

Session 1: Content

In looking at the early history of the Christian Church it is perhaps best to gain an understanding of the environment into which the Church came – to see the religious and political factors that affected its beginning. To do that we must go back several centuries before its beginning; we do so in this first session.

- I. Alexander and the Greek Empire.
 - A. In 331BC Alexander extended the Greek Empire to the South, conquering the Persians (Darius) in Palestine and occupying Egypt, where he created the city Alexandria.
 - B. Alexander dies in 323BC, leaving the leadership of his empire to seven generals, including the Ptolemies in Egypt and the Seleucids in Syria. In 320BC Ptolemy annexes Palestine, leaving the Jews under mild rule through their priests.
 - C. Around 285BC the Greek Septuagint (Old Testament) is completed in Alexandria, being translated by seventy Jewish scholars brought there by Alexander. As Jews become increasingly Hellenized (i.e. adopting Greek customs and way of life), they grow less familiar with their native language and came to use and venerate the Septuagint. Later, as Christianity spreads, use of the Septuagint spreads with them. Seeing that the Septuagint could be used against them by Christians, Jews developed contrary feeling and deprived the Septuagint of all authority. The Septuagint, which is the Old Testament used by the Orthodox Church, predates the next major translation – the Masoretic text – by many centuries.
- II. Hellenism threatens Jewish faith.
 - A. In 198BC the Seleucid Antiochus III annexes Palestine and impresses Hellenism upon it. Priests become Hellenized, but Hasideans (i.e. Hasidic Jews) reject Hellenization.
 - B. In 169BC the Seleucid Antiochus (IV) Epiphanes battles Ptolemy in Egypt. Aristocratic Jews petition Epiphanes to make Jerusalem a constitutionally Greek city with the new name of Antioch. Jews outside Jerusalem, the common people in the city, and the scribes rebel against this, realizing it would be an end to Mosaic law. Epiphanes passes through after conquering Egypt, pillaging the countryside, burning Jerusalem and sacking the temple. He builds an Hellenistic stronghold in Jerusalem called the City of David or the Citadel, and decrees that the Sabbath be profaned, that the people must sacrifice to the gods, that males cannot be circumcised, and that books of the Mosaic law must be destroyed. Many die in rebellion, and many follow his decrees.
 - C. In 167BC Antiochus Epiphanes orders that a sow be sacrificed upon the altar in Jerusalem. A prominent Jew, Mattathias Hashmon, takes drastic action. This is real revolt, led by the Hasmonean family from 167 until 104BC. Mattathias soon dies, appointing his son Judas as successor. Judas takes the name Maccabeus, and it becomes the Maccabean revolt.
- III. Maccabean revolt.

- A. Syria (Seleucids) immediately attack with an army six times larger than Judas'; Judas defeats them at the Battle of Emmaus.
- B. In 164BC Judas attacks the City of David in Jerusalem and cleanses it of Gentiles. He then restores the temple, replaces the altar, and holds an eight day Festival of Dedication which Jews celebrate to this day (Hanukkah).
- C. Judas wins many more battles. Antiochus Epiphanes dies. Jews supporting and against the Maccabees form two groups or parties, which will later be known as Pharisees (for) and Sadducees (against).
- D. Antiochus Epiphanes named Philip his successor. Lysias, the general defeated at the Battle of Emmaus, names Antiochus V king. The Seleucid Demetrius (in Rome) names himself king and kills Antiochus V and Lysias. Judas establishes peace with the Roman senate, but Demetrius ignores it and sends 22,000 troops to the Battle of Berea, where Judas is defeated and killed. He names brother Jonathan as successor.
- E. Demetrius (Rome) and Alexander (Egypt) both press Jonathan for alliance, seeking to avoid a Jewish alliance with the other. Demetrius exempts Jews from taxation, provides an annual stipend for maintaining the temple, and makes Jonathan governor and high priest. Alexander sends Judas a gold buckle (i.e. an Egyptian symbol that he is made part of the Egyptian royal family). Alexander kills Demetrius, and Arabs kill Alexander and send Demetrius II, the Roman successor, his head.
- F. Demetrius II makes an alliance with the Maccabees. Then, under siege in Antioch, he calls for Maccabean troops, which break the siege and rescue Demetrius II. Demetrius II immediately breaks the alliance and sends a general to trick and kill Jonathan. Brother Simon succeeds Jonathan.
- G. Simon forms an alliance with Demetrius, secures Palestinian lands, and is honored by Rome and his own people. He is made high priest.
- H. The governor of Jericho wants to control Judea; he tricks Simon into meeting him, and kills him and two sons, Mattathias and Judas. John, the surviving son, becomes king of Judea and high priest (134BC, conferred by Demetrius II). He adopts the Greek name Hyrcanus and takes a moderate view of Hellenization.
- I. The reign of John Hyrcanus (134-104BC) gets off to a bad start and improves from there. In 133BC the Seleucid Antiochus VII marched into Judea and laid siege to Jerusalem for one year. Due to terrible food shortage, John negotiated a truce. The deal included heavy taxation of Jews and a commitment that John's army fight alongside Antiochus' against the Parthians. To pay taxes John looted the tomb of David. That and his alliance with Antiochus led to great loss of support among Jews.
- J. In 128BC Antiochus VII was killed by the Parthians. John began building projects throughout Judea. He established stable relations with Rome; they confirmed independence for the Hasmoneans and Judea. He established alliances with Egypt and Athens. He then began unifying surrounding nations with Judea to rebuild the Jewish kingdom back to its size and power during the time of David.
- K. By this time the pro-Maccabees were known as Pharisees, and the anti- as Sadducees. Although a minority, the Sadducees became dominant. Groups that existed were:
 - 1. **Pharisees**- about 6,000 males who believed: in foreordination and free will of man, immortality of the soul and resurrection of the body, that future life is a reward or punishment for this life, in angels and demons, and in oral law (tradition). In Pharisaism religion was conformity to the law (Mosaic), and grace is extended to

