

# **THE INTERTESTAMENTAL PERIOD**

**by Robert C. Walton**

**Grades 9-12  
Year 1  
Quarter 2**



# **THE ASSYRIANS AND THE FALL OF SAMARIA**

## **Lesson Aim**

To familiarize students with the first great empire of the first millennium before Christ, the Assyrians, and their impact on biblical history.

## **Memory Verse**

**Hebrews 1:1** - “In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways.”

## **Lesson Background**

This series of lessons deals with the Intertestamental Period, a span of about 400 years between Malachi and Matthew. In order to get the flow of history from one great empire to the next firmly fixed, and also to tie the study firmly to biblical moorings at both ends, we will be starting with the Assyrian Empire. In fact, the first five lessons actually involve Old Testament material.

The value of the study should be apparent after last quarter’s work. It is in the Intertestamental Period that the world in which Jesus lived was shaped. As we gain insight into the formation and character of such groups as the Samaritans, scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees, we will be able to understand the Gospels much more fully. In addition, the period in question did much to shape the Jewish religion as it is practiced today. A better understanding of Judaism can help in our witness to Jewish people.

A good, basic source for information on the Intertestamental Period is Charles F. Pfeiffer’s *Between the Testaments* (Baker, 1959). Such a source may help you in preparing the lessons for this quarter.

## **Lesson Procedure**

The task this week is to trace the rise and fall of the Assyrian Empire, and in so doing to note its influence on the history of Israel.

### **1. The Location of Assyria**

Find a map and show your students the location of the Assyrian Empire, on the Tigris River, and its extent at the height of its power. Any good set of back-of-the-Bible maps will show this. Note that today Assyria's homeland (not including conquered territories) would include parts of Iran, Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and Russia.

### **2. The Rise of Assyrian Power**

The expansion of Assyrian influence began under Ashurnasirpal II (reigned 884-858). At the time of his brutal conquests, Omri, the father of Ahab, was the king of Israel, the Northern Kingdom. These conquests actually helped Israel by occupying the attention of Israel's persistent enemy, the Syrians. Further conquests were attempted by Ashurnasirpal's successor, Shalmaneser III (reigned 858-824), but he was stopped cold in 853 at the Battle of Qarqar by an army led by Ahab and the Syrian king Ben-hadad. (It is interesting to note that the Bible doesn't even mention this greatest triumph of Ahab's career. In its place, we find the sordid account of Naboth's vineyard [I Kings 21], which is a far more accurate portrayal of Ahab's character as a man and as a king.)

### **3. The Period of Assyrian Weakness**

Powerful rulers continued until the time of Adad-nirari III (reigned 810-782), who again did Israel a favor by defeating the Syrians in 803. He was followed by three successive weak rulers, during which time Assyria experienced internal chaos and military reverses. Israel was able to take advantage of this temporary weakness to expand its borders significantly, especially under Jeroboam II (reigned 793-753), during whose reign the Northern Kingdom was peaceful and prosperous. During this time of Assyrian weakness, God sent Jonah to preach in Nineveh, one of the chief cities (and later the capital) of Assyria. Jonah was somewhat understandably reluctant to be the instrument of deliverance for Israel's most threatening enemy, but his message was one for which the Ninevites had been prepared - the way things had been going, they had no trouble believing that Nineveh's days were numbered! Meanwhile, Amos was warning the complacent Israelites that they were ripe for judgment (overripe, in fact - see Amos 8). That judgment was to come at the hands of the Assyrians.

### **4. The Period of Assyrian Conquest**

The Assyrian Empire was roused suddenly out of its slumber by the powerful Tiglath-pileser III (reigned 745-727). He and his son, Shalmaneser V (reigned 727-722), gobbled up huge chunks of territory. The expanded empire ultimately extended as far as Egypt. Tiglath-pileser subjugated the Northern Kingdom, reducing the king to the status of a puppet, and collecting enormous tribute payments. Hoshea, the last king of Israel, allied himself with Egypt (which had not yet fallen under Assyrian sway) and refused to pay the tribute. Shalmaneser lay siege to Samaria, the capital of the Northern Kingdom, in 724, and the city fell in 722 B.C., bringing to an end the idolatrous Northern Kingdom of Israel.

Shalmaneser was succeeded by Sargon III (reigned 721-705). With Israel out of the way, the Southern Kingdom of Judah was next in the line of conquest. As before, Assyria at first helped Judah by

defeating her enemies (Syria, Israel, and Philistia fell during the reigns of Tiglath-pileser III, Shalmaneser V, and Sargon III, benefitting the Judean rulers Ahaz [see Isaiah 7] and Hezekiah). But when Sargon was succeeded by his son Sennacherib, Judah began to turn away from the Assyrian dominance. This led to an invasion of the Southern Kingdom and eventual besieging of Jerusalem, from which God granted a miraculous deliverance (Isaiah 36-37). Assyria was to have two more powerful expansionist rulers, Esarhaddon (reigned 681-669) and Ashurbanipal (reigned 669-633), the latter of whom was responsible for the captivity of the Judean king Manasseh (II Chronicles 33:11), which was used by God to bring about the wicked Manasseh's conversion.

## **5. The Decline and Fall of the Assyrian Empire**

After the death of Ashurbanipal, the Assyrian Empire lasted less than thirty years. Internal collapse began almost immediately and external dismemberment soon followed. Nineveh, the capital, fell to the Babylonians in 612 as predicted graphically by the prophet Nahum, followed by Haran in 610 and Carchemish in 605. This set the stage for the rise of Babylon to world supremacy.

## **6. The Impact of Assyria on Biblical History**

The most obvious area of impact made by Assyria was as an instrument of God's judgment. Few empires in the history of the world have been more cruel or vicious than the Assyrians, yet they became God's instruments, used against His own people Israel. We must never think that because we are relatively righteous, God will not use those far more wicked than we to judge us.

Another less obvious development to come out of Assyrian rule occurred after the fall of Samaria. The Assyrians had a practice of preventing revolt among conquered peoples by the forced intermingling of subject populations. The resultant combination of cultures, languages, and religions made mutual trust difficult and organized rebellion almost impossible. Thus, after Samaria fell, Sargon not only deported a large portion of the remaining Israelite population to scattered points throughout the vast Assyrian Empire, but also imported people from many other conquered territories and settled them in Israel. Inevitably, intermarriage occurred eventually and brought with it a general combining of cultures. The result was a mongrel race and a hybrid religion. These people came to be known as Samaritans, and were looked down upon by the "pure" Jews of the Southern Kingdom. This animosity grew and festered until it produced the open hatred visible in the Gospels. It is against this background of racial prejudice that Jesus speaks and lives a love that breaks down such barriers.









# **THE BABYLONIANS AND THE FALL OF JERUSALEM**

## **Lesson Aim**

To familiarize students with the impact of the Babylonian Empire on biblical history and give insight into the justice and mercy of God.

## **Memory Verse**

**Hebrews 1:2** - “. . . but in these last days He has spoken to us by His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, and through whom He made the universe.”

## **Lesson Background**

We continue our lead-in to the Intertestamental Period this week by examining the Babylonian Empire. Confusion sometimes is generated by the fact that two distinct empires are referred to in this way. The Old Babylonian Empire is best known for Hammurabi and his law code and the Epic of Gilgamesh. This was the empire left by Abraham in the final years of its decline. The Chaldean or Neo-Babylonian Empire, made into a world power by Nabopolassar and his son Nebuchadnezzar, is the empire we are dealing with in this lesson. It lasted less than 100 years, but played a major role in biblical history.

In the last lesson, the practical application involved God’s judgment of sin, and the background for the Gospels came from the introduction of the Samaritans. Today we will continue to see the judgment of God, but will also see His mercy at work in the preservation of His people and the keeping of His promises. The background for the Gospels will be enhanced by a brief study of the development of the synagogue.

## **Lesson Procedure**

Begin the lesson by reviewing briefly the highlights of last week's lesson. This is necessary because the material in this week's lesson continues and builds upon what has gone before.

### **1. The Location of Babylonia**

Again use a map to show the location and extent of the Babylonian Empire. The city of Babylon was located on the Euphrates River, and their homeland roughly corresponded to present-day Iraq, with conquests expanding the empire to include modern Syria and Palestine (Israel, Jordan, Lebanon).

### **2. The Rise of Babylonian Power**

The Babylonian Empire began its rise under the leadership of Nabopolassar (reigned 625 - 605), the father of Nebuchadnezzar. He challenged and largely subdued the declining Assyrian Empire in several strategic military engagements mentioned last week. In these battles he had the support, though not the active participation, of Josiah, king of Judah. In fact, Josiah was killed in 609 while trying to prevent Necho, the Egyptian pharaoh, from challenging Babylon. Toward the end of his reign, Nabopolassar became infirm, and the decisive battle against the Egyptians, at Carchemish in 605, was won by his son and successor, Nebuchadnezzar.

### **3. The Period of Babylonian Dominance**

Nebuchadnezzar ruled from 605 to 562 and built for himself a vast and splendid realm. The city of Babylon became a showplace, its Hanging Gardens one of the Seven Wonders of the ancient world. With Assyria and Egypt subdued, Palestine was his for the taking, and he moved quickly to assert his dominance in the region. In 605, he succeeded in reducing Jehoiakim, king of Judah, to the status of a puppet, and carried off to Babylon the most promising young men of the region (including Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah). He then attempted to conquer Egypt, but was unable to do so. Despite the warnings of the prophet Jeremiah that surrender was the best policy, Jehoiakim foolishly rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar. He soon died, however, and his teen-aged son Jehoiachin was on the throne when Nebuchadnezzar's army arrived in 597. Nebuchadnezzar captured Jehoiachin and took him back to Babylon in chains, installing his uncle Zedekiah in his place. The Babylonian ruler also removed over 10,000 of Judah's leading citizens, rulers, and craftsmen, and took them back to Babylon. This group included the prophet Ezekiel. But Zedekiah did not learn the lessons of history - he, too, rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar, and as a result, Jerusalem was besieged in 588 and finally utterly destroyed in 586. The few survivors fled to Egypt, taking with them the prophet Jeremiah.

