

The Intertestamental Period

A Brief History

by Jareb Collins,

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Greek Rule

Alexander the Great (331-320 BC)

The reign of Alexander the Great began with the brutal assassination of his Father, Philip of Macedon. Alexander's exclusive education in matters both academic and military would help shape him into the powerful young conqueror he became. At the age of 13, Philip placed Alexander under the tutelage of none other than Aristotle, who would help instill deep Hellenistic values, which would later pervade Alexander's empire—and beyond. His military training proved itself worthwhile, as he would need to quickly quell the Greek city-states early to establish his dominance. Alexander is reported to have captured and burned the city of Thebes, selling the city's inhabitants into slavery, with the intention of intimidating the Greeks. Shortly thereafter, he took a small Macedonian army across the Dardanelles to invade—and capture—the city of Troy.

Despite Persia's initial disinterest with Alexander's military campaign, it soon became evident that the young general was to be taken seriously. The Battle of Issus, a small town in what is modern day Turkey (near Iskenderum), was a decisive victory for Alexander. Alexander's army, numbering roughly 31,000, was far under matched by Darius' III Persians, numbering some 120,000. Darius is reported to have fled the battle, leaving his wife, mother, and children to be captured. This battle will be a catalyst to the end of Persian reign.

Alexander's ambition would continue to push the borders of his expanding kingdom. After the defeat of Persia, Alexander would turn south, to capture Palestine and Egypt. In all, only two cities would resist Alexander: Tyre and Gaza. Tyre fell after a siege of seven months, while Gaza lasted only two. During this time, Jerusalem is reported to have surrendered willingly to Alexander. According to some accounts, the high priest Jaddua was eager to receive Alexander. Josephus, the Jewish historian, records the following interaction between Alexander and the Jews in his work *Antiquities of the Jews*: „And when the Book of Daniel was showed him, wherein Daniel declared that one of the Greeks should destroy the empire of the Persians, he supposed that himself was the person intended. And as he was then glad, he dismissed the multitude for the present; but the next day he called them to him, and bid them ask what favors they pleased of him; whereupon the high priest desired that they might enjoy the laws of their forefathers, and might pay no tribute on the seventh year. He granted all

they desired. And when they entreated him that he would permit the Jews in Babylon and Media to enjoy their own laws also, he willingly promised to do hereafter what they desired.“

Most scholars refer to this alleged interaction as embellishment, at best, but it is significant in its context, both historically and theologically. The book of Daniel does, in fact, record a prophetic word that is accepted to be in reference to Alexander; the word gives precisely detailed predictions about a long line of rulers in the Middle East, particularly those found in Daniel Chapter 11. There are multiple other references, found in 7:6, 8:5-8, 21.

Alexander's massive territory would expand after the eventual death of Darius III. Alexander was crowned ruler of the Persian world with no apparent Persian successor. After Alexander's troops refused to march past the Indus River, he chose to return to Persia, where he eventually caught a deadly fever and died at the age of 33. In a short 13 years, Alexander—styled »The Great«—had exercised his might across the Middle East, ranging from Macedonia and Aegyptus to Sogdiana and Gedrosia.

Ptolemaic (320-198 BC)

After Alexander's death in 320, his empire was distributed to four of his generals, called the *Diadochi*, a Greek term for „successors“. Of these four generals, only one, Ptolemy I Soter was able to form a successful kingdom. Ptolemy I had been named ruler of Egypt by Alexander, and was able to hold that position after Alexander's death and through the warring of the Diadochi. Having already exercised some influence over Jerusalem in 320 BC, Ptolemy invaded the Jews on the Sabbath, taking advantage of their unwillingness to fight on their holy day. Capturing more than 120,000 Jews, Ptolemy had them deported to the great city of Alexandria, where they would remain until the reign of Ptolemy II, Philadelphus. Alexandria was an important city to the Jews, which was home to many thousands of them. There is not much record of Jews living in Judah, though it appears they were somewhat self-governed (if heavily taxed), sending a local tribute to Egypt annually.

Of particular note to the Jewish heritage during this time is the origination of the Septuagint. As Hellenization was aggressively enforced throughout the land, many Jews had begun to read Greek as their first and primary language. Ptolemy II, Philadelphus, commissioned either 70 or 72 translators (depending on the version of the story being reported) to translate the Old Testament into the Greek language. This text was not only important to those in the surrounding area; Hellenization was widespread, and the text would be used widely. The Septuagint continues to be used; „the Eastern Orthodox Church relies on the Septuagint for its Old Testament teachings. Some modern Bible translations also use the Septuagint along side Hebrew manuscripts as their source text.

