

Hasmoneans, Herods and the Intertestamental Period

Prolegomena: The birth of Christ, the first Christmas, came at a time of great change, as the Mediterranean world was entering into a new epoch. Rome's preeminence had been established for nearly 200 years but its dominance and rule were chaotic, as the Roman Republic was consumed by civil war and its administration, as well as that of its provinces, was often ad hoc or neglected. Understanding this time period offers a helpful framework to grasping the setting and significance of the events surrounding the birth of Christ, as well as those of His crucifixion and the foundation of the early church. In addition to this, knowledge of the forms of government established in Judea, as well as the leaders (in particular the Herods) yields clarity about the participants in these great events.

- I. The Book of Daniel offers a framework in which to understand the events between the closing of the Old Testament and birth of Christ. The salient parts are found in chapters 2, 7, 8 and 11. These chapters lay out the course of empires that will surround and control Judea until the coming of the Messiah. While all of these chapters have great significance, chapter 2 is a good place to start and lays out an easy path to follow for our purposes.
 - A. Prior to the conquest of Jerusalem in 586, the Jews had been independent and generally free of foreign domination since the days of the Exodus, which likely occurred around 1450 B.C. Now, they were once again under the control of foreign powers, whether in Babylon or back in their own land. Daniel's dream charts the phases of empire that control the land.
 - B. Daniel 2:31-45 describes a dream experienced by Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon. He observes a large statue with a head of gold, chest and arms of silver, stomach and thighs of bronze, legs of iron and feet of iron mixed with clay. Daniel then interprets the dream for him. The different metals correspond to the kingdoms that will control Jerusalem since the conquest of the city by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.
 1. Gold – The Neo-Babylonian Empire ruled over Judea from 586 to 540. In truth, they had controlled the region of Judea since 597 but had allowed the kingdom to still exist with a puppet king, Josiah's son Zedekiah. In 586 Jerusalem was destroyed and a significant portion of the kingdom, including David's descendants, were exiled to Babylon.
 2. Silver – The Persian Empire, also referred to as the Achaemenid Empire, conquered the Neo-Babylonians and incorporated them into their empire, which now grew to the largest empire the world had ever seen. Cyrus the Great, the conqueror of Babylon, allowed the Jews in exile to return to Judea, though many chose to stay in Babylon.
 3. Bronze – The empire of Alexander the Great consumed Persia in a whirlwind of conquest and glory. Greece and Persia had been at war with each other since the Ionian Revolt in 499 but the wars had always been fought around Greece. With Macedonia ascendant and Alexander's unique gifts, the Greeks invaded Persia and conquered its empire in 13 years, ending when Alexander died in 336. His empire was then broken up by the *Diadochi*, his generals who went on to establish kingdoms carved out of Alexander's conquests.
 4. Iron – The Greek kingdoms, like the rest of the Mediterranean world and beyond, were all devoured by the inexorable march of Rome. Many of the conquests of Rome were achieved while it was still under a republican form of government while more were later added after its evolution into the Roman Empire. It is in the phase (or possibly the next) that Christ was born.
 5. Iron and clay – This portion is challenging to interpret and not necessarily germane to the discussion.

II. The details of the Jews history upon their return to the land is complicated, and recounted, in part in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Concurrent with those books are the visions of Daniel, some parts of which he is given a vision of the future course of history as it pertains to Jerusalem, Judea and the surrounding region. In particular, chapters 8 and 11 offer more detail (the latter chapter especially) give a detailed account of what lies ahead. Here individual events and historical figures are discernable and it aligns with ancient historians such as Josephus.

- A. Following the conquest of Babylon by the Achaemenids, the Jews were allowed to return to Judea and rebuild Jerusalem. This return was led by Zerubbabel, Ezra and Nehemiah. The foundations of Jewish society at the time of Christ were a product of these events. It is also notable that in Jeremiah 43, that some of the remaining Jews decide, against God's judgments, to go to Egypt, thus establishing a tenuous presence there.
- B. When Alexander comes to Jerusalem during his conquest of the Persian Empire, he encounters the High Priest and honors him because he believed he had seen a dream in which a man dressed as the High Priest was had assured him he would defeat the Persians. He then offered sacrifice to Yahweh in the temple, under direction from the High Priest. Furthermore, a scroll was shown to Alexander:

"And when the Book of Daniel was showed him wherein Daniel declared that one of the Greeks should destroy the empire of the Persians, he supposed that himself was the person intended. And as he was then glad, he dismissed the multitude for the present." (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 11)

