

Darkening Valleys

- living between the testaments

COMING OF THE GREEKS

Alexander the Great

At the close of Nehemiah and Ezra's ministry the Persian Empire had years of power ahead but a decline had set in. We also move into a period in which we know little about events in the now semi-autonomous province of Judea. However, a new era was dawning for those with eyes to see it.

The years of Persian rule had been paralleled with a period of internal conflict in Greece, the city-states at war with one another. However, by 338 BC Philip of Macedon had brought the Greeks under his control and had begun planning a campaign of conquest against the Persians. Two years later he was murdered, but his brilliant young son Alexander took control. No one could have anticipated the consequences. Within a few short years he would not only break Persian power but also establish a Greek empire of even greater proportions and significance. In 334 BC he crossed into Asia Minor, subdued Syria, Palestine and Egypt and by 326 BC had taken his campaign beyond the Indus River where his army seems to have refused to go any further. In 324, while preparing to invade Arabia, Alexander caught the fever and died in Babylon, weakened by the luxurious life of conquest. He was only 32 years of age and one of the greatest military conquerors that history has ever seen.

Vision of Hellenism

Alexander had been the pupil of the philosopher Aristotle and had a passion for everything Greek. He saw Greek culture as the means by which the east and west could be united. While at his death Alexander did not leave a political unity, as we shall see, he did however leave a cultural unity which was to last more than a 1000 years.

In all the new territories he conquered he encouraged his soldiers to marry local women. Koine Greek became the *lingua franca*. Greek life was essentially urban, and the *polis* ('the city') became in focus of life wherever Hellenism spread, a beacon and womb for Greek culture throughout the Orient. It was an environment that emphasised freedom and everything that made for the 'good life'. There was the market place for public affairs and justice, the gymnasium for physical exercise and special social privileges, the hippodrome for chariot races and the stadium for foot races. Hellenism had 'humanism' at its heart. While the gods were important, in practical terms the focus was upon man and his ability and enjoyment.

Once the *polis* was established in a local area it was guaranteed that the influence of Greek culture would seep into the surrounding countryside gently but irresistibly. Local deities were easily identified with the many gods of the Greek pantheon and so religious ideas were unified. While the Greeks made military conquest their cultural invasion was much more significant. While in turn they would fall to the Romans, it is Greek culture that would be the dominating influence. We shall see that the subtle attractiveness of Hellenism, with its polytheism and its emphasis upon the good life, will present a massive crisis for the Jews and will shape their destiny in important ways.



Ptolemies

At Alexander's death his great empire was divided between four of his generals. The little province of Judea found herself on the boundary between Seleucus in the north and Ptolemy whose power base was Egypt in the south.

Initially Ptolemy, who entered Jerusalem in 320 BC, controlled Judea. While he deported a considerable number of Jews from Jerusalem to his capital Alexandria in Egypt, the inhabitants of Judea, with a few exceptions, were well treated. And while the Seleucid and Ptolemaic armies marched against each other along the coastal road Judea was not directly affected by these wars until the end of the third century.

Building Alexandria in Egypt was one of the great accomplishments of Alexander the Great. Under Ptolemaic rule large numbers of Jews began to live in the city, enjoying the economic advantages and freedom to follow their faith unmolested. Within several generations Jews in the city gave up Hebrew and spoke Greek like everyone else. This brought a need for the Hebrew scriptures to be translated into Greek. This task was begun c.250 BC with work on the Pentateuch, but probably took 150 years to complete the Prophets and the Writings as well. This important translation has become known as the Septuagint (LXX).

'ABOMINATION OF DESOLATION'

Seleucids

Increasingly the Seleucids in the north brought pressure to control Palestine and in 198 BC, under Antiochus III 'the Great', Judea found herself under Seleucid control. Again she was quite well treated by her new Greek masters; at least during the early days of their rule.

