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SUMMARY

Have you ever traveled abroad or lived in a foreign country? If so, you know firsthand how different life can be from one culture to another. Matthew and the people he describes in his Gospel lived in a different culture and time from ours. Even more, he lived simultaneously in two disparate yet related worlds—Jewish and Hellenistic—and the text he wrote has traveled across the globe for some 2000 years to meet us where we are. Just as people today can benefit from learning in advance something about the foreign cultures through which they will travel, readers of Matthew’s Gospel will understand far more of its distinctive message—while they are traveling through it and when they return home— if they will consider first some important aspects of the cultures and time-period from which it came.

Basic Bible References

1 Maccabees 1:1-64

Isaiah 11:1-9

Acts 7:1-53

Acts 17:16-21

Word List

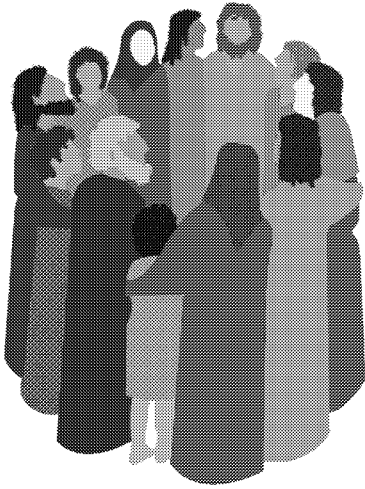
Pharisee

Sadducee

Essene

Zealot

Gentile



MATTHEW'S WORLDS AND OURS

A Different World

Matthew's ancient Greco-Roman world was different from ours in many ways. Some of his culture's guiding principles and perspectives were the exact opposites of ones that we hold today. For instance, Matthew's world was suspicious of anything that was "new and improved." It treasured instead that which had endured the tests of time and changing circumstances. Ancient ways were valued over new ways, and new "truths" were but shadows of antiquity's pristine realities. People believed that the world was decaying, and that older was better. Read **Acts 17:16-21**. Imagine how this view might affect your life today.

Matthew's world also believed that the destiny of an individual or nation was determined by the iron will of the gods and goddesses who lived in the heavens and controlled everything in the universe. They believed that character was established by the positions of stars and planets at birth, and that success came to those who aligned their choices with the will of the gods who ruled life's arenas. This is a far cry from our modern view that individuals can shape their own lives and destinies. We believe also that individuals are unique and have the right to self-determination; people in Matthew's world would have found such thinking offensive, for they believed that the rights and needs of the group always took precedence over those of any group member. Consequently, family roles seldom wavered; and loyalty to the family, community, tribe, or nation was the individual's supreme commitment and responsibility. Matthew's world differed from ours also in the

arenas of religion and politics. Rulers regulated the religious practices of the ruled, binding religion and politics as an absolute unity. Separation of “church” and state was unthinkable.

Simply put, Matthew’s Greco-Roman world was quite different from our world today, and familiarity with these differences is useful for interpreting important events recounted in his Gospel. Yet Matthew lived simultaneously in two distinct cultural arenas—Jewish and Hellenistic—and each of these spheres also helped shape his distinctive perspective among the Gospels.

Matthew’s Jewish World

When it comes to Matthew’s Jewish world, we would do well to think of *Judaisms*—so distinctive were the major parties of Judaism in the first-century Greco-Roman world. The Pharisees are the most frequently identified group of Jews in Matthew’s gospel. They were called the “separated ones” because they zealously incorporated the Jewish Law into their daily lives and “separated” themselves from “sinners,” which was their term for anyone who did not keep the Law. They were largely middle-class lay people who valued oral traditions about the meaning of scriptural texts along with the texts of the Law and the Prophets themselves. They did not accept the dominant deterministic view of the Gentiles, but believed instead that the God of Israel controls the events of history and that humans have a degree of freedom to make decisions on their own. They believed in a resurrection of the faithful dead and that all peoples would one day worship the God of Israel. The Pharisees were popular, and Matthew identifies them among the strongest opponents of Jesus. Read **Acts 7:1-53**.

The Sadducees were far less popular among the Jews, but their wealth, political clout, and positions of influence in the Temple, the Sanhedrin, and the Hellenized courts gave them a power far greater than their number suggests. They were largely a priestly class—created by David as a counterbalance to Levitical influence—that gave scriptural authority only to the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament). They believed that God does not determine history in advance, and that humans are entirely free to direct their lives as they choose. They denied both the existence of spirits and the resurrection of the dead. Clearly, the Sadducees were quite different from the Pharisees, yet Matthew identifies them with the Pharisees as Jesus’ chief opponents. Something about Jesus and his ministry united ancient Judaism’s most dissimilar religious groups against him.

