

THE WORLD INTO WHICH CHRIST WAS BORN

By REV. J. A. O'FLYNN, L.S.S.

The Gospels: Their Message and Credibility—I.

The main purpose of this series of booklets is to examine two points of particular interest which arise from the study of the four canonical Gospels, or, as they are usually called, the Gospels according to SS. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. What is the specific story or message concerning Christ and His teaching which the Gospels have left us? Are we to accept that story as a trustworthy account of actual events of history, or, on the contrary, to reject it as a fiction and a fraud? It is with these two questions that we shall be chiefly concerned in these booklets.

The importance of determining the correct answer to these questions can scarcely be exaggerated. If, as the Gospels tell us, Christ is the divine Saviour of mankind, no one may adopt an attitude of indifference or neutrality to Him or to His teaching. No event of history is even remotely comparable in significance with the coming of Christ, and upon the attitude which men adopt towards Him depend issues which can be measured only in terms of eternity. For person's who are groping for the light, or for Catholics who are liable to be brought into contact with such people, a general knowledge of the evidence which goes to show that the Gospels are reliable records, is of very considerable importance. Such knowledge will enable Catholics to show the reasonableness of their own position. As St. Peter has it, they will be "always ready to give an answer to everyone who demands an account of the hope which is in them." (I Peter. c. 3. v. 15.) If unbelievers, who are seriously engaged in the search for the truth, can be brought to see the reasonableness of the claim that, on purely scientific, literary and historical evidence, apart from other considerations, the Gospels have a solid title to be regarded as trustworthy documents, they will have made a notable advance in the solution of their difficulties.

In the series of booklets here introduced the discussion of the various relevant topics will be necessarily brief. It is hoped, however, that it will be adequate for the immediate purpose of showing that the case for the truth of the Gospels is a strong one; that it is based on tangible scientific evidence of the kind which satisfies scholars in the examination of other ancient documents; that, in fact, the rejection of the Gospels cannot be justified by any allegation of insufficiency, either in the quantity or quality of the evidence, but is due to philosophical prejudice which, from the outset, refuses to admit the possibility of the supernatural and, consequently, rejects as unhistorical the Gospel account of miracles and of the Incarnation of the Son of God.

In order to avoid confusion, it should be noted carefully that we are not here concerned with the general doctrine of biblical Inspiration, nor with its application to the Gospels. We consider the Gospels as documents which have come down to us from antiquity, liable to be subjected to the same rigorous scientific examination as other ancient documents, e.g., The Annals of Tacitus, The Histories of Thucydides, which claim to deal with historical facts rather than with legend, myth or poetic fancy. We claim, however, that the same scientific standards, which are adopted to distinguish fact from legend and myth in other ancient documents, should be applied with equal impartiality in the case of the Gospels. The issue in which we are principally interested, viz., the truth or falsehood of the Gospels, is one which can be discussed quite independently of any theological doctrine concerning the sacred character of these books. All that is needed is an unprejudiced attitude, and a willingness to accept, in the case of the Gospels, evidence which would be considered entirely satisfactory in the case of other historical documents. While no special favour is sought for the Gospels, it must be insisted that they should not be subjected to purely *a priori* criticism of a kind which finds no place in the examination of other ancient documents which purport to give a narrative of fact.

Most readers will be familiar with the broad outlines of the Gospel story, and will also have some acquaintance with the actual text of the Gospels themselves. Considered as literature they come under the heading of biography. Although they may not conform precisely to the definition of biography as we use that term in modern times, they are definitely biographical in character. They tell much of the Story of the life and teaching of the figure known to history as Christ or Jesus of Nazareth. They do not give a complete, nor a strictly chronological account, but they do give an outline of what may be regarded as the items of greatest significance from that life and history.