### **4. The Jews Under Nebuchadnezzar**

Nebuchadnezzar's treatment of his conquered peoples reflected the desire not only to prevent rebellion, but also to incorporate the conquered peoples into the Babylonian way of life. We thus find him grooming young men from throughout the empire to become part of his civil service and including the best of them among his advisors. The assimilation process included the giving of Babylonian names in honor of Babylonian deities (Daniel became Belteshazzar, Hananiah became Shadrach, Mishael became Meshach, Azariah became Abednego), the eating of Babylonian food (certainly not kosher), the use of the language of the Babylonians (much of the Book of Daniel is written in Aramaic rather than Hebrew), and the practice of Babylonian religion (this is what got Daniel's three friends into hot water - well, not exactly - in Daniel 2).

While the most talented young men were becoming part of the government of the empire, the majority of the people who had been exiled to Babylon were permitted to settle there and live peaceably as they chose. Thus, Jewish settlements grew up all over the Babylonian Empire. Those who remained faithful to the worship of God faced a problem, however. The Temple had been destroyed, along with the rest of Jerusalem, in 586. Without the Temple, true worship was not possible in the fullest sense. The people knew that the Captivity was temporary - Jeremiah had indicated that it would last for seventy years. They were determined that the Jewish religion and Jewish way of life would be preserved until the Temple could be rebuilt. Consequently, the Jewish people began to gather together to discuss the law and teach it to their children. These gathering places came to be known as synagogues (which means “gathering places” - literally, places where people are “led together”). As they gradually became formalized in their structure, the following characteristics appeared:

- Ten adult males, called a *minyan*, were required for the formation of a synagogue.
- Each synagogue was ruled by a group of men called a *sanhedrin*. These men also served as an informal court to decide questions relating to Jewish law and practice.
- The synagogue was a place for prayer and study of the Torah, but never a place for sacrifice. Because it was not intended to take the place of the Temple, the synagogue continued to exist even after the Temple was rebuilt.

## **5. The Decline and Fall of the Babylonian Empire**

After Nebuchadnezzar’s death in 562, the empire went through six years of confusion during which three different rulers sat on the throne. The confusion was ended by the accession of Nebuchadnezzar’s stepson Nabonidus (reigned 556-539). He brought temporary stability to the empire, but soon lost interest in ruling. He went into seclusion at a religious retreat in the Arabian desert, leaving the kingdom in the hands of his son, Belshazzar, who ruled as regent in his father’s stead. It was this Belshazzar who, during a wild party in Babylon in 539, saw the handwriting on the wall (Daniel 5), and that night was killed by the invading Medo-Persian army.

The Medo-Persian conquest of Babylon was made easier by the benign neglect of Nabonidus and the raucous abuses of Belshazzar. When the armies of Cyrus entered the city of Babylon, they were welcomed as liberators rather than being resisted as invaders. The great empire fell, “not with a bang, but a whimper.”

## **6. The Babylonians and the Judgment of God**

In the same way that God used the vicious Assyrians as His instrument of judgment against the blatantly idolatrous Northern Kingdom, He used the pagan Babylonians to chasten the outwardly religious but ultimately hypocritical Southern Kingdom. God’s practice of judging His sinful people by using people more wicked still was a dilemma for the prophet Habakkuk and constitutes the theme of his book. Habakkuk surfaces at the end with faith in, if not with understanding of, the ways of God.

Another puzzle comes in the book of Jeremiah, where Jeremiah advises surrender rather than resistance in the face of the Babylonian invasion. The wisdom of submission becomes apparent, however, when one realizes that the Babylonian policy, in contrast to that of the Assyrians, allowed for the preservation of the Jewish people. Thus the instrument of judgment became at the same time an instrument of mercy. A comparison of the two conquests, those of Assyria and Babylon, serves to illustrate the

difference between God's judgment of unbelievers and His chastening of believers. The former leads to destruction, while the latter has preservation and restoration as its ultimate goal.

## **Conclusion**

At this point, the teacher should make it clear to his students that God has not changed in this regard. Those who are Christians may be assured that God brings chastening into their lives for their own good (cf. Hebrews 12:3-11), while those who are not must be reminded that they face ultimate destruction at the hands of a holy God.





# **CYRUS AND THE RISE OF THE PERSIANS**

## **Lesson Aim**

To impress upon the students that God has in His hand the rulers of this world, as He did the pagan king Cyrus, whom He called “His anointed.”

## **Memory Verse**

**Hebrews 1:3** - “The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of His being, sustaining all things by His powerful word. After He had provided purification for sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.”

## **Lesson Background**

The Babylonian (Chaldean) Empire, despite its great splendor under Nebuchadnezzar, lasted less than 100 years. It was followed by a much larger, longer-lasting (about 200 years) empire, that of the Medo-Persians (often referred to as the Persian Empire because the Persian half of the alliance, under the leadership of Cyrus, quickly became dominant).

In addition to going over the history of the first two Persian rulers, the thrust of the lesson is taken from Isaiah 44:24-45:7, which speaks of God’s sovereign use of Cyrus (“though you do not acknowledge me”) in fulfilling His promises of restoration to His people. It is important for the students to see that a government does not have to be Christian in order to carry out God’s purposes and to have confidence that all of the rulers of this world are under the hand of God.

## **Lesson Procedure**

Begin again with a review of last week's lesson, enabling your students to maintain continuity between the Babylonian and Persian periods.

### **1. The History of the Period**

#### **A. Cyrus**

Cyrus was born in 599 B.C. in the kingdom of Anshan, in present-day Iran. At this time Nebuchadnezzar ruled Babylon, and Anshan was under the control of the Medes. In 559, at the age of 40, Cyrus became king of Anshan, and before long moved to expand his power. The mystic Nabonidus was now king of Babylon, and had turned the country over to his son Belshazzar. In 550, Cyrus revolted against the Medes and, aided by the defection of a Median general and the mutiny of the Median army, he soon became master of a new empire. He, unlike the Middle Eastern empire-builders who had preceded him, was generous to his defeated foes, allowing many Median officials to retain their positions. This generosity characterized his entire life, and was to make Cyrus one of the most popular rulers the Middle East has ever known.

With the formation of the Medo-Persian Empire, Cyrus looked for other directions in which to extend his power. He turned first toward the Lydian Empire in Asia Minor, ruled by the proverbially wealthy Croesus. As a confrontation loomed on the horizon, Croesus sought aid from a prophetic oracle and was told that, if he were to attack Cyrus, "a great empire would be destroyed." He assumed that the oracle referred to the Medo-Persians, but instead the Lydians fell. A key advisor to Croesus defected to Cyrus, taking with him the Lydian battle plans; the famed Lydian cavalry was routed when the horses were stampeded by the unfamiliar sight of Cyrus' war camels. Croesus himself wound up committing suicide. Cyrus then fortified the eastern borders of his empire before turning his attention to Babylon in 539 B.C.

An efficient and benevolent ruler such as Cyrus seemed constantly to be attracting defectors from the ranks of his enemies. Many Babylonians were disenchanted with the incompetent Nabonidus and his hedonistic regent-son Belshazzar, not the least of whom was the Babylonian general Gobryas. He joined Cyrus' army and actually led the assault on the city of Babylon. On the night when Belshazzar saw the handwriting on the wall, the Persian army dammed up the canal that passed under the city walls and crept in at night through the canal bed. Belshazzar was executed, but otherwise the conquest was virtually without bloodshed. Cyrus was welcomed as a deliverer when he entered the city several weeks later. He appointed Gobryas as satrap (provincial governor) of the newly-conquered territory, and the Jewish diplomat Daniel became his chief advisor. Gobryas is referred to in the book of Daniel as Darius the Mede.

Cyrus sought to strengthen his empire through loyalty rather than force (like the Assyrians) or assimilation (like the Babylonians). He allowed all of the Babylonian captives to return to their homes, rebuild their cities and temples, and worship their own gods. But most of the Jews had settled comfortably in captivity and had little desire to return. In response to Cyrus' decree, only about 50,000 Jews returned to Judea under the leadership of Sheshbazzar and later Zerubbabel in 537 B.C. By the time Cyrus died in 530, little rebuilding had been accomplished by the Jews.

#### **B. Cambyses**

When Cyrus was killed in a battle on the eastern frontier in 530, his empire passed to his son Cambyses, who reigned for eight years. Cambyses sought to add Egypt to his empire, and succeeded when the Greek army with whom the Egyptians had formed an alliance deserted and joined the Persians.



Cambyses then declared himself pharaoh of Egypt and a descendent of the sun-god Ra. Attempts to move across North Africa and conquer Carthage failed when the entire army was lost in a sandstorm in the desert. Meanwhile, a revolt broke out back in Persia. Before it could be put down, Cambyses died by his own hand. Power was then seized by the son of one of the Persian satraps, a capable general who was to rule as Darius the Great.

## **2. The Spiritual Significance of This History**

Have the students turn to Isaiah 44:24-45:7. Isaiah penned these verses about 150 years before the rise to prominence of Cyrus. Even before Jerusalem had been destroyed, God was giving a promise of its restoration. What can be learned from the history studied today, and from this passage?

### **A. God controls history for the benefit of His chosen people (Isaiah 45:4)**

This benefit may be prosperity and blessing, but it may also be chastisement. It is because of their influence upon the people of God that the rulers of this world are brought on the scene.

### **B. God controls history for the sake of His own Name (Isaiah 45:3,6)**

“The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.” Not all will enjoy God forever, but all ultimately will glorify His Name.

