

The Intertestamental Period (323 B.C. to A.D. 132)

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1. Introduction

The gospel recorded in the New Testament is best understood in its historical setting. It is therefore of good value to know the condition of Palestine as it was met by Jesus when he entered this world. For an even better understanding of the historical context we will also consider its development. We therefore step back to briefly study the period of the Greek and Roman Empire as it relates to Palestine during the intertestamental period, before we then concentrate on the first century.

2. Survey of the Intertestamental Period (323 B.C.-A.D. 132)

A. From Alexander the Great to the Maccabean Revolt (323-167 B.C.)

Alexander the Great by his sudden and far-reaching triumph over Persia imposed the Greek culture upon the ancient near East including Palestine. His aim was to unite his empire not only by means of military power but even more by establishing one common thought world. He introduced the Greek language, built Greek cities and infrastructure that eased travel and trade all over the conquered area, and so he spread out 'Hellenism' from Macedonia southwards to Egypt and eastwards to the borders of India. Its influence further remained after the Greeks were succeeded by the Romans. After eleven years of conquest, Alexander the Great died in 323 B.C.

His generals battled for succession, and eventually most of the territory was shared between Seleucus in the North and Ptolemy in the South. About the whole third

century B.C. the Ptolemies dominated Palestine, but in 198 B.C. the Seleucids defeated them and took over control. More Cities were modeled on Greek culture and Hellenism continued to infiltrate Judaism. Eventually, tension in Palestine reached its climax when the Seleucid ruler Antiochus IV Epiphanes profaned the Temple and outlawed the practice of the Jewish religion in 167 B.C. (cf. 1 Macc 1:41-64)

B. The Holy War of the Hasmoneans (167-142 B.C.)

Antiochus' ruthless policy resulted in the Maccabean revolt. In a village called Modein nearby Jerusalem the local priest Mattathias, of the House of Hasmon, not only refused to take part in Hellenistic sacrifice but also killed an apostate Jew who did sacrifice as well as the Seleucid official in command. Together with his five sons he then fled to the wilderness of Judah and called those who were 'zealous of the law' and 'maintaineth the covenant' to join him. (1 Macc 2:24-28) With guerilla tactics they started a 'holy war' against the Seleucids.

After Mattathias' death in 166 B.C. his third son Judas 'Maccabeus' succeeded him. Eventually in 164 B.C. they captured Jerusalem and rededicated the Temple three years after its profanation by Antiochus IV. Judas continued to fight for political freedom and was finally killed in battle in 160 B.C., and the youngest brother Jonathan followed his leadership (160-142 B.C.). Contrary to Judas, he collaborated with the Seleucids and was appointed High Priest as well as governor which gave him

direct access to the Seleucid king. The combination of the religious and political headship into one office was reason for many pious Jews to withdraw from Jerusalem. (Roetzel 2002, 15) In 142 B.C. Jonathan was betrayed and killed by a Seleucid official.

C. The Hasmonean Dynasty (142-63 B.C.)

After Jonathan's death, Simon his brother was acknowledged as successor. (cf. 1 Macc 13:8) Under his rule, Israel was released from tribute and taxes and gained political independence from the Seleucids, and "the yoke of the heathen was taken away from Israel." (1 Macc 13:31) Different from Jonathan who was appointed as High Priest by the foreign king, Simon was appointed High Priest by the Jews themselves, which officially transferred the hereditary rights to the Hasmonean line. (Russel 1965, 31) As High Priest in political control, Simon established the Hasmonean Dynasty that lasted until the Roman invasion in 63 B.C.

Simon was killed in 134 B.C. and his son John Hyrcanus inherited the Priesthood. He continued as a political leader and extended his territory. When he died in 104 B.C., the headship of Israel remained in the Hasmonean line, and his younger son Alexander Jannaeus eventually marked the course of Israel until 78 B.C. He was the first who titled himself 'King' and thus further advanced the secularization of the high priestly office. (Russel 1965, 33) During the reign of Hyrcanus and Jannaeus, the division among the Jews between the Hellenicizers and the pious people grew even stronger.

After a short reign of Salome Alexandra (78-69 B.C.), the Hasmonean Dynasty ends with a battle for the throne between the two brothers Hyrcanus II and Aristobulus II, which eventually gave reason for Pompey to intervene and invade Palestine in 63 B.C.