Seleucid (198-164 BC)

The Book of Daniel, chapter 11 describes the fighting between the „King of the north“ (the Seleucids) and the „King of the south“ (Ptolemies). Following Seleucus' split from Ptolemy in 311 BC, the two kingdoms fought for the next 100 plus years for control of Palestine. „After two centuries of peace under the Persians, the Hebrew state found itself once more caught in the middle of power struggles between two great empires: the Seleucid state with its capital in Syria to the north and the Ptolemaic state, with its capital in Egypt to the south... Between 319 and 302 BCE, Jerusalem changed hands seven times.“

Life under Seleucid rule was brutal and taxing for the Jews; political troubles played a major role in the oppression. While under the protection of Antiochus III, Hannibal convinced the king to attack and attempt to capture Greece, which would make him a great threat to the Romans. Rome, however, had other plans. Declaring war on Antiochus III, Rome summarily defeated and chased him from Greece, where he was captured at Magnesia. Rome stripped from him Asia minor, and forced him to relinquish his navy and war elephants. Also, Rome exacted a massive sum of retribution, to be paid over the next 12 years. Wanting to ensure the payment of the enormous sum, Antiochus IV, the younger son of Antiochus III was taken as a hostage.

Antiochus III effected huge tax levies on the Jews, and even resorted to the robbery of temples. During one such attempt, he was killed, with his son Seleucus assuming his reign until 175, when he too was killed. With the death of Seleucus, Antiochus IV—who named himself »Epiphanes« (God is manifested)—assumed rule, and his reign was wicked; says Battle, „His place in Jerusalem rivals that of Nero in Christian history.“

Though Antiochus III had given his word to the Jews, promising religious freedom, Antiochus IV would not keep that promise. He appointed Joshua, the brother of Onias III, (the Jewish high priest) as the new high priest by way of a bribe. Joshua, who adopted the Greek name Jason began to adopt a pro-Greek attitude, seeking to „make Jerusalem the »New Antioch«.“

The aggressive Hellenization and exercising of Greek ideals and religious expressions made for difficult times. Antiochus IV was pursuing a successful military campaign against Egypt, only to be turned back by the Romans at Alexandria. His humiliation was the catalyst to the Great Persecution of the Jews, „two years of horrible persecution.“ Antiochus attacked Jerusalem on the Sabbath, killing thousands, causing massive destruction of the walls, and the enslavement of more than 10,000 Jews. He then demanded that the Jews adopt a syncretistic policy, meshing the worship of Yahweh with the worship of the emperor and other Greek gods. Profane acts were committed in the temple, where Antiochus erected a statue of Zeus and sacrificed a sow on the holy altar. Eventually, Antiochus forbade the worship of Yahweh altogether, insisting on pagan sacrifices and rituals and the eating of forbidden food; the penalty for refusal was death. 2 Maccabees 7 records „the valiant testimonies of Jewish martyrs who refused to disobey the regulations to the Torah.”

Jewish Self Rule

(167-63 BC)

The climax of the conflict with Greek rule was brought about in the village of Modein. Antiochus had sent an emissary to attempt to garner the loyalty of the Jews there, who was to offer to Matthias—an old priest—„the prestige of being a friend of the king plus gold and silver“, in exchange for a sacrifice to pagan gods. When Matthias refused, another Jew attempted to make the exchange; Matthias killed both the Jew and the emissary. Matthias then departed for the wilderness, and a revolt followed.

Incited to a revolution, Judas »Maccabeus« (a nickname meaning „hammer“) led attacks against the Seleucids. Maccabeus is reported to have been a gifted leader and military tactician, but as much credit for the Jews' is owed to Syria's conflicts on other fronts. Though killed in battle in 160 BC, Maccabeus was able to gain back much control from the Syrian rulers. Maccabeus' brothers would continue his efforts, and it was his youngest brother, Simon, who eventually led the Jews back to „the benchmark of national autonomy.“ Simon, demanding release from tribute, agreed to help defend Syria from other potential claimants in exchange for this autonomy. He was bestowed with the priesthood by the Jews, as well as military and executive privileges. This power would resemble more of a totalitarian despotism than the original, Biblical intents for Jewish rule. Simon and two of his sons were eventually murdered by his son-in-law, Ptolemy; Ptolemy would eventually be defeated by Hyrcanus, Simon's remaining son.

Maccabean rule was replaced by John Hyrcanus, the first of the Hasmonean rulers. Hyrcanus expanded the Judean territories into Moab and Idumea, and won back control of several coastal cities the Syrians had managed to capture. Upon Hyrcanus' death, his son Aristobulus—claiming himself to be king—conquered Galilee and ruled for one year before dying of an unknown illness. Aristobulus' widow, Salome Alexandra, appointed Alexander Janneus (Aristobulus' older brother) king and the two were immediately wed. Janneus was a Hellenistic king, interested in military expansion but „cared nothing for the spiritual duties of a high priest.“ A brutal ruler who exacted terrible revenge on those who sought to usurp him, Janneus died in 76 BC, leaving the kingdom to his wife, Salome Alexandra to rule. She would reign from 76 to 67 BC, the only female ruler of the Hasmoneans. She appointed her son Hyrcanus II as the chief priest, while her other son Aristobulus II commanded the armies. When she died in 67, the two vied for ultimate leadership. Roman armies, led by Pompey's representatives, „subdued the ever-unstable Seleucid kingdom.“ Though both appealed for leadership, Hyrcanus II was given support and named High Priest, and Aristobulus II was conquered (he sought to rebel) and taken back to Rome. The Jews were now under Roman rule, their self-government given way—forcefully—to the imperial rule of the governor in Syria.

