



### 3. After the Restoration and Before The Birth of Jesus

The history that comes to us from the Old Testament (or Hebrew Scriptures if you prefer) ends sometime around 400 BC. If we take the year 0 as being when Jesus was born (which is probably not quite right) this leaves roughly 400 years of Biblical silence. It should be noted that the books referred to as the Apocrypha are not silent on this time period, but more about that in a later lesson. The narrative that begins with the creation of the world in Genesis ends with the restoration of the Temple in Ezra/Nehemiah, which should make us wonder what exactly was going on in this time frame. The answer turns out to be quite a bit. If we see the Old Testament narrative as largely about a group of people living in geographic proximity, the last 400 years before the coming of Jesus are still about a group of people, but the geography gets much larger and what defines Israel and who rules it becomes much more fluid.

We left last lesson with the return from exile in Babylon and the rebuilding of the temple, but the thing is that not everyone returned. Those who stayed behind are believed to have been somewhere between 800,000 and 1,200,000 at their peak. Babylonia would remain the second largest center of Judaism for centuries. As stated in a previous lesson the Babylonian Captivity sparked much soul searching on the part of the Jewish people as to why such a thing had happened. One of the conclusions reached was that it had happened because of lack of adherence to God's laws and commandments. As a result in post-exilic Judaism much of the focus "emphasized the duty of following out the prescriptions of the Law with punctilious exactitude."<sup>1</sup> It should also be noted that during this time the Jewish people largely existed within the Persian Empire (also known as the Achaemenid Empire or first Persian Empire). This lasted up until 332, when the Persian Empire was overthrown by Alexander the Great (or not so great depending on your perspective). And while this brought changes, Judea "continued to exist as a political unit. But there was now greater opportunity to move out of the cramped conditions of Palestine, and trade and settle throughout the Hellenistic world."<sup>2</sup> As a result many Jews settled in other areas within the Greek empire and many from outside of the Jewish faith settled within Palestine. In practical terms this means the two cultures became more entwined, where the Hellenistic Greeks picked up some ideas from Judaism and The Jewish people picked up some ideas from the Hellenistic Greeks. This, coupled with the renewed vigor for the Law, also brought with the feeling that the Jews were watering down their beliefs and their worship of God and adopting too much of a foreign culture. According to the book of Maccabees (found in the Apocrypha) the high priesthood started to let things slide stating that one particular high priest, "with alacrity founded a gymnasium right under the citadel, and he induced the noblest of the young men to wear the Greek hat. There was such an extreme of Hellenization and increase in the adoption of foreign ways because of the surpassing wickedness of Jason, who was ungodly and no high priest, that the priests were no longer intent upon their service at the altar. Despising the sanctuary and neglecting the sacrifices, they hastened to take part in the unlawful proceedings in the wrestling arena after the call to the discus, disdaining the honors prized by their fathers and putting the highest value upon Greek forms of prestige." These rumblings would come to a head with the Greek monarch Antiochus IV Epiphanes who, "for reasons as much material as cultural – to move too far too fast towards the complete Hellenization of the Jewish people."<sup>3</sup> The ham-fistedness with which Antiochus IV set out to Hellenize the Greeks is still a marvel to behold. In 168 he set up an altar to Zeus in the court of the Temple at Jerusalem. Writing in 75 AD the Roman Historian Josephus said that in addition Antiochus IV, "offered swine upon the altar, and sprinkled the temple with the broth of their flesh; in order to violate the laws of the Jews, and the religion they derived from their forefathers."<sup>4</sup> With such provocations it is fairly easy to guess the sentence that follows. It reads in reference to the swine sacrifice, "for which reason our nation made war with him; and would never be reconciled to him."<sup>5</sup> This rebellion found a leader in the person of Judas Maccabaeus. They fought a roughly seven-year rebellion, which relied heavily on guerilla warfare. In this they destroyed pagan altars and directed much of their ire against Hellenized Jews. Ultimately they prevailed and restored the Temple. The story goes that upon entering the Temple those under the leadership of Judas Maccabeus could only find a small jug of oil that remained

<sup>1</sup> WHC Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 15.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>4</sup> Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews — Book XIII*. Accessed January 15, 2019.  
<http://penelope.uchicago.edu/josephus/ant-13.html>

<sup>5</sup> WHC Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 17.

uncontaminated. This oil should have only been enough to sustain the menorah for one day, but miraculously it lasted for eight days. This is the event that is commemorated by Hanukah every year.