- C. After Alexander's death, his empire was divided up between some of his cadre of generals. These are known as the *Diadochi*. The four main kingdoms to emerge are Antigonid Macedonia, the kingdom of Lysimachus in Thrace, Ptolemaic Egypt and Seleucid Syria. This last constituted the vast majority of Alexander's empire but was also confronted with the most difficult borders to possess and defend.
 - 1. Daniel chapter 11 recounts the struggles of the Kings of the North and the Kings of the South. These are references to the kings and their kingdoms in relation to their positions from the perspective of Jerusalem. Syria lies to the north and Egypt to the south. In a state of perpetual war, the Ptolemies and Seleucids fought for generations over Judea, as it formed the buffer between their kingdoms.
 - 2. Of particular note is the king of north referenced in 11:21-32. This is Antiochus IV Epiphanes, who will inflict his embarrassment and aggression at the Jews as a result of the humiliation inflicted upon him. Antiochus instituted a persecution of the Jews. While in Jerusalem, he entered the temple and sacrificed a pig on the altar, after which, he raided the temple treasury and absconded with a massive amount of treasure. These, as well as related events, led to the revolt of the Maccabees and the establishment of the Hasmonean dynasty.

III. With the end of Daniel 11, the Biblical account of the age between the Testaments goes silent. When the New Testament begins, historically with the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, the state of the world of the Jews has changed considerably. However, to piece the events of how we get from Daniel and Malachi to Luke and Matthew, it requires looking to extra-Biblical sources. There are many that are useful but two of the most important are the aforementioned Josephus as well as the books of the Maccabees, which are a central part of the Apocrypha. Through these, we can ascertain the events of the Maccabean Revolt, the Hasmonean Dynasty and the coming of Rome. These events are the foundations of the world that Christ was born into.

- A. The actions Antiochus IV provoked the Revolt of the Maccabees. This began in 167 B.C. when a rural priest, Mattathias refused to sacrifice to the Greek gods. When a Hellenized Jew stepped forward to do so, Mattathias killed him. He then fled to the mountains with his 5 sons.
 1. Jewish society wrenched by tension between traditional elements who remained loyal to God and practiced the torah and the Hellenized sections of society that had adopted Greek ways of thinking in the wake of Alexander's conquests. These latter groups held the upper hand politically, as they were aligned with the Greek governments in Alexandria and Antioch.
 - a. This is reflected in the struggle for the position of High Priest that was ongoing when Antiochus IV began his persecutions.
 - b. The High Priest at the time was named Onias, who was known to be a devout man. However, his brother Jason bribed Antiochus IV to install him as High Priest instead. Onias was then killed and Jason elevated to the position.
 - c. However, he was soon outbid (or out bribed) by another Hellenized Jew named Menelaus, how became High Priest.
 2. The cultural conflict between the Hellenized Jews and the traditional Jews became a central component in the revolt of the Maccabees, as the revolt was not simply against Antiochus IV and the Seleucid regime, but also over whether or not the Jews and the Temple would be ruled by those who followed torah or by the diktats of Athens and Antioch.
 - B. Following the death of Mattathias in 166, the revolt was led by one of his sons, Judas Maccabeus. He led a guerrilla campaign in the countryside, gathering forces and using speed and mobility to surprise and harass the heavy Greek phalanx used by the Seleucids.
 - C. In 165 Antiochus IV dies while campaigning in Persia. That same year, Judas leads the Jews to victory at the Battle of Emmaus. They enter Jerusalem and cleanse the Temple. It is during this cleansing that the clean menorah oil was said to burn miraculously for 8 days, thus beginning the tradition of Hannukah.
 - D. The Jews lost control of Jerusalem in 160 after the disastrous Battle of Elasa, in which the Seleucids reasserted their dominance in the area around the city. Judas Maccabeus was killed but his brothers picked up his mantle and continue to lead a government in exile in the countryside.
 - E. In 152 the Seleucid Empire was wrecked by civil war. Jonathon Maccabeus reached an agreement with Alexander Balas, whereby semi-autonomy was granted and Jerusalem restored if Jonathon and his partisans fought for Alexander's faction. Jonathon was confirmed as both High Priest and *strategos*, combining the ecclesial and military offices into one position.
 - F. Jonathon was captured and executed by one of the Seleucids claimants in 143. He was succeeded as High Priest by his brother Simon. Simon continued the struggle against the Seleucids before declaring the full independence of the Jews in 140. The Roman Senate recognized the fledgling state in 139. This established the Hasmonean Kingdom, named after the great-grandfather of Mattathias. Simon was assassinated along with his two oldest sons in 135. He was succeeded by his son John Hyrcanus.
- IV. The Hasmonean Dynasty ruled Judea from 140 B.C. to 37 B.C. During their 100 year ascendancy, the offices of High Priest and King were essentially combined. The Hasmoneans were afforded the historical opportunity for independence by the waning might of both the Seleucids and Ptolemies and by the growing, but still far-off strength of Rome.