those who follow it. They believed the common man was too ignorant to understand the law.

2. **Sadducees** were fewer than Pharisees, but the sophisticated, educated ruling class in Jerusalem. They did not accept oral law, were politically liberal, did not believe in resurrection, immortality, or good and evil spirits.
3. **Essenes** were about 4,000 in number. They believed in a simple life and many were celibate. They thought the Messiah's coming was soon, and that temple worship and Jerusalem were polluted. They visited and established settlements in the wilderness West of the Dead Sea.
4. **Herodians** supported Roman rule and joined with the Pharisees to entrap Jesus.
5. **Zealots** believed as the Pharisees but refused to pay tribute to Rome. Some were assassins. Their last holdout was in 73AD, three years after the sacking of Jerusalem, at Masada.
6. **Common people** in Jerusalem and the countryside consisted of over 95% of the population.

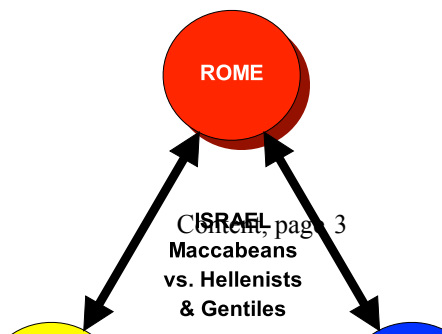
L. At the end of his life, John Hyrcanus decreed a separation of the high priesthood from secular authority. He gave his wife control of civil authority and appointed his son, Judas Aristobolus, as high priest. After John's death Judas Aristobolus cast his mother into prison where she starved to death.

IV. End of the Jewish Kingdom.

After the death of John Hyrcanus conflict grew between groups within the kingdom, especially between Pharisees and ruling Sadducees. Leadership was weak and there were many contenders for the throne. In 64BC some contenders appealed to Rome for support. A year later Roman legions seized Jerusalem and installed one contender as high priest, but without the title of king. Thus ended the Hasmonean dynasty and the independence of the Jewish nation.

V. Conclusion.

In turning over the Greek empire to his seven generals, Alexander planted the seeds for its breakup and replacement with the Roman empire. During this transition Ptolemies in Egypt, Seleucids in Syria, and Seleucids and others in Rome fought one another for supremacy. The Jewish people were caught in the middle. The Greek and Roman empires were polytheistic; Romans renamed Greek gods and even venerated an unknown god just in case they forgot one (Acts 17:23)! Church historian Bruce Metzger says, "Genuine belief in the reality of the ancient gods and goddesses of classical mythology had long since given way to widespread agnosticism." Skeptical materialism, superstition, astrology and mystery religions of the East were present. Perhaps the Greeks and Romans did not really care what the Jews believed, as long as they adopted the empires' customs and laws and did not consider themselves separate from or superior to their foreign masters. They could do this by worshipping the classical gods. Some would not. That was the cause for revolt against foreign masters and against those within who complied with foreign masters.



At the end of this period of history the Roman Empire was in its ascendancy, having consolidated its dominion over the Jews and the Middle East. But earlier conflict had given rise to factions in Jewish society. As the Graeco-Roman transition matured, conflict and even civil war between these factions became more frequent and intense. As the Graeco-Roman transition matured, one might say that for the Jews conflict transitioned from external to internal, with Rome trying to maintain stability. It was into this internal conflict that Christ and the Holy Church were to come.

