

Between the Testaments Egypt, Syria, Hellenism, Maccabees

Judea Under Egypt:

As we noted in the previous lesson when Alexander died in 323 BC he left no heir but in his armies were several ambitious and capable generals. After seven years of infighting, intrigue and struggle four primary leaders came into power over various portions of his empire. Antigonus occupied and ruled the lands from the Mediterranean to Central Asia; Cassander ruled Macedonia; Ptolemy ruled Egypt and Southern Syria and Lysimachus ruled Thrace.

Even when these four rulers emerged from the pack that did not end the conflict between the various sections of Alexander's empire. Antigonus had visions of replacing Alexander as ruler of the entire empire and the other three cemented an alliance to counter his ambitions. Ptolemy demanded that Antigonus turn over to Egypt parts of his Asiatic territory, including Babylon. Of course, Antigonus refused and war resulted. Ptolemy proceeded to defeat one of the armies of Antigonus and took over Judea, Samaria and many of the cities in southern Syria including Zidon bringing the Jews under Egyptian rule.

There was no battle to capture Jerusalem. Josephus, quoting a historian of the period, describes how Seleucus took the city.

“The people known as Jews, who inhabit the most strongly fortified of cities, called by the natives Jerusalem, have a custom of abstaining from work every seventh day; on those occasions they neither bear arms nor take any agricultural operations in hand, nor engage in any other form of public service, but pray with outstretched hands in the temples until the evening. Consequently, because the inhabitants, instead of protecting their city, persevered in their folly, Ptolemy, son of Lagus, was allowed to enter with his army; the country was thus given over to a cruel master, and the defect of a practice enjoined by law was exposed. That experience has taught the whole world, except that nation, the lesson not to resort to dreams and traditional fancies about the law, until its difficulties are such as to baffle human reason”.

Does this remind us of anything regarding the worship of the church or presentation of the gospel in today's world? These Jews honored the Mosaic Law to the extent that their city was taken and the world called it foolishness and folly. Much of this world has the same attitude toward God, his will and the church today. The Apostle Paul told us that men would consider the proclamation of the gospel foolishness, didn't he?

I Corinthians 1:18 “FOR THE PREACHING OF THE CROSS IS TO THEM THAT PERISH FOOLISHNESS; BUT UNTO US WHICH ARE SAVED IT IS THE POWER OF GOD.”

Between the Testaments Egypt, Syria, Hellenism, Maccabees

Another occurrence during this period that has an impact on the coming of Christ is the removal of Jews from Judea to Egypt. In a letter written by a man called Aristeas to another named Philocrates he says of Ptolemy:

"He had overrun the whole of Coele-Syria and Phoenicia, exploiting his good fortune and prowess, and had transplanted some and made others captive, reducing all to subjection by terror; it was on this occasion that he transplanted a hundred thousand persons from the country of the Jews to Egypt. Of these he armed some thirty thousand chosen men and settled them in garrisons in the country."

So as a result a great many more Jews became residents of Egypt adding to the Jewish population already there from prior times.

For the most part the years that followed under the rule of Egypt the Jews enjoyed a period of peace and were able to maintain their religion and culture. There continued to be battles, wars even, between Alexander's generals with numerous shifting of power and rule over various parts of the world.

During this period one of the generals of Ptolemy, Seleucus, who occupied Jerusalem, abandoned Ptolemy and became a power to be reckoned with on his own. He and his descendants ruled Syria and some of the surrounding areas and warred with Ptolemy for several years that followed.

Judea Under Syria:

When Seleucus rebelled against Ptolemy he took over Northern Syria, another ambitious general ruled part of Phoenicia and Syria and Ptolemy only retained control of Syria south of Aradus (Arvad). Seleucus established his capital at Antioch of Syria; a location very familiar to us from the New Testament. As is common when ambitious men claim control of areas of the world, fighting and battles between these men, their sons and other successors was almost constant. This condition continued from about 283 BC for some sixty years until about 223 BC. In 223 BC Antiochus III, a son of Seleucus, took over this kingdom and started pursuing his ambition to take over Syria, Phoenicia, Judea and points south. This brought him into conflict with the Egyptians.

