

# Old Testament History

## Lesson #31

### The Hellenistic Period

**Introduction.** This final lesson will consider two miscellaneous topics: the origin of Jewish sects and the rise of Apocalyptic literature. These topics will introduce us to several aspects of Jewish history which we encounter in the New Testament, particularly the gospels. By understanding the intricacies of the Jewish culture we can better understand why God chose this time in which to send His Son (Galatians 4:4).

#### I. ***The Origin Of The Jewish Sects***

##### A. The beginning of the sects.

1. The rise of the Jewish sects is traceable to the impact of Hellenism on the life and culture of the Near East. When the new clashes with the old, violent reactions frequently result. This is particularly true when the new ideology had religious and moral overtones.
2. Many of the Jews were willing to attempt a synthesis of Greek civilization and Hebrew religion. Jews in Palestine as well as Jews throughout the Hellenistic world, adopted Greek names, subscribed to Greek philosophies and looked to Greek institutions as the harbingers of cultural progress.
3. Other Jews reacted violently against the Hellenizers. They saw Hellenism as a way of life which was opposed to that prescribed in the Old Testament. As idolatry had been the besetting sin of Israel before the exile, so Hellenism was regarded as the new temptation to unfaithfulness.

##### B. The Pharisees.

1. The party of the Pharisees is first mentioned by name during the reign of John Hyrcanus (134-104 B.C.). After initially supporting the Pharisees, Hyrcanus became convinced that they were really opposed to him. He then espoused the cause of the Sadducees.
2. The word "Pharisee" means "separated ones." Although some have suggested that the separation was from the common people, it is more probable that the Pharisees were so named because of their zeal for the law which involved separation from the influences of Hellenism. In this sense they were the heirs of the Hasidim.
3. The laws regarding ceremonial purity were strictly observed by members of the Pharisaic brotherhood. Furthermore, the particular domain of the Pharisees in pre-Christian Judaism was the synagogue. The synagogue seems to have had its origin in the Babylonian captivity when the Jews were prevented from participating in

the sacrificial offerings which could be offered only in the Jerusalem temple.

4. In a sincere desire to make the law workable within the changing culture of the Greco-Roman world, the Pharisaic scribes developed the system of oral tradition which proved such a burden to Judaism during the time of Christ.
  - a) To the Pharisees, tradition was not simply a commentary upon the Law, but was ultimately raised to the level of scripture itself. To justify this attitude it was stated that the "oral law" was given by God to Moses at Mt. Sinai, along with the "written Law" or the Torah.
  - b) The ultimate in this development is reached when the Mishna stated that the oral law must be observed with greater stringency than the written Law, because statutory law (i.e., oral tradition) affects the life of the ordinary man more intimately than the more remote written Law.

#### C. The Sadducees.

1. The Sadducees were the party of the Jerusalem aristocracy and the high priesthood. They had made their peace with the political rulers and had attained positions of wealth and influence. The Sadducees held themselves aloof from the masses and were unpopular with them.
2. Theologically the Sadducees must be described with a series of negatives. They did not accept the oral law which developed under the Pharisees, and seem to have limited their canon to the Torah, or Pentateuch. They did not believe in resurrection, spirits or angels (Mark 12:18; Luke 20:27; Acts 23:8). They left no positive religious or theological system.
3. The Pharisees welcomed and sought proselytes (Matthew 23:15), but the Sadducean party was closed. None but the members of the high priestly and aristocratic families of Jerusalem could be Sadducees. With the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in A.D. 70, the Sadducees came to an end. Modern Judaism traces its roots to the party of the Pharisees.

#### D. The Essenes.

1. The Essenes and the Pharisees both continued the philosophy of the Hasidim. But a more extreme reaction against the influences which corrupted Jewish life was taken by the sect which the ancient writers Philo, Josephus and Pliny call the Essenes. They seem to have lived for the most part in monastic communities, such as the one which was headquartered at Qumran.
2. The life of the Essene was one of rigor and simplicity. Devotion and religious study occupied an important place in the community.

Scripture and other religious books were studied and copied by members of the Essene community. Each Essene was required to perform manual labor to make the community self-supporting. Community of goods was practiced in the Essene communities, and strict discipline was enforced by an overseer.

3. The Essenes accepted proselytes, but the novice was required to go through a period of strict probation before he could become a full-fledged member. Numerically the Essenes were never large.

E. The Herodians.

1. The Herodians are not mentioned outside the gospels, and the gospels tell us nothing about them. The Herodians believed that the best interests of Judaism lay in cooperation with the Romans.
2. Their name was taken from Herod the Great, who sought to Romanize the Palestine of his day. The Herodians were more of a political party than a religious sect.

F. The Zadokites.

1. The term "Zadokite" appears to be related to the word "Sadducee," but the two groups had different historical developments. The Zadokite Work, discovered in 1896 in a Cairo synagogue, speaks of a group which was compelled to migrate to Damascus where, under the leadership of a man called "the star" (Numbers 24:17), they entered into a New Covenant (Jeremiah 31:31). A prominent leader of the sect, who may have been the founder, is the Teacher of Righteousness mentioned in the Zadokite Work and the scrolls at Qumran.
2. Some have suggested that a group of spiritually minded priests, alarmed at the drift toward worldliness of early second century B.C. Sadduceism, separated from it and formed the nucleus for the new group of "sons of Zadok." Whether this movement found spiritual affinity with a group like the Essenes, or whether a new beginning is to be posited for the group at this time is not clear.
3. The circumstances of this migration are not given in sufficient detail to warrant a positive statement of date. It has been thought that the removal of Onias III from his office as High Priest in the days of Antiochus Epiphanes was the occasion for the flight of Zadokites to Damascus.