This narrative concerning Christ is set against the background of life in Palestine at a time when that country had come under the dominion of Rome. Our knowledge of the general conditions of life, as well as the great figures and events of that age, is extensive, and is constantly being added to as a result of the thorough-going studies of modern scholars. Assuming for the moment the historicity of the Gospels, we can place all the events which they record within the limits of the period 10 A.D. Between these two extremes there is ample room: for some differences of opinion about the exact dates to be assigned for the birth and the death of Christ. The Gospels, therefore, have as historical setting that period of Roman history when Augustus and Tiberius ruled. Both Emperors are mentioned in the Gospels. (Luke c.2. v.1; c.3. v.1.) The same is true of members of the Herodian dynasty of Palestine, rulers whose history is well known to us from the writings of Josephus. The high priests, Annas and Caiaphas, and the parties of the Sadducees and Pharisees who figure so prominently in the Gospel account of the opposition to Our Lord, are also well known to us from contemporary records. In fact, there is scarcely a page of the Gospels which does not reflect in some way the political conditions, or the prevalent social, ethical and religious ideas within the Roman Empire, and more particularly within Palestine and among the Jewish people, at the period to which the Gospel narrative belongs. Time and again, we find that a knowledge of the historical background enables us to understand more fully portions of the narrative, or passages from the teaching of Our Lord, the full implications of which would otherwise escape us, e.g., the question put to Our Lord: "Is it lawful to pay tribute to Caesar?", the teaching of Christ on marriage and divorce, the account of the trial and crucifixion of Our Lord. These are but a few of the very many instances which might be cited to show how closely the Gospels bring us into contact with the laws, customs and beliefs of the world in which their story has its setting. There can be no doubt, therefore, of the value of a knowledge of the historical background for a thorough understanding of the Gospels. It may be added that belief in the reliability of the Gospels receives no slight confirmation from the accuracy with which they reflect contemporary conditions, as these are known to us from independent historical research.

Some writers, of course, under the influence of the theory of progressive evolution in religious ideas and practices, have ought to show that Christianity is nothing more than an easy natural development from the conditions prevailing at the beginning of the Christian era. This development, they say, would have been accelerated somewhat by the high ethical teaching and personal qualities of Christ, Who is looked upon merely as a man, a distinguished prophet or teacher of a high code of morality, but not the Messiah or the Son of God. According to these writers, the picture of Christ and His teaching which the Gospels give us must be regarded as the result of a period of pious speculation and hero-worship whereby Jesus of Nazareth was transformed (in the minds of his followers) from a mere man into the promised Messiah and eventually into a divine person incarnate. According to this theory, the Gospels are not so much a record of fact as a reflection of popular belief in the period 50-100 A.D.

In order to put the problem in proper perspective, and provide a suitable background for our discussion of the Message and Credibility of the Gospels, the first booklets of this series will be devoted mainly to an outline of conditions in the political, social and religious spheres within the Roman Empire, and particularly in Palestine and among the Jews at the the beginning of the Christian era. This sketch of *The World into which Christ was born* will pay special attention to those elements which have, or might be considered to have, a particular bearing on the origin of Christianity, or are of interest for the question of the credibility of the Gospels.

At the outset, it may be necessary to rid our minds of some misconceptions. The period to which the story of the Gospels belongs is so far removed from our own age, that we may be disposed to regard it as culturally and intellectually backward as well as historically remote. But the detailed knowledge now available of the Augustan age, and of the men and women who lived in it, tends to show that the Roman Empire bears striking resemblances to some empires of our own day. In fact, it is often helpful to visualize modern imperial methods when we wish to bring home more vividly the conditions of life within the empire of the Caesars. Imperial Rome was distinguished by a unified political administration and an ease of communication which was really remarkable for those days; the educated classes took a deep interest in philosophical speculation; writing flourished; humanitarianism, of a kind, was not unknown; between the upper and lower classes there was a veritable chasm in social conditions. All of these things have a familiar, even modern, ring, and go to show that conditions in imperial Rome are not too remote, nor too primitive, to have any interest for men of the twentieth century.

Political Conditions.—At the period in which we are interested the Roman Empire extended from France to Egypt, and from Spain to the borders of Persia. That great empire had been formed over a long period of time, mainly by wars of conquest. And now, at the beginning of the Christian era, after a long succession of civil wars which had ravaged Italy itself, this vast territory was settling down to enjoy, under the Emperor Augustus, the blessings of a period of calm, in which constructive ideas of order, justice and peace were very definitely to the fore. It was the most brilliant period of Roman history up to that time, an age of really outstanding achievement. Clear proof that the greatness of the political achievement of Augustus and the benefits his rule conferred on the subject territories were recognised and appreciated, is found in that emperor-worship which began during his lifetime and led ultimately to his apotheosis.

