

CHAPTER THREE: THE WISDOM OF THE GREEKS

About the time of the book of Judges in the Bible (1400 to 1050 B.C.), the world was undergoing a dramatic change due to the invention of a new revolutionary substance, iron. During this time period there was also a collapse of civilization (1200 B.C.). A number of historians have put the two events together, claiming that the new metal caused this so-called “dark age.”

We should be careful about such a conclusion however; it is all too easy to blame our inventions for our problems instead of realizing it is the way they are used that makes the difference. Today some blame the invention of the atom bomb for psychological stress, while others attack technology as the culprit behind the energy shortage and pollution problems. It is far easier to blame things rather than people (especially ourselves) for our difficulties. Blaming objects of even society is far easier than looking at poor motives or negligence.

The Fall of Troy

About 1250 B.C. the people of Troy (referred to as “Trojans”) went to war with the Greeks, most of whom were from the city of Sparta. Several hundred years after this event, Homer wrote his epic The Iliad which recounted the events, mixing truth and fiction to make a most interesting story. We will probably never know the entire story, except that Troy lost the war.

It was from this war that we get the story of the Trojan horse, where a large wooden horse was made in which fighters hid. The horse was given to the enemy, and after it was received the fighters burst out killing the occupants of the city¹.

Adding a bit of romance to the story, Homer tells us the war was over Helen, the most

beautiful woman in the world, who had been captured by the Trojans. “The face that launched a thousand ships” presumably to save her, not to avoid her) was supposedly an inspiration for the many men that gave their lives for the honor of Greece. C. S. Lewis, in his own fictional account of the war (*Of Other Worlds*), adds a twist to the story--the beautiful Helen turned out to be an old hag!

The Rise of Sparta

With this triumph, the Spartans rose in power and influence. By the ninth century B.C. the leader of Sparta, Lycurgus, formulated plans for an ideal military stateⁱⁱ. Lycurgus had traveled widely, talked with many leaders in other countries, read a great deal, and in the process tried to sift good ideas from bad ones. He then went to work rebuilding the government and lifestyle of Sparta.

While instituting a number of democratic reforms, he also emphasized collective ownership of certain property. Children were considered property of the state rather than parents, beginning military training at age seven. Every area of life became regulated, with a sort of group tyranny becoming the norm. A totalitarian despot can be easy to depose, but a totalitarian peer-directed society is much harder to overcome, as the Soviet Union clearly illustrates today.

According to the accounts of Lycurgus, which are part fact and part legend, he also incorporated a number of other “progressive” reforms. Citizens listened to their statesmen as they ate dinner (much as we listen to our TV news over the evening meal), and unwanted weak children were allowed to die, not unlike what today’s abortion and infanticide advocates recommend.

A philosophy of might makes right prevailed. “Marriage” consisted of men carrying

women away by force, while children grew up with few restrictions. In fact kids were taught to steal and were whipped if caught, not because it was wrong but because they were clumsy enough to be caught. Children grew up to be excellent fighters, partly through the emphasis placed upon athletics (although they also emphasized intellectual pursuits).

Lycurgus wanted Spartans to be tough, not rich, and he was successful in attaining both goals. The city went into a permanent depression, primarily because of devaluing the currency. This old trick of using something worthless as money was repeated in the United States during the 1930's, when we went off the gold standard. Lycurgus used iron for Spartan money, while we use even less valuable paper for ours.

This mistake has been repeated over and over through the centuries, with the same results. A country becomes desperate for more money, so it begins to use cheap materials in its coinage. As the state needs more money, it makes more (we do essentially the same thing through "easy credit").ⁱⁱⁱ The side effect is that the money is then less valuable, resulting in inflation. Both Rome and Germany made the same mistake, and the catastrophic inflation aided the fall of both. Fortunately the Greeks learned from their mistake and later added a promise to not tamper with the currency as part of the oath of office.^{iv}

Why Did Democracy Fail?