In 217 BC Antiochus managed to conquer territory from Ptolemy as far south as Gaza but was defeated by the Egyptians at Raphia and was chased all the way back to northern Syria. One of the Ptolemys again ruled the area including Judea and this continued until about 198 BC when several events occurred that changed the Judea's situation totally.

Between the Testaments Egypt, Syria, Hellenism, Maccabees

First of all, Hannibal, a Carthaginian, who was following his own ambitions, was defeated at Zama by a Roman army in 202 BC. He fled to Antiochus in Syria and encouraged him to try to take Greece from Rome. This generated a war between Rome and Antiochus of Syria. Antiochus lost and was forced to pay a tremendous indemnity to the Roman government and send his youngest son, Antiochus to Rome as a hostage. Antiochus, later known as Antiochus IV or Antiochus Epiphanes spent 12 years in Rome and gained a healthy respect for Roman power and Roman ways of doing things. Meanwhile the death of Egypt's ruler, Ptolemy IV, created a vacuum in the Egyptian government and because of this Antiochus III, also called Antiochus the Great, took over Palestine in 198 BC. This, of course, included Judea. Not too long after this Antiochus IV or Antiochus Epiphanes, also took over the throne of Syria.

With this change in rulers the situation in Jerusalem and Judea changed drastically. Antiochus Epiphanes was born in Athens, served as chief magistrate of that city and viewed the Greek culture as the epitome of the ways of life. He had also served for 12 years in Rome and learned the value of power and political astuteness. He set out "to civilize" which meant to "Hellenize" his domain. This meant converting all of the diverse tribes, nations and cultures over which he ruled to the Greek culture. In the Jewish state there were a number of people, primarily younger folks, that admired the Greek culture as well and Antiochus used them to interfere in the internal affairs of Judea.

One the events that came out of this interference sets the stage for a similar situation under Rome during the time of Christ. Jerusalem was ruled by the Levitical High Priest who served as both their civil and religious ruler. At this time this was Onias III, a descendant of Simon the Just and a Jew that strictly followed the Mosaic Covenant. Onias III had a brother named Jason that favored the Greek culture and opposed him. To Antiochus Epiphanes the high priesthood was a political office, so he could appoint whomever he chose to serve in that office. Consequently by paying Antiochus Epiphanes a higher tribute than his brother Jason had himself appointed High Priest. Basically he bought the office as many political appointees do today with contributions to political campaigns. This situation continued during the time of Christ. Observe:

John 18:24 "NOW ANNAS HAD SENT HIM BOUND UNTO CAIAPHAS THE HIGH PRIEST"

Acts 4:6 "AND ANNAS THE HIGH PRIEST, AND CAIAPHAS, AND JOHN, AND ALEXANDER, AND AS MANY AS WERE OF THE KINDRED OF THE HIGH PRIEST, WERE GATHERED TOGETHER AT JERUSALEM."

Between the Testaments Egypt, Syria, Hellenism, Maccabees

Luke 3:2 “ANNAS AND CAIAPHAS BEING THE HIGH PRIESTS, THE WORD OF GOD CAME UNTO JOHN THE SON OF ZACHARIAS IN THE WILDERNESS.”

So during the time of Christ both Annas and Caiaphas ruled as high priests in Jerusalem. Roman history records that Annas was appointed high priest in AD 7 by Quirinius, a Syrian serving as Roman governor of Judea at that time. Scholars are still debating which of these two men was the legitimate high priest under the Mosaic Covenant and which was not. Caiaphas was the son-in-law of Annas.

