

**Historical Interlude (425-5 BCE)**  
***Influences on a Dispersed People***  
***Hellenism and the Jews***  
***Judaism under Roman Rule***

**Readings: No readings – summary of information provided in “The Narrated Bible”**

***Reflections:***

- Influences on a dispersed people (425 to 330 BCE):
  - Only a remnant of Jews actually returned to Israel and Jerusalem while the majority remained within Babylon, Egypt and other surrounding countries. This integration into other communities resulted in the Jew’s slowly assimilating into those cultures and beginning to adopt some of the religious perspectives of those communities. Here are a list of a number influences that impacted the Jews during this time:
    - The Hebrew language was used less and less with Aramaic and other languages becoming more common among Jews. This led in turn to a decreased reading of the Torah as well as the increased lax stance on dietary customs and laws.
    - There remained the practice of intermarriage as well as increased interest in Persian beliefs like astrology and the occult. This resulted in the practice of adding special spiritualized meanings to the Hebrew stories that emphasized demons and the battle between light and dark forces. The Torah became increasingly mystified in people’s understanding.
    - Another influence of Persian religious perspective was the notion of God being much more distant and disconnected from daily life.
    - Obviously these dispersed Jews did not have the ability to go to the temple or to sacrifice for their sins. This leads to the rise of the synagogue with an emphasis on Torah reading, prayer and the inner sacrifice of the heart before God. Priests are replaced by Rabbis

(teachers) and a more intellectual and behavioral religious emphasis rather than ritualistic religious emphasis.

- This in turn leads to another evolutionary change: sectarianism and the rise of rabbinic tradition. With more teachers and philosophical approaches, more groups form with their own unique beliefs and emphases. These are written down in the Midrash or captured and passed on through oral tradition. Here we see the development of a hyper legalism and the attempt to humanly codify righteousness.
- From this emerges what should be viewed as the unavoidable, logical consequence of sectarianism: the belief that all Jews may not be saved under the covenant. This remnant theology leads various groups to draw the lines in various places. Are you in true covenant with God by remaining more religiously orthodox within the setting of your choosing? Or do you need to return to Israel and fully participate in Temple sacrifice and the original vision of the Israelite nation? Different rabbis come to different conclusions. Here is the big change though: not all Jews are real Jews!
- All of these factors impact this dispersed Jewish nation as they live for the most part peacefully within Persia. With the fall of the Persian Empire in 330 BCE and the conquest of Alexander the Great, more changes will come.
- Hellenism and the Jews (330 to 63 BCE)
  - Alexander the Great, after sweeping through Syria, Palestine, and Egypt (including the complete destruction of Tyre as Ezekiel predicted), establishes the new city of Alexandria on the Nile. This becomes a center for the rise of Greek thought and culture. With Alexander's forces pushing into India, a whole new world opens up as East and West are united and a new language, Koine Greek, becomes the common trade language.
  - In 323 BCE Alexander dies and the empires are divided as military generals grab for power and control of different states. The Ptolemies take Egypt and Seleucids take Syria and Palestine is caught in the middle. Ptolemy I take a number of Jews captive to Alexandria as a part of strengthening the city. Here we see the integration of Greek thought into Jewish thought as reflected in a number of Apocryphal works written in Alexandria during this period. Ptolemy II will commission the translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek, known as the Septuagint, and over the next 300 years this version of the Old Testament will virtually replace the Hebrew version.
  - The Seleucids from time to time take control of Palestine until finally they themselves come under the control of a new power, Rome. One of their rulers, Antiochus IV is empowered to rule the region while Rome concentrates on

Greece. The Seleucid ruler, Epiphanes, is one of the cruelest leaders to hold power. Here is what he did to Israel: demanded heavy taxes, sold the office of high priest, built gymnasiums for naked athletes, confiscated property, looted the temple, and even sacrificed a pig on a pagan altar he erected in the temple area.

- The pig was probably the last straw as a rebel group called the Maccabees started to initiate guerilla warfare. This carries on for twenty years (163 to 143 BCE). Epiphanes responds by executing 1,000 Jewish soldiers for refusing to fight on the Sabbath. With the help of a devout Hasidim sect of Judaism, the Maccabees get control and set up a self-ruled government under John Hyrcanus (135 BCE). For seventy years they will have a certain amount of autonomy and freedom under the watchful eye of Rome.
- No doubt the nation feels the insecurity and tentative nature of virtually every aspect of their life. The notion of a strong, secure nation under God is a distant memory as they have lived in the shadow of such powerful foreign rulers.
- Judaism under Roman rule (63 to 5 BCE)
  - In 63 BCE, Pompey invades Palestine and seizes control of Jerusalem. A measure of self-rule remains in Palestine. Although the wars, political power struggles and great dramas (like the stories of Caesar, Antony, Cleopatra, and Octavian) continue through this time, Palestine remains somewhat ignored and somewhat controlled under Antipater and his son, Herod. By 27 BCE, Octavian is given the title of Augustus by the Roman Senate. It is this Caesar Augustus that begins the 200 year reign of peace known as Pax Romana.
  - Herod will try to build some peace with the Jews by restoring the temple that was looted and destroyed by Epiphanes. Herod is far from a friend of the Jews as he freely kills those who threaten him.
  - In these final years before the appearance of Jesus, the nation is in some ways restored with the temple and religious system in place. The sectarian nature of Judaism is now entrenched.
    - The Pharisees have become the keepers of the oral tradition of the rabbis. They are obsessed with interpretation and legalisms. Their approach is basically “salvation by Torah observance” with a firm conviction about life after death, the resurrection of the dead and the importance of living distinct lives as displayed through circumcision and observing the dietary laws of the Torah. This group enjoys the favor of the common people which wins them popular support for being chosen for high government positions including the Sanhedrin, the highest council of the Jews.

- The Saducees is more closely tied to the Greek intellectual movement and have embraced the idea of the soul dying with the body. They reject the oral traditions of the rabbis but embrace the Torah Law and a more rationalistic interpretation of the Law.
  - The Essences are a more monastic group that lives apart from community awaiting the coming Messiah and kingdom. They are devout and believe in remaining completely pure and set apart for God.
  - The Zealots are openly rebellious to Rome and desire to see Israel restored through military action.
  - The Herodians are a more politically active group seeking to improve conditions through political action.
  - The Samaritans are a group that has grown up through intermarriage and syncretism. Their religious beliefs include Persian mysticism, Greek humanism, patriotic Judaism, as well as ritualism. It is not surprising that this group is severely rejected by those that consider themselves orthodox Jews.
- In all of this, we can see that the original vision of Israel (the Torah, the Promised Land, the Kings and the Prophets) is completely decimated. They are divided, compromised, and oppressed. The story of “what doesn’t work” not only doesn’t work but has left them in a complete mess. Here under the shadow of the most powerful empire known to the world at that time, could anyone powerful enough come to rescue this nation and fulfill the prophecies? As we will see, God in his weakness will triumph over all the power of humanity and the spiritual forces set against God. The Messiah will come in ultimate humility and bring about the most powerful spiritual revolution known to humanity: a revolution of the heart!