### **C. God did not lift up Cyrus because he was a good ruler**

Because of his refusal to acknowledge Yahweh (Cyrus was a bit of a religious eclectic; though he reputedly was impressed when shown Isaiah’s prophecy concerning him, he continued to give homage to many gods as a matter of political expediency), Cyrus was, in the spiritual realm, no better than the vicious Assyrians, who had also been used by God.



## **FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT**

## **CYRUS AND THE RISE OF THE PERSIANS**

1. What characteristics made Cyrus a good ruler? Why was he able to attract the support of his enemies and maintain the loyalty of the people he had conquered?
2. Compare and contrast the empire-maintaining tactics of the Assyrians, Babylonians, and Persians. In what sense was each successful? How did God use each method to accomplish His purposes in the lives of His people?
3. In Isaiah 45:1, Cyrus is called “anointed” - Messiah in Hebrew. Is it legitimate to call Cyrus a type of Christ? Why or why not?
4. How can you see Isaiah 44:25-26 being fulfilled in the history covered in today’s lesson?



# **THE GROWTH AND DECLINE OF THE PERSIAN EMPIRE**

## **Lesson Aim**

To show the larger political setting in which the Old Testament came to a close, and in which God preserved and protected the people through whom would come the Messiah.

## **Memory Verse**

**Hebrews 1:4** - “So He became as much superior to the angels as the name He has inherited is superior to theirs.”

## **Lesson Background**

The first lesson on the Persian Empire concentrated on the reign of Cyrus, mentioning briefly that of his son Cambyses. In this lesson, we will be going over the remainder of the political history of the Persian Empire. We will be touching tangentially on the biblical history of the period, but will be covering that in more detail in the next two lessons, looking first at those who returned to Judea (from the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, and Zechariah), and then at those who remained dispersed throughout the Persian Empire (from the books of Daniel and Esther).

The background material in this lesson may not have tremendous biblical significance in itself, but it is important for the understanding of the next two lessons and gives insight into some of the personalities involved in the biblical accounts.

## Lesson Procedure

Begin by reviewing the lesson from last week to provide continuity.

### 1. **Darius the Great (ruled 522-486 B.C.)**

After the death of Cambyses, the Persian throne stood vacant, occupied only by an imposter claiming to be Bardiya, the long-dead brother of Cambyses. The chief noblemen of Persia soon banded together to dispose of the imposter, and the most powerful among them soon ascended the throne as Darius the Great. With brutal efficiency, he put down numerous revolts and consolidated his power.

Darius turned out to be one of the most efficient administrators in history. It was during his reign, and with his encouragement and help, that the Temple was rebuilt in Jerusalem. He appointed provincial governors known as satraps, maintained their loyalty with marital alliances, and set up a well-run postal system, the description of which has become the motto of the U. S. Postal Service (“Neither snow, nor rain, nor heat, nor dark of night shall stay these couriers from their appointed rounds,” penned by the Greek historian Herodotus).

Darius effectively expanded the Empire with campaigns in North India and Macedonia, but was unable to invade the Greek mainland with any degree of success. The defeat of the Persians by the Athenian troops at Marathon and the heroic exploits of the courier who brought the news to Athens have given the name to the long-distance race in the Olympics. At the time of Darius’ death, revolts were breaking out all along the borders of the Persian Empire.

### 2. **Xerxes I (ruled 486-465 B.C.)**

The son of Darius was well-prepared to assume the throne at the death of his father, having served as governor of Babylon for 12 years before becoming king. He is called Ahasueras in the King James Version of the Bible (the Hebrew form of the Persian original for which Xerxes is the Greek form; the Hebrew alphabet contains no letter X), and is the king who made Esther his queen.

He quickly put down the revolts on the fringes of the kingdom and turned his attention to the goal his father had been unable to reach - the incorporation of Greece into the Persian Empire. He determined to mount simultaneous invasions by land and sea and spent years preparing for his conquest. The land invasion began auspiciously with the defeat of the Spartans with the help of treachery at Thermopylae, which led to the conquest and burning of Athens. The sea campaign was a disaster, however, and the crushing defeat of the Persians at Salamis in 480 B.C. put an end to Xerxes’ hopes of subjugating Greece. Within a year, the Persian troops had been driven out of Europe altogether.

Xerxes was a vain and selfish man, as the book of Esther indicates. A plot like the one foiled by Mordecai succeeded later, and Xerxes was assassinated by the captain of his bodyguard.

### 3. **Artaxerxes I (ruled 464-424 B.C.)**

Xerxes was succeeded by his son Artaxerxes, who began his reign by putting down various revolts, including a serious rebellion in Egypt. He ruled during the days of Ezra and Nehemiah, and it was with his permission that the city of Jerusalem was rebuilt, along with its walls. This was the Golden Age of Greece, when Pericles ruled in Athens, and as the Greeks grew stronger, the Persians grew weaker. The reign of Artaxerxes was one of decreasing influence and diminishing territory.

#### **4. The Decline of the Persian Empire.**

The last four Persian rulers, Darius II, Artaxerxes II, Artaxerxes III, and Darius III, presided over the disintegration of the Persian Empire from 424-330 B.C. As the territories revolted and broke away, a new power arose in the West - Philip of Macedon, and his formidable son Alexander the Great.









# **THE REMNANT - THOSE WHO RETURNED**

## **Lesson Aim**

To give the students confidence that God keeps His promises and accomplishes His purposes through an examination of the biblical history of the returning exiles.

## **Memory Verse**

**Hebrews 1:5** - "For to which of the angels did God ever say, 'You are my Son; today I have become your Father'? Or again, 'I will be his Father, and he will be my Son'?"

## **Lesson Background**

We now begin a pair of lessons that deal specifically with the Jews under Persian rule. This week's lesson will look at the Jews in Palestine, and will make use of information from Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. Next week will focus on the Jews of the Diaspora, with special emphasis on the book of Esther.

Having gained a general understanding of the history of the Medo-Persian Empire, the students should now be able to see the biblical events of the period more clearly against that background. In order to facilitate such a juxtaposition, we will be dealing with the material in today's lesson chronologically.

The study of history can sometimes seem dry, but we as Christians must realize that God both works in history and communicates truth through it. Thus it is important that our students see in today's study the reflection of a faithful and sovereign God who keeps His promises to His people and carries out His purposes in human history.

## **Lesson Procedure**

The Babylonian Captivity had been God's judgment on the sins of the Southern Kingdom. Through the mouths of the prophets, He had indicated both the length of the exile (Jeremiah 25:11) and the name of the man who would end it (Isaiah 44:28).

### **1. The Return of the Exiles**

The benevolent policy of Cyrus was put into effect immediately after the conquest of Babylon. He announced that all those in exile in Babylon were free to return to their homes, rebuild their cities, and worship their gods (cf. Ezra 1:1-4). Many of the Jews had settled down to a rather comfortable life in Babylon, however, and had no desire to return to a land that was little more than a pile of rubble, where they would have to start over again from nothing. The vast majority of the Jews, therefore, remained in the region of Babylon. A relatively small handful of 50,000 Jews returned under the leadership of Sheshbazzar, taking back with them the sacred vessels that had been carried off by Nebuchadnezzar (Ezra 1-2). Their chief goal, as outlined in Cyrus' decree, was to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem.

### **2. The Rebuilding of the Temple**

Two men emerged as leaders among the people who returned to Israel - Zerubbabel, who became the royal governor, and Joshua, the high priest. These led the people in constructing the Altar of Sacrifice on the Temple grounds and reinstating the sacrificial system. At this point, however, the work bogged down. The people became discouraged at both the magnitude of the task and at the unexpected opposition they received from the local population, particularly the Samaritans to the north. Consequently, nothing further was accomplished during the reigns of Cyrus and Cambyses. In the reign of Darius the Great, God sent two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, to stimulate the work (Ezra 5:1). Haggai rebuked the people for their selfish attention to their own affairs while ignoring the rebuilding of God's House (Haggai 1:3-11). Zechariah, meanwhile, encouraged the leaders by assuring them that they were engaged in God's work, and that He would give them the strength to carry it through (Zechariah 4). Finally, in 516 B.C., the Restoration Temple was completed and dedicated and the Passover was celebrated once again (Ezra 6:13-22). Rather than being an occasion for joy, this became an occasion for mourning, as those who remembered the glory of Solomon's Temple wept at the sight of the completed Restoration Temple, which was pitiful by comparison (Haggai 2:3). Yet God assured the people that the glory of this Temple would far exceed the glory of the one built by Solomon (Haggai 2:9) - because this Temple would be visited by the Son of God Himself.

### **3. The Ministry of Ezra and Nehemiah**

During the reign of Xerxes I we know only that the Jews in Judea faced continuing opposition from the local inhabitants (Ezra 4:6). No further details are given. When Artaxerxes replaced his father, however, the biblical narrative became considerably fuller.

In the seventh year of the reign of Artaxerxes (458 B.C.), Ezra was sent at the head of a group of Jews to Jerusalem with full authority to restore Jewish worship in the province and the funds necessary to carry out his charge (Ezra 7:11-26). He organized the Temple worship and, according to Jewish tradition, established the group of men known as scribes, whose task was to preserve and teach the law of God (this group still existed in New Testament times). He also put a stop to the mixed marriages that had been contracted by the Jews in Palestine. Though Ezra improved the religious situation considerably, the physical condition of the land remained dilapidated.

Finally, in the twentieth year of Artaxerxes (445 B.C.), word reached Nehemiah of Jerusalem's broken-down condition. Nehemiah was the king's cupbearer, a position of considerable trust (if the king trusted anyone, he had to trust the man who screened the food he ate). The trust vested in Nehemiah is particularly striking in light of the fact that Artaxerxes' father, Xerxes, had died by assassination. Nehemiah requested and was given permission by the king to go to Jerusalem and supervise the rebuilding of the city walls. Despite considerable opposition from the neighboring provinces, by deceit, threats, and delays, the walls were finally completed. The people then covenanted together to keep God's laws, but it was again necessary to put a stop to religiously-mixed marriages.

