these Greeks would say, "Well, we have another Goddess of the Hunt," and you'd find other Goddesses of the Hunt. Or when they'd get to Jerusalem, they'd see, "Oh, these people worship Yahweh. Well that's just Zeus, that's just another name for Zeus. It's the same god, they just have a different name for it." Alexander took this tendency of syncretism, of mixing together different religious traditions from different places, and he used it as a self-conscious propaganda technique.

[26] He even identified himself, because he started claiming divine status for himself. He went around passing out rumors that his mother had actually been impregnated by the god Apollo, when he appeared as a snake in her bed. So, Alexander is putting himself forward as divine. Why? This is not a Greek tradition, but it's very much a tradition in the East for kings to be considered by their people to be gods. Alexander says, "Well, if they can be gods, I can be a god." So he starts spreading rumors

that he is divine himself. He probably even believed it. I don't think he necessarily lied about it, he probably believed that he was divine. And so he had a god father, he had a human mother, and so then he would identify himself with whoever was a god in the different places. So he would identify himself as a Greek god with a Persian god. He would identify the goddess Isis with some Greek goddess. And so all the time these different gods from different places were basically all said to be simply different cultural representations, different names, for what were generally the same gods all over the place.

[27] Also, though, what they would do is sometimes they wouldn't try to simply say these gods are the same. What they would just do is add on more gods. They'd just say, "Oh well, we got to Egypt and we found out there are a whole lot more gods than we knew about." Or they'd get to Syria, "Look at all these god that the Syrians worship. Well, we'll just add those into our pantheon of gods too." And this is part of what ancient religion was like, is that people were not exclusive. You didn't have to worry. Just because you worshiped one god doesn't mean you couldn't worship another god or several gods or five gods or a hundred gods. Gods knew that everybody was—they weren't particularly jealous, in that sense. So this is the way people did it. But what Alexander and his successors did was they made sort of a conscious, propagandistic decision to use religious syncretism to bind together their kingdoms. Now this will become a problem obviously when we talk about Judaism, because Jews—the Greek rulers, were trying to do the same thing with Jewish gods and Jewish figures, as they had elsewhere. And some Jews would go along with this and some Jews would resist it.\

4. *The Roman Household and Social Structure*

[28] The Romans, when they came on the scene, in the East, and they gradually became more and more powerful, they destroyed Corinth in a big battle in 144 BCE. Pompey was the Roman general who took over Jerusalem in 63 BCE. So the Romans were in charge of Judea from 63 BCE on. And this is very important, because the Romans, as their power grew in the East, they simply moved increasingly into

the eastern Mediterranean and they adopted the whole Greek system, the Greek world, and they didn't even try to make it non-Greek. So Romans didn't go around trying to get people in the East to speak Latin. They might put up an official inscription in an Eastern city in Latin, but they'd almost always, if it was an official inscription, it would also be listed in Greek. So Romans who ruled in the East were expected to speak Greek. And by this time all educated Roman men were expected to be able to speak Greek, well if possible. So the Romans didn't try to make the East Roman, in that sense, culturally, nor did they try to change the language. Greek language, culture, and religions, different religions and the syncretism, Greek education, the polis structure—all of these things remained in the East throughout the Roman rule of the East, all the way up until the time you had a Christian emperor with Constantine, and later.

[29] But there's one thing that the Romans made even more of, than the Greeks had made of, and this is the patron-client structure. This is a bit more of a distinctly Roman institution, even a legal institution. But it's important for understanding both the Roman Empire, as well as early Christianity and its patron-client relations. The household structure of a Roman household was this—and I say "household," because our word "family," which we usually take to mean the biological family: the father, the mother, the children, maybe the grandchildren, maybe the extended family. But we usually mean by it the immediate, the nuclear family, with some extension. That use of the English word "family," although it comes from the Latin, *familia*, means something totally different in Latin. The Latin word *familia* didn't mean that biological kin group. It actually was originally used for the slaves of a household. The slaves and the freed persons of a Roman household were legally the ones who were the *familia*. But so when I say "family"—we try to avoid even talking about "the Roman family," because it means something so different to them than what it means to us. So I'll tend to talk about "the Roman household," because that's what's more meaningful sociologically when we talk about this.