About this same time other cities in Greece were trying more democratic forms of government, but almost every time a dictator would arise and take over. The cycle was almost inevitable--a more or less democratic state would be introduced in reaction to monarchy. However the democracy proved to be unstable because people expected more from the system than what it could produce.

As a result, people would call for a new rulership, a dictator who might start out being respected but soon became cruel and suppressive. Enemies were quickly banished and the dictator became the new monarch to be overthrown.^v

This cycle has its parallels today, with the cycle of dictators and coups in many third world countries. Instability becomes the norm as a result, with one dictator (or an equivalent elite) being substituted for another with no real improvement. Newer left wing governments usually prove to be as corrupt and non-democratic as their predecessors, and sometimes even more violent and cruel.

What well-meaning socialists forget is that the basic nature of people is distorted, the result of mankind's fall in the Garden of Eden. Changing a government or economic system does nothing to change this evil nature, and thus sin only takes another form when people are forced to share. Leaders are not immune from the sin nature, and they quickly become as self-serving as the previous regime had been. In the wake of killing and violence of revolution, things rarely change (except for the worse) for the average person.

Athens

To the north and east of Sparta lay the city of Athens, which made the mistake of giving token help in a war against Persia. The leader of Persia, Darius, decided to get even by conquering Greece. What he probably did not realize was that if he was able to conquer "the tail" of Europe (the peninsula of Greece), he would either have to go on to conquer the rest of the continent or retreat--there was no stopping place after Athens.

When Darius attacked Athens, the outnumbered Athenians won against huge odds because they used an unexpected strategy, although one can also credit higher motivation as well-

-it is easier to defend one's own country than attack another country. After the war was over, the Spartans belatedly showed up, praised the people of Athens, and went home.^{vi} This was a bit like the role of the United States in World War I; the British have never forgiven us for waiting so long before entering into the conflict.

Darius was succeeded by his son, whose name was Xerxes. He very well may have been the king who saved the Hebrews, as we read in the book of Esther. Xerxes attempted to attack Athens using a bridge made of boats, but a storm came up and destroyed his unique approach to moving troops. In anger he ordered that the Hellespont receive 300 lashes and be branded,^{vii} which failed to make much of an impact upon the water! A second try was more successful, Sparta was crushed and Athens abandoned as people fled to the island of Salamis. When Xerxes attacked the island, the Greeks forced the retreat of Xerxes. He apparently went home to Persia and married Esther.

The "Golden Age" of Greece

Soon afterward, Greece went on to have a period of unprecedented achievement, which lasted about 50 years (480 to 431 B.C.). Under the leadership of Pericles, Athens began an "urban renewal" plan, building in the rubble of the Persian wars.

The freedom and political involvement in Athens promoted initiative, although it was far from perfect. In fact one could only ask why such an advancement toward real democracy lasted only a short time. Lord Acton, the famous Britain of the last century, concluded that "The short triumph of Athenian liberty and its quick decline, belongs to an age which possessed no fixed standards or right and wrong." Without a firm basis for law and morality, society quickly declines--a warning our own society should heed.

The Great Scholars of Greece

During this time, a number of famous scholars inhabited the city of Athens, scholars whose influence has been powerful throughout the history of the West. Seven of the greatest artists and philosophers lived in the city during this era.

Herodotus^{viii}, for example, wrote about other cultures and customs, noting that everyone tends to be partial to their own ways, a tendency we now call “ethnocentrism.” The grandfather of modern anthropology, he was quite willing for cultures to be different. Much of our information about Athens comes from Herodotus, a source thought to be relatively unbiased.

Socrates, the great philosopher, taught and debated other philosophers in public at this time. While he never wrote a book, his pupil Plato wrote about Socrates’ ideas and added many of his own. Plato wrote The Republic, a blueprint for utopia, and was also the mentor of Aristotle, another famous Greek philosopher.

