GRECO-ROMAN CONCEPTS OF DEITY

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1. Introduction

Paul always wrote with a purpose in mind, a purpose built upon his understanding of the people to whom his correspondence was addressed. For example, the Corinthian correspondence displays detailed knowledge about the Corinthian church such that Paul directly criticized how a specific person was behaving (e.g. 1 Cor 5; cf. Phil. 4:2). Paul also utilized his knowledge of the places to which he wrote, including religious details (e.g. temple prostitution in 1 Cor 6:12–20). When Paul wrote to the pagan world, he assumed a common set of facts, including cultural and religious norms. At the same time, he wrote from his own Jewish ideas as well. In each piece of correspondence, Paul centered his thought on God, yet he explained how God should affect his readers. Paul assumed his readers would have a familiarity with the God of Israel, yet he did not hesitate to clarify and correct misperceptions based upon the culture of the day. It is due to this dual usage that the theological landscape of Paul’s time needs to be understood in order to clarify his writing, writing that assumes this level of knowledge. The purpose of this article is to look at the Greco-Roman concepts of deity, or the meaning of θεός, of the first century in order to ascertain what Paul’s readers would have understood when he wrote about God.

The Roman people of the first century defined themselves and their world through the gods and goddesses they worshipped. While sharing between the Greek and Roman cultures occurred, especially with respect to the nature and function of the gods, first-century Rome held a unique blend of Greek and Roman thought such that only the term “Greco-Roman” could encapsulate the true nature of the culture. Stewart Perowne describes this mixture as the older impersonal Roman gods being adapted to fit their more human seeming and yet more divine Greek counter parts, such as Juno taking on the traits of
This article will describe the Greco-Roman concept of what is meant by “god,” or θεός. In order to set boundaries for the term, this chapter will describe a statue to give a pictorial rendering from Rome about the associated cult while also reflecting the theology of the people. This chapter will then turn to look at how the various myths of Rome shape what the people believed about the nature of the gods, the issue of worship, the idea of triads, and the questions surrounding salvation (what is it and when is it). These topics were chosen due to their influence on the world view of a typical person from Rome and their intersection with Christianity. After looking at these areas, the issue of the Imperial Cult will conclude the discussion. All of these sections will be limited to descriptions based upon occurrences or items from the first century or earlier in order to avoid anachronistic findings. These discussions will paint a picture of what the Greco-Roman concept of deity was in first-century Rome.

2. The Greatest God: Jupiter

Upon Capitoline Hill was the temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus (Jupiter best and greatest). This hill lies in the heart of Rome, surrounded by the Circus Maximus, the giant statue of Nero, and later the Flavian amphitheater (more commonly called the Coliseum). This area constituted the public face of Rome, both to her enemies and to her citizens. The main temple held the altars to Jupiter and his two consorts, Juno and Minerva. A statue of Jupiter sat within the main hall of the temple, dominating the place of worship. This statue looked much like the statue of Zeus at Olympia, with the great god seated on his throne. In his right hand he held a thunderbolt, ready to strike down any opposition. He wore a purple toga with designs of gold, signifying his royal or imperial status as ruler of the gods. He also wore a tunic covered in palm branches, indicating victories. Around his head he wore a wreath, which led to the title of Jupiter Victoris and the later association of the wreath with victory in various games or in war. During various festivals,

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