Origination of the Pharisees and Sadducees

It was during this time of Jewish self-rule that a group of devout Jews who were against the widespread Hellenization that was pervading Jewish society and threatening the way of life heretofore held dearly by God's chosen ones—emerged. These men started with good intentions: the preservation of the Law, adherence to God's commands, and the continued teaching and instruction of the precepts of the Lord. It is thought that perhaps they „could reclaim their Jewish brethren from their pagan Hellenistic ways... their initial purpose was clear, and their motives were pure.“

The origination of the Pharisees is unclear. The term Pharisee means „separated ones“, and they were marked by their zeal for the Law and their strict observance of it. Due to the Jews' past experience with syncretistic beliefs and pagan idol worship, purity of God's Law was paramount, and their enforced captivity and loss of total autonomy only served to emphasize the necessity of maintaining that purity.

The problem with their strict observation of the Law is that it replaced God's intention for the Law. They became so focused on the outward appearance that they eventually lost touch with the internal work of God. „They became so concerned with obeying every detail of the Law that they forgot God's original intention for it... In essence, they lost sight of the inner man... what is worse, perhaps, is that they condemned others who did not follow their example.“

The typical profile of a Pharisee was a Jew of middle class heritage, a businessman or tradesman, and he was not usually a priest. He spent the majority of his time, therefore, in the Synagogue and was involved in all aspects of the Jewish life. While his overall demeanor was aloof from all who were not Pharisees, „we must remember that his virtuous lifestyle became the mainstay of Judaism.“

Another group that arose during the Intertestamental Period (though again, not much is known of their origin) is the Sadducees. The Sadducees, by contrast, were of the wealthy, aristocratic class and made up the priestly class of the Jews; they therefore spent most of their time in the Temple and attending to Temple business. The ranks of the Sadducees were not open; it was a hereditary membership only.

The Sadducees varied greatly from the Pharisees in their approach to the Jewish lifestyle. Counter to the Pharisees, the Sadducees actually accepted and embraced the Hellenistic lifestyle. „They felt that the Hellenistic culture and Roman authority were necessary for the good for the people. The fact that they accepted this outside influence indicates they valued politics more than religion.“ In fact, the acceptance of Hellenism assured that the lifestyle which they were accustomed to—wealth and luxury—would not be disturbed. Scripture provides almost the entirety of what is known about the Sadducees, though some mention is made in the works of Josephus. As aloof as the Pharisee was from his brethren, he still had more in common with them than the Sadducee. Both classes were part of the Sanhedrin and great Sanhedrin, along with the Scribes (professional students and interpreters of the Law, whose word on religious matters was considered final). The two groups were the largest religious parties during the time of Christ, and their influence and interactions—however brief—are fascinating and can be seen in the Gospels.

Roman Rule

(63 BC – AD 70)

Now under Roman rule as the leader of a client kingdom, Hyrcanus showed himself to be inept at governance, and consequently had his duties as the high priest reduced. No longer the „chief political leader in Jerusalem... the temple state had come to an end.“ Herod, having fled to Rome, was given Galilee, was named »King of Judea« in 40 BC, though it would be several years—37 BC—until he assumed power by way of disposing Antigonus, with the help of Antony.

Despite his accomplishments as an administrator and champion of public works, Herod was a king beset with cruelty and paranoia. He had a reputation for each, and exhibited them on many occasions. He even went so far as to have his wife Mariamne and sons by her murdered for what he believed to be aspirations of usurping his throne. After his death, Herod's son Archelaus was appointed ethnarch over Judea, Samaria, and Idumea in 4 BC; his incompetence led to his dismissal some 10 years later (AD 6). Another of Herod's sons, Philip, was made tetrarch over Iturea and Trachonitis, and was reputed to be „an able and conscientious ruler.“ Herod Antipas, considered the foremost capable of Herod's son, was made tetrarch over Galilee and Perea. He would later be responsible for the martyrdom of John the Baptist, who spoke out against Herod Antipas' divorce and marrying of his half-brother's wife.

After AD 6, Judea was made a Roman province, and was therefore ruled by Roman governors. However, as Kostenberger et al states, „The Jews were exempt from many of the major requirements of client kingdoms.“ They had freedom to worship Yahweh, to mint their own coins devoid of offensive images, and a limited amount of autonomy, as the Sanhedrin—led by the high priest—governed their affairs. For the next 63 years, Roman supremacy and domination of the Jewish culture would give the Jews much cause for the desperation they expressed, awaiting the arrival of Messiah. It is no surprise, therefore, that Jesus—the son of a carpenter, hailing from Nazareth—was rejected by the very ones He came to save. The Jews were expecting a conquering Savior, not a man preaching a Gospel of servitude and submission to authority. When the Romans summarily defeated the „Bar Kokhba revolt“, ending in AD 135, the Jewish state ceased to exist entirely until 1948.