Greek philosophy

Plato and Aristotle took opposite views regarding the nature of reality and in the asked many brilliant questions, which people still ponder. Plato emphasized how things are aloke (the universals), while Aristotle emphasized how things are different (the particulars). This constitutes a basic question philosophy still struggles with, the paradox of the one and the many.

Plato emphasized the ideals in life, including the notion of a “higher law” which is above the human laws that people make. This perfect law, behind our human notions of law, is the law of the gods and cannot be altered, said Plato and other Greek philosophers.^{ix} Man’s law is deemed valid only if it is consistent with God’s law, a notion accepted by most of America’s founding fathers. As evangelist John Wesley once stated, “Despite ten thousand laws, right is

still right and wrong is still wrong.”^x

Plato unfortunately neglected to define God adequately, since he did not hold to the Hebrew understanding of who God is. In addition, his emphasis upon ideals was taken too far by some of his later followers (particularly during the Middle Ages) who denigrated the body in favor of the ideal “spirit” of the person.

In contrast to Plato, Aristotle focused on the real things in life, rather than the ideals. Concepts were the product of experience rather than the product of preexistent ideals, said Aristotle. His emphasis upon the importance of the individual things in life may have been a factor in the development of modern science, particularly as this philosophy was combined with a Christian base by Aquinas just prior to the Renaissance. Unfortunately, there is a tendency for Aristotle’s philosophy to make the individual things in life all important; thus the One behind the many is easily overlooked.

As a further illustration of how these two philosophies differ, Plato believed that the newborn baby came from the realm of all ideals and the child later rediscovered those ideals, helping concepts to be reborn. In contrast, Aristotle came closer to modern psychology in stating that the child develops concepts from experiences he or she has; ideas are learned, not rediscovered.

While the philosophers differed a great deal, they agreed that thinking and reasoning through an issue were important. By learning to dialogue they attempted to find flaws in arguments, yet ultimately the individual could not know anything with absolute certainty. The eventual rejection of the “Thus saith the Lord” by many Jews in the Maccabbean era was due to the influence of Greek philosophy an culture.^{xi} Philosophy without God contributes little, but

when refined by Christian assumptions philosophy can be a great asset. On the other hand, Christians who do not think have caused more problems than the Greek philosophers ever did.

The End of the "Golden Age"

There was another side of the "glory that was Greece," however. Pericles, the ruler, bought public favor with his public works projects, in which large numbers of people were recruited to work for the government. Half or more of the citizens may have been on the public payroll, subsidized by the tribute of nearby colonies.^{xii} When the colonies got tired of paying the bills, civil war broke out. In addition, the government had spent itself into bankruptcy, and thus a great era ended.

Plutarch, who wrote during the Roman era, pointed out the obvious fact that everyone cannot be on the government payroll; someone must finance the government. Unfortunately we have failed to learn that lesson today--we have thousands of bureaucrats, hundreds of thousands on the government payroll, and millions getting some kind of subsidy from the government. People get money from welfare, farmer's supplements, corporate aid, and ...(you name it, most of us get something from the government, if only a student loan).

The point is, someone has to pay the bill, and that someone is always the taxpayer. The solution to higher taxes and more government debt is obvious; get rid of the benefits, including those we receive. That is where the difficulty lies--everyone is in favor of cutting taxes until it affects their own subsidy. We all seem more willing to let the other guy go without. Selfishness ultimately lies behind our taxation and public debt problems.

Greek Mythology

Many tales of the Greek and Roman gods and goddesses were told to children at that

time, and most have come down to us today. In the past Americans read these myths for enjoyment, as well as for the moral content. Today, however, the Greek and Roman myths are neglected for an entirely different kind of entertainment on television.

This is hardly a change for the better. The hero mentality of today's school aged children is consumed with cartoons such as "Masters of the Universe" which, unlike the Greek myths, have little moral content, only violence and action. Greek mythology is a part of our Western heritage and is alluded to in many great pieces of literature, while it is doubtful that our modern television stories will stand the test of time. Too often today's entertainment teaches relativism and winning through the use of sheer power or occultic practices--a far cry from the Mickey Mouse of an earlier era. Perhaps a return to the great Greek and Roman classics would provide better quality entertainment, supplemented of course with biblical and other historical content.