[30] The Roman household was constructed like a pyramid. Imagine this as a pyramid and not a triangle. At the top of it is the head of the

household, the man, the paterfamilias. And increasingly you'll actually see this written in the New York Times or used in politics. But it comes from the Latin, and it referred to the head of the household; pater, father, familias is the household, the family. The paterfamilias is the oldest man of the household. Under him is his sons, his daughters, and then at the bottom are his slaves, and here are his freedmen, freed persons. And then also you consider, in some ways, free people who may exist as clients. But legally the word client in Latin refers to the freed slaves of a paterfamilias.

[31] Now where's the wife in this picture? Notice, I didn't put the wife and the mother in there. Why is that? Because legally she's actually not part of this man's household. She remains part of the household of her father, and she's legally under the control of her father probably, or her brothers, if her father is dead; or her grandfather if her grandfather is still alive. But since life expectancy in the Ancient World was much less than ours, you didn't have usually several generations in these households, because older people just died.

[32] The wife though is legally a part of her own household over here. Why did the Romans do that? That's very different from the Greeks, very different from other people in the Ancient Mediterranean. Why did they want to make sure that the daughters stayed in the households of their fathers? They did this because they didn't want the upper-class in Rome, who were the elite, they didn't want any one household, or any small group of households, to become too powerful. And if you have women marrying off into other families, and then they leave the household of their fathers, and they are officially and legally in a household with somebody else, that may end up increasing those households that have intermarriage coming in and not so much intermarriage going out.

[33] By keeping women under the household of the men of their original family, the upper-class Romans tried to balance these different households in size and importance. They didn't care about the lower-class really. The lower-class didn't really count much. What they cared about—because the Roman Republic by this time was basically a bunch of very important households, wealthy men and their households, and they were the members of the

Senate, they were the knight class, they were the people who ran Rome. So they didn't want one king to arise, and they didn't want a small coterie of leaders to arise. They wanted there to be some kind of balance of power among the several major households of Rome, the families of Rome.

[34] Now slaves obviously are in [the household of] the paterfamilias. When a slave is freed—and in the Ancient World, in the Roman Empire, most slaves were eventually freed, unless they just died before long—they became a freed man. They didn't become a free man, they became a freed man, and that was legally different. So the status of slave was lowest, freed persons was next highest in Roman Law, and free people were next. But even though they became freed, they were still considered a member of this guy's household, as his client and his freedman. And they owed certain duties to him. For example, they might—paterfamilias would often put a slave up in business, give a slave enough money to run a business. And the slave could keep a lot of the income from that business for himself, and the slave could actually gather together a bit of money for himself. He couldn't legally own the money; his master legally owned everything the slave owned. But, practically, and in some legal contexts, what they would do is they'd allow the slave the use of that money, and that's called the peculium.

[35] Now when this slave is freed, by the owner, the slave could take the peculium with him, and then he could set up his own business, but he'd still be a client of the owner, because he's still officially part of his household. So this maintained, even when—why would a person free a slave? Well if you have a slave, that slave can't actually sign contracts. The slave might be your business manager, but all the slave could do is the paperwork. But if you need a slave representing your business, and you live in Rome and you need somebody in Ostia, the port city of Rome, to be able to be there and watch your imports and your exports of your business, you need someone who can sign contracts, who can lend money, who can borrow money, who can do things like that. Slaves can't do that legally, but freedmen can. So rich Romans were often freeing slaves for their own purposes. It was not like they were giving them a great deal, this was part of constructing their own business expansion.

