

## **Background to the New Testament Part 01 by Rodney Bowen**

### Introduction

In our Bibles today the Old Testament ends with the book of Malachi and the New Testament immediately begins with the Gospel accounts of the life of Jesus Christ. However between the Old and New Testament there is a gap of almost 400 years. During this time Israel experienced periods of independence and blessing, upheaval and destruction, oppression and humiliation. A mass of Jewish literature was written, for example, the books in the Apocrypha, the books of Jubilees and Enoch, the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, the Sibylline Oracles, the Septuagint, and the list goes on. Jewish theology changed with the influence of Persian and Greek mythology. For example during this time belief in evil spirits, demons, and the devil, were incorporated into Jewish thought. Empires changed with the passing of seasons, the sacred position of High Priest was defiled, and the Jewish nation became divided in allegiance and in religious beliefs. Factions such as the Scribes Pharisees and Sadducees, those who should have been leading the nation, fought, bribed and murdered one another, all to gain the rulership of Israel.

### History

In 538 BC, a proclamation by King Cyrus of Persia, who had conquered Babylon, permitted the exiles to return to Jerusalem. It was during the ensuing Persian Period (539-333BC) that what is known as the 'Second Temple' was built. The people were led by the leading figures of Ezra and Nehemiah. As the leader and governor of Jerusalem, Nehemiah required every family in Judah to send ten of its members to live in Jerusalem, thus augmenting the city's meagre population. Nehemiah rebuilt the walls and fortified the city under the threat of destruction by political enemies. The law was reinstated and the High Priest was reinstated. The Temple and the Torah once again became central to Jewish life.

During this time the prophets Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi encouraged and warned the Jews to turn to God. Haggai encouraged the Jews to return from Babylon and rebuild the Temple. Zechariah and Malachi both foretold the coming of Jesus the Messiah, who would build the temple of Yahweh and rule in peace and righteousness. Malachi foretold the coming of a messenger who would prepare Israel for the Messiahs appearing – John the Baptist.

After conquering the Persian Empire Alexander the Great (333-323BC) brought radical change to the world. He introduced the Greek culture to all the lands he conquered including Israel. Following his death, his empire was divided between his generals, and Israel became wedged between the rival Greek Empires of the Ptolemies who ruled from Egypt to the south, and the Seleucids who ruled (originally from Babylon) from Antioch in Syria to the north (cp. Dan 11). Between 323 and 199BC these two powers fought over the Jewish state. At first Israel came under Ptolemaic Egypt, then passed to the Seleucid Syrians. Rival priestly families started taking sides with either the Ptolemies or the Seleucids hoping to have the other family deposed and gain the position of High Priest for themselves.

Hellenistic culture (from the Greek word for Greece: Hellas), a mixture of Greek and early eastern cultures, grew dominant under the Seleucids. The Jewish aristocracy (including many of the priestly families) and others within the Jewish society in a bid to keep power and stay on good terms with their rulers, adopted customs and attitudes deriving from Hellenistic culture. They made Jerusalem a Greek city introducing such things as a Gymnasium, Hellenistic education, drama, literature, music, food and theology. The situation was bound to create tension between the Greeks and Hellenistic Jews on the one hand and the traditionalist Jews on the other.

The Seleucid Antiochus Epiphanes IV (175-163BC) precipitated the Hasmonean revolt in Israel. Accepting a bribe from the prospective High Priest Menelaus, Antiochus marched into Jerusalem murdering and enslaving many Jews. He desecrating the Temple by setting up an altar to Zeus in it, sacrificing pig's flesh, and carrying off the Temple treasures (1st Macc 1:20-28; 2nd Macc 5:11-6:2). Traditionalists were enraged.

In 168BC the Hasmonean revolt, led by Judah Maccabee, broke out. Jerusalem was liberated and the Temple was purified and restored as the people's spiritual centre. Some 20 years later, Simeon the Maccabee (142-135BC) defeated the Hellenistic Jews, and ushered in an 80-year period of Jewish political independence in Jerusalem.

"Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely" (Lord Acton, 1834-1902)

Under the last Hasmonean ruler, Alexander Jannaeus (103-76BC), the independent state achieved its greatest territorial expansion and political power, but the same fierce energies that drove this leader into war against the nations enemies also thrust him into unparalleled conflict with his own people. In one case Alexander, a Sadducean supporter, had his soldiers slay 6,000 Jews, when they pelted him with lemons during the Feast of Tabernacles because he corrupted the libation ceremony. This brought on a civil war that lasted six years and cost 50,000 Jewish lives. When the war eventually ended, Alexander transported some of his Jewish prisoners of war, most of them probably Pharisees, to Jerusalem. While he was feasting with his concubines, he ordered about eight hundred

of them to be nailed to crosses and crucified, and while they were living, he ordered the throats of their children and wives to be cut before their eyes (Josephus, Ant, 13, 14,2).

A rift between Alexander Janneus successors lead them to petition the Roman General Pompey for assistance. The Roman legions (legion = 4200-6000, infantry and cavalry) marched into the historic land of Israel, for the first time in 63BC. From a Jewish point of view, the land promised to them by Yahweh had once again fallen under the rule of others.

The Romans killed thousands, and appointed a local notable, Antipas, an Idumean, (Edomite) as ruler in Israel. In 40BC, the Senate in Rome proclaimed his son Herod the Great as "King of the Jews." Within three years he had established his rule over an expanse of territory that virtually equaled the kingdom established by David some nine centuries earlier. Herod was at times generous, and at others tyrannical. Matthew records his slaughter of all children less than three years of age, in and around Bethlehem at the birth of Christ (ch.2). He hoped to kill Jesus, and eradicate any possible threat to the throne. He murdered many Jews, and killed many of his own family including his wife and three of his eldest sons.

At his death in 4BC, the Romans divided his kingdom among three of his sons. Archelaus (cp. Matt 2:22) ruled over Judea and Samaria (the area around Jerusalem) for 10 years (4BC-6AD). For a variety of reasons, mainly that he was extremely cruel, he was eventually deposed and the Roman emperor placed his own Roman governor directly over these territories. At the time of the ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus in about 30AD, the Roman governor of Judea and Samaria was Pontius Pilate (26-36AD). Herod Antipas ruled Galilee and Perea (4BC-39AD), and Herod Philip (4BC-34AD) ruled over territories to the northeast of the Sea of Galilee (cp. Luke 3:1-2).

Just as political jurisdiction in the land of Israel was multi layered, the social situation also had many layers. Among the upper classes were the rulers, whether Roman or Roman appointed, and those who directly served the rulers as retainers. Also among the upper classes were the priestly families, the Sadducees, the Elders, and the Scribes and Pharisees. The vast majority of the population however belonged to the peasant underclass.

#### The Roman Governors

At the removal of Archelaus in 6AD, Judea (including Samaria and Idumaea) was placed under the general oversight of the Roman Governor of the province of Syria. However it was also given a governor of its own who was answerable to the Imperial governor of the province of Syria, and the Emperor. (Incidentally one of the duties of the Syrian governor was to conduct a census to assess the number of people in the province and their employment, to create an effective method of collecting taxes. Luke records a census conducted by the Syrian governor Quirinus in 2:1-5, and the resulting revolt is alluded to by Gamaliel in Acts 5:34-37).

The Governors responsibilities included being commander of the military forces involved in both protecting the province from threats from outside (e.g. the Parthians cf. Acts 2:9, and the Nabataens, who ruled from Petra) and the suppression of revolt from within (Cp. Acts 23:24 – Ch. 26). He was also the provinces chief judicial officer, deciding important cases of law usually only involving Roman citizens. However this was not the case if a Jew was involved in a matter relating to the Roman government, or if the Sanhedrin sentenced someone to death. In the latter case, by law the Sanhedrin had to bring the accused before the Governor, and only he could ratify and carry out the execution (cp. John 18:31). However the High Priest and Sanhedrin did not always observe this law and sometimes exceeded their jurisdiction (cp. Luke. 4:29; John 8:59; 10:31). Usually this ended in the deposition of the High Priest and the appointment of another (cp. example of the Martyrdom of James, Jesus brother by the High Priest Ananus in 62AD, Antiquities 20:9,1). Only Roman citizens had the right to appeal any decision of the governor directly to the Emperor (cp. Acts 25:11-12).

