

“A Brief History of the Intertestamental Period”

Dr. E.K.D. Quick

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Introduction

In order to have a better understanding of the Gospels, one has to have more than a knowledge of the Old Testament record alone. In addition, there needs to be some understanding of the four hundred years that elapsed from the writings of the prophet Malachi to the coming of Jesus Christ, the time known as The Intertestamental Period. The Intertestamental Period was a 400-year time between Malachi and the New Testament that directly impacted the Jewish people consisting of varied empires and family ascensions, all couched in Messianic anticipation. Israel continued in her struggles for existence and restoration during the period between Malachi and the events of the N.T. The results of Alexander's the Great victories and the dispersal of his empire, the spread of the Roman Empire, the rise of the Maccabees and the rise of the Herods, form a thread of historical events that directly affect the religious thinking, customs, government and lifestyle of the those living in the first century era. The stage of events to come are set with Alexander the Great. Alexander promoted Greek culture everywhere he conquered. When his armies took Palestine from the Persians in 332 B.C., they required the Jews to adopt Greek language and customs. When Alexander died his kingdom was divided among his four Generals, Cassander took Greece and Macedonia; Lysimus took Asia Minor; Seleucus took Syria, Babylon, Persia, Media, and other eastern parts; and Ptolemy took Egypt.

The Rise of the Maccabees

From 175-164 B.C., Antiochus Epiphanes ruled Syria and was determined to Hellenize the region. He launched a campaign against Jerusalem in 168 B.C.¹ He commenced by burning the scriptures, prohibited worship of Jehovah, polluted the temple, compelling the Jews to sacrifice to idols. At this time the Maccabees, led by the priest Mattathias of the Hasmonaean family, and his five sons, of whom Judas Maccabaeus was eventually to emerge as leader, arose. Their efforts of resistance were successful and the prohibition of Jewish religion was abandoned.² In honour of the rededication of the temple in 164 B.C., the Jews instituted the Festival of Dedication described in 1 Maccabees 4:59. It is this annual festival that Jesus is present at in John 10:22-42. Having gained religious freedom, the Maccabeans continued to grow in strength and went on to found a dynasty which controlled Judah until the Roman conquest of 63 B.C.E.³ In connection with this period, two prominent religious groups developed, the Pharisses and the Sadducees. The Pharisees arose from the pious party or Hasidim, and the Saducees from the Hellenists during the Maccabean revolt. 'Pharisee' means 'separatist', and it is possible that the name originated by the groups practice of separating tithes and offerings required for the temple, or because they disassociated themselves from other Jews.

1 – Fiensy, D.A. *New Testament Introduction* (College Press Publishing, 1994), 14.

2 – F.F. Bruce, *New Testament History* (London: Oliphants, 1971), 1.

3 – C.J. Roetzel, *The World That Shaped the New Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1985), 14.

The name 'Sadducee' is probably derived from Zadok (the priest who lived in the time of David and Solomon).⁴ During the reign of Alexander Jannaeus, the Pharisees took a prominent part in public affairs. The first mention of them as a party occurs in Josephus in his account of the reign of John Hyrcanus (135-105 B.C.) where they appear as a very influential party.⁵ It is through the Pharisees that the oral law was handed down and expanded, till finally codified in the Mishna and eventually completed in the Talmud.⁶ The Sadducees represented the party of the wealthy priests and their friends in the aristocracy. They combined traditional religious outlooks with politics. Their political position and sense of survival led them into an openness to Hellenistic cultural influences. After the coming of Rome, they encouraged collaboration with the ruling power and were concerned in maintaining the status-quo, which secured their position.⁷ The principal agency of the Sadducees power was in the Sanhedrin, the supreme court of justice. This administrative and legal body consisted of 71 people, the majority of whom, including the high priest, were Sadducees.⁸

The Roman Presence

During the 3rd Century B.C. Roman power began to be felt and after a series of

4 – G.H. Box, *Judaism in the Greek Period* (London: Oxford University Press, 1945), 29.

5 – Josephus, *Ant.* 13:288-300. Cited by G.H. Box, 49.

6 – J. Bright, *A History of Israel* (London: SCM Press, 1967), 450.

7 – E. Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 2nd. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), 486.

8 – V.G. Beers, *The Victor Handbook of Bible knowledge* (Illinois: Victor Books, 1981), 539.

regional struggles, the Romans conquered Greece and Macedonia about 200 B.C. After, a series of victories with Macedonia and Syria from 207-200 B.C., Greece and Macedonia became part of the Roman Empire in 168 B.C. The Romans demanded two primary requirements of its people: that they pay taxes and accept the government of Rome. Any attempt to rebel was met with extreme severity. Since the Roman domination of Palestine in 63 B.C. the Jews had to pay taxes, but when Judea was added as a Roman province, they were also expected to pay provincial taxes. Throughout the Gospels the dominating presence of the Roman Empire is clearly seen. Luke connects the birth of Christ with the decree issued by the Emperor Augustus (Luke 2:1). It is under a Roman magistrate that Christ was sentenced to death (Matt. 27:11-26, and by a form of Roman execution that the sentence was carried out (Matt. 27:31).⁹

The Effects of the Herodian Reign

The Herods emerge as significant people in intertestamental history and an awareness of their origins and activity helps to shed light on references to them in the Gospels. The rule of the Herods began with Antipater, governor of Idumea in 67 B.C.¹⁰ In 48 B.C. he was given Roman citizenship and appointed procurator of Judea by Caesar as a reward for assisting Caesar in civil war against Pompey. Antipater appointed his two son's to govern; Phasael governed Jerusalem and Herod governed over Galilee. By 40 B.C. Herod's power had increased to such a degree that he was appointed king of Judea by Caesar and the Roman senate. In 37 B.C. Herod the Great, by the aid of Roman

9 – F.F. Bruce, *New Testament History* (London: Oliphants, 1971), 1.

10 – J.D. Douglas, *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, part 2 (Leicester: IVP, 1980), 542.

troops, deposed the last Asmonian (Maccabean) prince, Antigonus, and became the nominal sovereign of the Jews, albeit, subject to Rome. Herod betrayed his people to the Romans, fostered immorality, cultivated alien customs, corrupted the priesthood and massacred many nobles. Herod's unstable and jealous nature sparked by rumor of a rival king is seen in Matthew chapter 2 with the massacre of the infants of Bethlehem. After his death in A.D. 40 his kingdom went to his three sons; Archelaus ruled Judea and Samaria (Matt. 2:22), Antipas ruled Galilee and Peraea, and Philip ruled over his father's North East regions (Luke 3:1).

Conclusion

After the victories of Alexander the Great, Hellenism swept through the ancient world both influencing, and at times, forcing itself as a lifestyle. Along with the rise and victories of the Maccabeans, we see the Jews' continued struggle for religious freedom and the emerging influence of the Pharisees and the Sadducees. With later Roman domination, a combination of sustained Hellenistic and Roman influence is attributed to the Gospels, most noticeably with the Sadducees and the establishment of the Sanhedrin. The Pharisees, however, tended to reject Hellenistic influence and arose from the pious party or Hasidim. The authority of the Roman Empire is seen throughout the Gospels demanding payment of taxes and obedience. In connection with the activity of Rome the Herods also emerged as puppets of Rome ruling over their own people.

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