Understandably this created a division among the Jewish people and fostered rebellion. In addition to rebellion against the heavy hand of the Syrian ruler there was also infighting and civil strife among the Jews themselves. When Antiochus Epiphanes decided to try to expand his empire and take over Egypt he was stopped by Rome. Rome was becoming a world power but wasn't ready to take over either Syria or Egypt just yet; but at the same time Antiochus had to kept in check so that he didn't become too powerful.

Since Antiochus Epiphanes couldn't take over Egypt he had to protect his southern borders against Egyptian ambitions. That meant retaining his hold over Palestine and converting it to a vassal state. With the Jews that meant converting it to the Greek culture by force. Consequently the Jews view this period of time and one of darkest of their history.

First of all a decree was issued stating that all of the nationalities in the Seleucid Empire, as Syria was called, was to worship only Greek gods and goddesses. A philosopher from Athens was dispatched to Jerusalem to oversee the conversion of the Jews. He identified the God of the Jews with Jupiter the supreme ruler of the Roman gods, the same god that the Greeks called Zeus. What followed was not only an abomination to the Jews but to God as well. He placed an image of Jupiter, that was reported to look much like Antiochus Epiphanes, in the Temple. Greek soldiers and their paramours performed heathen rites in the Temple courts. Swine were sacrificed on the altar. The drunken orgy associated with the worship of Bacchus was made compulsory. Jews were forbidden, under penalty of death, to practice circumcision, Sabbath worship or the feasts of the Jewish year. Copies of the Hebrew Scriptures were ordered destroyed. Judaism was to be eradicated.

The response from the Jews eventually removed the Hellenists from power from Jerusalem and overthrew Syrian rule of Judea. But before we review those events we need to look at some of the positive things that were also brought about by this infusion of Greek culture.

Between the Testaments Egypt, Syria, Hellenism, Maccabees

The Jews and Hellenism:

Charles Pfeiffer writes that "Alexander the Great had been a missionary as well as a conqueror." "Although the empire of Alexander was short lived, being divided shortly after his death, his cultural accomplishments were of much longer duration. In the years following Alexander's death, Palestine was subject successively to the Egyptian Ptolemies and the Syrian Seleucids, but in each case the culture was Hellenistic."

As we can see from much of what is recorded in the New Testament; after the Babylonian exile the majority of the Jews if the world did not live in Jerusalem or in Judea. Many remained in Babylon and other cities in the Tigris-Euphrates valley. Others migrated to Syria and settled in Antioch and Damascus. In Asia Minor we find large Jewish communities in Lydia, Phrygia, Ephesus, Pergamum and Sardis. For this reason we find this account in Acts 2:

Acts 2:8-11 "AND HOW HEAR WE EVERY MAN IN OUR OWN TONGUE, WHEREIN WE WERE BORN? ⁹PARTHANS, AND MEDES, AND ELAMITES, AND THE DWELLERS IN MESOPOTAMIA, AND IN JUDAEA, AND CAPPADOCIA, IN PONTUS, AND ASIA, ¹⁰PHRYGIA, AND PAMPHYLIA, IN EGYPT, AND IN THE PARTS OF LIBYA ABOUT CYRENE, AND STRANGERS OF ROME, JEWS AND PROSELYTES, ¹¹CRETES AND ARABIANS, WE DO HEAR THEM SPEAK IN OUR TONGUES THE WONDERFUL WORKS OF GOD."

These Jews remained loyal to the temple in Jerusalem but at the same time each community took on some of the culture in which they lived. Consequently those of Judea frequently thought only of themselves being the true people of God.

The most significant group of Jews in this dispersion are found in the city of Alexandria, Egypt. They were also one of the most prominent ethnic groups in this city. While one third century BC writer would complain that "In recent times under the foreign rule of the Persians, and then of the Macedonians by whom the Persian Empire was overthrown, intercourse with other races has led to many of the traditional Jewish ordinances losing their hold." Since Alexandria took over from Tyre and Sidon the role as the center of commercial trade on the Mediterranean wealth and prosperity was also afforded these Jews. Many were merchants and businessmen who could afford to educate their children, support libraries and scholars and generally enjoy the finer things of life.