- [36] Sons and daughters, though, were still part of the household, as long as the paterfamilias was alive. So sons legally were still under their paterfamilias. Now this is all legally and officially what's the case. You wouldn't really see this working all like this. For example, I said wives were not really part of their husband's household. Legally, that's correct, but you see cases in letters and all kinds of stuff from the Ancient World that women actually were more unofficially part of their husband's house. They ran it when he was away, for example. They told his slave—she might have her own slaves and her own property, the wife had her own property that was separate from the husband's property. But in practical purposes most of the time, they didn't—they just mixed these together and they might use different things. So the legal situation was set up to try to keep the wife's ownership as part of a different family, and so her money didn't go to her husband, and his money didn't go to her. But this was a legal situation to try to keep this balance of power among households. Practically, sons didn't all live in the same place with their father. They would get married and move off to an apartment or someplace down the street, or to another city. But this is the legal situation.
- [37] Now when you go to jail—I mean when you go to court, slaves of course can't represent themselves in court at all, they don't have any legal standing. But if you're a freedman you're—the other thing I should tell you is that in Roman law if you're manumitted as a slave, you're made free, if you're manumitted in the normal way they did it, that makes you a Roman citizen, if your owner was a Roman citizen. Notice what this means. Only in the Roman Empire could slavery actually start being a way that you can move up in society, because you could—if you were a talented slave, your owner might free you, probably would free you. When he freed you, if he was a Roman citizen, you would automatically become a Roman citizen also, and your children would be Roman citizens. And although you were a freedman, which was lower in status than a free person—there were some privileges you couldn't have—your children would be, if they were born after you'd been freed, would be free people, not freed.
- [38] So within a couple of generations people could move up from being the lowest slaves to two generations of being free Roman citizens. So Roman slavery and the freedom of that was actually one way that a few people in the Ancient World recognized some kind of social mobility, which was very rare in the Roman Empire. Any questions about any of that?
- [39] Now why is this important for the rest of this stuff? This will be very important because Christians started out as house churches, and their house churches fit sometimes the model of a Greek ekklesia, an assembly, but sometimes the model of the Roman household. And so this household structure becomes very important for the growth and structure and even the theology of Christianity eventually.
- [40] This is also important though for Roman politics, because if you're if a freedman, or even if you're a free person—sometimes see freemen would connect themselves to a powerful Roman who was higher status than them, because they could use him for important things. For example, say you want to take your neighbor to court, because your neighbor is starting impinging on your land. Well if you're of lower status, lower social status, the judge is going to look at you and say, "Come on, you're poor, your neighbor's rich, I'm going to side for the neighbor." Because Roman legal structures—and they even said this in Roman laws—if you're a judge and you have a rich man and a poor man in your court, of course you're going to decide for the rich man, because the poor man has incentive to cheat; he's poor. But the rich man already has money, he doesn't have any incentive to cheat. That's their logic. [Laughs] But so Roman legal system was really geared toward the wealthy and the people of high status.
- [41] For that reason, if you wanted to win a court case, it helped—or have somebody represent you in politics or all kinds of things—it helped to have strong patrons. So you'd have a patron who would be higher class, richer, more powerful, have some political power, and you would be loyal to your patron, and your patron would then represent you in court, try to get you jobs, try to get you more business, do all the kinds of things that patrons do for their clients. Also, if your patron wanted to run for a city office, your patron would expect you to

be loyal and vote for him. So lower-class people—now what happens, though, when you have—see your clients, your freedmen, your sons, your daughters, all these are part of this pyramid structure, and they all benefit from a strong *paterfamilias*, and he benefits by having a strong household and a large household.