D. The Roman Period (63 B.C.-A.D. 132)

The freedom and independence from Greece gained under the leadership of the Maccabeans about eighty years before was now lost to the Romans. “From that time forward the spirit of Jewish nationalism sprang into revolt and continued right down to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Jewish state in A.D. 70.” (Russel 1965, 35)

Antipater Herod supported Pompey and then shifted his loyalty to the succeeding Emperor Julius Caesar. As a reward, Caesar granted him Roman citizenship and made him governor of Judea. His son Herod ‘the Great’ was later appointed king by the Roman senate in 40 B.C. He secured his kingship by military force in 37 B.C. and ruled until his unmourned death in 4 B.C. After him, three of his sons were appointed by Augustus to succeed his rule. (cf. Josephus n.d., Jewish War, II.6.3)

Jesus lived in Galilee under the rule of Herod Antipas (4 B.C.-A.D. 39). Archelaus who was made ethnarch of Judea was soon replaced by a Roman official. With few exceptions, Palestine was then for the most part governed by Roman procurators. Jesus was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and the Jewish revolt in Jerusalem broke out under the oppression of Albinus and Gessius Florus. (Josephus n.d., Jewish War, II.14)

The Jewish War started in A.D. 66 and reached its climax at the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70. A second revolt started by Simon bar Kochba in A.D. 132 was equally unsuccessful, and the nation Israel ceased to exist until 1948.

3. The Condition in First-Century Palestine

A. Hellenistic Influence

Alexander the Great's ambitious policy to unite the area he conquered into one uniform empire by one universal language and culture had a huge impact on Palestine that reached into the first century. Alexander and his successors installed the Greek language and founded Greek city-states ('polis') like Athens or Corinth. There were about thirty 'polis' in Palestine. (Roetzel 2002, 109) Many cities were modeled after the Greek 'polis' like Samaria. (Niswonger 1988, 24) Greek architecture flourished, Greek arts, philosophy and science developed and Greek literature abounded. Alexandria in Egypt with its library became the intellectual center of that time. It was in Alexandria where the Hebrew Bible was translated into the Greek 'Septuagint'.

The external environment of the region only set the parameters for the internal shaping of the people's thought world. The Greek culture spread from city to city and challenged a Jewish culture that was contrary in many terms. The Greeks emphasized on the present rather than eternal life. They searched for the beauties of life. Athletes presented themselves naked in the gymnasiums (gr. '*gymnos*' = 'naked').

Homosexuality prevailed, and cultic rituals like 'sacred prostitution' later led to the struggle of the church with sexual immorality, especially in Corinth. Greek polytheism met Jewish monotheism. The Greeks believed in various gods and goddesses but had no relationship to them. (cf. Schaff 1997, I.11) Such Hellenistic religious beliefs later contributed to the complex syncretism of the first century.

Gnosticism was one of the strongest religious movements in the Hellenistic world. Core point is a radical dualism between (good) spirit and (evil) matter and thus it excludes a belief in the incarnation doctrine of Jesus Christ. Besides, Palestine suffered from religious forces such as the mystery religions, Cynicism, Stoicism, and primitive folk religions with its multiple superstitions and rituals. In summary, the minds of the people in Palestine were polluted by syncretistic beliefs of various kinds. John in his gospel, his three epistles and at many points Paul and Peter in their letters address and correct heretical teaching related to Gnosticism or other movements.

The Alexandrian Philo Judaeus is the supreme example of a Jew who tried to interpret his faith in light of the first-century Hellenistic culture he was living in. He tried to reinterpret Moses in Platonic terms by way of allegorical exegesis. (Russel 1965, 18) Even the translation of the Hebrew Bible, the Septuagint, was influenced by Hellenistic thinking at some points. (Ibid., 16)

B. Roman Oppression

The Romans continued what the Greek had begun. They built paved roads that formed a modern infrastructure. Under the protection of Roman power, travel became safe. Ambitious building programs shaped the landscape in honor of the Emperor. Roman towns were likely to have a market place, baths, a theatre, a stadium and a gymnasium with an architectural style adopted from the Greeks. The imperial cult matured since the time of Augustus and temples were built all over the empire. (Goodman 1997, 130)

In some provinces client kings were installed like in Palestine, where Herod the Great ruled from 37-4 B.C. King Herod was hated by the Jews. He was of Idumean ancestry that identified him with the Edomites of Old Testament days. He collaborated with Rome as a reliable ally and friend. (cf. Josephus n.d., Jewish War, I.20.1) He spent large sums of money for Hellenistic structures with the outstanding example of Caesarea that was built in dedication to Caesar. Its theater, amphitheater, hippodrome, and the temple to Augustus were constructed after the Roman model. (Niswonger 1988, 48) Likewise Herod shaped the cities in and around Palestine.