Between the Testaments Egypt, Syria, Hellenism, Maccabees

It was this situation that led to one of the greatest accomplishments of Judaism; the translation of the Hebrew Old Testament into the Greek vernacular. Legends surrounding the creation of this translation claim that it was done at the request of Ptolemy Philadelphus, the first of the Ptolemy rulers. The purpose was to provide a copy of Jewish Law for the Alexandrian Library. However, what is more likely, is that the Jewish children in Alexandria, whose language was Greek, were losing their ability to read and speak Hebrew. So in order to provide the Scriptures in a form that they could read and study this translation came into existence. And as spoken Hebrew continued to fade out in Egypt it was needful in order to preserve the Old Testament scriptures in the language of the people. The Torah, or Pentateuch, was translated sometime around 250 BC. The remainder of the Old Testament was then translated including the apocryphal books. By the time of Origen, a scholar and theologian who lived from 185-264 AD, this entire collection was called "the Septuagint" where previously that name had only been used to designate the Pentateuch.

As we noted before there are many legends surrounding the production of this translation: some contend that the Septuagint was translated by seventy-two elders who were sent to Alexandria from Jerusalem. Some contend that it was translated in seventy days on the island of Pharos. We don't know, but we do know that quotations from Genesis and Exodus appear in Greek literature before 200 BC. We also can see the hand of God in its creation. Because Greek was the common language of the people of the Roman empire it provided a scriptural basis for the preaching of the gospel of Christ throughout the world.

As is also common when two cultures collide; a liberalization of the Jewish religion began to occur; particularly outside of Jerusalem. Allegorism, a form of "written, oral or visual expression that uses symbols, figures, objects and actions to convey truths or generalizations about human conduct or experience." (*Britannica Concise Encyclopedia*) This led to the application of what was then "modern philosophy" to the Old Testament Scriptures much the same as we see among various denominations today. There also arose various other translations of the Old Testament that also, like today, whose reliability was questionable at best. Pfeiffer states that "From the Jewish allegorists, the Christian Church (read that as Catholic) adopted a method of Biblical interpretation which has persisted in some places to the present. From the time of Origen it dominated the thinking of the Roman church."

In Judea an anti-Hellenistic party arose which, rightly so, considered the Greek manner of life a threat to Judaism. The Hasidim, or "the pious" were ready to defend their ancestral faith to the death and under the rule of Antiochus Epiphanes many did. The formation of this group, along with the excesses of their Syrian ruler led to a Jewish rebellion that was successful beyond anyone's expectation; including that of the Jews.

Between the Testaments Egypt, Syria, Hellenism, Maccabees

The Maccabees:

The atrocities of Antiochus Epiphanes generated the Jewish sect or group called the "Hasidim" or "Hasideans" then all that was needed was an event to trigger their revolt and a leader. Antiochus Epiphanes provided both.

Again we quote from "Between the Testaments" by Charles Pfeiffer: "The emissaries of Antiochus erected a pagan altar at Modin. In order to show their loyalty to the government, the Jews were asked to come forward and sacrifice at the altar. The aged priest of the village, Mattathias, was asked to come forward first to set a good example for the others. Mattathias refused to sacrifice at the pagan altar. Fearing the wrath of Antiochus, a timid Jew made his way to the altar. Mattathias was enraged. He approached the altar, slew the apostate Jew and the emissary of Antiochus. With his five sons, Mattathias destroyed the heathen altar and fled to the hills to avoid the certain reprisals which might be expected from Antiochus. Others joined the family of Mattathias."

Shortly after this revolt by the Maccabees, their patriarch, Mattathias, died. Even though two of his other sons were older his followers chose Judas (Judah) to be their leader. Through guerrilla warfare they continued to make themselves felt throughout Palestine. Syria continued to underestimate the Maccabees and sent only small detachments of soldier against them led by less than competent officers. Eventually Antiochus realized that he had a full scale rebellion on his hands and sent a larger, better led army against them. Judas Maccabee made a surprise night attack, annihilated the Syrians and opened the way for them to take Jerusalem.

