

The Early Church To Early Reformation

The Ancient Church (100 – 313 A.D.)

Lesson 1

“Historical Backgrounds and the World of the Early Church”

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Historical Backgrounds and the World of the Early Church

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“But when the time had fully come, God
sent forth His Son, born of woman,
born under the law”

- Galatians 4: 4

Introduction

- Without understanding our past, we are unable to understand ourselves, for in a sense the past still lives in us and influences who we are and how we understand the Christian message.
- The notion that we consistently read the New Testament exactly as the early Christians did, without any weight of tradition coloring our interpretation is an illusion. It is also a dangerous illusion, for it tends to dogmatize our interpretation, confusing it with the Word of God.

Introduction

- Not only is our view of the present colored by our history, but our view of history is also colored by the present and by the future we envision.
- History is not the pure past; history is a past interpreted from the present of the historian.
- Every renewal of the church, every great age in its history, has been grounded on a renewed reading of history.

Historical Context

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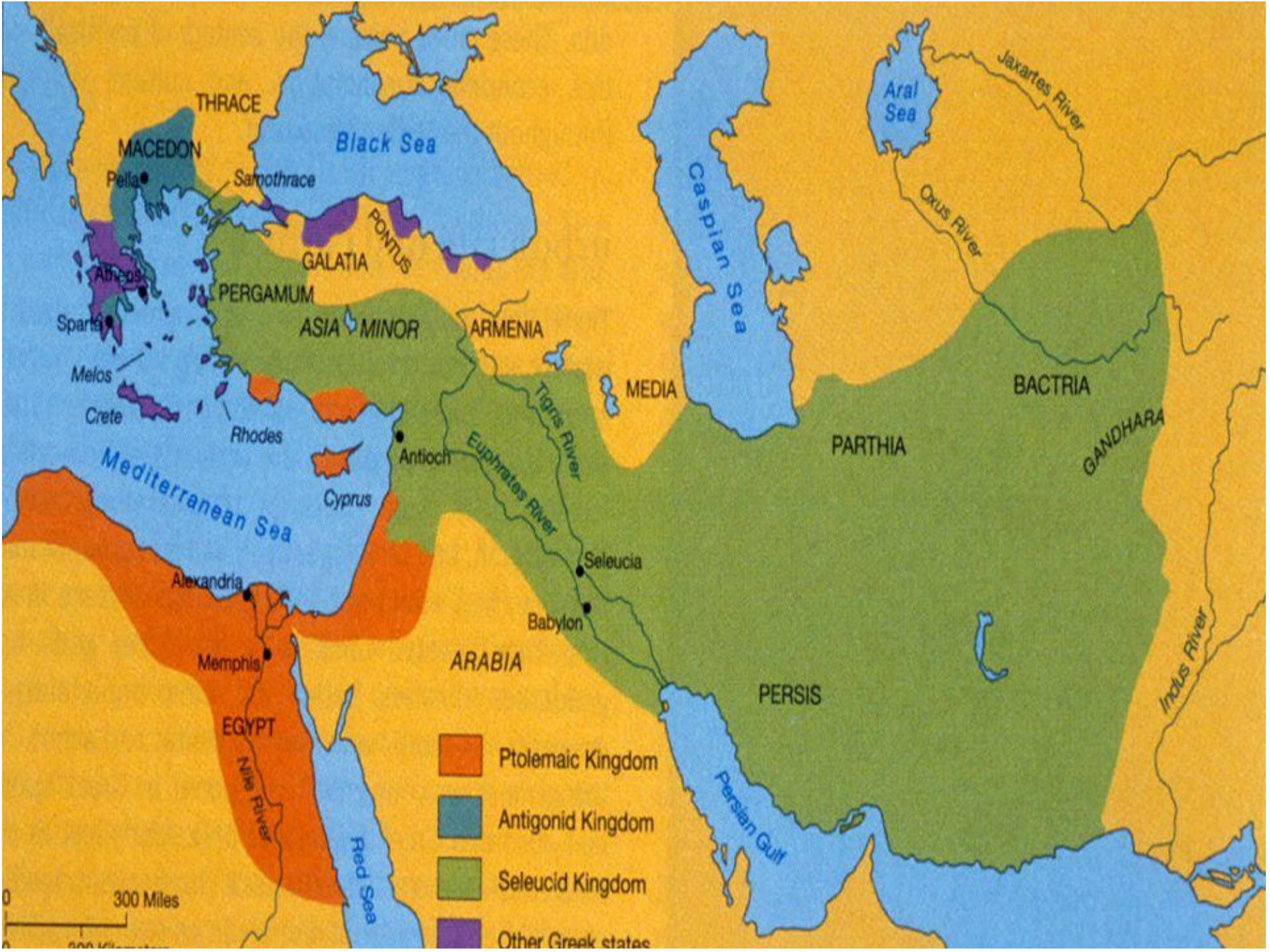
- 1,000 to 922 B.C. - David & Solomon unite & expand the Kingdom of Israel.
- 922 B.C. – the Kingdom divides
- 722 B.C. - the northern kingdom of Israel falls to Assyrian Empire
- 587 B.C. - the southern kingdom of Judea falls to Babylonian Empire
- 538 B.C. - return of the exiles
- 539 to 333 B.C. - Persian rule

Historical Context

- 333 B.C. - Alexander the Great & the Macedonian armies
- 323 B.C. - Ptolemaic rule
- 200 B.C. - Seleucid rule
- 164 B.C. - Hasmonean rule
- 63 B.C. - Roman rule
- 40 B.C. to 3 A.D. - Herod the Great
- 70 A.D. – Destruction of Jerusalem
- 135 A.D. – Hadrian removes Jews from Judea

The Ancient Near East, 1800 to 1400 B.C.