#### **4. The Close of the Old Testament**

The Old Testament takes us no farther than the reign of Artaxerxes. The last of the Old Testament prophets, Malachi, prophesied during the time of Nehemiah and gives us a picture of a lifeless, formalized religion - a Judaism well on its way to being what we see in the Gospels. The judgment of God may have cured the Jews of idolatry, but even right forms of worship mean little if they don't emanate from the heart.

God had been faithful to His promise to preserve His people. His faithfulness was to be revealed even more clearly when He sent His Son in human flesh through this people He had preserved.









# **THE DIASPORA - THOSE WHO REMAINED**

## **Lesson Aim**

To help students see the marvelous providence of God as He watched over His people scattered throughout the provinces of the Medo-Persian Empire.

## **Memory Verse**

**Hebrews 1:6** - "And again, when God brings His firstborn into the world, He says, 'Let all God's angels worship Him.'"

## **Lesson Background**

As we have seen previously, only a small minority of the Jews returned to Judea under the decrees of Cyrus and, later, Artaxerxes. The vast majority of Jews remained scattered throughout the Medo-Persian Empire. The protective hand of God was not restricted to the remnant who returned. The Jews of the Diaspora were also under the providence of God.

In this lesson, we will examine the providence of God in delivering the Jewish people from two threats - assimilation and annihilation. The first will be accomplished through an examination of the development of the synagogue, which was used by God to preserve both the religion and the culture of the Dispersion Jews. We will also note the role played by the synagogue in the New Testament. The second work of God's providence - God's work of delivering the Jews from annihilation - will be seen through a brief overview of the book of Esther. Though the book of Esther never mentions God, He is clearly at work in its pages. It is important that students realize that the unseen hand that guided the pagan empires of the past for the benefit of God's people is still at work in this pagan world.

## Lesson Procedure

Briefly review the previous lesson. This one fits in the same time frame, but deals with those Jews who did not return to Jerusalem but instead stayed in the places to which they had been scattered throughout the Medo-Persian Empire.

God is a faithful God - one who keeps His promises. He promised to preserve Israel through their time of Captivity and bring them back to their land again. He kept that promise, but did much more. He preserved not only those who returned to the land, but also those who refused to return when given the opportunity. God's providential protection took two forms. He preserved His people from assimilation - the fate of the Northern Kingdom, which lost its Jewish identity and religion - and from annihilation - the utter destruction of the race.

### 1. Deliverance from Assimilation - the Development of the Synagogue

The Jews of the Northern Kingdom who had been scattered among the peoples of the Assyrian Empire had lost their identity through intermarriage, and with it the religion of the True God. With the Southern Kingdom Jews, however, that identity was maintained largely through an institution that has characterized Jewish life ever since - the synagogue.

#### A. The Origin of the Synagogue

The Temple in Jerusalem had been the focal point of Jewish worship, the place where God had put His Name. No legitimate Temple could be established anywhere else. Thus, when Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple with it, Jewish worship came to a sudden halt. It was the exiles in Babylon who first developed the synagogue. The word itself is Greek, and means "gathering." The Hebrew equivalent, *keneseth* or *kneset*, is the name given to the modern state of Israel's parliament. Though it could never be a place of sacrifice, the synagogue became a house of prayer, as well as a sort of community center that served to preserve the Jewish way of life. A *minyan* - ten adult Jewish males - was required to start a synagogue. Each synagogue was ruled by a *sanhedrin*, a governing body of elders who exercised oversight in the synagogue and also served as a local court to settle disputes relating to Jewish law and customs. The synagogue also served as the educational center of the Jewish community.

#### B. The Worship of the Synagogue

Synagogue worship became the model for that of the early church. It consisted of five major elements:

- The recitation of the *Shema* - this consists of Deuteronomy 6:4-9; 11:13-21; Numbers 15:37-41, and later came to be viewed both as a confession of faith and as a substitute for sacrifice.
- Prayer - this later became formalized, though originally it was spontaneous.
- The reading of the Law - systematized so that a certain passage was designated for each week.
- The reading of the Prophets - as above, with the passage chosen to illuminate the first reading.
- An exposition of the Scripture that was read - by any adult male member of the congregation.

## C. The Importance of the Synagogue

- It preserved the Jewish culture and religion among the Jews of the Diaspora.
- It became the chief power base of the Pharisees during the New Testament period.
- The Great Sanhedrin in Jerusalem, a sort of Supreme Court made up of seventy men, tried and condemned Jesus.
- The synagogue was a frequent scene of Jesus' teaching and Paul's preaching.
- Synagogue worship became the model for the worship of the early church.

## 2. Deliverance from Annihilation - the Book of Esther

The Bible concentrates on those Jews who returned to Jerusalem, and gives us a look at Jewish life in the Diaspora only once - in the book of Esther. This colorful narrative, which takes place during the reign of Xerxes I, is full of the flavor of an oriental court. The basic narrative will be familiar to your students, but the following insights may not be, and may be used to add interest to the retelling:

- The book of Esther, which details the origin of the Feast of Purim, is read at the celebration of that feast, often in the style of an old-fashioned melodrama - the hero is cheered, the villain booed and hissed, etc., as the story is read.
- **1:11** - The king's request was for the queen to expose herself before his drunken guests. She was right to refuse.
- **1:16-22** - The reasoning used here sounds surprisingly modern. The nobles obviously were not in favor of feminism.
- **2:12-14** - "Beauty Contest" does not capture the essence of what is going on here - "tryout camp" is more to the point.
- **3:1-2** - Men live and die, rise and fall at the whim of the king.
- **3:7** - The casting of lots was a form of divination. Haman's hatred of Mordecai was such that he wanted to know precisely the best day to carry out his plot against the Jews.
- **3:10-11** - Bigotry flourishes in the environment created by this sort of indifference.
- **4:11** - This law was instituted by a man convinced he was surrounded by assassins - and maybe he was right (Esther 2:21-23)!
- **4:14** - The key verse of the book - God's providence is at work in human history.
- **5:10-6:5** - "Coincidental" cases of insomnia - one cured by constructing a gallows, the other by listening to the royal chronicles.
- **6:10** - This is called "rubbing salt in the wound."

- **8:7-8** - The king was bound by the law. He could make it, but he could not change what had been decreed (cf. Daniel 6:8,12).
- **8:17** - A unique, though hardly recommended, means of evangelism.
- **9:28** - The origin of the Feast of Purim, named for the lots (*pur*) cast by Haman to determine the date of the extermination of the Jews.

The incidents discussed in this lesson are the typical ingredients of history - the adaptations of a downtrodden people and the whims of a tyrannical despot. Yet it is events such as these through which God works to accomplish His purposes and spread His Kingdom. Can we doubt that God's providence continues to operate in the history of our contemporary world?





# **ALEXANDER AND THE MACEDONIAN CONQUEST**

## **Lesson Aim**

To examine the career of Alexander the Great and contrast the values of this world with those of the children of God.

## **Memory Verse**

**Hebrews 1:7** - "In speaking of the angels he says, 'He makes His angels winds, His servants flames of fire.'"

## **Lesson Background**

The Medo-Persian Empire, despite prolonged effort in that direction, had never been able to extend its authority into Greece. With the decline of the Persians, it became readily apparent that, while the Greek city-states could put up valiant resistance against Persian aggression, they were totally incapable of mounting an offensive challenge to the crumbling Persian Empire because of their appalling lack of unity, as seen in the Peloponnesian Wars. Only when the Greeks were forcibly united under one head did they become a force of imperial proportions in the world. That unity occurred under the leadership of Philip of Macedon and his son, Alexander the Great.

It is very instructive to compare the careers and kingdoms of Alexander and Jesus Christ. Though this deviates from the basic thrust of these lessons, which has been to examine the work of God in preparation for the coming of His Son, the opportunity to contrast worldly and spiritual greatness in this way should not be missed.

## Lesson Procedure

Place the lesson in its historical context by reviewing the last 100 years of the Persian Empire - the period of decline following the reign of Artaxerxes I.

Persia ruled the world of the fourth century B.C. by default: not because of Persian power, but because of a lack of competent challengers. The Greeks had long had the resources for expansion, but had lacked unity. They spent so much time fighting one another that no time or energy was left for expansion. That situation changed with the rise of Philip of Macedon. Not a Greek himself (Macedonia is north of Greece, formerly part of Yugoslavia), Philip had a vision of harnessing the power of Greek civilization. His formation, by force and diplomacy, of the Hellenic League, incorporating every major city-state except Sparta, paved the way for the realization of this dream. Philip never lived to see his dream come to pass, however. In 336 B.C. he was assassinated, and the mantle of leadership fell upon the shoulders of his 20-year-old son, Alexander.

### 1. The Preparation of Alexander

Philip of Macedon's admiration for the culture of the Greeks resulted in an education for his son that was more Greek than Macedonian in character. Alexander was personally tutored by the great philosopher Aristotle and gained an almost fanatical zeal for the spread of Greek culture throughout the world. He was not a Greek himself, and had only grudging support from the Greeks of the Hellenic League, but Alexander the Great did more to spread the Greek way of life than anyone else in the history of the world. His later departure from the Greek ideal in no way detracts from the magnitude of his accomplishment.