5. *The Rise of Julius Caesar and Octavian*

[42] But most of the free citizens of the Roman Empire, of Rome, were poor people—free, and even citizens, but they were poor people who weren't part of any rich household. So what do you have with all these other people, these other Romans around here, who don't have a powerful patron, who don't have a powerful *paterfamilias* to help them out? This is where Julius Caesar was quite the genius. Julius Caesar came from a patrician family—that is, a family, an aristocratic family—but he started siding with a party in Rome called the *populares*. And I think this is on your handout; correct? The Roman Senate, in the late part of the Republic—yes—started dividing itself into two sort of parties; not official parties, but factions. The *optimates*, meaning “the best,” tended to support the interests of the wealthy senators and the few wealthiest families. The *populares* started representing the interests of everybody else in Rome. *Populares* just comes from the word for “the people.” Julius Caesar was from one of these aristocratic, patrician families, although his family didn't have a lot of money, they weren't really, really wealthy. But he had great birth, and so he started getting more power politically and financially by setting himself up as the patron of the patronless. Also, generals ran their armies this way.

[43] So Julius Caesar—if you were really going to be important in Rome, you had to serve as a general at some point. Julius Caesar capitalized on his role as a general of a large army that was at the time winning battles in Gaul, modern France. One example about this is how—Julius Caesar was the patron, the *paterfamilias*, in a sense, of his army, his soldiers—is that one time the Senate, who got nervous about Julius's growth in popularity and power, they wanted to take some legions, some Roman legions, away from Julius Caesar in Gaul, and send them to another general in Syria. The reason they did this was because

they wanted to take some of Julius's power away. They were afraid he was going to set himself as dictator, which of course he did. So they took these Roman legions away, and they sent them to Syria. When they left, Julius Caesar, out of his own pocket, gave every soldier in those legions a year's pay. This is what patrons do, you see. He bought the loyalty of his soldiers, when they were being taken out of his control. This is the patron-client structure at work in the Roman army.

[44] Julius also, then, set himself up in the city, when he started gaining more power in Rome. Actually he gained power in Rome mainly by military might, by kind of making the Senate nervous and winning a few battles, and that was against the law. It was against the law for Julius Caesar to do that, but he did it anyway. He tried to consolidate his power, though, by putting forth policies that moderately helped the lower classes. He didn't cancel debts, but he mitigated debts. He eased some of the strains on the poor. He was assassinated by conservative Senate forces—you know, Brutus and Cassius and others—on the Ides of March, as you all know, March 15th, 44 BCE.

[45] He had adopted another Roman, Octavian, and Julius Caesar's adopted son, Octavian, then formed an alliance with Mark Antony, who had been Julius Caesar's friend, and a lesser known figure named Lepidus, whom you don't really need to remember. Because at the end it turned out that Mark Antony and Octavian fought a civil war. Octavian won, and Octavian defeated Mark Antony. And by this time Mark Antony had palled up with Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt, and Octavian beat both of them, and he became the sole ruler of the empire in 27 BCE.

[46] He refused the title of king, and he took the traditional Republican titles. One of his propagandists said this about him: “The pristine form of the Republic was recalled as of old.” Or Augustus—he had taken the title Augustus by this time, which means “the great”—he himself said, “I transferred the Republic from my power to the dominion of the Senate and the people of Rome.” In other words, in his propaganda, Augustus basically said, “I'm not a king, I'm just another senator, and I'm giving the Senate and the people all their power back.” A lie, all lies. See, lying in government didn't start with our government.

So Augustus actually reconstituted the Senate, and it was just that, a Senate reconstituted by the emperor. He became more and more the patron of all the people. And this is the way the emperor would forever then try to present himself. He and his family, the emperor's family, was, in a sense, the patron for the whole people of the Roman Empire—at least for all the Romans—the paterfamilias of the entire empire.⁶ *The Pax Romana*

[47] This led to what we famously call the Pax Romana, “the Roman Peace,” because you had the end of long, hundreds of years of civil wars and other wars, at least within Rome itself. There were always battles and wars going on, on the boundaries, the frontiers of the Roman Empire, but within the center of the empire there was an amazing period of peace.