Jewish Expansion Under the Hasmonean Dynasty 140–116 BCE

- Judea before the Maccabean revolt
- Conquests of Jonathan
- Conquests of Simon
- Conquests of Hyrcanus I
- Conquests of Aristobolus I
- Conquests of Alexander Jannaeus



THE ROMAN REPUBLIC c. 49–44 BC UNDER CAESAR'S SUPREMACY



Hellenistic Tensions in Judea

- Hellenism (language, ideology, religion, social structures, education, governmental structures) did not take on a constant form from one local culture to the next, but it was a blending of local & Greek culture.
- Jews of the Diaspora were quick to be influenced by Hellenism.
- Some Judean Jews embraced Hellenism & some resisted.
- Equating & mixing the gods of different nations
- 175 B.C. - Antiochus IV blew the lid off by outlawing Jewish traditions.

Early Roman Rule

- Roman policies toward the religion & customs of conquered people were rather tolerant.
- The Roman brand of tolerance could not reconcile with what appeared to be the inflexibility of the Jews, who insisted on worshiping only their God, and who threatened rebellion at the smallest challenge to their faith.
- Herod the Great & his successors followed a pattern of building (or rebuilding) new cities, & encouraging the immigration of Gentiles.

Judaism

Pharisees & Sadducees

- In general the Pharisees were the party of the populace, who did not enjoy the material benefits of Roman rule, & Hellenistic civilization.
- The Pharisees believed it was more important to be faithful to the Law, and for that reason they studied & debated how the Law as to be applied in every conceivable situation.
- Through their emphasis on the Law they sought to make the faith of Israel relevant to everyday situations.
- While moving among the common people, Jesus & his followers had more opportunities to rub shoulders with the Pharisees than with the Sadducees.

Pharisees & Sadducees

- In general Sadducees were more conservative than the Pharisees, both in policies & in religion.
- Sadducees held to the Torah only, and rejected many of the doctrines of the Pharisees as unwarranted innovations.
- Their interest centered on the Temple.
- There were probably many other sects including the Zealots & Essenes.

Commonality of Jewish Sects

- All Jews agreed on the need to worship only one God with the whole of life.
- Messianic hope (eschatological) was the second common thread. All firmly believed that God would intervene in order to restore Israel, & fulfill the promise of a Kingdom of peace & justice.

Diaspora Jews

- By the time of Jesus, there was a sizable Jewish community in every major city of the Roman Empire.
- Diaspora Judaism is of crucial importance to the history of Christianity, for it was one of the main avenues through which the new faith expanded throughout the Roman Empire.
- Diaspora Judaism unwittingly provided the early church with one of the most useful tools for its missionary expansion, the Greek translation of the Old Testament.
- Aramaic was spoken within the eastern wing of the diaspora & Greek was spoken by the western wing.
- Diaspora Jews were forced to come to terms with Hellenism in a manner that could be avoided in Palestine itself.

Philosophical Context

Socratic Teaching

- Socrates was Plato's teacher
- Was critical of ancient gods
- Taught about a Supreme Being that was perfect & unchanging
- Believed in the immortality of the soul
- Plato affirmed that, far above this world of fleeting things, there was a higher world of abiding truth.
- Early Christians found these teachings attractive & useful in their attempts to respond to charges that they were ignorant & unbelieving.

Stoicism

- This school of philosophy, slightly younger than Socratic philosophy, held to a very high moral standard.
- In the 3rd century B.C. Stoics were materialist who believed that all things were made out of fire. They were also determinists who were convinced that all they could do was to train themselves to assent to the inescapable laws that rule events (fate) .
- Stoics were also critical of the religions of their time.
- Stoic philosophy was to understand the laws of nature, and obey or adjust to them. When this occurs passions subside, and the philosopher approaches life without passions (apatheia).
- Stoic ideals of apatheia call believers to steadfastness.
- Many of the Stoic arguments against the gods were taken up by Christians.

The World of The Way

- This was the world into which Christianity was born: The presence of Judaism in various parts of the world, the order afforded by the Roman Empire, & Hellenistic civilization all provided avenues for the proclamation of the new faith.
- Roman law & Hellenistic culture comprised the context in which the early church took shape.
- Since trade flourished, travel was constant. Thus Christianity often reached a new region, not through persecution, or the work of missionaries or preachers, but rather through traveling traders, slaves and other common peoples.
- “But when the time had fully come, God sent forth His Son, born of woman, born under the Law.” Galatians 4: 4