It is at this time that the tensions within the Jewish community to compromise with the influence of Jewish culture began to show themselves clearly. At the time when Judea came under Seleucid control Simon from the family of Onias (Zadokite) was the High Priest. He had great support from Jews who deplored any Hellenistic influence, which threatened to erode the Hebrew faith. These pious people increasingly became recognised as a definite party within the community, known as the Hasidic ('pure' or 'loyal ones'). In contrast to Simon and the Oniads there were distinguished families like the Tobiads who had assimilated Hellenism and wanted Jerusalem to become a Greek polis. Everyone was feeling the tensions in the Jewish community.

In 175 BC Antiochus IV came to power. He was someone of erratic temperament and a passion for Hellenism. He saw himself as the incarnation of the god Zeus and so took the title 'Epiphanes' (lit. 'manifestation'). Although he was an able ruler and liked by many of his subjects some twisted his title to 'Epimanes' (lit. 'the madman'). With his coming to power dark days lay ahead for the Jewish people.

The coming of Antiochus IV to rule coincides with a power struggle for the High Priesthood in Jerusalem. The legitimate High Priest Onias III was ousted from office in 174 BC by the intrigue of his own brother Jason who promised Antiochus that he would turn Jerusalem into a Greek city in return for the title. True to his word he set up a gymnasium within the shadow of the Temple and encouraged young Jewish men, including a significant number



of young priests, to become part of it. The Hasidic and others were scandalised to see young Jews wrestling and discus throwing completely naked, some even going so far as to attempt to remove the marks of their circumcision.

In 171 BC Menelaus, the captain of the Temple, out-bid Jason for the office of High Priest from Antiochus, even though he was not even from a priestly family. Jason escaped to trans-Jordan.

Abomination of Desolation

In 169 BC Antiochus involved himself in the affairs of Egypt. The Romans moved in as 'protectors' and demanded his withdrawal. Antiochus had been a hostage of the Romans in his youth and knew and respected their power. Not only was this a humiliation, but also the sign of where real authority now lay in the ancient world.

Amid false rumors that Antiochus was in fact dead Jason chose this moment to regain the High Priesthood. Though Jason was unscrupulous and Hellenising his brother Onias was now dead and he came from a priestly family. However, enraged by his humiliation by the Romans, Antiochus saw the change as a revolt against his authority and sent his soldiers to Jerusalem to reinstate Menelaus. The city was subdued with bloodshed, Greek troops were garrisoned within the city, citizens were put under martial law and some were sold into slavery.

Antiochus was determined to turn Judea into a Greek city-state and force the stubborn Jews to add Yahweh to the Greek pantheon of gods and embrace Greek culture. The governor Apollonius was put in charge of the task. The walls of the city were demolished. A new citadel, Acra, was built to dominate over the Temple area; troops were garrisoned in it and it became the acropolis to the new civic body in Jerusalem, Hellenising Jews enrolled as citizens.

The next task was to Hellenise the Jewish population by force. Temple sacrifice was terminated, scriptures were burnt, the study of the Law forbidden, Sabbath-keeping and festivals were abolished, food laws and circumcision became illegal. All infringements were punishable by death. The pagan population was encouraged to force Jews to eat swine's flesh.

In December 167 BC an altar to the Olympian Zeus was erected in the Temple, unclean animals were sacrificed upon it and Jews were forced to celebrate the feast of Dionysus. The Olympian Zeus with whom Yahweh was being identified had long been linked with *Baal Shamayim* ('Lord of Heaven'). Pious Jews changed the name to *shiqqus shomem*, the 'appalling horror' or the 'abomination of desolation', by which this event is now known.

Maccabean revolt

In all this Antiochus only managed to stiffen Jewish resistance against Hellenism even more. The centre of resistance came, of course, from the Hasidic. The price of faithfulness to Yahweh was high, many died, thousands fled into the wilderness. Some, discovered hiding in caves on the Sabbath would not fight even though swords were at hand. There can be little doubt that it was in days like these that the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead became an important article of faith in Hasidic theology. Though

the seeds go back to Abraham (cf Lk 20:38) it took persecution to sharpen its implications and be a source of courage.