Two other things happened as a result of the actions of Antiochus Epiphanes that would have long-term implications. The first is that with hostile neighbors Judas Maccabeus, “having chosen Eupolemus son of John, of the family of Accos, and Jason son of Eleazar, Judas sent them to Rome to make a treaty of friendship and alliance with these people, in the hope of being rid of the yoke, for they could see that Greek rule was reducing Israel to slavery. The envoys made the lengthy journey to Rome and presented themselves before the Senate with their formal proposal: ‘Judas Maccabaeus and his brothers, with the Jewish people, have sent us to you to conclude a treaty of alliance and peace with you, and to enroll ourselves as your allies and friends.’ The proposal met with the approval of the senators.” (1 Maccabees 8:17-21) The second thing that happened was that, “Antiochus IV’s rash actions resulted in lasting damage to the relations between the Jews and the pagan kingdoms. The Jewish nation that emerged from the successful wars against him and his successors was self-conscious and intolerant toward all Gentiles whether friendly or unfriendly. It was imbued with a determination to build an even higher ‘barrier around Torah’ than before.”<sup>6</sup>

The next hundred or so years would be marked by a fair amount of fighting, quarrels, invasions and the destruction of Samaria (thus the enmity between Jews and Samaritans at the time of Jesus). In 63 B.C. the Roman General Pompey advanced on Jerusalem and after a three month siege captured the city. Most viewed this as an improvement over the issues with the Greeks and “In the ensuing peace, the Jewish state preserved some vestiges of independence.”<sup>7</sup> The land of Israel would remain with the Roman Empire for the next seven centuries. As you can imagine this led to resentment and “sharpened all the latent antagonism among the Jews against non-Jewish power in their land and inflamed the imagination of some with the hope that the day of deliverance would soon dawn in a vast cataclysmic war. Freedom would be gained through a warrior Messiah of the house of David.”<sup>8</sup>

The last thing about which to be aware of the society into which Jesus would come are the sects and parties that existed at the time. They are as follows: 1. The Herodians: This group while obviously named after Herod and found largely among the wealthier classes includes more than just his direct family and is used more in reference to those who had no problems with Hellenistic culture and were not looking to “get rid” of Rome. 2. Sadducees: While also coming from the wealthier classes this group, “They were deeply conscious of their responsibility for maintain the purity and survival of Judaism and were prepared to sacrifice an inconvenient individual if he appeared to endanger what they believed to be its true interest. Rome had to be accepted as a temporary affliction.”<sup>9</sup> They also did not believe in life after death. 3. Pharisees: They represented the leadership of most of Palestinian Jews. They were laypeople and “considered themselves a godly elite among their fellow citizens.”<sup>10</sup> They opposed kingship or at least felt that it was lesser than priest. They believed in life after death and favored works of mercy and charity towards the poor, but because it was systematized it opened itself up for the criticism that Jesus directed towards it. 4. The Scribes: Were very learned laypeople that brought Torah leaning to a wide section of the people and as a result were greatly revered.

## Questions

1. How can a religion differ based on its geographic location?
2. Part of the explanation for Jewish troubles was lack of adherence to the Law. Do you think this is true?
3. Certain Jews were upset that they were becoming too Greek. How much is religion cultural?
4. Does war have a place in religion? Are there times where it is justified to go to war in order to prevent possible eradication?
5. How should we treat those outside of our religion? Does it vary based on how they treat us?
6. If you were asked to describe what a Messiah should do, what would that look like?

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.,22.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.,23.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.,24.