

Christianity and Hellenism

Horace's celebrated remark, 'Grecia capta ferum victorem cepit' ('Greece, once captured, took her barbarous captor captive'), was made in relation to the influence of Greek culture (especially poetry) on the civilization of Rome. Rome had come to dominate Greece militarily in the second century BC and had absorbed the country into its own political sphere of influence, making it a Roman province. But culturally Greece's influence on Rome was vast, especially in the fields of philosophy and literature. Hence Horace's famous dictum. But a surely weightier historical irony occurred in the centuries after Horace (65-8 BC) when, in the shape of Christianity, a small Jewish sect infiltrated the Greco-Roman world and eventually came to dominate it. This is acknowledged even by those, like Gibbon (who saw the Christian conquest of the Roman Empire as 'the triumph of barbarism and religion') and Nietzsche ('Christianity robbed us of the harvest of the ancient world' [*The Anti-Christ*]), who, in different measures, abhorred this triumph as one of the great disasters to befall humanity.

At the time of the origins of Christianity, the Greco-Roman world was, culturally, Hellenistic. Earlier, in the fourth century BC, the sweeping conquests of Alexander the Great had overwhelmed the Jewish heartland of Palestine, as well as engulfing such significant centres of the Jewish diaspora as Egypt (the still extant Egyptian city of Alexandria is evidence of Alexander's superb megalomania). The sustained policy of fostering a Hellenistic style of life among the conquered peoples who found themselves in the new empires to emerge in the immediate aftermath of Alexander's death, was hugely successful, even in the case of Judaism. Indeed, the Septuagint, or Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures made in Egypt in the third and second centuries BC, could serve as an inestimably significant example of how irresistibly attractive the new international arrangements proved to be. Yet the attempt to foist Hellenistic values on

Jews did eventually meet with some serious resistance, as is demonstrated by the Maccabean wars of the second century BC, when traditional elements within Judaism challenged the ascendancy of foreign ways, perceived as anti-religious from a Jewish perspective, and sought to defend their ancestral faith from the threat of extinction.

The Maccabean struggle succeeded in establishing a short-lived Jewish state that was finally destroyed by the Roman general Pompey in 63 BC. But in the following century, another Jewish movement, this time with no military dimension, set out, using the weapons of the conquerors, especially their language (the New Testament was written in Greek) and their more visible means of communication, in the shape of their roads, and perpetrated what might be described as a belated, but long-lasting, act of revenge on the mighty conquerors of former times.

If nothing else, the rise of Christianity does indeed seem to support the idea that the pen is mightier than the sword, or, in more traditionally religious language, that the spirit is more durable, and perhaps also more cunning, than even any political power.