G. The Zealots.

1. Roman rule was not popular with the majority of Jews. To the Pharisees, Roman rule was a punishment visited upon Israel because of its sins. It was to be accepted with humility, in prayerful anticipation of the day when God would remove the horrible Roman yoke.
2. A more extreme attitude was taken by the party known from the writings of Josephus as the Zealots. They first appeared in Galilee

- under the leadership of Judas the son of Ezekias during the early years of Roman rule. They refused to pay taxes and considered it a sin to acknowledge loyalty to Caesar.
3. Gamaliel mistakenly regarded Peter and the apostles as Zealot leaders. He urged that no action be taken against them, believing that if the movement they represented were not of God it would come to naught, as in the case of Theudas and Judas of Galilee (Acts 5:35-39).
  4. Ultimately the Zealots were successful in winning the bulk of the people to their side. Their defiance of Rome brought on the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

## II. ***The Rise Of Apocalyptic Literature***

### A. General observations concerning apocalyptic literature.

1. During the last two centuries of this period and the first century of the Christian era, a species of literature developed among the Jews which is termed apocalyptic. An "apocalypse" is an unveiling. This type of writing is also found in various portions of the Old Testament prophetic books including Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Joel and Zechariah. The chief noncanonical apocalyptic books are the writings ascribed to Enoch and Baruch, the Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs and 4th Ezra.
2. During the two centuries before Christ, the Jews knew that prophecy had ceased. Some, however, felt that they had a message for their generation.
  - a) Sometimes these messages contained words and thoughts which had been popularly ascribed to some ancient Hebrew historical figure.
  - b) In order to give a production the appearance of age, and thus to insure a wide audience, the books were pseudepigraphal. The name of some ancient man of God, like Enoch, was assigned as the author of the writing. Some examples include the Assumption of Moses and the Ascension of Isaiah.
  - c) The writers doubtless believed that they were writing in the spirit of the earlier patriarch, and much of the material which they used was really old.
3. Apocalyptic literature was both a message of comfort in days of trouble and an effort to show how God had purposed to bring victory to His people, although they were in the midst of an apparently hopeless situation, such as in the persecutions of Antiochus Epiphanes.
4. Seven key predictions common to apocalyptic literature:
  - a) A time of severe tribulation will proceed the New Age.

- b) The time of tribulation will culminate in a great battle against Israel.
  - c) The unrighteous will be judged and punished, the righteous saved.
  - d) The Messiah will rule.
  - e) God will deal decisively with the Gentiles.
  - f) The New Age will commence.
  - g) The righteous dead will enjoy eternal life.
- B. The imagery of apocalyptic literature.
1. Students of apocalyptic literature note a constancy in the imagery. Frequent references are made to "horns," "heads," "watchers," "seven heavens" and the "seven angels." In general, men are described as animals, nations as beasts, the Jews as sheep or cattle and their leaders as rams or bulls.
  2. The message is usually given in the first person. If Israel's prophet claimed direct revelation from God Himself, the apocalyptic writer claims to receive divine revelation mediately through an angel. The prophets had much to say about the present, but the chief concern of the apocalyptic writer was the future. The final consummation was regarded as imminent.
  3. The coming Messiah is a recurrent theme for the apocalyptic writer. This concept finds its roots in the Old Testament. The apocalyptic writer frequently speaks of the Messiah as the great Judge who will come in the clouds of heaven to punish the wicked and reward the righteous.
  4. The concept of the kingdom of God is the climax of apocalyptic literature.
    - a) The kingdom of God in some writers is a period of divine rule on earth. This rule may last from one hundred years to eternity. If this kingdom of God is temporary, it is followed by an eternal heavenly existence.
    - b) To those who look for a kingdom of God in this world, the end of the present age means the end of evil in the world. The future age is earthly but not evil. Some, however, insist that the present world is inherently evil. They expect the world to be destroyed, or miraculously changed into a heavenly world.
- C. The influences of apocalyptic literature.
1. It is frequently suggested that Persian influences, particularly in angelology and the dualistic conflicts between light and darkness, account in large measure for the nature of apocalyptic literature. Greek and Egyptian contacts are also suggested.

2. It is best to see in the apocalyptic literature an echo of the prophetic writings, given shape by the sufferings under Antiochus Epiphanes.

**Conclusion.** In the days of Herod the Great, in an obscure corner of the Roman Empire, in the city which had been the birthplace of King David, Jesus was born. History took little note of His life. Only a few devoted disciples espoused His cause. To the Roman officials He was an insurrectionist; to the Jews, a blasphemer. In the hour of His trial, His disciples forsook Him. He was crucified between two thieves. Yet His life and death introduced a new age. From apparent defeat came the triumph of victory. His death on the cross is the divinely provided atonement for sin. The resurrection brings the assurance of eternal life.