In favor of the Jews he started to magnificently reconstruct the Temple in Jerusalem. Work begun in 20 B.C. and did not finish until A.D. 64, six years before its destruction. However, Herod promoted Hellenism even in Jerusalem, e.g. by building

a costly theater as Josephus records. (Antiquities, XV.8.1) He installed the offering of sacrifices to Caesar and set a Roman eagle above the Temple entrance that was later pulled down by the Jews. He celebrated the Olympic Games, built temples in support of Emperor Worship and even allowed the erection of statues to himself. Herod caused the Jews to hate the foreign rule and thus contributed to a Jewish nationalistic commitment that eventually ended in revolt. (Russel 1965, 37)

Economically, most of the people in Palestine were poor peasants who worked hard for survival. The Romans burdened the people with high direct and indirect taxes (Goodman 1997, 100f.) and stirred up the spirit of rebellion. Taxes were levied by local tax farmers who in many cases exploited the people to gain profit. The extensive building programs of King Herod required corresponding finances. Later, the oppressive rule of the Roman procurators like Pontius Pilate, who even seized funds from the sacred temple treasury in times of financial need, added to their distress. (Roetzel 2002, 29) At the time of Jesus' ministry, the condition of Palestine was a mixture of political instability and insecurity due to the foreign rule and poverty.

C. Jewish Division

Since Alexander spread his culture over the empire, the Jewish people were divided between those who adapted to Hellenism and those who defended their Judaism. The latter were formerly called the 'Hasidims.' They appear in 1 Maccabees 2:42 as those

who joined Mattathias into the desert and supported his rebellion. In the course of time, the division developed and formed sects. At the time of Jesus, basically five groups of Jewish people lived in Palestine – the Sadducees, the Pharisees, the Essenes, the Zealots and the simple ‘people of the land.’

The Sadducees saw themselves as descendants from Zadok who was priest under David. Similar to the Hasmonean priest-rulers, they were in control of the Temple as well as in political control, though at the time of Jesus such power was limited to the extent granted by the Roman Emperor. (Goodman 1997, 138) They made up the majority of the Jewish court (‘Sanhedrin’) and served as the provincial magistrates. By supporting Rome they maintained their own important position. The priests were rather wealthy and lived in houses of Hellenistic style. (Berlin 2004, 50f.) In terms of religion, they centered on the Torah and did not believe in resurrection.

The Pharisees, in contrast, originated from the former Hasidim party. They not only joined with Mattathias for revolt but stood firm in their Judaistic piety when the succeeding Hasmonean rulers tended to strive for political domination. They constantly protested against Hellenism and separated themselves from the Hellenizers. Some Pharisees were members of the Sanhedrin since the reign of Salome Alexandra in the first century B.C. However, their primary base of operation was not the Temple in Jerusalem but the synagogues in and around Palestine. From the religious

standpoint, they were the most influential party among the Jews. Apart from the Law and the Prophets of the Old Testament they believed in a body of oral traditions as divine authority originally revealed to Moses. They laid strong emphasis on purity.

Similar to the Pharisees the Essenes separated themselves from the secular people but formed a new sect with even stricter rules and rituals especially in regard to purity. Most scholars identify them with the Qumran community that withdrew to the Judean desert near the Dead Sea. (Dupont-Sommer 1973, 11f.) Some of the discovered scrolls expose their ascetic lifestyle, e.g. the *Scroll of the Rule*, which is confirmed by the account of Josephus on the life of the Essenes in *Jewish War*, chapter VIII. In addition, unearthed pottery and tombs at Qumran give us some indications about the rigorous religious practices of the separate community. (Berlin 2004, 49)

The Zealots are the “spiritual children of the Maccabees.” (Russel 1965, 53) They were the pious nationalists who continued to advocate a ‘holy war’ to defend Judaism. Josephus claims that they were responsible for the outbreak of the Jewish War. (Antiquities, XVIII.1.1) In summary, “as the Sadducees had their spiritual roots in the extreme Hellenizing influences of the early Maccabean period, so the Pharisees, Essenes and Zealots had their spiritual roots in the conservative reaction against those same influences in the same period.” (Farmer 1956, 189)

The vast majority of the Jews were simple ‘people of the land’, however. Although rooted in Judaism, too, they were mostly poor and hard-working farmers with little time or opportunity to concern about religious matters as deeply as the parties described above, thus they were rather open to Hellenistic tendencies and neglected by the pious Jews who denounced them to be ritually unclean. (cf. Roetzel 2002, 59f.) Jesus encountered and welcomed these people, particularly in Galilee.