[48] Most people saw this peace—many people in history say it is good. It's debatable whether it was good for everybody. Non-Romans and poor people may have seen the Pax Romana as more oppressive than a liberation, just like people saw the Pax Americana that way, after the collapse of the Soviet Union and before the beginning of the Iraq War. The Romans maintained peace, for one thing, by leaving local populations pretty much alone when it came to local customs, religions, and living arrangements. When they thought it was necessary, they maintained peace by destroying communities and forcibly moving populations. But they tried to do that only when they needed to do so to keep their absolute control.

[49] The Romans prospered by taxation. They did hold censuses, not universal ones as mentioned in the Bible, but local censuses, in order to keep taxes high and fully paid. But they didn't—the Romans themselves didn't want to be bothered with collecting taxes. So they would have local, sort of higher class, local elites, would bid for the right to collect local taxes, and so the Romans would take the highest bid. In other words, if I'm a rich, wealthy person in Corinth, I would say, “I'll be the local tax collector, and I'll guarantee you I'll send to Rome this amount of money for a year.” Of course, the Romans didn't care then how much I charged you, the people of Corinth in its area. Actually the City of Corinth wouldn't have been taxed because it was a Roman colony, and one of the benefits of

being a Roman colony is that you didn't have to pay taxes, or at least the citizens didn't have to pay taxes. But the people in the outlying villages and towns and farms and everything would pay taxes.

[50] And if I'm the tax collector, the way I make a profit is by charging you a lot more than I need just to send to Rome. The Romans didn't care about this. They just knew it was going to happen. This was the way they collected their taxes. This is why the word “tax collector” is such a bad word, for everybody but the Romans; why you'll see in the gospels the term “tax collectors and sinners.” Why? Because the Jews didn't like the tax collectors because they were being ripped off by them. Is your hand up?

[51] *Student:* Did Matthew come from a rich background then?

[52] *Professor Dale Martin:* Well, number one, we'll talk about who the historical Matthew is. The figure in Matthew, in the Gospel of Matthew, we don't know much about his actual history. He just appears. But when it calls him a “tax collector,” it doesn't necessarily mean that he was the one who owned the right for that whole area. It just means he was—he could've been hired by somebody to sit at a roadside and collect taxes and tolls and stuff. So the word “tax collector” didn't necessarily mean that the person themselves were wealthy, but whoever had the tax—what's the thing I'm looking for?—franchise, whoever had the tax franchise for that area would be someone from a wealthy background. But then you'd hire out other people to do the taxes. So these people, of course, were very unpopular. The Romans maintained peace to a great extent by keeping the poor poor. So the Pax Romana may have sounded great, if you were an elite, but if you were not in the elite, it may have seemed more oppressive than anything.

[53] There were some other benefits, though, that the Romans did. They made travel much easier. Pompey had cleared the Mediterranean of pirates, which is something that our governments can't seem to do. They built roads, maintained some communication. They had a mail service, although it was for official use only. But this meant that you could get—at least the Roman officials could get mail

delivered fairly quickly. They used even a horseback relay that could go a hundred kilometers a day. Soldiers were expected to be able travel thirty kilometers per day, in full pack. And that was only possible because, besides using the sea, the shipping lanes for travel, which was much faster than overland travel, the Romans maintained roads. They didn't really care about roads for everybody else. They wanted the roads for their Army, just like the US Interstate system was originally created in case the Army needed to be moved across the country very quickly if the Soviets attacked. So this is the same way with the Romans. They built roads for the army, but of course other people used the roads too. This was why Christianity and other things were able to spread so easily, why Paul was able to travel around the empire. He would prefer to go by sea, if possible, because it's much quicker, but at least he could travel on the roads that the Romans built and maintained.

