

By Phillip Campbell

One constant message of the Sacred Scriptures is that the times and seasons are in the care of God's wise providence. When David is persecuted by his enemies, he prayed, "I trust in thee, O Lord ... my times are in Thy hand" (Ps. 31:14-15). David recognized that affirming God's custody over the "times" is an act of trust in His providence. "God has made everything beautiful in its time," says Solomon (Eccles. 3:11), commenting on the seasons of man's life. This idea is reaffirmed in the New Testament. In the Gospel of St. Matthew, Christ says that even the most minute of circumstances of life are all part of a grand design: "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground without your Father's will" (Matt. 10:29). The takeaway is that nothing "just happens" in this world. The entirety of the created order — with all its causes and effects, its interrelated web of contingencies — is all part of a divine order.

If something as seemingly insignificant as the death of a bird is subject to the inscrutable providence of God, surely the same applies to events of much greater import, such as the rise and fall of nations or the scientific progress of mankind. How much more, then, would it apply to the events of salvation history, around which the entire drama of humanity revolves?

This line of inquiry inevitably brings us to consider the timeliness of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ during the reign of Augustus Caesar. Clearly, God specifically selected this time in history as the opportune moment for the revelation of the Word made flesh. St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians offers a tantalizing hint of Paul's awareness of this truth when he writes, "But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent His Son, made of a woman, made under the law: that He might redeem them who were under the law: that we might receive the adoption of sons" (Gal. 4:4-5).

What does St. Paul mean by this phrase, "the fulness of time"?

"The Fulness of Time"

If we return to Solomon's reflection on time in the Book of Ecclesiastes, there is a famous verse which tells us, "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven" (Eccles. 3:1). If Christ was born at a certain moment, it was because God deemed it to be the proper "season" for this event. There must, therefore, be something specific about the "season" of Christ's birth during the reign of Augustus that designated it as "the fulness of time" in God's grand plan.

The question then becomes, what was so special about the state of things at the time of

Christ’s birth that made the Incarnation so opportune?

We can only speculate, of course — God did not reveal the answer to us, and, as the Psalmist says, “Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain it” (Ps. 139:6). Nevertheless, we may offer some guesses based on our knowledge of history and the developments in politics, philosophy, and religion around the time Christ came.

First Century Political Situation

Let us first consider why the political situation of the first century was ideal for the Incarnation. Through most of the first millennium B.C., the Mediterranean world was a tapestry of different political states. For example, in 300 B.C. Italy was divided between the Etruscan League in the north, the republics of the Romans and Samnites in the center, and the Greek city-states of the south. North Africa was under control of the Berbers, Carthaginians, and Ptolemaic Greeks ruling from Alexandria. In far off Spain, the Celtiberians dominated the peninsula, while the Gallic tribes held sway in modern-day France. Greece was under the Antigonids of Macedonia, while Asia Minor and Palestine were ruled by the Seleucids, a polyglot empire made of up ethnic Greeks, Persians, Arabs, Jews, and other Asiatics. Hundreds of languages were spoken across these polities as well, making the Mediterranean world a theater of cultural and political conflict as these kingdoms jostled with one another endlessly.

This began to change in the third century B.C., however, with the ascendancy of Rome as a major power. After consolidating control of Italy, Rome overcame its North African rival Carthage in a series of monumental conflicts known as the Punic Wars (264-146 B.C.). It would continue its path of conquest, gradually gobbling up Spain, Greece, Palestine, and Gaul in the coming century. As Rome fought to secure its empire, there was also a struggle within the government for supreme power. A series of civil wars were fought between 83 and 31 B.C. between two factions for control of Rome. This civil war was of tremendous scale, fought on three continents in engagements of hundreds of thousands of combatants with an equal number of casualties. The chaos only ended in 31 B.C. when Octavian Caesar, the grandnephew of Julius, defeated Mark Antony and Cleopatra at the Battle of Actium, seized Egypt, and became the undisputed master of the Roman Empire and the entire Mediterranean world. Octavian took the title Augustus and became the first Roman Emperor.