### 2. The Conquests of Alexander

Alexander conquered most of the known world in eleven years, between the time of his crossing of the Dardanelles in 334 B.C. and his death in 323 B.C. at the age of 33. At first, Alexander's challenge was not taken seriously by the Persian king Darius III, who sent a mediocre, overconfident army to drive Alexander out of Asia Minor. Alexander's Macedonian forces earned a narrow victory, and the conquest was on. Asia Minor fell rapidly, with most cities offering voluntary submission to the new conqueror. Those who did not submit were "liberated" anyway. The Persian army was now fleeing in confusion. Alexander's surprise assault on Damascus netted him not only a rich city, but also the Persian king's family as hostages.

Alexander next turned southward toward Phoenicia, the trade center of the Near East. Most of the country gave him voluntary allegiance, but the city of Tyre resisted, burning the mainland city and moving the entire population onto a nearby fortified island. Alexander laid siege to the city and had his army construct a causeway between the mainland and the island by throwing the rubble from the razed city into the channel separating the two. When the causeway was completed, the island, too, was razed, and its population utterly annihilated.

The conqueror then continued around the Mediterranean coast to Egypt. Here no fighting was necessary - Alexander was welcomed with open arms and promptly installed as Pharaoh. This was hardly what one would expect of an avid Hellenizer, and some of his soldiers began to suspect that power was turning their commander's head at the ripe old age of 25. Alexander then headed north again through Palestine and Syria, receiving a hero's welcome in Jerusalem on the way.

It was now the right time to open the offensive against Persia itself. In quick succession, the Persian capitals of Babylon, Susa, Persepolis, and Ecbatana fell; some, like Babylon, by willing submission, and



others, like Persepolis, by cruel brutality. Within a year, Alexander was king of Persia. He then continued to the East, conquering first Bactria (in southern Russia), then the Punjab (northern India). At this point, Alexander's army, tired of fighting, sated with plunder, and disillusioned with a leader who had seemingly been bewitched by the trappings of oriental despotism, was on the verge of mutiny. Alexander himself bewailed the fact that he had no more worlds to conquer. He returned to Persia and died of a fever in Babylon in 323 B.C., at the age of 33.

### **3. The Greatness of Alexander**

Note the following characteristics of this man and compare them with the qualities of the true King, Jesus Christ:

- He was born into a royal family.
- He was educated by the greatest intellectual of his day.
- He inherited a kingdom and began his work at the age of 20.
- He became King of the Jews, riding into Jerusalem on a white charger to great popular acclaim.
- His kingdom spread throughout the known world.
- He died at the age of 33, deserted by his followers, his ambitions unfulfilled.
- His empire fragmented shortly after his death.
- The culture he spread influences even today many of the regions into which he spread it.

What are the comparisons and contrasts to be seen with Christ and His kingdom? What does this tell us about true greatness? About the differences between the values of the world and those of the Christian?







# **THE HELLENIZATION OF JUDAISM**

## **Lesson Aim**

To present the changes introduced into Jewish society by the successors of Alexander the Great, and through these to impress upon the students the danger of compromise with the world.

## **Memory Verse**

**Hebrews 1:8** - "But about the Son he says, 'Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever, and righteousness will be the scepter of your kingdom.'"

## **Lesson Background**

After the death of Alexander the Great, his newly-conquered empire was divided among four of his generals. During the next century, Palestine became, as it has so often been in history, a political football, the object of conflict between the Ptolemies, rulers of Egypt, and the Seleucids, rulers of Syria. The Hellenizing influence of Alexander was perpetuated in varying degrees by his successors.

The impact of Hellenization on the Jews was both compromising and divisive. Many enthusiastically adopted Greek ways, turning from the standards laid down by God in the Old Testament. A rift quickly developed between these "modernists" and those who desired to hold firmly to the Jewish traditions. The rift was deepened as the conservatives sought to fortify the law with traditional practices and teachings.

Daniel 8:8-14, 22-25; 11:4-45 refer to this period in history. A good commentary will allow you to fit the narrative to these prophetic passages.

## Lesson Procedure

Begin by reviewing briefly the career of Alexander discussed last week. Unlike the Kingdom of Christ, the kingdom of Alexander ended with his death. He left no heir except a young son, who was quickly dispatched by one of Alexander's ambitious generals. After a decade of infighting, four of Alexander's generals emerged with portions of his empire. Cassander ruled Macedonia, Antigonus controlled Asia Minor, Lysimachus ruled Thrace, and Ptolemy governed Egypt. After another decade of conflict, Antigonus' successors emerged as rulers of Macedonia and Asia Minor and the Ptolemies had strengthened their grip on Egypt and extended their control into Palestine. Meanwhile, Seleucus, Ptolemy's top general, had carved out for himself an empire in Syria and Babylonia.

Throughout the next century (third century B.C.), the Seleucids and Ptolemies continued to struggle for dominance in the Near East. The Ptolemies controlled Palestine throughout this period, but were unable to extend their power into Seleucid territory to any significant degree. At the end of the third century, a strong ruler emerged among the Seleucids, Antiochus III, also known as Antiochus the Great. Simultaneously, Egypt was being ruled by the largely ineffective Ptolemy Philopater. The result was that Palestine changed hands and passed under the control of the Seleucids.

### 1. Hellenization Under the Ptolemies

The Ptolemies, though convinced apostles of Hellenism, were tolerant toward the Jewish religion, demanding political loyalty while allowing the Jews to worship freely, with the High Priest exercising both political and religious authority in Jerusalem.

Many Jews, however, particularly those who had settled in Egypt, became enamored of Greek ways and freely espoused Hellenism. This was particularly true of the large Jewish community in the "model city" of Alexandria. Hellenistic influence led to the adoption of many of the trappings of Greek culture (Greek dress, gymnasiums, amphitheaters, etc.), but also produced two developments of great significance for the history of the church.

#### A. The Septuagint

The adoption of Greek ways included the adoption of the Greek language. As the use of Hebrew declined among the Jews in Egypt, the need for a translation of the Scriptures into Greek became apparent. This translation was made in the third century B.C. in Alexandria, and included the Old Testament and the Apocrypha (though the latter books were not recognized as authoritative Scripture by orthodox Jews). This translation had an impact on the church in several areas:

- The accessibility of the Scriptures to the non-Jewish population. Even by the time of the New Testament, we find "God-fearers" - Gentiles who believe in the God of the Scriptures but have not been circumcised.
- The Septuagint was the version of the Old Testament most frequently quoted by the writers of the New Testament.
- The Septuagint was the version of the Old Testament most frequently used in the first four centuries of the church's history.

## **B. Allegorical Interpretation**

Greek philosophers had long ago found that the only way they could take their traditional mythology seriously was by interpreting the tales of the gods and their exploits as symbolic fables rather than literal events. The Alexandrian Jews applied this same approach to their understanding of the Scriptures, and not very surprisingly wound up concluding that, since Plato and Moses were really saying basically the same things, the great philosopher must have gotten his ideas from the Hebrew prophet. The obvious distortion of the Scriptures produced by such interpretation simplified the accommodation of Judaism and Greek culture.

It is interesting to note that the Christian Church later faced the same problem. Apologists such as Justin Martyr defended Christianity on the basis of its similarity to Greek philosophy, while Alexandrian theologians such as Clement and Origen advanced the cause of allegorical interpretation of Scripture.

## **2. Hellenization Under the Seleucids**

With the conquest of Palestine by Antiochus the Great, the days of peace for the Jews came to an end. What the Ptolemies had sought to do by absorption, the Seleucids attempted to accomplish by force. This was particularly true of the son of Antiochus the Great - the infamous Antiochus Epiphanes. His name means “the manifestation” (implying divine origin), and he had an ego to match. He was determined to bring the blessings of Greek culture to the Jews whether they liked it or not. The Jews, who snidely referred to him as Epimanes (“the madman”), had other ideas.

Antiochus first earned the outrage of the Jews by treating the High Priesthood as a political office to be given to the highest bidder. He first replaced the rightful priest, Onias III, an orthodox Jew, with his Hellenizing brother Jason. Later, Jason was ousted and replaced with a renegade Benjamite named Menelaus. As the ire of the populace grew, Antiochus turned to the use of force. He instituted pagan worship in the Temple, including ritual prostitution, the sacrifice of pigs on the altar, and the erection of an image of Zeus which bore the face of Antiochus himself (Menelaus continued to preside over all of this, by the way)! He also outlawed circumcision, observance of the Sabbath, and Jewish festivals. These tactics accomplished two things: they divided the people into two groups of opposing extremists, the Hasidim and the Hellenizers (the forerunners of the Pharisees and Sadducees), and ultimately produced open rebellion. That rebellion, the Maccabean Revolt, will be the subject of next week’s lesson.









# **THE MACCABEAN REVOLT**

## **Lesson Aim**

To show the students that God is faithful to His promises, again preventing the extermination of Judaism in the face of efforts to do so on the part of Antiochus Epiphanes.

## **Memory Verse**

**Hebrews 1:9** - "You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy."

## **Lesson Background**

The account of the Maccabean Revolt is one of the more stirring instances of resistance to tyranny in the history of the world. A chronicle of this rebellion may be found in the apocryphal book of I Maccabees. Though this is not inspired Scripture, it is nonetheless reasonably accurate history and should be read by the teacher prior to teaching this lesson. While reading it, take note of the reasons why it is not Scripture, including its highly parochial view of God.

The thrust of the lesson should be on God's faithfulness to His promises beyond the confines of biblical history. If God was faithful then, He will surely be faithful to His people today.

## Lesson Procedure

God had promised that through the seed of Abraham all nations would be blessed. Satan has never wearied in his efforts to exterminate that seed. We saw earlier the attempt to exterminate the Jews under the leadership of Haman. God providentially preserved His people through Esther. Last week, we saw the advent of another threat. This was not an attempt at physical annihilation, but rather at the kind of social assimilation that had already produced the Samaritans. Unlike that situation, however, the assimilation under Antiochus Epiphanes was not allowed to occur naturally, but instead was imposed upon the people by force. (At this point, review the latter part of last week's lesson concerning the reign of Antiochus Epiphanes.)

