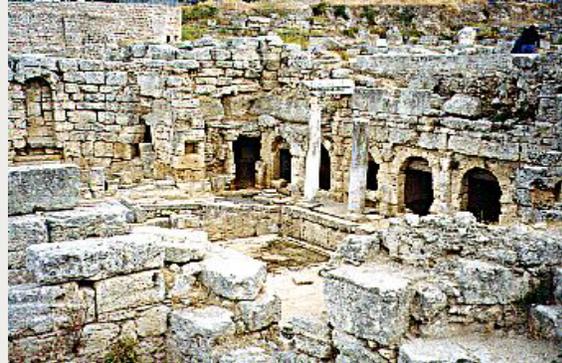


CRISIS AT CORINTH: THE DECADENCE OF THE PAGAN RELIGION

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Saint Paul's conversion story is well-known. However, details about his childhood may not be so commonly known. He was born during the reign of Caesar Augustus sometime between 5 and 10 A.D., and was circumcised on the eighth day. "Being a Roman citizen, he was registered in the archives of one of the Roman tribes in the capital" (The World of Saint Paul, 2011). He was educated in the sect of the Pharisees, "which was renowned for its piety and ardent patriotism" (The World of Saint Paul, 2011).



We read in the Acts of the Apostles of St. Paul having said, "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus, but brought up in this city. At the feet of Gamaliel, I was educated strictly in our ancestral law and was zealous for God..." (Act 22:3). It was during this time that there was the dispersion of the Jews that is, "the general title applied to those Jews who remained settled in foreign countries after the return from the Babylonian exile" (Bible Gateway, 1993). There was Alexander the Great - who "during his leadership, from 336 to 323 B.C., he united the Greek city-states and led the Corinthian League. He also became the king of Persia, Babylon and Asia, and created Macedonian colonies in Iran (Biography, 2013). The Roman Empire whose religion had as its "objective to gain the blessing of the gods and thereby gain prosperity for themselves, their families and communities (PBS, 2006). In Corinth there was a general uneasiness about Salvation, the people knew little of what would happen after they die and they feared the gods. This brings us to the main topic of this paper the decadence of the Pagan Religion. Was this the most important factor in the craziness of Corinth?

The Romans of that era were pagan, just like the ancient Romans who "believed everything had a spirit. These spirits were thought to influence for good or evil, daily life. The Romans therefore had to keep them happy through worship and sacrifice. If the rituals and sacrifices were performed properly the Romans believed the gods would be happy and help them" (Think Quest, 1999).

"Paganism is a broad group of indigenous and historical polytheistic religious traditions—primarily those of cultures known to the classical world" (Wikipedia, 2013). It was said to have been a culture filled with numerous gods and goddesses. These gods and goddesses were thought to be "in human form who were distinguished from mere mortals only by their power and their eternity" (The World of Saint Paul, 2011). This religion "was protected and supported by the state or the local authorities, who decided which gods should be venerated and to whom sacrifices could be offered (The World of Saint Paul, 2011). Therefore, the people not only participated in immoral rituals pertaining to these gods, but they had to venerate the gods singled out by the authorities.

Saint Paul went on three missionary journeys, all of which led him to encounter paganism in its varied expressions. What happened to first journey? Maybe a sentence here During his second missionary journey, Saint Paul spent a short period of time in Athens and then moved on to Corinth, the first city to organize bullfights and gladiator games. It is "located at the end of a neck of land attaching the Peloponnese peninsula to mainland Greece and having a port facing east (Cenchreae) and another with access to the west (Lechaion), Corinth was geographically predestined to be a corridor of commerce and a potpourri of cultures" (First Corinthians, 2011). A great number of merchandise passed through this city, "being able to excise duty on shipping, and celebrated for its shipbuilding and its production of bronze, ceramics, and textiles, Corinth was a wealthy city" (First Corinthians, 2011). It was one of the ancient world's cities, "its six-mile encircling wall locked into the Acrocorinth, a rocky hill rising to a height of one 1,887 feet like an impregnable fortress" (First Corinthians, 2011). This city was known for being one of the most sensual cities of its time. "The temple of the Greek goddess Aphrodite stood atop the Acrocorinth and prostitutes had their reserved seats in the theater" (First Corinthian, 2011).