The administration of the imperial territories was unified under the supreme power of the Emperor. The personal financial independence of Augustus, combined with the immense power concentrated in his hands, made it possible for him to legislate for the benefit of the empire as a whole. No longer were the subject territories considered merely as convenient places for pillage by Roman officials, or merely as granaries to meet the needs of Rome and Italy. In all subject territories, whether imperial or senatorial provinces, as well as in districts where allied or subject kings were left in control, the power of the Emperor was supreme. Palestine, at the time of Christ, was ruled partially as a protectorate with members of the Herodian family in immediate control, partially as a district of the province of Syria with a Governor to represent the Emperor. The city of Rome was the chief centre of political, administrative and flourishing commercial life. Closely allied with this unity of administration was the excellent system of communication both, by road and by sea. To illustrate the point, there is the story of the merchant from Phrygia in Asia Minor who made no less than 70 business journeys to Rome. This relative ease of communication helps us to understand how St. Paul, later on, was able to cover so much ground on his missionary journeys in a comparatively short space of time.

It is generally agreed that the administrative unity and ease of communication in the Roman Empire had a certain importance by way of preparation for Christianity. The conquests of Alexander, and the Hellenistic movement which he had inaugurated, had broken down the local patriotism and narrow nationalism of an earlier age. The idea of a common culture, a unified civilization with the Greek tongue spoken everywhere as a *lingua franca*, had been largely translated into reality over the districts conquered by Alexander and ruled by his successors. While this idea of a universal culture is rightly regarded as something distinctively Greek, unified political administration can be regarded as a Roman contribution. Both elements had their importance in the preparation of the world for Christianity. The notion that humanity consisted of isolated groups, with little in common and much to keep them separated and at enmity, had begun to yield to a wider outlook wherein all men were capable of being brought under a single culture and a single government. In this way the world was being prepared for the doctrine of the universal brotherhood of men, a contribution which is, of course, distinctively Christian.

Social and Ethical Conditions.—While the value of the Roman contribution, through its administrative system, to the progress of humanity generally, and also by way of preparation for Christianity, is recognised universally, a survey of social and ethical conditions gives us a picture of more sombre hues. Historians, as a rule, give a very dismal account of the prevailing standards in social and moral matters. There were, undoubtedly, abuses of the gravest character, some of them widespread, others confined mostly to the upper classes and to the wealthy. But there is evidence also that many of the natural virtues were appreciated and practised by that section of the community which rarely achieves notoriety or fame in any age. Both sides of the question must be kept in mind if we are to form a balanced picture of the situation as a whole.

In any account of social conditions in the Roman Empire the institution of slavery must hold a prominent place. The population was divided into 'free' and 'slave.' The slave, from the legal point of view, was scarcely a person or human being at all. He was a mere chattel or piece of property, just like the irrational animals owned by his master, and was often treated with much less consideration. The greatest rigour and cruelty were permitted in the treatment of slaves. If a master were murdered, all of his slaves could be put to death. In Rome itself slaves outnumbered the free population. Many slaves were persons of culture and education, unfortunate victims of war or piracy sold to masters who, judged by any decent human standards, were, frequently, their inferiors in everything except the possession of

wealth and power. It is true that, from time to time, voices were raised against the cruelty of this institution, and that some masters treated their slaves with kindness. Slaves were sometimes granted their freedom, and of those set free some attained the highest posts in civil administration. But it is unquestionable that the system was a degrading one, that it had the most deplorable consequences for morality, and that it contributed in some degree to the disintegration of the empire itself.