[54] As far as religion—Ehrman talks about this in your textbook, so I won't go into a lot of detail—but the common Hollywood idea that the Romans were kind of oppressive of other religions, or the Christians, is just that, a Hollywood idea. The Romans actually were very tolerant of local religions. They didn't care what gods you worshipped. The Romans actually were very pious in the sense that they believed that whatever land they were in, they should provide sacrifices and honors for the local gods, especially the important ones. So the Romans would honor local gods, other people's gods. Every people was allowed to use their own gods. Jews, for example, since the time of Julius Caesar, who befriended the Jews because they helped him out politically a lot, he gave them certain privileges. Jews didn't have to—they could observe the Sabbath, they didn't have to do things on the Sabbath that they didn't want to. They didn't have to serve in the army. They got to observe their own religions. They weren't expected to sacrifice, either to the emperor or to other gods.

[55] So the Romans, basically, were very tolerant. When they weren't tolerant was when some religious group or club started looking like they might be rebellious. If they started looking like insurrection would happen, the Romans didn't do it. So the Romans, for

example, outlawed volunteer fire departments, in local places, because they were afraid that volunteer fire departments could be a place where locals, especially maybe lower-class locals, could get together and then start gossiping about what they could do to cause trouble for the Romans. So the Romans were only concerned about religions when it looked like those religions were going to cause political problems.

[56] As we'll see next time, Jews fell into the system in many different ways. Sometimes they were relatively happy clients of the Romans. Sometimes they were subversive enemies of the Roman order. As I said, they were officially recognized by the Romans, but this caused problems for Jews sometimes. In Alexandria, the local Egyptian population resented the Jews because they were recognized as a legal ethnicity in Alexandria, and they weren't given complete privileges of the Greeks in—Alexandria was a Greek city. So they were Greek speaking, maybe people of Greek descent. But if they had fully adopted Greek customs, they were considered Greeks.

[57] The Jews were not considered Greeks, but at least they were higher in status in Alexandrian law than local Egyptians. The Egyptians were the lowest in the city. So the local Egyptians resented the Jews, because the Jews were recognized as their own ethnicity and given some privileges. So this is why you sometimes had Jews getting in trouble with local groups and had violence with Jews in different places. And sure enough, pogroms arise in places. Local people would attack the Jews, or the Jews would try to set up an extra big meeting house for themselves, and it would cause local problems. But these were not problems brought on by the Romans, these were local problems, and part of it was precisely because the Jews had been recognized by the Romans as having a special status in some places, and this caused some kind of local resentment.

[58] As we'll see, though, the very fact that the Romans had allowed this one universal empire, that had been created by Alexander originally, and with a Greek veneer, and they allowed the West to stay Latin and the East to stay Greek, and they melded these two different things—all of this was one of the reasons that Christianity was able to spread at this time in the way it did. In fact, you might

even think that had Jesus come and had Paul lived, had they tried to spread this new group, this new movement, at a time 500 years before this, or 500 years afterwards, it may have never happened. Because it was precisely because of this one world, run by the Romans and maintained by the Romans, that allowed the

spread of Christianity, to a great extent, both ideologically and thought-wise, as well as simply physically. Any questions? Okay, time's up. See you, not on Monday, but on Wednesday.

[59] [end of transcript]

Handout for Greco-Roman World Lecture

RLST 152 Introduction to New Testament History and Literature
Dale B. Martin

BCE= Before the Common Era=BC (Before Christ)
CE= Common Era=AD (Anno Domini)

Philip II, father of Alexander the Great
Battle of Chaeronea, 338 BCE
Battle of Granicus, 334 BCE

Greek city-state (polis) structures and institutions:

- Polis
- Paideia
- Gymnasium
- Ephebeia
- Demos
- Boule
- Ekklesia
- Hippodrome (Circus in Latin)

Pompey
Patron-client structure
Paterfamilias
Senate
Optimates and Populares
Julius Caesar
Ides of March, 44 BCE

Octavian/Augustus
Mark Antony and Cleopatra
Pax Romana

Roman Republic, until 44 BCE, or perhaps 27 BCE (it is debated)
Roman Empire, after 27 BCE