

THE SYNAGOGUE VS. THE GYMNASIUM

Next to the Apostle Paul, Alexander the Great (356-323 BC) was likely the greatest "evangelist" who ever lived. His "gospel" became the world view called *Hellenism*. He correctly believed that if a ruler could control 3 institutions, he could change the *world view* of any people. The 3 institutions were:

ART SPORTS EDUCATION

A Study in Contrasts

Hellenism, the dominant worldview in the first century, stands in stark contrast to the truths of God found in the Bible.

Hellenism	The Biblical Perspective
Human beings are the image of gods.	Only God is God. He is Lord of the Universe, the Creator of mankind.
The human mind is the greatest source of wisdom.	God is the ultimate source of all wisdom.
Human beings determine truth-what is right and wrong.	God, the source of truth, has given us the standards to determine what's right and wrong.
Human accomplishment is the goal of life.	The goal of life is to glorify and serve God.
The human body and what human beings create is the highest standard of beauty.	Human beings create beauty because they are made in the image of God.

HELLENISM AND THE DECAPOLIS

Alexander the Great had a mission: He wanted the whole world to be under the influence of Greek culture in religion, language, philosophy, political structure, and values. He died before he could make his dream a reality, but his successors accomplished his goal to a large degree. Much of the known world, including many of the people of the land of Israel, adopted Greek ways, although they modified them with local beliefs. Greek cultural institutions were established in many cities, including Jerusalem. Theaters became common and popular. The rabbis of Israel forbade attendance at these theaters because their dramas portrayed the myths of Greek and Roman gods, contained erotic themes common to Hellenism, and were performed in connection

with pagan religious festivals, which included sacrifices to the gods. Gymnasiums, or Greek educational institutions, appeared in many cities, including Jerusalem, not far from the Temple. In the gymnasium, the Greek ideal of training people's bodies and minds was put into practice. Students studied the philosophy of classical Greece, received athletic training, and competed naked in athletic events.

The Greek educational system was remarkably effective, instilling Greek ideals into entire generations of young Jewish people. Busts of Greek gods and heroes celebrated the ultimate ideal: the human form. Young Jews read Homer, Euripides, and Plato to absorb their values. They also learned to draw and sculpt, often creating the forms of Greek gods. Because Greek mythology offered heroes and role models who competed with the Jew's biblical ancestors, the Pharisees, devoted to keeping God's people faithful to Torah, constantly admonished young Jews intrigued by Greek culture.

Hellenistic cities had stadiums for the public display of athletic contests. Temples were built to honor local gods, and festivals were held to celebrate pagan holidays. In the midst of these attractions, the faithful Jewish population struggled to maintain its beliefs. The latest architecture and artistic designs made the Hellenized cities of the Decapolis seem very attractive and modern. People from the small villages of Galilee must have been awed by the marble streets, mosaic floors, running water, and fountains. In these cities and even in nearby regions, Hellenism influenced much of everyday life. In fact, the Greek language became the common tongue of the economic world.

Few people did more to bring these Hellenistic ideas to the Jews than Herod the Great and his sons. Though they kept a few Jewish "rules" to pacify their religious subjects (e.g., they did not put their "images" on coins and apparently avoided eating pork), the Herods built theaters, stadiums, and gymnasiums. It fell to the faithful Jews to resist these cultural institutions and the values they brought. As a result, the Pharisees adopted increasingly detailed laws to remain faithful to Torah; the Zealots resisted Hellenism more and more violently; and the Essenes withdrew into isolated communities. By contrast, the Sadducees, while maintaining the prescribed Temple ceremonies, often became as Hellenistic as the pagans. Supporters of the Herods, the Herodions, also enjoyed the Hellenistic lifestyle their overlords created.

The Decapolis city-states were satisfied with their freedom under Roman authority. They could enjoy their Greek practices, from sacrificing in their temples to eating pork (also used for sacrifices). Rome provided support for their cultural practices and helped them resist the seemingly outdated worldview of the Jews. One of the most magnificent of the Decapolis cities, Hippos, sitting high on a hill, could be clearly seen across the Sea of Galilee by the fishermen of Capernaum and other villages around the sea. Ironically, this area would become a vital center for the early church.

At its core, Hellenism was humanism. It glorified human beings above all other creatures and portrayed the human body as the ultimate in physical beauty. Truth could be known only through the human mind, and pleasure was a crucial goal in life. Hellenism's values permeated the gymnasium and its excellent system of education, the theater, and the games in the arena. The majestic Romanized forms of Hellenistic architecture must have seemed harmless enough, but its temples glorified the excesses of pleasure.