It was the village of Modein, in the Judean hills, that became the flash point. Greek soldiers demanded that all the inhabitants assemble and sacrifice to Zeus. Mattathias, the aged priest, not only refused to sacrifice but also killed the soldiers who tried to force him and a Jew who was prepared to compromise. With a cry, "Whoever is zealous for the Torah and the Covenant let them follow after me!" he escaped into the hills with his five strong sons. The revolt had begun.

Many joined them. Judas, the third son of Mattathias, welded these Jews into a fighting force. With his nickname 'Maccabeus' ('the hammer') he led a guerrilla war against the Greeks who vastly outnumbered him. With God on their side and Antiochus fighting wars elsewhere in his kingdom, at the same time, the Maccabeans won a series of amazing victories. On 25th of Kislev (December) 164 BC, exactly three years to the month after the 'abomination of desolation', the temple was cleansed, true worship to Yahweh restored and the 'Feast of Dedication' (Hanukkah) was celebrated.

JUDAH AND THE HASMONEANS

Struggle continues

Rededicating the Temple was just the beginning. By 163 BC Judas had begun the task of reclaiming back everything that remained of Jewish heritage that had been lost. But the fight against the Greeks and opposition from Hellenising Jews proved almost too much. In fact when Judas was killed in the pass of Beth-horon in 160 BC his cause appeared to be lost. Apart from the Temple being dedicated to Yahweh and the Jews having freedom of worship there was little difference from the days of Antiochus IV. The fact that everything was not lost was due to the hard core of Hasmonaeans refusing to give in, and dissension and weakening in Greek rule. It was Judas' strategic genius that made it possible for the statesmanship of his brother Simon to eventually win the day. Judas and his successors are often referred to as the 'Hasmonaeans' a title taken from the family name of his father Matathias ben Hasmon

Simon the statesman

Jonathan succeeded Judas as leader of the nationalist Jews with the help of his brother Simon. He lacked the military prowess of Judas and the political acumen of Simon. He was killed in 143 BC. Simon consolidated his position. In 142 BC he gained immunity from taxes and the Jews declared their independence. In 141 BC he was made High Priest with hereditary rights. We see an independent Jewish state emerging in which the civil head and military leader was also the High Priest. However, Simon was not allowed to die in peace and was treacherously slain in 134 BC.

Hasmonean rulers

Simon's son, John Hyrcanus succeeded him to the High Priesthood. The first six years of his reign saw Judea overrun once more by the Greeks; the walls of Jerusalem laid waste, heavy taxation and hostages taken. However, in 128 BC Seleucid power had been so weakened that he could declare independence once more. Hyrcanus began to extend the territory to include Samaria (destroying the Temple on Mount Gerizzim), and Idumaea (it is



from here Herod the Great would gain power). In fact under Hyrcanus and his successors the Jews experienced almost seventy years of independence. So confident were they that they began to speak of themselves as 'kings'; but these 'priest-kings' were not of Davidic line and so led to the anger of the Hasidic Jews.

JEWISH SECTS

Tensions and factions

For some time now we have identified tensions and groups within the Jewish community, but events during the Hasmonean dynasty and beyond begin to identify some of them more clearly. So this is a good place to comment upon them briefly:

□ **Pharisees:** We have seen that when the crisis with Hellenism began to affect the Jewish community those who were zealous for covenant traditions stood together as the Hasidic. The Pharisees sprang from this group. When the Hasmonean rulers began to take the title 'king' strongest opposition came from Hasidic who called themselves 'Pharisees' (meaning 'expounder of the Law', or 'separatist', or from Persian 'innovator'). They were purely religious, not a political sect, drawn largely from the middle class. They were destined to influence the faith for some three centuries. They were supporters of tradition, yet believers in the kingdom of God, resurrection, angels and demons. Their main sphere of influence was the synagogue where they taught and interpreted the Torah, bringing it into every day life. Many of the scribes were Pharisees, reading the Torah and interpreting it into everyday speech. Pharisees were in danger of legalism, formalism and externalism; yet they had a spirit of true devotion. Pharisees were about five percent of the Judean population.