- A. John Hyrcanus succeeded his father as ruler of Judea. Though his father, uncles and grandfather had been devout and rejected the Hellenization of Jewish culture, John reintroduced it to some degree, siding with them when the traditional elements of Jewish society asked him to relinquish the office of High Priest. This exacerbated the split between the two cultures and fortified the lines between Hellenized Jews (Sadducees) and the traditional Jews (Pharisees).
 - B. Aristobulus I followed John Hyrcanus, who died in 104. However, his rule was short lived and he was succeeded by his brother Alexander Jannaeus. He ruled for 27 years and added much territory to the Hasmonean Kingdom. During his rule, the Sanhedrin was formed.
 - C. After the reign of Alexander Jannaeus, the Hasmoneans lapsed into a period of instability and civil war. The factions were led by Hyrcanus II and Aristobulus II. The former was advised by Antipater the Idumean. The civil war raged from 76 until 63, when the Romans finally arrived.
- V. Prior to 63 B.C. the Roman Republic had been actively engaged in the political events of the eastern Mediterranean. This had begun with the Battle of Magnesia in 190 and had escalated during the reign of Antiochus IV Epiphanes. They had supported the Maccabees and formed a formal relationship with the Hasmoneans in 139. However, it was not until Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus arrived in 63 that the Romans became a physical presence in the region. Rome had finally ended the Seleucid Empire, adding the territory of Syria to the Republic. This naturally led them to neighboring Judea. Their presence there was permanent, though they refrained from formally incorporating Judea into the Republic for quite some time.
- A. When Pompey arrived, he found Hyrcanus II a far more pliable figure. He ousted Aristobulus and allowed Hyrcanus sole rule. However, Antipater was appointed as Procurator. When the king proved too weak and unable to collect taxes, he was demoted to *ethnarch* and Antipater was elevated to rule in his stead.
 - 1. Antipater remained loyal to Pompeius until his defeat in the Civil Wars, at which point he became a strong supporter of Caesar, who granted him Roman citizenship. When Caesar was assassinated, Antipater continued to navigate the changing Roman factions. He brought his sons Phasaël and Herod into the government, delegating regions for them to govern in his name.
 - 2. In 43 he was assassinated and succeeded by his son Herod.
 - B. Though Antipater had started Herodian rule, Herod was the first to rule in his own name (with Roman approval, of course). Herod would leave an indelible stamp on Judea and the history of the world. He plays an important, albeit infamous, role in Matthew and Luke's account of the birth of Christ.
 - 1. Prior to his father's death, Herod married Mariamne, a Hasmonean princess, thus establishing his legitimate claim as king.
 - 2. However, he did not assume the role of High Priest, which Hyrcanus II had lost. Like his father before him, Herod had converted to Judaism.
 - 3. In part to curry favor with the population but also to demonstrate his reputation as devout and to "fit in", Herod undertook massive building projects throughout Judea. The most notable of these is the rebuilding and aggrandizement of temple in Jerusalem.
 - 4. Herod died in 4 B.C. and was succeeded by 3 of his sons and his sister. This arrangement is referred to as the Herodian Tetrarchy. Though these rulers held sway in their own region, all of Judea was still under the thumb of Rome.

- a. Herod's sister Salome was granted some small regions of Judea to rule, notably Gaza and some small areas along the Jordan River.
 - b. Herod Archelaus ruled in the heart of the old Kingdom of Judah.
 - c. Herod Antipas ruled Galilee and the Transjordan.
 - d. Philip controlled the Decapolis, the area east of Galilee.
5. The arrangement for rule appeared fluid and all the rulers often found themselves in Jerusalem, where they would interact with Roman officials. This is likely the reason that Herod Antipas was in the city during the Crucifixion.
 6. Another son of Herod the Great, Aristobulus was the father of Herod Agrippa. He initially succeeded Philip the Tetrarch ruling the Decapolis but eventually managed to consolidate all of Judea under his control. He grew up in Rome, but returned to rule the Decapolis at the order of Caligula. He ruled until his death in A.D. 44. He
 7. Herod Agrippa was succeeded by his son, Herod Agrippa II. It was during his rule that the Apostle Paul was sent to Rome to appeal to Caesar. He was deposed by a popular rebellion in 66, which precipitated the Jewish Wars and the destruction of the temple.

VI. The Old Testament ends with the book of Malachi. In its final chapter, just before there is a 400 year long silence, God promises the Messiah is coming. He says:

But for you who respect my name, the sun of vindication will rise with healing wings, and you will skip about like calves released from the stall. (Malachi 4:2)

The sun of vindication, or righteousness, will certainly rise and His rising will inaugurate a new age. With His coming will come, there will be the healing of hurts, the righting of wrongs and the final joy that is the result of the serpent's head being crushed.

The Hasmonean Kingdom

- Judea after the Hasmonean Revolt
- Expansion under Jonathan
- Expansion under Simon
- Expansion under Hyrcanus I
- Possible expansion under John
- Expansion under Aristobulus I
- Expansion under Alexander Jannai