There were other influential groups in ancient Judaism that affected Matthew's understanding of the gospel. The Essenes were so critical of the Temple establishment and Hellenistic (i.e., Greek) influences that they formed remote communities in the wilderness (e.g., Qumran) and practiced strict asceticism and followed rigid holiness codes. They are not named in Matthew's Gospel, but there are some close parallels between this group and John the Baptist, even Jesus himself, especially the belief that the kingdom of God was at hand. The Priests included direct Levitical descendants of Aaron and the indirect line of Zadok (Sadducees). They governed the religious life of the people. The Scribes were the learned class, skilled in reading and writing as well as in law and business. Zealots were religious nationalists who sought to rid Palestine of Roman occupation and influence by any means available. Herodians were secular Jews who supported the Hellenized rule and policies of Herod the Great and his descendants. When Matthew refers to the union of the Herodians and the Pharisees against Jesus (22:16), there can be no doubt that Jesus and his message were perceived to pose a grave threat to the religious and political elements of first-century Judaism.

There were, of course, some unifying elements beyond their shared history that made it possible for these groups to think of themselves as Jews in contrast to their Gentile neighbors. Most importantly, they were monotheistic, revered the Law of Moses, believed Palestine was the land promised to them by God, and considered Jerusalem—especially the Temple—to be the closest point of contact between heaven and earth. Still, their deep religious and political divisions often overshadowed these common points. Yet as diverse as these groups were, the Judaisms of the first century were but microcosm of the greater differences of values and lifestyles that permeated the Hellenistic world in Matthew's day.

Matthew's Hellenistic World

Matthew lived in a world ruled by Gentiles (non-Jews). By the time the Romans came to power in Palestine in 63 B.C., the Jews had survived for more than a millennium the domineering influences of at least seven earlier empires that had ruled over them: Egypt, Phoenicia, Philistia, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, and Greece. In Matthew's day, the Romans had a tight grip on Palestine and maintained a strong military presence throughout the land. Read **1 Maccabees 1:1-64**. The Land of Israel, after all, was a land bridge between continents and empires, and Rome had every intention of controlling it. Not surprisingly, the Romans were careful to empower and protect only people who were sympathetic to their causes and customs. One important ally was Herod the Great (40-4 B.C.), followed

by his sons Herod Antipas, who ruled the area of Galilee, and Herod Philip, who governed the area northeast of Galilee. To oversee the region of Judea, the Romans established the office of Procurator, the most famous of whom was Pontius Pilate, who had little sympathy for the Jews. Little wonder that the Jews in Matthew's day were anxious for a deliverer—a Messiah who, like David, would free Israel from the control of foreigners and make of Israel a great kingdom. Read **Isaiah 11:1-9**. The Pax Romana (Roman Peace) was not peaceful for the Jews.

There is more to Rome's influence on Matthew's world than its political and military domination of Palestine. The Romans controlled a vast empire encompassing many other peoples and cultures; yet it was more than military might that held it all together, as important as such strength was to them. Rome's most pervasive and unifying influence was cultural. Continuing the civilizing legacy of the Greek ruler Alexander the Great (356-323 B.C.), the Romans promoted Greek (Hellenic) culture everywhere. The common language was Greek, and Greek literature, religion, philosophy, art, technology, and architecture were promoted and embraced throughout the Greco-Roman world. Trade and commerce exploded as the Romans built highways and established safe shipping routes. Consequently, many barriers among people from different cultural backgrounds dissolved, most importantly the barrier of language. A document written in Greek could now be read from one end of the empire to the other—a point that Matthew and our other Gospel writers understood.

Clearly, some important differences existed between Matthew's Jewish and Hellenistic worlds beyond monotheism and polytheism. There are also some striking differences between Matthew's worlds and ours. As we will see, in some respects our worlds are not that far apart. Nevertheless we will gain a better understanding of Matthew's Gospel by recognizing the gaps that exist between the first-century Greco-Roman world of the biblical text and the twenty-first-century world of today. Modern readers must be careful not to impose their perspectives and values on the ancient characters in Matthew's text. Better interpreters of the scriptures listen to the characters as much as possible in light of their own historical situations and, in this way, are better able to hear them speak to us for traveling and living in our world today.

FOR FURTHER STUDY AND REFLECTION

Memory Bank

1. Memorize Isaiah 9:2-7.

Research

1. Using a good Bible dictionary and other resources, investigate the diverse lifestyles and religious practices of the first-century Greco-Roman world.
2. Learn what you can about Herod the Great and the other “Herods” identified in the biblical text.
3. Investigate the word “Messiah” and the popular Messianic expectations in Judaism during the first century A.D.

Reflection

1. Imagine yourself a first-century Jew of any sort. What challenges from the secular world of Hellenism would be most difficult for you? Why?
2. Diversity is always a challenge to any group’s identity and life. In what ways is diversity a strength and a weakness for the life of the church? You may find passages like 1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12 helpful.