□ **Sadducees:** In contrast to the Pharisees, the Sadducees represented the clear tradition of compromise that went back to those on the fringe of the Hellenising movement during the early days of the Seleucid era. Their name is said to come from *syndikoi*, those Greek citizens of Athens who rigorously defended the status quo against innovation. The wealthy aristocracy, merchants, government officials and especially the Jerusalem priesthood represented among them. They were very conservative, maintaining the existing regime was the force that bound them together. They acknowledged the supremacy of the Torah but not the binding authority of the oral law (as the Pharisees did). For them the Torah found fulfillment in the Temple functions. Pharisees saw the Torah as central; Sadducees saw it as a circumference within which foreign Hellenistic practices could find a place. Sadducees were about one percent of the Judean population.

□ **Zealots:** The term 'Zealot' for an identifiable group does not occur until the Jewish War in 66 BC, but there were those in Judea whose spiritual and emotional roots went back to the conflicts of the Maccabean era; Jewish patriots motivated by deep religious convictions. There are reasons for believing they had planned teaching that was more than political ideas (ie. Josephus calls some of their leaders *sophists*). As Rome increased its hold upon Judea so their movement grew, their opposition coming from a zeal for the Torah, not mere patriotism. While the movement obviously attracted some disreputable and even criminal elements the heart of the movement was spiritually inspired. They were passionate about freedom, would call no person 'Lord', would not pay tax to any king, made light of suffering and death, had a passionate devotion to the Torah even to the cost of their blood. Zealots were about one percent of the Judean population.

□ **Essenes:** Another, and more radical, child of the Hasidic movement who developed an ascetic and closely-knit community lifestyle. Most lived in waste places like the western



end of the Dead Sea, though some appear to have been found in towns and even in the cities. Their name seems to cover a number of different groups with similar aims. Like the Pharisees much time was given to the study of the Torah, however their interpretations were much more visionary. This was the inspiration of the movement, seeing a prophetic interpretation of the present in the scriptures. The community at Qumran (known from the Dead Sea scrolls) appears to date from c.200 BC or earlier, as a result of the work of the Teacher of Righteousness. Bound together in a 'new covenant' they waited to play their part in the final conflict with the forces of evil.

ROMANS AND EMPIRE

Roman Empire

□ Wings of the Eagle

By 200 BC the city of Rome had firmly established her influence upon the world scene. Her power and influence placed the Greeks under increasing strain:

- Rome held supremacy in Italy
- Treaty with Pergamum gave Rome control of most of Asia Minor by 133 BC
- War with Hannibal led to Carthage becoming a Roman province in 146 BC
- Both Egypt and Greece enjoyed Rome's 'protection' by 168 BC
- The rest of Asia Minor was conquered by Pompey in 66 BC

□ Might of Rome

In 31 BC, at the battle of Actium, Octavian became the undisputed master of the Roman world. By 27 BC Rome had passed from being simply a Republic to become an Empire. It had reached all its natural frontiers; the Rhine, the Danube, the Euphrates and the Sahara desert. *Pax Romana* was established everywhere. Octavian took the title 'Augustus' and inaugurated a new era was. Everyone looked to Rome for good government and security.

Jewish State

□ Independence lost

In 66 BC Pompey moved into Syria and Rome cast a shadow across Judah and her independence. Strife between two Hasmoneans (Aristobulus 2nd and Hyrcanus 2nd), played directly into Pompey's hands. Both sought his support. Hyrcanus, supported by the Idumaeen Antipater was prepared to accept the Romans as allies. Aristobulus resisted.

