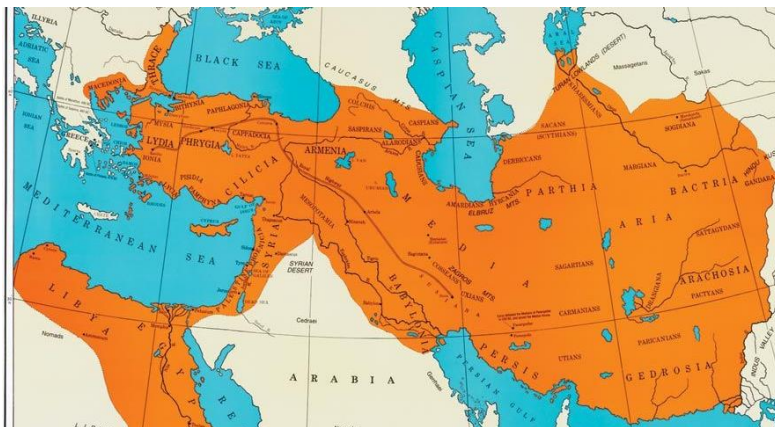


More of the Other Peoples of the Bible

Israel was not the only nation in the Bible. Here's a look at other peoples of the Bible focusing on one particular and typical interaction indicative of their culture.

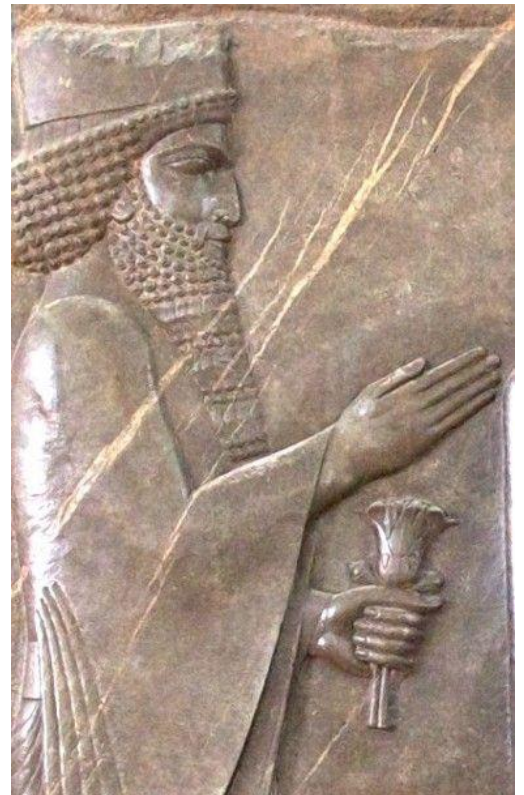
Persians

The Persians are one of the two cultures that span the gap between the Old and New Testament. With a knack for organization, they controlled the largest empire yet known. Unlike the Assyrians and Babylonians, the Persians were more self-restrained, almost humane(!) in the conduct of their affairs.



The Persians were an Indo-European people who emerged in cooperation and alliance with the Medes. The Medes controlled much of modern Iran, on the eastern border of the neo-Babylonian empire, while the Persians controlled land along the northwest shore of the Persian Gulf. Allied in their drive to topple Babylon, the two peoples formed a close and interrelated alliance, with ruling power moving from the Medes to the Persians under Cyrus the Great.

The Persian Empire's weakness, besides having an occasional weak ruler, was their extensive empire. Though they had a superior organizational system, it was still hampered by transportation and communication delays. A faraway benevolent King was no match for a close-at-hand hateful governor! It also was hampered by overreach. Persians receive favorable treatment in the Bible. Flush with wealth from trade routes it controlled and rich economies of Asia Minor, within 70 years of its founding, the Persians attempted the conquest of Greece. With an army of one million men Xerxes (featured in Esther) crossed the Hellespont. Herodotus tells us they drank dry the rivers they camped near. Hardly any returned alive. Greeks hated the Persians. The Persians were monotheistic, A rarity in the ancient world, the Persians were monotheistic (with a twist). Their religion was Zoroastrianism, a cosmic battle between good and evil. Ahura Mazda was the supreme being, Ahriman, the embodiment of the forces of evil. Both the Persians and Zoroastrianism survive to our day. Iranians call themselves Persians. Adherents of Zoroastrianism are found in northern Iraq and Iran and, of course, in America. The conquest of Alexander the Great, on the pretext of avenging Xerxes' burning of Athens, brought an end to the Persian Empire in 330 B.C. after a rule of approximately two hundred years.



If It Pleases the King

Read Nehemiah 1.1-4

What is the problem at Jerusalem?

Read Nehemiah 2.1-3

What is Nehemiah's position in the royal court?

Why is serving an autocrat a tenuous position?

Read Nehemiah 2.4-10

Nehemiah shows remarkable insight into the workings of the Persian government. What, perhaps, was his real position in the royal court?

How does Nehemiah's favored position show in the king's questions of him?

How does the frailty of the Persian government show in Nehemiah's request for letters of transit?

