

The Hellenistic World

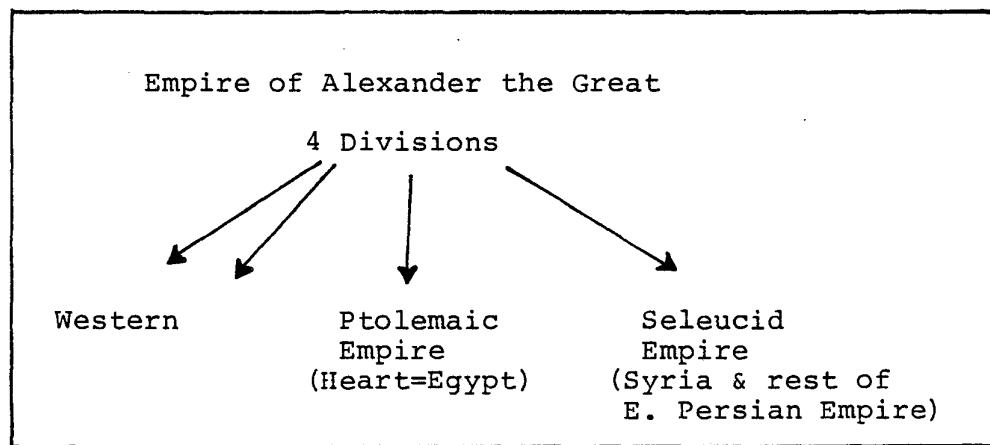
I. Political Background

A. Alexander the Great

The speed and thoroughness of his conquest of the Persian Empire was unprecedented. (No wonder Daniel pictures Alexander as a leopard.)

B. Division of the Empire after his death (323 B.C.)

Eventually, the Empire was organized into four divisions (as prophesied by Daniel).



II. Cultural Background

A. Nature of Hellenistic Culture

1. A fusion of pure Greek culture (Hellenic) with oriental (near eastern) elements.
2. Predominantly (90%) Hellenic culture.

B. Result of this cultural fusion was:

1. Creation of the first truly international culture. Throughout the Near East upper class and middle class residents of cities shared a common culture.
 - a. Common Language--Greek (koine)
 - b. Common religion--Greek gods, especially Zeus (sky god) and/or Apollo (sun god)
 - c. Common literary heritage--Greek Classics of drama, poetry and philosophy.

- d. Common political institutions--those of Greek "polis."
 - e. Common architectural style--especially Corinthian style.
 - f. Common social customs--Greek manner of dress, hairstyle, dietary habits.
2. Establishment of legal and social equality between Conqueror and Conquered (upper and middle classes).
- a. Unlike previous empires which admitted no foreigners to the privileged class (Assyrian) or which limited those admitted to a few naturalized foreigners (Babylonian) or those with unusual talents or abilities (Persian), the Hellenistic Kingdoms admitted all upper class and middle class residents to the privileged class.
 - b. One might have expected the Greeks to be the last to do this since:
 - 1. Greeks considered themselves superior to all other peoples (whom they called barbarians).
 - 2. Greeks during their "Golden Age" had severely limited the granting of citizenship to foreigners who were Greek (not barbarians).
 - c. This dramatic reversal of previous behavior is explained by necessity.
 - 1. Too few ethnic Greeks to control and run the cities of the Near East.
 - 2. Too few Greek women, hence intermarriage with upper and middle class native women.
 - 3. Thus, full equality had to be extended to upper and middle class natives.
 - d. "Price-tag" for full equality was the adoption of Greek culture by the upper and middle class natives. (Inevitable that some oriental elements would be retained; result:
 - a predominantly Hellenic--but not an exclusively Hellenic--culture.)

III. Importance

A. General

The unity created through the existence of a widespread international culture resulted in:

1. Many scientific advances
2. The development of universal philosophies (Stoicism and Epicureanism) and universal religions (mystery religions)
3. The tool which Rome later used as a "cement" to bind together the many diverse peoples of her Empire.

B. Biblical

Assisted the widespread dispersion of Jews throughout the Eastern Mediterranean. This helped pave the way for the spread of the Gospel in the 1st century A.D. since:

1. Greek-speaking Jews eventually required a Greek translation of the Old Testament which was read in the synagogue.
2. Gentiles attracted to Judaism learned Old Testament promises of the Messiah since scriptures were read and expounded from a Greek text in the synagogue (Paul's first Gentile converts were frequently attendees of the synagogue).