In 63 BC Pompey attacked Jerusalem and conquered it. He even entered the Holy of Hollies. Freedom won and held at such a price by the Maccabees and their descendants was lost overnight. Aristobulus was taken captive to Rome, Hyrcanus was simply made High Priest, and Judea was added to the province of Syria under the control of its Roman governor. Antipater worked for his own advantage by supporting Roman power in western Asia. With these events Jewish nationalism was fired once again, and was to continue to burn until the events of the Jewish War between 66-70 CE.

□ Antipater

In 49 BC there was civil war in Rome. In 48 BC Antipater supported Julius Caesar against Pompey in his troubles in Alexandria. Being made governor of Judea and gaining considerable privileges for Jews in both the province and the Diaspora rewarded him.



In spite of the benefits Antipater gained for the Jews he was bitterly hated by them; both because he depended upon the Romans for power and was an Idumaeen. On coming to power Antipater made his two sons, Phasael and Herod, the military prefects of Judea and Galilee respectively. Herod hastily established and increased his power base in the northern area. In 43 BC his enemies poisoned Antipater and Herod moved swiftly to take revenge.

□ Herod comes to power

The death of Caesar on the Ides of March 44 BC threw the Roman world into the melting pot. By 42 BC Anthony and Octavian had gained control of Roman power, and Herod and Phasael were made joint tetrarchs of Judea. However, in 40 BC the Parthians overran Syria; they supported Antigonus, a Hasmonean prince (son of Aristobulus 2nd), in his claim for the Judean throne. Phasael committed suicide and Herod escaped for his life to Rome.

The events, however, proved to be to Herod's advantage as Anthony and Octavian gave him the title 'king of the Jews'; a title he was to hold for 33 years. Inspired by his new status he returned to Judea and by 37 BC had the territory under his control. He persuaded Anthony to behead Antigonus; the first king the Romans executed. The Hasmonean dynasty was finally ended and Herod 'the Great' was firmly installed.

'WHEN THE TIME WAS FULLY COME ...'

World primed for the coming of Jesus

What we see during this period is that God has perfectly primed the whole environment of the ancient Mediterranean world for his climatic event of history:

- The Romans had established stable government, political peace, justice and administration (*Pax Romana*)
- There were excellent communications and good travel; added to which the Empire used *koine* Greek as the *lingua franca*, the common market language
- Everywhere there was discontent with the old religions, people were receptive to ideas and faith that would satisfy their 'soul hunger'
- The practice of Judaism was scattered throughout the Mediterranean world and beyond; every significant centre had its synagogue where Hebrew monotheism was openly taught
- Surprisingly Judaism was *religia licita*, a legal religion, which because of their cooperation with the Roman emperors freed them from the obligation to worship the Emperor as god; they simply had to pray for him
- Every Jewish synagogue attracted Gentiles drawn to its monotheism but not yet fully committed Jews; these 'God-fearers' were perfectly prepared and open to hear a message of salvation based upon 'grace' and not 'law'
- The Greek of the Septuagint made the Hebrew scriptures available in the market language of the Roman world to anyone who would read it
- The theological thinking and speculation of the Jews was electric with eschatological and end-time speculation

We stand at a unique moment in world history, and *the* unique moment of salvation history. God is about to make his move, 'the time has fully come' (Gal 4:4), and everything



was perfectly prepared. The majority would be taken by surprise but there would be those few whose spirits were also prepared and ready to respond as well.

Questions

1. What is the continuing impact of Hellenism on our culture to this day?
2. In a story that tells of the Jews as a struggling minority what can we learn?
3. What do you make of the reflections on how the social, political and spiritual dimensions of the Mediterranean world seemed to be perfectly prepared for the coming of Jesus as the Messiah?

Reading and Resources

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