Importance of the *Pax Romana*

This ushered in an era of relative peace known as the *Pax Romana*, which lasted for nearly two centuries. Augustus closed the gates of the Temple of Janus, a gesture of peace that had

only occurred twice before in Rome’s long history. Virgil, the Augustan-era poet, wrote a poem in 40 B.C. lauding the coming of an era of peace. Interestingly enough, this poem (known as the *Fourth Eclogue*) says the age of peace will begin with the birth of a child:

“Now is come the last age of the Cumaean prophecy:
The great cycle of periods is born anew.
Now returns the Maid, returns the reign of Saturn:
Now from high heaven a new generation comes down.
Yet do thou at that boy’s birth,
In whom the iron race shall begin to cease,
And the golden to arise over all the world,
Holy Lucina, be gracious; now thine own Apollo reigns.”

Future generations of Christians could not but notice the fittingness of Virgil’s language about a Maid, whose son to be born would usher in a new era of peace from Heaven. The *Fourth Eclogue* was thus seen as a kind of pagan prophecy of the coming birth of Christ.

With the Mediterranean unified under the aegis of Rome, the kaleidoscope of peoples inhabiting the empire were forged into a single political entity. With Roman law enforced from Scotland to Mesopotamia and the administrative language of Latin acting as an adhesive binding its peoples, Rome created one from the many, perhaps more effectively than any empire before or since.

These conditions proved ideal for the spread of Christianity. Instead of taking root among multiple countries and peoples, Christianity was able to leaven the Roman world with greater ease. Just as it is more efficient to frost a single cake than a dozen cupcakes, so the unity brought about by Emperor Augustus cleared the way for the conversion of the Roman world. The political unity of Rome provided the mechanism for the Roman world’s peaceable conversion to the Christian faith.

There is also a certain fittingness by way of analogy in Augustus’s peace and the peace brought by Christ. The rule of the bringer of political peace is mirrored by the birth of the Prince of Peace, Whose peace is “not as the world gives” (John 14:27). This is beautifully expressed in the proclamation of the birth of Jesus from the Roman Martyrology:

“In the forty-second year of the reign of Caesar Octavian Augustus, **the whole world being at peace**, Jesus Christ, eternal God and Son of the eternal Father, desiring to consecrate the world by his most loving presence, was conceived by the Holy Spirit.”





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The State of Philosophy

A second reason why the first century A.D. was an ideal time for the coming of Christ was due to the state of philosophy, especially in its relationship to religion. It is generally agreed that religion in remote antiquity was characterized by its magical and (by Christian standards) superstitious nature. Whether we consider the dark mysticism of the Celts, the Etruscan priest scrutinizing bird entrails upon smoking altars, or the magical rites that were ubiquitous throughout ancient Egypt, we see primitive paganism pervaded by magical symbolism that was meant to affect the worshiper primarily in the realm of the subconscious.

But in the sixth to fifth century B.C., something remarkable happened — all throughout the world, almost simultaneously, there was a revolution in the way men thought about religion.

The revolution was too complex to detail here, but if we were to summarize it, we could say it consisted of the application of reason to matters of religion. Consider this astonishing fact: the five most influential religious minds in the millennium before Christ were Ezra the Scribe, Socrates, Buddha, Confucius, and Zoroaster, and at least four of them were contemporaries (historians debate the life of Zoroaster, but he may have lived in the late sixth century, contemporary with both Buddha and Confucius). Each of these figures were highly influential in how religion was thought about within their respective societies. Ezra the Scribe (480-440 B.C.) systematized post-Exilic Judaism, ushering in the Rabbinic tradition whereby the Scriptures were subject to rigorous scribal exegesis in the interpretation of the Law. Socrates (470-399 B.C.) revolutionized the way Greeks thought by insisting on what we may call a deductive or “scientific” method in approaching life’s biggest questions. Compared to the Hindu culture of India, the system of Buddha (573-483 B.C.) was profoundly rationalist. For example, his famous saying from the Kalamas evidences an empirical approach to inquiry:

“Do not believe in something because it is reported. Do not believe in something because it has been practiced by generations or becomes a tradition or part of a culture. Do not believe in something because a scripture says it is so. Do not believe in something believing a god has inspired it. Do not believe in something a teacher tells you to. Do not believe in something because the authorities say it is so. Do not believe in hearsay, rumor, speculative opinion, public opinion, or mere acceptance to logic and inference alone. Help yourself, accept as completely true only that which is praised by the wise and which you test for yourself and know to be good for yourself and others.” (Anguttara Nikaya 3.65)

Confucius (551-479 B.C.), too, was a synthesizer, one who claimed to have invented nothing, but whose greatest contribution to Chinese thought was in the rigorous and systematic application of reason and virtue to ethical problems. The Confucian system was so helpful in this regard that it became the cornerstone of Chinese education for two millennia and offered a rationalist-virtue based structure for traditional Chinese Taoism.