D. Jewish Unity

Despite such diversity, Israel was ever united by a covenant relationship with God. The Jews centered on the Temple in Jerusalem and defended the Law. In 167 B.C., Antiochus IV Epiphanes challenged their identity by issuing a decree.

“The king had sent letters by messengers unto Jerusalem and the cities of Juda that they should follow the strange laws of the land, and forbid burnt offerings, and sacrifice, and drink offerings, in the temple; and that they should profane the sabbaths and festival days; and pollute the sanctuary and holy people; set up altars, and groves, and chapels of idols, and sacrifice swine's flesh, and unclean beasts; that they should also leave their children uncircumcised, and make their souls abominable with all manner of uncleanness and profanation; to the end they might forget the law, and change all the ordinances. And whosoever would not do according to the commandment of the king, he said, he should die.” (1 Macc 1:44-50)

This time was the turning point for many Jews to strongly defend their Jewish identity and the life of Israel. (Hellermann 2003, 402) People suffered martyrdom but remained faithful to the covenant. In 2 Maccabees 6 and 7 we read about an aged man and a mother with her seven sons who gloriously died martyrdom after refusal to eat unclean food. The Jews grew stronger in the same spirit and about two hundred years later refused to admit to Caesar's image. When Pilate threatened them with the sword, the Jews "...fell down in vast numbers together, and exposed their necks bare, and cried out that they were sooner ready to be slain, than that their law should be transgressed." (Josephus, n.d., Jewish War, II.9.3) When Petronius soon afterwards was charged by Caesar to set up his image, the people responded "that if he would place the images among them, he must first sacrifice the whole Jewish nation; and that they were ready to expose themselves, together with their children and wives, to be slain." (Ibid., II.10.4) Such impressive accounts illustrate the strong nationalism that developed before the first century, derived from their common belief in one God.

The intertestamental writings 1 and 2 Maccabees and Jubilees testify that not only the Law but also the Jerusalem Temple was a central symbol of Jewish identity. (cf. Hellermann 2003) People came together on mass pilgrimages and were unified by the sacrificial cult and other rituals that were practiced in the Temple according to the Law. The rededication of the Temple by the Maccabeans was a significant national event

and is since then celebrated as Hanukkah every year. The later Jewish revolt broke out with the Maccabean victory in mind, and the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in A.D. 70 was a severe hit on Judaism.

The Jews were further bound by a present expectation of the promised Messiah. Among the Dead Sea Scrolls, the *Scroll of the Rule* (1QS, IX.11) and the *Damascus Document* (CD, B.II.1) teach about the 'Anointed of Aaron and Israel' who would come after the appearance of the 'Prophet.' The Qumran people were waiting for a Prophet, a Priest-Messiah and a Davidic King-Messiah. (Dupont-Sommer 1973, 94f.; Kent 1962, 36; cf. Deut 18:15, Ps 110:4, Zech 9:9) Such belief is later exposed as erroneous by Jesus himself who embodies all three messianic figures. The Roman yoke of oppression stirred up the longing for an earthly King who would lead Israel into political freedom. Jesus, however, did not meet their expectation. The lack of scriptural understanding is one of the reasons for the Jewish rejection of the actual Messiah Jesus Christ. (cf. Story 1948; Jn 5:38)

4. Summary

The study of New Testament history is of great value for the understanding of the gospel accounts. Jesus encountered all types of Jewish parties in various situations and responded to the needs and hopes of the people who were influenced by Hellenism and oppressed by Roman power. The political setting of the Roman period followed

the Hasmonean period of freedom that was established by revolt. Jewish nationalism fostered the expectation of a political Messiah. Jesus was challenged to correct false beliefs and to welcome all people based on unconditional love.

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