Among that section of the population which was classed as free, there were many distinctions based on wealth and social rank. The privilege of Roman citizenship was not enjoyed by all the free population. It was a highly prized and jealously guarded right, which was extended outside Rome and Italy only as a special reward or favour to individuals or communities. Not until the year 212 A.D., by a decree of the Emperor Carcalla, was this right extended to all free subjects of the Empire. St. Paul, a native of Tarsus, had the good fortune to possess this privilege. His citizenship saved him more than once from indignities at the hands of Roman officials, and from the fury of the Jews who sought his death by any means at their disposal.

Next to slavery, possibly the most inhuman and debasing element of life under Roman rule was to be found in the so-called games of the amphitheatre. These gladiatorial shows, in which men fought to the death with beasts or with one another, tended, with the passage of time, to become more and more colossal displays of savagery and inhumanity.

The fact that the passion for these spectacles pervaded every class of society, and that they were one of the recognized methods of keeping the populace contented, gives us an insight into the appallingly low ethical standards of those who provided and enjoyed the shows of the amphitheatre. It is a curious irony of history that among the most tangible remains of an age that was, in many ways, one of great achievement, should be those very amphitheatres, e.g., The Colosseum in Rome, where such senseless carnage often lasted for days. Leaky has said that the continuance for centuries, almost without protest, of these games, is one of the most striking facts in moral history.

Slavery and the amphitheatre are dark blots on Roman history and remind us of the depths to which even a cultured people are capable of descending. They do not, however, exhaust the list of vices and defects which can be placed in the scale against the mighty achievements in practically every field of human endeavour, which have made the name of Rome immortal. Rome had a full quota of the faults which are liable to manifest themselves in a state, flushed with conquest, which is passing from the hard period of establishing its power to the peaceful enjoyment of the fruits of victory. The marriage bond was not universally respected nor adequately protected by law. Divorce was easy and resorted to frequently. With this instability of marriage went a host of other evils. The efforts of the Emperor to secure reform by legal enactments of various kinds are an indication of the extent to which abuses in connection with marriage and family life had begun to undermine society. Unwanted children, even those born in wedlock, were often exposed to death. There were frequent instances of other, and even more shameful, crimes. The theatre of the day contributed its quota to the demoralizing influences at work. Secular history thus confirms that account of pagan immorality which St. Paul has left us in his letter to the Romans, c.1. v.32. "God abandoned them to a reprobate mind so as to do what is unbecoming; being filled with all wickedness, malice, greed, badness; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malignity; tale-bearers, slanderers; haters of God, insolent, haughty; pretentious, inventors of vices, disobedience to parents; senseless, perfidious, heartless, merciless;—."

As a contributory cause to this loss of moral sense, we must attach some importance to the widespread lack of belief in any real survival of man after death. Cicero, Horace, Sallust, Catullus and other writers give evidence of fairly widely disseminated scepticism on this point. The inscriptions on the tombs of the dead also add their testimony to the fact that many lived for this life and cared but little for the hereafter, e.g., "I was not, I became, I am not, I care not." "While I lived, I lived well; now my little play is ended, soon shall yours be." "While I lived, I drank as I pleased; you who live, drink." "What I have eaten and drank, that I take with me; what I have left behind, that I have forfeited." Here we are brought into close touch with one of the reasons for the decline in morality; and we also get an insight into the causes of that feeling of hopelessness and aimlessness which some writers consider to be characteristic of the period in question. Historians also draw attention to the depressing sense of sin and guilt, of which the reflecting minds of the period became increasingly conscious. Seneca, one of the most attractive figures from the pagan world of the first century, has the following striking passage in a work written about the year 60 A.D. : "We have all sinned: the

fashion in vice may change, its reign is as powerful as ever : we are wicked, have been wicked and shall continue to be wicked." These are the reflections of an enquiring and philosophic mind, the thoughts of a man whose moral sense had not been completely dulled by contact with a corrupt world. The concise expression used by St. Paul to describe the pagan world—"they were men without hope and without God in the world" (Ephesians c.2. v.12)—sums up their condition.