The Hasidim ("pious ones") opposed the Hellenization program of Antiochus but were unable to organize any substantial resistance. The leadership for such resistance appeared from a rather unlikely source - the small village of Modin, in the Shephelah northwest of Jerusalem. The revolt, known as the Maccabean Revolt, was led successively by four men - an old priest named Mattathias and three of his five sons.

### 1. Mattathias

The aggressive Hellenism of Antiochus was being enforced, not only in Jerusalem, but in the outlying districts as well. Pagan images were being taken from village to village, and representatives of Antiochus were demanding that the people worship these images. One such image was brought to Modin. The Syrian representative gathered the people at the center of the village and ordered them to offer incense. Mattathias, the village priest, was told to go first in order to set a good example. He refused. Another Jew, afraid of reprisals from Antiochus, offered to take his place. Mattathias, enraged, proceeded to kill the cowardly Jew as well as the representative of Antiochus. He and his five sons then demolished the image and fled to the mountains, where they were soon joined by other Jews opposed to Antiochus. From their hiding places, they carried on a very successful guerilla war against the Syrians. The one weakness of the rebels was the well-known fact that, as orthodox Jews, they refused to fight on the Sabbath. After Antiochus took advantage of this to annihilate one rebel detachment, Mattathias decided that fighting in self-defense was not a violation of the Sabbath (cf. Arab invasion of Israel on Yom Kippur in 1973). Shortly after the beginning of the rebellion, Mattathias died and was replaced as leader by his third son Judas, known as Maccabeus ("the hammer"). It is from Judas that the rebellion took its name.

### 2. Judas

Judas was an able military strategist who won victory after victory over the Syrians, who persistently underestimated their opposition. Because Antiochus failed to take the Jewish revolt seriously, and because he faced another revolt on his eastern frontier, he sent second-rate troops against Judas and was beaten back time and again. After Judas gained a major victory at Emmaus by means of a surprise night attack, the Maccabeans took Jerusalem itself. They cleansed the Temple, removing all remnants of idolatry, and celebrated an eight-day Feast of Dedication, which came to be known as the Festival of Lights or Hanukkah.

At this point the Syrians offered peace. The Jews were to be granted religious freedom, and the radical high priest Menelaus was to be replaced by the moderate Alcimus, while the Jews were to acknowledge Syrian sovereignty in the region. Judas was skeptical, but the majority of the Hasidim favored peace, so the treaty was signed. Shortly thereafter, however, Alcimus began executing leaders of the Hasidim, and the revolt broke out again, albeit in weakened form, under Judas' leadership. This time, the Syrians attacked with their main force, and Judas was killed in the resulting battle.

### **3. Jonathan**

Judas was succeeded as leader of the Maccabees by his younger brother Jonathan. Though not a skilled fighter like his brother, Jonathan was a shrewd diplomat. A battle for succession was going on in Syria, and Jonathan played the two sides off against one another and succeeded in getting himself named both high priest and governor of Judea in return for recognizing Syrian sovereignty. He then made a treaty with Rome to protect himself against Syrian treachery. During his reign, Judea gained virtual independence from Syria, though he eventually was assassinated by a Syrian general.

### **4. Simon**

Jonathan was succeeded by his brother Simon, the youngest son of Mattathias who was by that time an old man. By agreement of the Hasidim, Simon was recognized as the legitimate high priest, and his descendants became the ruler-priests known as the Hasmonean Dynasty, which we will examine next week.

## **Conclusion**

It is very easy for people to get the idea that God's providential deliverance of His people is restricted to biblical times, though none would affirm this overtly. Point out to the students the providential work of God in the Maccabean Revolt, especially as it served to preserve the people through whom the Messiah was to come.



## FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

## THE MACCABEAN REVOLT

1. The account of the Maccabean Revolt is found in the apocryphal book of I Maccabees, a book in the Roman Catholic Bible. Though we do not recognize this book as inspired by God, yet it does contain reasonably reliable history. Read the book to gain better insight into the events of this week's lesson.
2. Was Mattathias right to kill the cowardly Jew and the representative of Antiochus? Why or why not?
3. Did the Maccabean Revolt succeed because God gave them victory, or because they had good leadership, or both? To what extent is the providence of God dogmatically discernable in events that lack the inspired interpretation given to biblical events? To what extent are we able to discern the providence of God at work in world events today?





# **THE HASMONEAN DYNASTY**

## **Lesson Aim**

To familiarize the students with the era directly preceding Roman rule from which many key elements of first-century Judaism emerged, and to sound a warning about the decline that frequently comes about in the generations immediately following a spiritual revival.

## **Memory Verse**

**Hebrews 1:10** - "He also says, 'In the beginning, O Lord, you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands.'"

## **Lesson Background**

The Hasmonians are the successors of the Maccabees, the hereditary dynasty of governor-priests descended from Simon, the youngest son of Mattathias. Our examination of the brief dynasty, which includes only two significant rulers, will have two purposes.

The first of these is to examine the climate out of which first-century Judaism was to grow. It was during the Hasmonian period, for example, that the two major sects of Jesus' day, the Pharisees and Sadducees, came into existence. We will also be able to see what circumstances permitted the rise of the two key political forces of first-century Palestine - Rome and the Herod family.

The second purpose is one of application, and lies primarily in the observation that spiritual revivals rarely last more than a single generation. The decline of concern for religious matters among the Hasmonians after the fervor of the Maccabean period should serve as a warning to any who think faith is perpetuated automatically from generation to generation.

## **Lesson Procedure**

Begin with a brief review of last week's lesson. At its close, we saw the end of the Maccabean Revolt with the establishment of a recognized priestly line descending from Simon, the youngest son of Mattathias. This line of priests, which also served as governors and later kings of Palestine, is known as the Hasmonean Dynasty.

### **1. John Hyrcanus (135-104 B.C.)**

The Hasmonean Dynasty began following the death of Simon, with the accession of his son, John Hyrcanus, to the High Priesthood. In return for recognition of his rule, Hyrcanus agreed to support the Syrian rulers in their military ventures, and as a result the Syrian threat was removed. The thirty-one-year reign of John Hyrcanus was a prosperous one and was marked by several notable developments:

#### **A. Territorial Expansion**

Hyrcanus successfully annexed Samaria to the north, as well as two major regional trade routes - the Philistine cities of the Mediterranean coastal plain, and the Idumaeans (Edomite) lands south of the Dead Sea.

#### **B. Conversion of the Idumaeans**

The Edomites were descendants of Esau, and thus were relatives of the Jews. Animosity between the two groups extended as far back as the time prior to the Conquest. The Edomites were subjugated by David, but later regained their independence during the period of the Divided Monarchy. By the second century B.C. they had migrated from their original lands south of the Dead Sea to the region near Hebron. When Hyrcanus seized the lands of the Idumaeans, he sought to incorporate them into the Jewish state. This was accomplished by the forcible circumcision of the entire Idumaeans population. One cannot fail to note the irony of a situation in which a son of the Maccabeans, who had given their lives to prevent the imposition of an alien religion by force, was now himself forcibly imposing his religion on others. It is important to note, too, that it was from among these Idumaeans that the Herods came, and that they were also involved in the eventual conquest by the Romans. Hyrcanus' ambition bought trouble for generations of Jews to come.

#### **C. The Rise of the Jewish Sects**

The Maccabean victory brought with it the ascendancy of the Hasidim and the virtual demise of the Hellenizers. But the contradictory perspectives of the two groups lived on in two new parties that appeared on the scene during the reign of John Hyrcanus. The Pharisees carried on the traditionalism of the Hasidim, while the Sadducees, though not as radical as the Hellenizers had been, nonetheless perpetuated the same desire for modernity, affinity for Greek thought, and contempt for Jewish tradition. It is a measure of how much things had changed in thirty years that at the time of his death Hyrcanus identified himself as a Sadducee.

### **2. Aristobulus (103 B.C.)**

The oldest son of John Hyrcanus succeeded him and promptly had his brothers imprisoned or killed. He also declared himself king. Mercifully, he died after reigning less than a year.

### **3. Alexander Jannaeus (102-76 B.C.)**

Aristobulus was succeeded by his only surviving sibling, Alexander Jannaeus. His father had been a pious Jew, but had raised his sons in the Greek-oriented milieu of the Jewish aristocracy. Alexander shared his father's ambitions without any of his redeeming virtues. He both continued his father's expansionism and further alienated the Pharisees and Sadducees from one another. He conquered additional territory so that his kingdom rivaled that of David and Solomon. But his treatment of the Pharisees created irremediable hatred between them and the Sadducees.

Two incidents in particular indicate how this animosity arose. While officiating at the Feast of Tabernacles, Jannaeus poured water on the ground, in the fashion of a Greek libation, rather than pouring it upon the altar, as prescribed by Jewish law. The Pharisees were so incensed at this sacrilege that they pelted him with the fruits that were carried for the celebration. Jannaeus then called out the troops, and hundreds of Pharisees were slaughtered. Later, after an attempted rebellion against Jannaeus by the Pharisees that was partially, though not permanently, successful, Jannaeus got his revenge in a singularly grisly manner. He held a banquet for the leading Sadducees and crucified 800 Pharisees for the after-dinner entertainment.

### **4. The Fall of the Hasmoneans (75-63 B.C.)**

After Jannaeus died, his widow Alexandra (who had earlier been the widow of Aristobulus) ruled in his place (75-67 B.C.). She unintentionally fostered rivalry between her two sons Hyrcanus and Aristobulus, naming the former High Priest and the latter military commander. The Pharisees quickly lined up behind Hyrcanus, the rightful heir, while the Sadducees supported the ambitious Aristobulus. After Alexandra's death, civil war broke out. The war was brought to an abrupt end by the Roman general Pompey in 63 B.C., who incorporated Palestine into the domain of Rome, set up Hyrcanus as puppet ruler, sent Aristobulus to Rome in chains, and gave a prominent position to his Idumaeen collaborator, Antipater - the father of Herod the Great.