When they marched toward Jerusalem the Hellenistic Jews who allied themselves with Syria fled and left the city open. Consequently, they quickly captured the city except for the fort called Akra, They then cleansed the temple, destroyed the statue of Jupiter, its altar and rebuilt the altar of God. Beginning with the 25th of the month Kisleb (December) they observed a eight-day Feast of Dedication. This feast is still celebrated today and is called the Feast of Lights or Hanukkah.

Peace did not last very long. Syria again sent an army against Jerusalem but heard that a rival was marching on Antioch and hurriedly offered peace to the Jews that included a lot of promises regarding relaxing of Syria's demands that were designed to force them to accept Hellenism. Judas didn't trust them and advised against accepting but the Hasidim Jews thought they had gained what they really wanted which was religious freedom. Judas fears were well founded. The new high priest appointed by Syria turned, had a number of the Hasidim Jews seized and executed. Judas and many of his loyal followers escaped and the civil war resumed.

Between the Testaments Egypt, Syria, Hellenism, Maccabees

When Syria sent another army against them Judas Maccabee was killed and his band reduced to a hand full of men. They fled to the eastern side of Jordan and were looked upon as a band of outlaws. This was not unusual during this period of Jewish history. What incident in the New Testament tells us this? When John and Peter were brought before the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem for the second time Gamaliel advised:

Acts 5:35-38 “AND SAID UNTO THEM, YE MEN OF ISRAEL, TAKE HEED TO YOURSELVES WHAT YE INTEND TO DO AS TOUCHING THESE MEN.
³⁶FOR BEFORE THESE DAYS ROSE UP THEUDAS, BOASTING HIMSELF TO BE SOMEBODY; TO WHOM A NUMBER OF MEN, ABOUT FOUR HUNDRED, JOINED THEMSELVES: WHO WAS SLAIN; AND ALL, AS MANY AS OBEYED HIM, WERE SCATTERED, AND BROUGHT TO NOUGHT. ³⁷AFTER THIS MAN ROSE UP JUDAS OF GALILEE IN THE DAYS OF THE TAXING, AND DREW AWAY MUCH PEOPLE AFTER HIM: HE ALSO PERISHED; AND ALL, **even** AS MANY AS OBEYED HIM, WERE DISPERSED. ³⁸AND NOW I SAY UNTO YOU, REFRAIN FROM THESE MEN, AND LET THEM ALONE: FOR IF THIS COUNSEL OR THIS WORK BE OF MEN, IT WILL COME TO NOUGHT:”

Victory finally came but not as a result of war, but as a result of diplomacy. Antiochus Epiphanes was to be replaced by Demetrius II, another son of Seleucus. A pretender, named Alexander Balas laid claim to the Syrian throne instead and both men sought the allegiance of Judea to their cause. Jonathan, another son of Mattathias Maccabee, had no interest in either Syrian party but used procrastination to his advantage. He finally supported Balas and made treaties with both the Greeks and Romans. By doing so he became High Priest, governor of Judea and a member of the Syrian nobility. When Johnathan was killed by a Syrian general his brother Simon succeeded him.

An additional result of all of this conflict was the recognition by the Hasidic party of the descendants of Mattathias Maccabee as the legitimate “leader and High Priest for ever, until there should arise a faithful prophet” (I Maccabees 14:25-49). They were known in history as the Hasmoneans, a name derived from an ancestor. Under their rule the concept of a hereditary high priesthood in the Hasmonean family was recognized and accepted.

Simon and two of his sons were murdered by an ambitious son-in-law in 135 BC. A third son, John Hyrcanus, managed to escape and succeeded his father as the hereditary head of the Jewish state.