A third important responsibility of the Roman Governor was that of chief financial officer, whose primary task in this regard was the collection of taxes. The actual receipt of taxes was contracted to local subjects called tax collectors (or 'publicans' in the NT cp. Luke 3:12-13 cf. 7:28-30;5:27-32;19:1-10 cf. 18:9-14;Matthew 10:3; 18:17; Matthew the disciple was a tax collector cp. Luke 5:27-32 and Matthew 10:3) over whom little supervision was employed, except to see that the government received what it demanded. This system permitted petty officials to extort large sums from the population, most of which was poor.

The Jews were given a certain amount of autonomy with which to rule themselves, through their Jewish Courts and Sanhedrin's. The High Priest was the Governors nominee and answerable to him. He could depose and set up another High Priest at will, however this caused problems as the Jews regarded the office of High Priest as an appointment for life. The fourth Roman Governor, Gratus (15-26AD) deposed several High Priests, including Ananus (Annas in the N.T.) who continued as the power behind the High Priest Caiaphas' office for many years (cp. Luke 3:2;John 18:13, 24;Acts 4:6).

The fifth and most notable governor of Judea was Pontius Pilate (26-36AD; cp. Matthew 27;Luke 3:1; 13:1;Acts 3:13; 4:27; 13:38;1 Timothy 6:13). One of Pilate's contemporaries, Agrippa (later King Agrippa I, 41-44AD, cp.

Acts 12:1) grandson of Herod the Great, sent a letter to the Emperor Tiberius which was preserved by Philo, Tiberius' embassy. According to Philo, Agrippa describes Pilate as "a man of inflexible disposition, harsh and obstinate." Philo also relates how Pilate set up golden shields (associated with emperor worship) in Herod's Jerusalem palace, "not so much to honor Tiberius as to annoy the multitude." When the Jews protested and threatened to send a delegation to Tiberius, Pilate "feared that if they actually sent to an embassy they would expose the rest of his conduct as governor by stating in full the briberies, the insults, the robberies, the outrages and wanton injuries, the executions without trial constantly repeated, with ceaseless and supremely grievous cruelty." Pilate's brutality is recorded in Luke 13:1 where he is noted as murdering Galileans at sacrifice, in Jerusalem. In 36AD he was finally removed from office and sent to Rome by the Syrian governor Vitellius to explain his conduct after an incident in which many Samaritans were murdered. (cf. Josephus on Jesus and Pilate, Antiquities, 18, 63-64; 20:200).

Other notable governors include Agrippa I (cp. Acts 12), Felix (52-60AD), and Porcius Festus (60-62AD). Of Felix the historian Tacitus says, "Practicing every kind of cruelty and lust, he wielded royal power with the instincts of a slave" (Histories Vol. 9).

In Felix's rule there were continuing efforts to channel the seething hatred of Rome into more organized forms of resistance, all of which Felix suppressed. One famous example was that of an Egyptian who gathered a large crowd on the Mount of Olives with the promise that the walls would fall down before their advance and the city would be theirs. Felix' chief captain Claudius Lysias (Acts 23:26) resident in Jerusalem for the Passover intercepted the group killing 400 and taking 200 prisoners, however the Egyptian escaped. This forms the background to Paul's capture by Lysias in Acts 21:37-39. Porcius Festus is mentioned in Acts 24:27, regarding Paul the Apostle.

In the next issue God willing, we will consider the Jewish Synagogue, the Sanhedrin, and the Jewish sect, the Pharisees.