## **Conclusion**

Discuss with the students the reasons why it is difficult to pass on spiritual fervor from one generation to the next. What conditions diluted the spirituality of the Maccabees during the Hasmonean period? How is it possible for decline to set in so quickly? What relevance has this for the second-generation Christians in your church (those who are Christians and have Christian parents), some of whom may be in your class?



## FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

## THE HASMONEAN DYNASTY

1. Is it possible genuinely to appreciate something not obtained at a significant cost to yourself? In what way did the Hasmoneans take for granted that for which the Maccabees had fought? Is there anything in your life that you find it hard to appreciate because it has come to you too easily?
2. “The sins of the fathers are visited upon the children unto the third and fourth generation.” What aspects of the Hasmonean period reflect the truth of this statement?
3. Because of the civil war between the Pharisees and Sadducees, Pompey was able to conquer Palestine for the Romans. Disunity among the Jews led to the subjugation of the Jews by an alien power. What similar dangers may be caused by disunity in the Church?



# **THE GROWTH OF ROMAN POWER**

## **Lesson Aim**

To trace the rise of the Roman Empire through the time of Caesar Augustus, noting how God raised up this mighty empire for His own purposes in preparation for the coming of His Son and the establishment of His Church.

## **Memory Verse**

**Hebrews 1:11** - “They will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment.”

## **Lesson Background**

The major political force in the world of the New Testament was the Roman Empire. In today’s lesson, we will be moving back in time to see the rise of that empire from the founding of the city of Rome (however shrouded in myth) in 753 B.C. Roman control of Palestine prior to the birth of Christ spans a period of slightly less than sixty years. But this sixty-year period is an eventful one, including the assassination of Julius Caesar, the power struggle that followed, and the emergence of the empire under Augustus.

In this lesson, we will be concentrating more on the broad events associated with the rise of the Roman Empire than with specific conditions in Palestine. Those conditions are associated largely with the rule of one man - Herod the Great - and we will be looking at him next week. The purpose for our overview of Roman history prior to Christ is to see how God first described the rise of this mighty empire through His prophets (specifically Daniel), then used it to prepare the way for the coming of His Son and the growth of His Church.

## Lesson Procedure

### 1. Rome and Prophecy

Begin the lesson by looking at the visions recorded in Daniel 2 and Daniel 7:1-8. Help the students to understand the relationship between these visions and the empires we have studied so far - Babylon, Persia, and Greece. Both visions include a fourth empire as well - the mighty Roman Empire. Discuss with your students the various characteristics of the Roman Empire brought out in the visions.

### 2. Rome and History

The founding of a city-state along the Tiber in Italy in 753 B.C. is not the stuff of which legends are made, though a legend arose concerning it (you might want to check out the section on Romulus and Remus in *Bulfinch's Mythology* or some similar work). This obscure settlement, founded as the tide of Assyrian power was rising in the East, remained obscure for several centuries thereafter. Three hundred years after its founding, the city-state of Rome had become well-established, with a republican form of government. In the third century B.C., Rome began its expansion with the defeat of the Etruscans, thus gaining control over the entire Italian peninsula.

Empire-building began in earnest in the second century B.C. with the Punic Wars against the North African city-state of Carthage. Despite Hannibal and his elephants, Rome emerged victorious, and the third Punic War ended in 146 B.C. with the destruction of Carthage. Rome now ruled the entire Western Mediterranean. Within fifteen years of the defeat of Carthage, Asia Minor was added to the territory ruled by Rome.

Roman power continued to expand eastward, and the civil war between the Hasmoneans Aristobulus and Hyrcanus soon degenerated into an open invitation to Roman intervention. Both sides attempted to bribe the Roman general Pompey to support them. Aristobulus offered the larger bribe, but Pompey got word that he intended to rebel against Rome after receiving aid from them. Such treacherous designs settled the issue. Pompey supported Hyrcanus, and in 63 B.C. invaded Palestine, capturing Aristobulus and appointing Hyrcanus as ethnarch (puppet governor) under Roman domination. Aristobulus was then carried off to Rome in chains to be displayed in Pompey's triumphal procession. This put an end to Jewish autonomy in Palestine.

As the power of Rome increased, so did the power of one man in Rome - Julius Caesar. He ruled as part of the First Triumvirate, but soon gained ascendancy over his companions, and the cry rose to offer him the role of Emperor. His reluctant acceptance brought about (if Shakespeare is to be believed, which is doubtful) his equally reluctant assassination by Brutus, Cassius, and others in 44 B.C. Civil war broke out, leading to the eventual defeat of the conspirators by the Second Triumvirate, consisting of Octavian (the nephew of Julius Caesar), Mark Antony (an ambitious statesman), and Lepidus (a general under Julius Caesar).

The members of the Triumvirate soon began fighting among themselves. Lepidus was soon forced out of the power struggle, and the stage was set for a final contest between Antony and Octavian. Despite his alliance with Cleopatra of Egypt, Antony was defeated (31 B.C.) and Octavian became sole master of Rome, ruling as Caesar Augustus from 27 B.C. to 14 A.D.



### **3. Rome and Christianity**

The mastery of the known world by the Romans can be seen as preparation by God for the coming of His Son into the world. Ask the students to think of ways in which Roman rule proved advantageous for the spread of the Gospel. The following should be brought out in the course of the discussion:

- Roman rule served as at least somewhat of a restraint upon Jewish hatred of Jesus. It was only Roman authority that prevented the Jews from stoning Jesus on several occasions (of course, Jesus' power prevented it on others . . .).
- The unity of the Mediterranean world in the first century allowed for the free spread of the Gospel without concern for wars or national boundaries.
- The well-developed system of Roman roads eased travel by those spreading the Gospel.
- The common use of the Greek language as the trade language of the Empire meant that many were already familiar with the Old Testament through the Septuagint and that the written message of the New Testament would have an extensive potential readership.
- It was a census ordered by Augustus that brought Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem at the time of Jesus' birth.

### **Conclusion**

Conclude the lesson by emphasizing the fact that God exercises control over the affairs of this world in order to accomplish His purposes.



## FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

## THE GROWTH OF ROMAN POWER

1. How does Nebuchadnezzar's dream (Daniel 2) illustrate the sovereignty of God? How does the last part of the dream, which we did not discuss, enlighten the events of this lesson?
2. What role does Augustus play in the events of the New Testament?
3. List some of the ways in which the existence of the Roman Empire facilitated the spread of the Gospel in the generation following the death of Christ.



# **THE HERODS IN PALESTINE**

## **Lesson Aim**

To familiarize students with the life of Herod the Great, a man whose family is involved with every imaginable aspect of New Testament history.

## **Memory Verse**

**Hebrews 1:12** - “You will roll them up like a robe; like a garment they will be changed. But you remain the same, and your years will never end.”

## **Lesson Background**

Herod the Great, the Idumaeen usurper, was a shrewd diplomat who cast his shadow over the entirety of New Testament history. It was he who provides the link between the chaos of first century B.C. Roman politics and the world of the Bible. Though he himself receives relatively little attention in the New Testament, since he died within a few years of Christ’s birth, his family is involved in everything from the execution of John the Baptist to the trial of Paul.

In order to understand New Testament history, one must understand the Herod family. That understanding is the goal of this lesson. Though we will focus primarily on Herod the Great, we will also give brief attention to the other members of his family who have an impact on New Testament history.

## **Lesson Procedure**

We looked last week at the growth and development of the Roman Empire. Start by reviewing with some care the period of confusion between the conquest of Judea by Pompey in 63 B.C. and the accession of Augustus to the imperial throne in 27 B.C. It is during this time that the Herod family rises to prominence in Palestine.

### **1. The Idumaeans**

The Idumaeans were the Old Testament Edomites, the descendants of Esau, the brother of Jacob, and thus were relatives of the Jews. Jacob and Esau had not gotten along well, and neither did their descendants. The Edomites were one of the tribes that harassed Israel during the time following the Exodus. They were eventually subjugated during the reigns of David and Solomon, but later regained their freedom. Their continued bitterness against Israel is reflected in the prophecy of Obadiah.

The Edomites had originally settled in the barren country south of the Dead Sea, with their capital in the famous stone fortress of Petra. They were later driven northward by the Nabatean Arabs and settled in the region west of the Dead Sea. During the reign of John Hyrcanus, they were again subjugated and forcibly converted to Judaism.

An Idumaeen named Antipater surfaced during the Hasmonean civil war as a chief supporter and confidant of Hyrcanus II. He used his position of influence with Hyrcanus and the Romans to gain favor for his sons, and when Hyrcanus died and Antipater was assassinated, it was the latter's son, Herod, who became King of the Jews.

### **2. Herod the Great**

With the assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 B.C., the Roman world descended into civil war. The conspirators, led by Cassius and Brutus, were aligned against the members of the Second Triumvirate.

#### **A. Herod's Accession**

Antipater and his sons, shrewdly seeking to anticipate the outcome of the struggle, threw their support behind the conspirators. With the victory of the Triumvirate at Philippi in 41 B.C., quick maneuvering was necessary. Herod paid heavy bribes to Mark Antony in order to gain his favor and stay in power. After driving back a Parthian invasion, Herod was confirmed as King of the Jews in 37 B.C. Dissension among the members of the Triumvirate soon brought confusion to Rome once more. Herod supported his friend Antony, but again chose the wrong side. The defeat of Antony at Actium in 31 B.C. left Octavian (later Augustus) undisputed master of the Roman world. Herod, seeking to preserve his position, fled to Octavian and sought to convince him that his loyalty to Antony was a desirable virtue, and that Octavian needed rulers under him who knew how to be loyal. Somewhat surprisingly, Octavian agreed, and Herod was reappointed as King of the Jews.