Along the way, St. Paul would have almost certainly encountered a statue of Poseidon. "In a remote spot

deep within a thick pine forest stood the shrine of Poseidon, where every third year the Isthmian Games were celebrated, for which the magistrates of Corinth were responsible" (The World of Saint Paul, 2011). "The athletes would compete in footraces, wrestling, boxing, throwing the discus and javelin, the long jump, chariot racing, poetry reading and singing," usually held in the spring time (Bible Archeology, 2013). These games were of the utmost importance and many traveled from distant places to attend. The athletes had to train and follow a specific diet for ten months and "take an oath that they were pure-blooded Greeks, innocent of any crime or act of irreverence" (The World of Saint Paul, 2011). If they won, they received a crown of laurel or pine branches. "Every athlete exercises discipline in every way. They do it to win a perishable crown, but we an imperishable one" (1 Cor 9:25). St. Paul is making a point, if man is willing to submit himself to the physical demands and restraints of a competition - simply for a crown of leaves, why would he then not do the same or even more for the eternal crown of heaven?

Upon his arrival Saint Paul encountered "Romans, Greeks and Near Easterners of every provenance, including a number of Jews - all attracted by commercial advantages of the city" (First Corinthians, 2011). Primarily, a select few wealthy people lived in Corinth, many workmen who did not earn much money and lots of slaves also lived there- "an additional sign of the wealth of the city" (First Corinthians, 2011). "Corinth was prosperous enough to be named as one of the three economic centers of Greece by Plutarch, a writer of the second century" (gbgm-umc). Many people traveled in and out of the city, attentive to the flow of the goods passing through it. Likely, many of these people also contributed to the wealth of the city. People were interested in money. Culturally this city deemed certain human lives as unimportant. Many had abortions and others would leave their babies at the temple or outside to die. "Corinth was virtually alone in its enthusiastic adoption of the homicidal games of the Roman amphitheater (First Corinthians, 2011). Often the children were sold into slavery for money and sickly babies were left to die so as to avoid an inconvenience.

The city of Corinth was at one time regarded as a blessed city. It was destroyed by order of the Roman consul Lucius Mummius. He took their bronze and later used to make the "Magnificent Gate" of the Temple in Jerusalem. The city lay in ruins for approximately one hundred years. Julius Caesar had it rebuilt around 47 B.C. and made it a Roman colony. However, they continued to believe and worship their pagan gods. "Beneath the cypress trees of the necropolis outside the city walls was the tomb of Lias, the most famous courtesan from Corinth...For the Corinthians this monument was truly their symbol of the terrible power of unbridled sensuality and of the madness of man enslaved by his urges" (The World of Saint Paul, 2011). One could only imagine how difficult it must have been for Saint Paul to preach the Gospel to these people...or were they ready for something new? Despite the obvious difficulties he was able to sow seeds of faith in this city, seeds that would bear much fruit.

People greatly feared the gods because they were wicked, cruel and unjust. They did not understand death or what they perceived to be the next life and were terrified of the eternal torments they believed were imposed by the gods. They believed that if a man cursed, these Erinyes would be awakened and seek out his ruin, as was the case with Amyntor, the father of Phoenix and Oedipus, who cursed the pagans. The Erinyes had black faces; "their clothing was black; they were not winged; serpents were entangled in their hair and with their arms; their breath poisoned the foam that spewed from their mouths, causing droughts and epidemics" (The World of Saint Paul, 2011).

Corinth was often referred to as the city of gods and goddesses. "Besides the Jewish synagogue, there were temples to Apollo, Asclepius, Athena, Demeter, Dionysus, Kore, Palaimon, Zeus, Cybele, Isis, Serapis, Melkart, Sisyphus, and Aphrodite" (First Corinthians, 2011). There were also, "cults of Jupiter Capitolinus and of Artemis, the Great Mother, flourished as did certain of the mystery religions, that of Isis surely and probably that of Dionysus" (First Corinthians, 2011). It was a town of two worlds and the pagans were winning? How did St. Paul combat all the evil and false gods? He preached the Gospels from the synagogues, but mostly he preached the Gospel by his example of life. We should strive to preach the Gospel not by words and reprimands, but rather by a life of virtue that can be clearly seen. God bless you.

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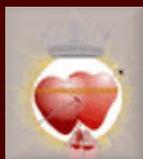
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