While we can say much less about Zoroaster with certainty, it is nevertheless true that the Zoroastrian conception of God was much further developed rationally than any other pre-Christian religion outside of Judaism. Zoroaster’s god was purely spiritual, transcendent, self-caused, and omniscient — a highly refined concept of the divinity compared to the Irano-Aryan pantheon that preceded Zoroaster in Persia.

Each of these teachers contributed to the development of religion within their societies, and each had followers who carried on or expanded their teachings. These developments each created a cultural climate conducive for the eventual reception of Christianity by moving religious thought from the merely symbolic, magical, and superstitious towards the rational,

metaphysical, and empirical — religion from the sixth-fifth century B.C. onward became more philosophical, as thinkers from Greece to China began applying logic to religious questions: What are the attributes of divinity? What does it mean to be a man? What is justice? How ought the gods be worshiped? What is a good life? What is virtue? What are man’s obligations to the state? This philosophical pivot accustomed men (or at least the most thoughtful among them) to recognize religion as fertile ground for rational inquiry.

Of course, we do not mean here to suggest these men and their systems were equally rational, only that they each moved the spectrum of discourse within their respective cultures further towards rationalism. This would be profoundly important when we see how the Church interacted with culture, both Jewish and pagan. Regarding Judaism, the rabbinic system ushered in by Ezra and his successors created the religious climate of expectation for the Messiah who would come and usher in a New Covenant. And with its message of the Incarnation of the Logos, the Wisdom of God, Christianity proved eminently rationalist compared to the pagan cultures that surrounded it. The shift towards rationalism represented by Greek philosophy in the last centuries of the first millennium B.C. ensured that the intellectual soil of the Mediterranean was fertile for Christian seed.

While this process was most successful in the Mediterranean world, we see something similar occur with Christianity’s spread into places like Persia, India, and (eventually) China, where Christian missionaries were able to draw on principles from Confucianism to demonstrate how they are fulfilled by Christianity.

In general, we can say that the close of the first millennium B.C. was an ideal time for the emergence of Christianity because intellectual movements within paganism in the centuries leading up to Christ’s birth had uniquely disposed certain cultures to be receptive to the Christian message.

The Jewish Diaspora

Our third reason concerns the Jewish diaspora. The centuries leading up to the birth of Christ saw the scattering of Jews from Judea throughout the Mediterranean world and the Levant. Of course, the fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. resulted in large numbers of Jews being taken to Babylon. Many of these chose not to return after the exile ended, opting instead to remain in Mesopotamia where they founded Jewish communities that would endure for centuries. This was not the only diaspora, however, as the regional tumults of following centuries would see more and more Jews opting to abandon the Holy Land for a more stable life elsewhere. By the first century B.C., Jewish colonies existed across the Mediterranean, from Alexandria and Cyprus all the way to Rome, Marseilles, and Spain. Let us recall the multitude of foreign Jews that were present in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost:

“Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians.” (Acts 2:9-11)

We know from the Book of Acts that it was through the network of synagogues that the Gospel was first preached, not only in Judea but among the diaspora as well. The Book of Acts tells us that the Gospel was preached in the synagogues of Damascus, Salamis, Antioch, Iconium, Thessalonica, Beroea, Corinth, and Ephesus. Though not mentioned in the Scriptures, we may presume that the earliest Christians in places like Rome, Alexandria, and Carthage also came from the Jewish diaspora community. In this we see marvelously another reason why Christ’s coming was so timely: the buildup of Jewish diaspora communities in the centuries preceding the Incarnation created hubs for the dissemination of Christianity throughout the Greco-Roman world — all expectant for the coming of the Messiah.

Conclusion

As I said at the outset, we do not know with any certainty why God chose the first century A.D. for the arrival of Christ. But looking at the situation from a perspective of human judgment, we can see that the political unification brought about by Rome, the intellectual revolution in religion and philosophy, and the diaspora of the Jews created conditions uniquely suited for the emergence of Christianity, which came “like a word in due season” (Prov. 15:23). Through currents intellectual, political, and religious, the world had been carefully prepared like a fertile garden waiting for the divine sower to drop his seed.



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