On the credit side, there is considerable evidence of practical civic pride and patriotic devotion to the welfare of city or state. We know also that marital and family affection and loyalty still influenced many lives, and that other natural virtues were esteemed and put into practice. In this connection, it has been noted that the Stoic philosophy, with its insistence on the need for the practice of the virtues and the duty of self-control, had exercised a genuinely beneficial influence, even though Stoicism was, in the last analysis, a philosophy of despair which approved of suicide. The protests made from time to time against the social and moral evils which were undermining society and destroying what was best in the Roman Character, and the various attempts to secure reform, also deserve mention. They show that, despite widespread corruption, there were still some who were neither completely insensitive to moral values, nor blind to the fact that the prestige and continued welfare of Rome were gravely imperilled by the serious disorders in social and individual life.

The last century of the pre-Christian era was one of flourishing activity, a period in which the Roman genius reached a high level of achievement in law, administration, literature, architecture and engineering. It is generally recognized that, in these spheres, Rome made contributions of permanent value which have placed the whole civilized world in its debt. The value of the literary and cultural legacy bequeathed to the world by Roman writers of that century is too well known to need extensive treatment here. Virgil and Horace, chief ornaments of the Augustan age of literature, are still, as Mackail notes, "the schoolbooks and the companions of the whole world; forming the mind of youth, and yielding more and more of their secret to prolonged study and inveterate acquaintance." The writings of Virgil, "the noblest poet of the Roman tongue," give striking expressions to the hopes aroused by the establishment of peace and order. Virgil deserves, in a special way, the title "poet of Imperial Rome," because, more than any other writer of the age, he manifests a sense of the high dignity of the Roman state and of the role which Rome should play in the world. It was for Rome "to rule the nations," "to establish the settled ways of peace, to deal gently with subject peoples, to vanquish the proud." The rule of Augustus marked the return of the golden age, and the beginning of an era of universal peace under the dominion of Rome. A well-known passage from the fourth Eclogue of Virgil, sometimes referred to as the messianic Eclogue, contains a remarkable expression of the poet's hopes, and of his exalted conception of the part which the Roman state was called upon to play in world history.—`Now is come the last age of the song of Cumae; the great line of the centuries begins anew. Now the virgin (Justice) returns, the reign of Saturn returns; now a new generation descends from heaven on high . . . And in thy consulship, Pollio, shall this glorious age begin, and the mighty months begin their march; under thy sway, any lingering traces of our guilt shall become void, and release the earth from its continual dread." (Trans. Fairclough). The optimism of Virgil is a refreshing change from the prevailing cynicism and depression, and sharp contrast to the verdict which, one hundred years later, the historian Tacitus passed upon the Imperial rule—"The wrath of the gods upon the Roman State."

Virgil and Horace stand out from their contemporaries, but they are not the only distinguished authors of an age which produced numerous writers catering in prose and verse for the varied literary tastes of the public. Nor did the cultured and educated classes confine their interest to a merely aesthetic appreciation of literature. From the middle of the second century B.C., philosophy had been enjoying increasing attention. Greece, of course, had been the home of philosophy for centuries, and her thinkers had made a contribution of outstanding merit to philosophical enquiry, showing a capacity for original and profound speculation which the Romans never equalled. The Romans were content, on the whole, to accept their philosophy at second-hand, and in this sphere, more than any other, they remained the disciples and imitators of the conquered Greeks who had become their teachers. With the progressive decline of polytheistic religion, and its manifest inability to give satisfactory answers to vital questions concerning the meaning of life, the regulation of human conduct, the fate of man after death etc., reflecting minds naturally turned to philosophy in search of the light and guidance of which they felt the need. All the well-known schools of philosophy had their advocates and won some measure of support; but it was the Stoic philosophy which had the greatest

influence and the largest following. This is not altogether surprising, because the ideal of conduct propounded by the Stoics was one which appeared to be particularly suited to Roman temperament and tradition. The picture of the true Stoic, practising the virtues and capable of rising superior to external changes of fortune, was bound to make a strong appeal to those who revered the traditional Roman virtues of gravity, dignified restraint in adversity as in prosperity, and piety, due discharge of duties to families, kindred, state and the gods. It is not to be supposed that the general body of the population was deeply interested in the teaching of the different schools of thought. While some attempt was made to reach the common people, it was mainly within the fairly narrow limits of cultured Roman society that persons were to be found with the capacity to take an enlightened interest in philosophical discussion. The majority, apart from those who had lapsed into practical atheism or scepticism, held on to the ancient beliefs, or were won over to newer and more seductive forms of religious belief and worship.