How does the king show he realizes his power may not extend to the further territories of his kingdom?

Who were the local Persian authorities making trouble for Jerusalem?

Read Nehemiah 2.11-16

How bad is the situation in Jerusalem, judging from these verses? Give your evidence as you present your case.

Read Nehemiah 2.17-20

Why did the Jews have the courage to start rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem?

What is the worst charge you can bring against anyone in an autocratic empire?

Isn't this ridiculous, that puny, ruined Jerusalem rebuilding a wall would be an act of rebellion?

What if I don't like the President (or the Senate, or the House of Representatives, or the Governor, or...?

Things I Will Remember About the Persians



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Greeks

Greeks are everywhere in the New Testament. Timothy's father is a Greek. The charge against Jesus which was attached to the cross was in Aramaic, Latin and Greek. Who are the Greeks in the Bible? And why is the story of a Savior born to the Jews written in Greek?



Classical Greece

The Greece we know is Classical Greece, the home of Socrates and Plato, Aristotle, Euripides, Pericles and Leonidas, the home of democracy. Classical Greece was also a hornet's nest of warring and jealous city states, united only when and invading Persia threatened their freedom. A generation of internecine warfare (Peloponnesian Wars) left Greece exhausted, Athens in shambles and Sparta in control.

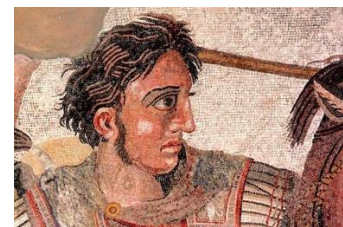
Alexander the Great

After his father, Phillip, had united and controlled the quarrelling cities of Macedonia, he set his sights on Greece. Alexander became king after Phillip's assassination on 336 B.C. In thirteen years he would conquer the world.

While a strategist, Alexander's aggressive initiative was even more important against a frail Persian Empire where delay was state policy. When he faced the legendary knot at Gordium and was told whoever could untie the knot would rule the world, he took out his sword and cut it in two. Alexander is pictured in Daniel as a goat almost flying across the face of the earth.

With Alexander came Greeks carrying gifts—Greek culture and Greek colonies. Alexander was generous to a fault in incorporating foreign troops into his army and government.

At his death his empire divided into three kingdoms, Macedonia, Seleucid Asia and Ptolemaic Egypt. So pervasive was Greek culture in the New Testament, that anyone who was not Jewish was "Greek." Greek was the official language of the early Roman Empire.



Koine

The Greek of the New Testament is not Classical Greek. It is a simpler, more aural form of Greek which we call “koine”—common.

The vocabulary is smaller, the sentence structure simpler. Here’s some of the Watchman’s lines from the opening of Aeschylus’ Agamemnon.

Ah well, may the master of the house come home and may I clasp his welcome hand in mine! For the rest I stay silent: a great ox stands upon my tongue—yet the house itself, could it but speak, might tell a plain enough tale; since, for my part, by my own choice I have words for those who know and to those who do not know, I’ve lost my memory.



Sinaiticus Codex of John’s Gospel

Compare that with opening verses of Mark’s Gospel.

And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.

Paul in Athens

Read Acts 17.16-23

What must have seemed ironic to the casual tourist in an Athens known for its wisdom and the power of human logic?

Review the two schools of philosophical thought in Athens? What were they missing?

Did you catch Luke’s slam on Athens?

Read Acts 17.24-28

A good rule of teaching (and public speaking) is that start with where the audience is and take them to where you want them to be. How does Paul masterfully follow that dictum?

Would the Athenians agree with him?

What is Paul already implicitly attacking?

Read Acts 17.29-34

Why is it illogical for people to worship statues made of stone or precious metals?

Why should we repent?

Why would the Greeks reject Paul’s message?

“Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.”

1 Corinthians 1.22-24

How does the response Paul received at the Areopagus illustrate this?

How much do I argue religion and how much do I confess Christ?

Things I Will Remember About the Greeks



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Samaritans

Of all the peoples we have studied, the Samaritans are the strangest. They never ruled anything. They had no original national origins. They had no home-grown religion. Yet they are the ones who held the choicest land in Palestine.



After the Assyrians destroyed the nation of Israel and its capital, Samaria, they wanted the land to be productive of tribute and taxes, so they repopulated it with exiles from other parts of their empire. Suffering from lion attacks, 2 Kings 17 relates how the king sent an exiled Israelite priest back to teach the Samaritans how to worship the LORD. They, however, also continued to worship the gods of their homelands, Babylon, Avvah and Hamath, a practice, the writer of 2 Kings tells us, continued.



Because of their religious instruction from a renegade and exiled priest of Israel, the Samaritans only accepted the Pentateuch (the first five books of Moses) as their Bible. In this way they were very much like the Sadducees. They set up an alternate universe of temple worship in Samaria, on Mount Gerizim. As such, by the time of Jesus they claimed to be true worshippers. For this, the Jews hated them.

So thorough was the hatred of Jews towards Samaritans, Galileans would avoid Samaria as they made their way south to Jerusalem. They would either cross over two mountain ranges to follow the coastal road (Emmaus) or they would cross the Jordan River, journey down Perea, and then cross again (at Jericho) as they entered Judea.

