

Old Testament History

Lesson #29

The Hellenistic Period

Introduction. Although Alexander's large empire was divided into multiple parts after his death, Hellenism still played a great part in the development of Jewish society. However, the Jews could not be forced to accept these new ways. A revolt occurred in 166 B.C. which would set the stage for an independent Jewish state.

I. ***The Impact Of Hellenism On The Jews***

A. Observations of Hellenism.

1. Alexander the Great had been a missionary as well as a conqueror. From his teacher Aristotle he had been taught the virtues of Greek philosophy and the Greek way of life.
2. Alexander attempted to establish a model Hellenistic community in each of the lands he had conquered. Alexandria in Egypt is the best known and most successful of these planned communities.
3. 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. Although military rivals, culturally the states which emerged from the empire of Alexander were one.
4. The Hellenistic city could readily be identified. Fine public buildings were erected. A gymnasium was built for that culture of the body which the Greeks always stressed. An open air theater was built to entertain the populace. Greek dress was observed in the city, with people speaking the Greek language and subscribing to one of the schools of Greek philosophy. The city government was modeled along the lines of the Greek city-states.
5. Hellenism was not all bad or all good. It did, however, present a challenge to Judaism both in the Dispersion and in Palestine proper. Norman Bentwich observes, "The interaction of Judaism and Hellenistic culture is ... one of the fundamental struggles in the march of civilization."

B. Hellenism in the Dispersion.

1. At no time after the Babylonian exile did the majority of Jews live in Palestine. Many remained in their settlements in Babylon, or settled in other parts of the Tigris-Euphrates Valley. Others went to Syria where there were large Jewish settlements, particularly in Antioch and Damascus. Asia Minor had large Jewish communities. Lydia, Phrygia, Ephesus, Pergamum and Sardis all had numerous Jews in their population.

2. The most significant group of Jews of the Dispersion, historically speaking, was located in Alexandria. From the initial settlement of Alexandria the Jews had formed one of the most important and largest segments of the city.
3. There was a temptation for a life of ease with the Jews concerning Hellenism. The merchant class was able to amass great wealth which could purchase better housing and food than the pre-Hellenistic world could have imagined. Great libraries in Alexandria and other Hellenistic centers, together with schools emphasizing a Greek education, would appeal to many of the nobler youths of Israel. Sculpture and the fine arts offered an aesthetic outlook which would be frowned upon by the orthodox, but which would make an impact on the young in particular.
4. The Septuagint.
 - a) The greatest monument of Alexandrian Judaism was, without question, the translation of the Hebrew Old Testament into the Greek vernacular. While the legends suggest that the work was done in order to provide a copy of the Hebrew scriptures for the Alexandrian library, it is more likely that the translation was made at the impulse of the Alexandrian Jews who wanted their Greek-speaking children to be able to read the scriptures.
 - b) According to the *Letter of Aristeas*, Demetrius of Phalerum, said to have been Ptolemy's librarian, aroused the king's interest in the Jewish Law. At his suggestion, Ptolemy sent a delegation to the High Priest in Jerusalem, who chose six elders from each of the twelve tribes to translate the Law into Greek.
 - c) Although without question translated by Alexandrian Jews for their own use, the Septuagint did serve as a means of acquainting the non-Jew with the principles of Jewish faith and practice. When we come to New Testament times, we read of many "God-fearers" among the Gentiles. In a real sense the Septuagint helped to pave the way for the work of the apostle Paul and others who took the message of Christ to non-Jews as well as to Jews.
5. Alexandrian allegorism.
 - a) Alexandrian Jews followed their Gentile neighbors in subscribing to a school of Greek philosophy. This resulted in an attempt to harmonize scripture with Greek thinking which produced the allegorical method of interpreting scripture.
 - b) The allegorist regards the literal sense of scripture as the vehicle for a secondary sense which is regarded as more spiritual and profound.

- c) Allegorical interpretation is thoroughly subjective. If the literal sense of scripture suggested something which the interpreter deemed unworthy of God, he considered this sufficient warrant to seek a "hidden" allegorical meaning.

C. Hellenism in Palestine.

1. Palestine itself was not so far removed from the centers of Hellenism as to be untouched. The educated classes were especially enamored with the Greek way of life. The amphitheater and the gymnasium were attractive to the young, and a strong Hellenistic party emerged.
2. In Judea, however, the lines were more closely drawn than they were in the Dispersion. An anti-Hellenistic party arose which considered the Greek manner of life a threat to Judaism. The emphasis on materialism, the nude appearance of athletes in the gymnasium and the neglect of Jewish rites were regarded as evidence of defecation from the law of God.
3. The Hasidim, or "the pious," were ready to defend their ancestral faith to the death if need be, and in the days of Antiochus Epiphanes many of them did die for that faith. Future history shows us how necessary the Hasidim were in maintaining the place of the Law of the Lord in a day of moral and spiritual decay.

II. ***The Maccabees And The Struggle Against Hellenism***

A. Mattathias.

1. The oppression of the Jews by Antiochus Epiphanes produced a reaction which stunned Antiochus and surprised many of the Jews themselves. The representatives 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.
2. 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 and slew the Jew and the representative 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.
3. The early days of the Maccabean revolt, as the struggle against Antiochus and Hellenism came to be called, were days of guerilla warfare. From their mountain strongholds, the sons of Mattathias and their allies raided the towns and villages, killing the royal officers and the Hellenistic Jews who supported them.