This brief sketch is sufficient to indicate that Roman society at the end of the pre-Christian era presented some remarkable contrasts. High ideals and notable achievement in many spheres were to be found side by side with moral degradation and social disorder. But even taking into account every element of good which historians have been able to detect, and making full allowance for the abiding worth of the Roman contribution to human progress, the general picture is not bright. The prevailing standards in ethical and social matters were law, and neither appeals to ancient tradition nor legislative reforms were able to check the steady moral decline and corruption of society.

Religious Ideals and Practices.—The religious conditions which obtained within the Roman empire at this time might be regarded as the root-cause of the widespread corruption of society. In the absence of a firm conviction of the existence of a Supreme Being who sanctions the moral law, it is vain to hope for the general maintenance of high moral standards. Rome was now in a transition period when the traditional beliefs were going by the board. At an earlier stage, religious duties centred mainly on the worship of the domestic gods and the cult of those deities who were looked upon as the founders or protecting patrons of the city or state. But this narrow concept of the deities, as mere domestic or local patrons and guardians, broke down before the philosophy of the Greeks; and the consequent tendency towards scepticism increased with the ever widening horizons opened up by the conquests of Alexander the Great and of Rome.

In the New Testament period the official attitude of the ruling power in Rome was one of tolerance for all religions of subject peoples, provided that these religions were prepared, in turn, to extend similar toleration to other religions. This official recognition of a whole pantheon of deities, however admirable as a political expedient designed to avoid clashes with subject races, inevitably drew attention to the irrational basis of polytheistic religion, and this accelerated still further the disintegrating process which had set in. Moreover, the stories of the exploits of pagan gods, which had become part of mythology and the stock-in-trade of poets, were frequently of a character not calculated to edify. It is true that Stoicism had done something to introduce a purer and more elevated concept of the deity; but it is hardly surprising that, once the essential weakness of polytheism had been brought to light, men tended to atheism and scepticism rather than to the formation of a more correct idea of a Supreme Being who ruled the whole world. There were some, of course, who still clung to the beliefs and rites of their fathers and were encouraged in that attitude by official attempts to give a new lease of life to the ancient religion of Rome. This loyalty, however, and the respect for ancient tradition which inspired it, proved unequal to the task of maintaining the prestige and influence of the ancient cults against the attacks of philosophy and the attractions of newer forms of worship.

As a result of the general policy of tolerance, many new religions found their way to Rome itself. Most notable of these were the mystery religions of the East, e.g., the mysteries of Isis, Cybele, Orpheus and Eleusis. There is considerable uncertainty about the exact history of these cults and the precise nature of their rites; but it would appear that they began as "fertility rites," which were concerned with the constantly recurring cycle of death and re-birth in nature. At a later stage of their history they held out to those who had been duly initiated, the prospect of some kind of purification and the hope of happiness after death. This probably goes a long way towards explaining the popularity which they achieved—they provided a way of escape from the depression and sense of guilt which appear to have weighed heavily on many minds of the age. The rites of the mystery religions had, moreover, an emotional appeal not found in the traditional forms of worship. But it is to be remembered that the celebration of the mysteries was often merely a cloak for wild orgiastic ceremonies of an utterly immoral kind. The mystery religions were alien to the

Roman character, and their harmful influence was recognised by Augustus, who made a vain attempt to check their growth.