When Jesus goes through Samaria, it is indicative of his haste.

The Samaritan Pentateuch (a translation of the Hebrew Books of Moses) is an important witness to the text of the Old Testament. A small group (a few hundred) of Samaritans still exist around ancient Samaria. None are particularly altruistic.

Neither on This Mountain nor in Jerusalem

Read John 4.4-9

List the indications that you see tensions between Jewish and Samaritan culture in these verses.

Read John 4.10-15

Did you catch the Samaritan claim to the family of God?

Jesus, like Paul in Athens, starts where the woman is at and takes her to where he wants her to be. Identify those two places.

What is the woman's problem at this point that stymies Jesus' first attempt?

Read John 4.16-19

How is the woman's marital status typical in the eyes of a Jew?

Why does Jesus "embarrass" her like this?

Read John 4.20-24

The devil is a theologian with no perspective. How does the woman try to evade Jesus' authority?

Again, did you catch the Samaritan claim?

Why won't it matter whether people worship in the Temple in Jerusalem? God had commanded his people to offer sacrifices and prayer there!

What does "God is spirit" do to the concept of gods who are localized in either jurisdiction or geography?

Read John 4.25-26

The woman's last attempt to change the subject brings her right to the door of heaven. Explain.

Read John 4.27-30, 39-42

The oppressed oppress. What added indignity does this woman suffer from disciples and townspeople?

Evaluate her confession of Christ.

How does Jesus show he is not prejudiced according to race or gender?

But they don't use the new hymnal!

Things I Will Remember About the Samaritans



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Romans

The ungodly villains of the Bible (in ascending order) are Egypt, Babylon, and Rome! Yet the Romans were the most successful of all the other peoples of the Bible. Their rule was the widest, their empire lasted the longest (depending on how you reckon) and their impact was the greatest.



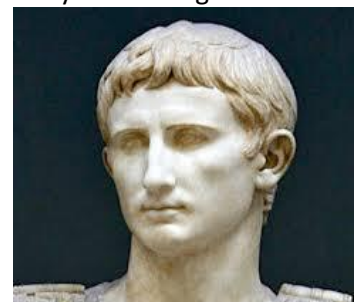
Starting in the malarial swamps of the Tiber River in the 8th century B.C., the Romans spent centuries conquering the peoples of the Italian peninsula. From there a representative and democratic government formed as Roman influence spread south and east. By 146 B.C. Rome had defeated arch-rival Carthage in Africa and humbled Corinth in Greece. In 63 B.C. Rome had added Jerusalem to its empire, invited in by warring factions. With the coming of an empire, democracy fell by the wayside. Keeping institutions of the Republic, Emperors ruled with authority unchallenged.

The Romans did not claim to be original. They recognized the Greeks were better thinkers and artists than they. Using Greek science they were great engineers, as their system of roads and aqueducts attest to. And their military genius was unparalleled. You don't hold an empire for a thousand years without being able to beat back all challengers.

*These are your arts,
To bring peace, to impose the rule of law
To spare the downtrodden and cast down the haughty.*

The Romans were to bring justice to mankind. This was their real religion and their claim to fame.

The Romans worshipped the familiar Greek gods in Roman forms (and persecuted Christianity). For this Rome is pictured as Babylon, the great whore in Revelation. The empire converted to Christianity in 325 A.D. The bishop in Rome became the leader of the western Church and a de facto political leader of the west with the fall of Rome in 476 A.D. The emperors in Constantinople took a strong hand in governing the eastern church.



Jesus Before Pilate

Read John 18.29-38

How does Pilate show the Roman pride in administering justice?

Pilate gets the charge against Jesus—a king of the Jews causing trouble for Rome. What did he discover regarding that charge?

How does the atheism of Pilate (common to the Roman elite) show through?

Read John 18.39-40

Why does Pilate offer a holiday release for Jesus and give the crowd a chance to approve it?

How did it blow up in his face?

Read John 19.1-6

What is Pilate's next plan to release an innocent Jesus?

What reasons might the soldiers have to be especially brutal to Jesus?

How does this plan blow up in Pilate's face?

Read John 19.7-12a

Could the Jews take Jesus and crucify him? What is Pilate really threatening to do with the case?

What brings the trial to a screeching halt?

How does Pilate show his superstition?

Who is really in the drivers' seat at this point in the trial? Prove it.

Read John 19.12b-16

Why did Pilate subvert Roman justice?

Why does Pilate rub salt into the wounds by reminding the Jews he is going to crucify their king?

Note: While Rome was in control of Jerusalem, the Jews claimed to be independent. They had asked the Romans in. They were allies, not subjects to Rome. Through the ruling family of Herod, Rome maintained this political fiction—it was cheaper than paying legions to occupy the country. But everyone knew it wasn't true. The chief priests show their lust to put Jesus to death by claiming Caesar is their king.

How does the purpose of the American judicial system line up with God's will?

Things I Will Remember About the Romans