#### **B. Herod and the Jews**

Herod, as an Idumaeen, was never really accepted by his Jewish subjects. Though a shrewd and capable ruler, he got little but bitterness from those he ruled. He sought the favor of the Jews in many ways. His attempt to legitimize his position through marriage to the Hasmonean princess Mariamne only brought political intrigue into his own household. His beautiful building projects, including the renovation of the

Temple, failed to win him favor because he also built gymnasiums and amphitheaters, symbols of Roman culture despised by the Jews.

### **C. Herod's Family Life**

During his eventful career, Herod had ten wives and produced numerous children. His home life was far from happy, however. His jealous nature made him increasingly paranoid about his wives and his throne. He divorced his first wife, Doris, in order to marry Mariamne, whom he seems genuinely to have loved. During the tumultuous years of unrest, however, he left word on at least two occasions that Mariamne was to be killed if he failed to return from a meeting abroad - he could not bear the thought of her marrying someone else. She found out about these orders, which obviously did not contribute to tranquility on the home front. Ultimately, Herod wound up executing Mariamne, her mother, and her uncle on suspicion of disloyalty. Later, he had three of his sons (Antipater, Alexander, and Aristobulus) executed for plotting to take the throne. This behavior, combined with Herod's attempts to impress the Jews by keeping their laws, once caused Augustus to remark, "I would rather be Herod's pig than Herod's son."

In light of this behavior, his jealous rage at receiving the message of the wise men and his order to exterminate the infants of Bethlehem come as no surprise. In fact, one report indicates that, before his death, Herod ordered the leading men of every village gathered together in a hippodrome. He left orders that, upon word of his death, the hippodrome was to be burned to the ground, thus assuring that there would be mourning throughout the land when Herod died (the orders weren't carried out, by the way).

### **3. Herod's Successors**

Numerous members of the Herod family left their mark on the New Testament. Following is a brief description of each:

- Archelaus - Son of Herod the Great who ruled Judea until 6 A.D. He was followed by a succession of Roman prefects, one of whom was Pontius Pilate.
- Herod Antipas - Son of Herod the Great who ruled Galilee and Perea. He executed John the Baptist, married Herodias, the wife of his brother Herod Philip, and refused to pass sentence on Jesus at the time of His trial in Jerusalem.
- Philip - Son of Herod the Great who ruled Iturea and later married Salome, the daughter of his brother Herod Philip and Herodias.
- Herod Philip - The only surviving son of Herod the Great who did not rule, he married and later lost Herodias to his brother Antipas.
- Herod Agrippa I - Son of Herod Antipas, ruler of Galilee. He was responsible for the execution of James the son of Zebedee and was struck down by God for his boasting.
- Herod Agrippa II - Son of Herod Agrippa I, this was the King Agrippa before whom Paul was tried.





## FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

## THE HERODS IN PALESTINE

1. Research and construct a family tree showing the relationships of the members of the Herod family.
2. To what extent was the Jewish hatred of Herod justified? To what extent was it not?
3. In what way does the account of Matthew 2 fit in with what we know of the personality of Herod the Great?
4. Look up all occurrences of the name “Herod” in the New Testament and match up each verse with the right man - Herod the Great, Herod Antipas, Herod Philip, Herod Agrippa I, or Herod Agrippa II.



# **THE JEWISH SECTS**

## **Lesson Aim**

To introduce students to the four major sects that helped shape first-century Judaism - the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and Zealots.

## **Memory Verse**

**Hebrews 1:13-14** - "To which of the angels did God ever say, 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool'? Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?"

## **Lesson Background**

Everyone knows that the Pharisees and Sadducees were enemies of Jesus, but few realize that they were also enemies of one another. The four Jewish sects to be studied today played a major role in first-century Judaism, and thus had a significant impact both on the ministry of Jesus and on the history of the New Testament Church.

A sound knowledge of where these groups came from and what they believed is essential for a good understanding of the New Testament. Students are now in a better position to gain that knowledge, having studied the historical milieu from which these Jewish sects grew. We will be looking briefly this week at both the origins of these groups and their impact on New Testament history.

## Lesson Procedure

Today we will be looking at the four major Jewish sects existing at the time of Christ.

### 1. The Pharisees

The Pharisees first appear on the scene during the reign of John Hyrcanus. They are the spiritual descendants of the Hasidim, those pious followers of the law of God who resisted Hellenization at the time of Antiochus Epiphanes and from whom the Maccabees came.

The Pharisees were zealous to maintain the purity of the Jewish religion and sought to keep that purity by “fencing the law.” This was a procedure by which traditions were developed that, when observed, would keep people from even getting in a position where they might violate the law of God. (Example: The law says not to take the name of the Lord in vain. The Pharisees “fenced the law” with their tradition that the name Yahweh [“the Lord”] should not be spoken at all!) Obviously, they focused their attention on the externals of the law, and Jesus rightly accused them of simultaneously perverting its true intent.

As the dominant teachers of their day, the Pharisees virtually controlled the synagogues. When the Sadducee-dominated Temple was destroyed in 70 A.D., it was the Pharisees who survived. Their traditions became the basis for the Talmud, which defines the Judaism of the Christian era.

The Pharisees’ hatred of Jesus stemmed from the fact that He distinguished between God’s law (righteous) and their traditions (perverse), thus undercutting the source of their authority among the people.

### 2. The Sadducees

If the Pharisees were the descendants of the Hasidim, the Sadducees were the successors of the Hellenizers. They, too, first appear during the reign of John Hyrcanus, but there the similarity with the Pharisees ends.

While the Pharisees fenced the law with their traditions, the Sadducees sought to adapt it to new circumstances. In fact, they acknowledged only the Torah as authoritative and denied such basic doctrines as the resurrection of the body and the existence of angels.

Their concerns were largely political in nature. At the end of John Hyrcanus’ reign, he identified himself with the party of the Sadducees. Throughout the remainder of the Hasmonean period and on into the first century A.D., the Sadducees controlled the High Priesthood (by then little more than a political office), and with it the Temple and its functions. Thus it was that with the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D. the Sadducees passed from the scene, while the religion of the Pharisees prevailed.

The opposition of the Sadducees to Jesus was likewise political. They lived in comfortable symbiosis with the Roman conquerors and desired nothing more than the preservation of their power. They knew that blame for a popular uprising would fall on the shoulders of those charged with keeping the peace - themselves! “Rocking the boat” would generate the evolution of a new ruling class, and the Sadducees had no desire to see that happen. Thus it was that the Pharisees and Sadducees, polar opposites in belief, bitter enemies for over a century, were able to cooperate in the elimination of the King of the Jews.

### **3. The Essenes**

The Pharisees opposed the Sadducees, not the Temple they controlled. For some Jews, however, the level of corruption was simply too great to permit further participation in the Temple ritual. These Jews isolated themselves in monastic communities of various kinds, some in cities and some in the wilderness. These separatist Jews are referred to collectively as the Essenes.

The Essenes saw their monastic communities as taking the place of the Temple. They lived under strict discipline and held all property in common. Some groups practiced celibacy and added to their number by proselytism and even adoption of abandoned boys, while others permitted marriage. Their hatred of the corrupt Temple took on apocalyptic overtones, and they saw themselves as the Sons of Light (as opposed to the Sons of Darkness) and the Community of the New Covenant.

The most famous Essene settlement was at Qumran, near the Dead Sea. This settlement included a scriptorium, where manuscripts were copied. Shortly before the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., the members of the community hid their precious documents in some of the caves nearby. These documents, discovered by accident in 1947, are known as the Dead Sea Scrolls, and tell us much about the beliefs and practices of the Essenes as well as providing strong evidence for the reliability of the text of the Old Testament.

The Essenes are not mentioned in the New Testament, though certain intriguing speculations have been made about possible connections. Some have suggested that John the Baptist, with his ascetic lifestyle, may have been influenced by the Essenes, though this is doubtful, since the legalism of the Essenes was even worse than the Pharisaic legalism so soundly condemned by Jesus. Others have suggested that, since the Essenes were given special favors by Herod the Great, they are referred to in the Gospels as Herodians - a definite possibility in light of their opposition to and condemnation by Jesus. A third possibility is that the book of Hebrews was written to a group of Essenes who had been converted to Christianity - again, an interesting suggestion in light of the similarities that exist between the teachings of the Essenes and those opposed by the author of Hebrews.

### **4. The Zealots**

In opposition to the collaboration of the Sadducees and Pharisees with the Roman occupation and the ostrich-like stance of the Essenes, some Jews were willing to fight to free their land of the Roman invaders. These successors of the Maccabees were known as Zealots.

Throughout the first century, they carried on guerilla warfare against the Romans. One of Jesus' disciples was a former Zealot (Simon the Cananaean), as probably was Barabbas. It was increased Zealot activity that finally brought on the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus and the Tenth Legion in 70 A.D. Remnants of the Zealot force fled to the mountaintop fortress of Masada, constructed by Herod the Great near the Dead Sea. After a lengthy siege, the Romans built a ramp up to the walls of the fortress. Upon breaching the walls, the Roman soldiers found nothing but an eerie silence - along with the bodies of almost 1,000 men, women, and children who had committed suicide (actually, the men had killed their families and then themselves) rather than fall into the hands of the Romans. Later, two women and five children were found hiding under some flooring - the sole survivors of Masada.



**FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT**

**THE JEWISH SECTS**

Fill in the following chart:

	PHARISEES	SADDUCEES	ESSENES	ZEALOTS
ORIGIN				
CHARACTER- ISTICS				
ATTITUDE TOWARD JESUS				
MEMBERS MENTIONED IN THE NEW TESTAMENT				
REFERENCES WHERE MENTIONED IN THE NEW TESTAMENT				