Another factor to note in this rather complicated religious situation is the development of "emperor-worship." The first movements appear to have come from the population of certain of the eastern provinces who had long been accustomed to some form of ruler-worship. In Greece, it had long been the custom to speak of men of distinction, or great public benefactors, as somehow equal to the gods. In Rome itself there was a strong tradition of veneration for ancestors and a tendency to exalt the memory of the great heroes of the past. The benefits conferred on the imperial territories by the rule of Augustus were so unmistakable that it was an easy step to bestow upon him titles such as 'saviour' and 'god,' and to found temples and institute worship in his honour. Allowance must, of course, be made for some element of exaggeration and flattery in all this. But it is clear that, in origin at least, the cult of the emperor, far from being mere adulation, was a sincere manifestation of the feelings of hope and gratitude aroused by the restoration of order and peace. Augustus was quick to see the political advantages that might be expected to accrue to the Empire and to himself from this worship. It would serve as a new bond between the different parts of the Empire; and, when associated with the worship of the goddess Roma, promote the interests of the imperial house. Emperor-worship was at all times largely political in its significance, even though it took on the usual external formalities of religious worship. Many Christians were destined to suffer for their refusal to participate in the usual sacrifices to the divinity of the emperor.

By way of conclusion to this outline it may be appropriate to touch upon the general question of the relation of the Roman Empire to Christianity. Was the empire in any sense a preparation for Christianity? Were conditions in the Roman world such that the Christian economy could have developed naturally from them? What was the attitude of the Roman power to the Christian religion? The thesis that the Roman empire, by its very existence and organization, facilitated the preaching of the Gospel and the growth of the Church is one which few will be disposed to question. Rome had done much to break down national barriers. The system of communications which had been built up within the limits of Roman rule made travel comparatively easy and secure. The widespread knowledge of the Greek tongue was a further advantage to those whose message was for men of every race and nation. In brief, the Roman empire had removed a number of material obstacles to the spread of Christianity; and, moreover, in its political, social and administrative structure, it provided a unique framework for the building up of a supranational Church. It is not surprising that Christian writers have always been attracted by the contention first put forward by Melito of Sardis in the second century, in an apologia directed to the emperor, Marcus Aurelius that it was Divine Providence which had arranged that such a system should have come into existence precisely at the time when the Christian religion was about to be preached.

To what extent was the Roman world mentally prepared for the Christian message? Roman dominion would, no doubt, have suggested to some the notion of a world-wide kingdom, and have strengthened the concept of common bonds between men. Philosophy had shown the weakness of polytheism and of the traditional beliefs, but as an alternative to some form of religious belief and worship, had failed to satisfy men's minds and hearts. Conditions in the ethical sphere served only to show the weakness of men whose only moral guidance comes from tradition and reason. Possibly all this should be regarded as a negative preparation for a religion which would give clear teaching concerning One true God and His relations to men, together with guidance and strength to observe the moral law. Obviously, the Roman world was not one which would take easily to the high moral standards of Christianity. For certain classes, e.g., slaves, the Gospel brought a message of hope, not by proclaiming the immediate abolition of slavery, but by the promise of eternal life, and by teaching that all men, bond and free, are equal as sons of God and brothers of Christ. The Christian doctrine of One God Who lays down and sanctions the moral law would be a light to thinkers who had failed to find in the schools of philosophy a satisfactory answer to any of the great problems of life. The doctrine of the forgiveness of sin was bound to make a wide appeal; and the prospect of eternal happiness would compensate in some measure for the woes of this present life. But the history of the early Church shows that the transition from paganism to Christianity was anything but easy. The fundamental doctrine of spiritual salvation through the death of Christ upon the cross was, as St. Paul tells us, "a folly to the pagans." The moral code of Christianity made very serious demands upon persons accustomed to an almost unbridled reign of vice; and the power

of Rome was, from an early date, directed to the repression of the new religion. Neither as a system of philosophy, nor as a code of high moral teaching, would Christianity have sufficed to convert the world from paganism. In that process the finger of God, manifested in miracles, and the blood of the martyrs, had to play their part.

It is useful to keep this outline of Roman conditions in mind. The full significance of the Message of the Gospels will be all the more evident when contrasted with the confusion of ideas and the low moral standards, which characterized this great empire, great in its own right and heir to all the glory and achievement of the Greeks.

Nihil Obstat :
RECCAREDUS FLEMING,
Censor Theol. Deput,
Imprimi Potest:
✽ IOANNES CAROLUS.
Hiberniae Primas. Dublini, die^o 22 Nov., anno^o 1945.