The Peloponnesian War

The "golden age" ended in civil war (431 B.C.). Generally the war was between Athens and Sparta, but things got confusing. For example, totalitarian Sparta fought for the liberty of colonies that were oppressed by democratic Athens. How much more confusing can you get?

Of course we have had similar confusion in our own country. The Revolutionary War was due to oppression by one of the most democratic countries at that time (England), and we were aided by France who was soon to be led by Napoleon, hardly known for his love of freedom! Again, the Northern states, promoting freedom for slaves, fought the South who resisted the slavery to taxes which the North demanded. How easy it is for us to forget there was more than one cause of the Civil War.

Of course leftists paint a picture of Soviet and American relations much like that of the

Poloponnesian war. In the communist view of things, totalitarian Soviets fight for the liberty of countries oppressed by the democratic United States. It is obviously a lie, yet that is precisely what many in third world countries believe, accounting for some of the anti-American attitudes overseas.

Alexander's Macedonian Call

To the north of Greece is Macedon, from which came Alexander, who conquered much of the then known world. He conquered Greece, Persia, Tyre, and Egypt. Josephus tells us that after the defeat of Tyre (333 B.C.), Alexander advanced upon Jerusalem to punish the Jews who had failed to side with him against the Babylonians. In a questionable account, written long after the events took place, Josephus^{xiii} tells us that God told the Jews, in a dream, to wear white robes and open the gates of the city to Alexander. The Jews bowed to Alexander, and he responded by saluting the high priest and adoring the name of God on the priests' clothing. We are also told he stayed in Jerusalem long enough to sacrifice to God and read the book of Daniel. When he read that the Greeks would overthrow the Persians, he supposed he was the Greek mentioned, and thus bestowed many favors upon the Jews.

While many historians doubt this version of the story, it is possible. Alexander visited several other shrines and religious places as he conquered the world, even proclaiming himself the son of an Egyptian god. As a result of Alexander's conquests, the Greek influence was spread throughout the Near East, paving the way for the dispersion of the gospel 350 years later in the, by then, universal language of Greek.

Under the influence of Alexander and the Greek culture, science advanced dramatically. At this time the circumference of the earth was calculated almost exactly, while writers theorized

that the earth moved around the sun (an idea later abandoned and eventually rediscovered by modern science). They laid the foundation for geometry and nearly discovered blood circulation.^{xiv} Epicurianism flourished, with its emphasis upon pleasure and avoidance of marriage, while stoicism went to the other extreme of avoiding feelings and being in complete control of the self.

Alexander probably did fulfill the prophecy of Daniel 8:8 which speaks of “the great horn.” What he apparently overlooked in his reading of the book, however, was that the “great horn” was broken. How was he eventually broken? He drank himself to death. He conquered most of the known world of his time, but he could not conquer himself.

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 - iii. George Soule, *Introduction to Economic Science*, p. 77.
 - iv. Elgin Groseclose, “Money, Man and morals,” *Christianity Today*, June 21, 1963, pp. 17-18.
 - v. Parkinson, *The Evolution of Political Thought*.
 - vi. George Rawlinson, ed., *The History of Herodotus*, vol. III, pp. 404-416.
 - vii. Ibid, vol. IV, pp. 28, 39-40, 61, 72-76, 91-93, 143-144.
 - viii. Ibid, vol. II, pp. 363-364.
 - ix. F. Roy Willis, *Western Civilization*, vol. 1, p. 48.
 - x. John Wesley, *The Complete Works of John Wesley*, vol. XI, p. 70.
 - xi. J. Barton Payne, *Outline of Hebrew History*, p. 182.

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- xii. Parkinson, op cit, p. 174.
- xiii. Flavius Josephus, *History of the Jews*, vol. II, book XI, ch. 8.
- xiv. Willis, op cit, p. 69.