B. Judas the Maccabee.

1. Soon after the beginning of the revolt, Mattathias died. He urged his followers to choose as military leader his third son Judas (Hebrew, *Judah*), known as the "Maccabee" (usually interpreted as the "hammer"). Continuing victories in guerilla warfare proved the choice a good one. More and more Jews rallied to the cause.
2. In the early days of the revolt the Syrians underestimated the strength of the Maccabees. Thinking the revolt only a minor skirmish, they sent inferior generals and small detachments of soldiers into the field. The Maccabees, however, were able to hold their own. They defeated one after another of the Syrian armies thrown against them.
3. Before long Antiochus realized that he had a full-sized rebellion on his hands. Because of his proximity to Egypt, Judea was particularly important. Yet Antiochus could not throw his full strength in Judea because he was faced with another revolt in Parthia at the same time. Antiochus moved eastward to Parthia, leaving his general Lysias to take care of the revolt in Judah.
4. Lysias sent an army of Syrians, Hellenistically-minded Jews and volunteers from the neighboring countries to defeat the Maccabean rebels. Judas, however, by a surprise night attack, annihilated the Syrian army and seized enormous stores of booty. This victory at the town of Emmaus opened the road to Jerusalem to the Maccabees.
5. Judas and his army moved toward Jerusalem. Menelaus and his sympathizers fled. The Maccabees entered the city and were able to take everything except the fort known as the Akra. They entered the temple and removed all the signs of paganism which had been installed there. The altar dedicated to Jupiter was taken down and a new altar was erected to the God of Israel. The statue of Zeus-Antiochus was ground to dust. Beginning with the twenty-fifth of Kislev (December) they observed an eight-day Feast of Dedication, known as Hanukkah, or the Festival of Lights. To this day, the Jews celebrate the end of the three-year period during which the temple had been desecrated.
6. Lysias later marched against the Maccabees and defeated them in a battle near Jerusalem. He next besieged Jerusalem, hoping to starve the Maccabees into submission. Because of conflicts in other areas, Lysias could not stay and made peace with the Jews.

C. Jonathan.

1. Simon, Jonathan and Johanan, brothers of Judas, with several hundred Maccabean soldiers, fled across the Jordan. From the standpoint of Syria they were a band of outlaws. Jonathan became the

leader of the band, and young Jews were attracted to their ranks. Syrian efforts to destroy them were unsuccessful.

2. When a pretender, Alexander Balas, claimed the Syrian throne of Demetrius II, both parties sought help from the Jews. They turned to Jonathan as the man best able to raise and lead a Jewish army, bypassing the Hellenistic Jews.
3. Jonathan supported Balas and made treaties with Sparta and Rome. Before the war was over, Jonathan was High Priest, governor of Judea and a member of the Syrian nobility. Jonathan's brother Simon was governor of the Philistine coastal area. The Roman senate declared itself the "Friend" of Judah, but no efforts were made to implement the declaration. In time, Rome would become a hated enemy.
4. Jonathan's foreign policy promoted the internal prosperity of Judah. The coastal cities, ruled by Simon, were practically annexed. When Judah died at the hand of a Syrian general, his brother Simon succeeded him as ruling High Priest.

D. Simon.

1. Simon was advanced in years when he assumed office. Syria was again rent between two factions, one looking to Demetrius II as king, and the other recognizing Antiochus VI, a boy under the guardianship of Tryphon. Tryphon deposed Antiochus and reigned in his stead.
2. Tryphon was the first Syrian king who was not of the Seleucid line. Simon ignored him, recognizing Demetrius as rightful king in Syria. Demetrius, in return, granted the Jews full immunity from taxes. This was interpreted as an acknowledgment of independence, and occasioned great rejoicing among the Jews. Simon was also able to starve out the Syrian garrison at the Akra and to occupy the cities of Joppa and Bethsura.
3. During the period of peace which marked the high priesthood of Simon, the question of the legitimacy of the Maccabean priests was settled. The Hasidic party recognized the line of Onias as the legitimate heirs to the Aaronic priesthood. The family of Onias had gone to Egypt during the Maccabean conflict, however, and any claims they had to the priesthood were thereby forfeited. In recognition of his wise rule, the leaders in Israel named Simon leader and High Priest.
4. This act legitimized a new dynasty which is known in history as the Hasmoneans. The name is thought to be derived from an ancestor of the Maccabeans named Asmonaeus, or (in Hebrew) Hashmon. Simon was the last of the sons of Mattathias. Under him, however,

the concept of a hereditary high priesthood in the Hasmonean family was legitimized.

5. In 134 B.C., Simon and two of his sons were murdered by an ambitious son-in-law. A third son, John Hyrcanus, managed to escape. He succeeded his father as hereditary head of the Jewish state.

Conclusion. The Maccabean era was crucial to the Jewish development in the time of Jesus. During the Hasmonean dynasty, which will be studied next, the Romans will take control of Palestine and its rule will continue to first century times.