



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Class Notes

2 - Origins, Persian, and Greek [Part 1]

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Review

- I. Surveying The Era: Major Periods and Crises for the Jews.¹
 - A. Jews continue under Persian rule (516 [424]-331 BC).²
 - 1. Crisis 1: Destruction of the First Commonwealth and the First Temple (before period 1).
 - B. Alexander the Great inaugurates the Greek period (331-167 BC).
 - 1. Crisis 2: Collapse of the Persian Empire in the wake of Alexander the Great's invasion.
 - 2. Crisis 3: Persecution by Antiochus IV Epiphanes.
 - C. The Maccabean revolt and the Hasmonean dynasty [independence] (167-63 BC).
 - 1. Crisis 4: Domination by Rome (periods 3, 4).
 - D. The Roman period (63 BC-70 AD).
 - 1. Crisis 5: Roman destruction of the Jewish state and temple.

Origins

- II. Captivity and Crisis
 - A. The *Second Temple* Period did not actually begin until that temple was constructed (ca. 516 BC), but the period cannot be understood without knowledge of the events that came before.
 - B. So, we begin at the destruction of Solomon's temple and Babylonian exile of the Jews in 586 BC.
 - 1. Consider what Israel lost at that point: (1) land; (2) monarchy; (3) Jerusalem, its capital city and political center; (4) the temple; (5) national identity.
 - 2. Consequently, they were left with a religious system without political support for: (1) protection; (2) the means for implementation; (3) financial backing.³
 - C. In his letter to the exiles, Jeremiah told them to maintain their national identity and be good citizens in Babylon, but gave no instructions for compensating for the above losses (Jer 29.4-9).
- III. Persian Rule.
 - A. The influence of Cyrus.
 - 1. In 559 BC, Cyrus began his ascent which resulted in the conquest of all Persia; by 539, he had conquered Babylon and assumed control over her subject peoples.

2. Unlike Babylon, Cyrus did not seek to humiliate his vassals, but permitted them to maintain their customs and religions in their homelands.
3. Accordingly, he allowed Jews who had been deported the opportunity to return to Israel.
 - a) Ezra 1.2-4 records the application of the policy to the Jews.
 - b) There were three mass returns, in 536, 458, and 445 BC (see 2 Chron 36.22-23; Ezra 1.2ff.; 7.1; Neh 2.1).
 - c) Those who returned lived under Persian rule (in the 5th satrapy, under the Syrian governor); they rebuilt the temple (cf. Ezra 3.7-6.22)⁴ and Jerusalem's walls (Neh 1-6).
 - d) Not all the Jews returned; many chose to remain, continuing as the first of what became known as the diaspora (dispersion).
- B. Generally, the Jews' 200 years under Persian rule (539-331 BC) were comparatively uneventful (see Esther for an exception, about 15 years prior to Ezra's return; cf. Esth 3.7; Ezra 7.1, 7).⁵

The Greek Period—United Rule

IV. Second Crisis: Collapse of the Persian Empire to the Invasion of Alexander the Great.

- A. Philip of Macedon.
 1. In Greece, an ambitious ruler named Philip of Macedon rose to power and, by 338 BC, succeeded in consolidating the rival factions of a loose confederation of Greek city states.
 2. Philip believed that the art, literature, and architecture of the Greeks was superior to any others the world had to offer, and therefore was determined to spread the Greek way of life throughout the world. So, a period of Greek conquest began.
 3. Philip set out to overthrow the Persians, but was assassinated in 336 before he succeeded.
- B. Alexander the Great (356-323 BC).
 1. At the age of 19, Philip's son, Alexander, succeeded his father and proved to the Greeks that he was capable of leading them.
 2. By 331 BC, he had routed the Persians in battle at Grannicus and Issus, liberated Egypt from Persian rule, and conquered Darius III at the battle of Gaugamela.
 - a) 334-330 — he expanded through Asia Minor and conquered Persia (including Egypt and Mesopotamia).
 - b) 333 — he overran Galilee and Judea, extending Greek influence into Judaism.
 - (1) See 1 Maccabees 1.1-7 (also Dan 7.3ff; 8.5ff., 20-22; 11.3).
 3. After successfully overthrowing the Persians, Alexander continued to march eastward, extending the Greek empire to northern India.
 - a) His rule extended from Greece to India and from southern Russia to northern Africa.
 4. Just thirteen years after succeeding his father, Alexander was ruler of the ancient world. But he died in Babylon in 323 BC (cf. 1 Macc 1.5-9).
- C. Alexander's legacy.
 1. Alexander was taught by Aristotle and inspired by Achilles (the warrior in the *Iliad*).
 2. The impact of his conquests and agenda lasted well into the Roman period.⁶
 - a) Improved standards of living and administrative efficiency (including transportation).
 - b) Foundation and growth of urban centers (urban-centered empire, not rural centered).
 - (1) This meant news could be shared more easily with the masses.
 - c) The spread of Hellenization: Greek culture and influence.⁷
 - (1) Religion and philosophy

- (2) A love for the beautiful in art and literature, including theater.
- (3) Scientific and critical inquiry
- (4) Development of mind and body (with associated customs, such as interest in sports to the exclusion of worship and sacrifice and nudity in male athletic competition).
- (5) Major libraries (including Alexandria and Tarsus).
- d) The spread of the Greek language itself.
 - (1) Blomberg comments, "Almost everyone who had to do business with the Greek soldiers and merchants who came to be located in every urban center had to learn to speak a little Greek. A simplified form of Attic (Athenian) Greek developed. . . . It was less flowery and semantically precise than its classical predecessors. The Greek of New Testament times became known as *koinē* (Gk. for 'common') and reflected what Romans called the *lingua franca* (Lat. for 'common language')."
 - (2) He continues, "Thus even through the first century, many Jews in Palestine may well have been at least marginally trilingual, with some knowledge of *Hebrew* (probably limited in use to religious literature), *Aramaic* as their common vernacular, and *Greek* as the language of business, commerce, and relations with the military and political authorities."⁸
 - (3) The extent of the spread of the Greek language is seen in the need of diaspora Jews to translate their Scriptures in the Greek as early as the mid-third century BC and the widespread use of that translation (Septuagint, LXX) through the first century AD.⁹
- D. With the collapse of the more lenient Persian Empire, the Jews had to contend with Greek kings who believed strongly in their cultural superiority and were determined to fully embed Greek culture in the lands they ruled.¹⁰

The Greek Period—Divided Rule

V. What Happened When Alexander Died.

- A. Alexander did not clearly designate an heir and, though an arrangement involving members of his family was made, it soon broke down and his generals vied for power.¹¹
 1. From 323-301 BC, the outcome was uncertain; the period is known as the *Diadochoi* (Greek for "successors").
 2. Initially, the empire was divided into four parts (cf. Dan 7.6; 8.8, 20-22; 11.4).
 - a) Antipater controlled Greece and Macedonia.
 - b) Lysimachus controlled Thrace and much of Asia Minor.
 - c) Seleucus I Nicator controlled Mesopotamia and Persia.
 - d) Ptolemy I Lagi Soter controlled Egypt and Palestine.
 3. Although boundaries were largely settled before the date, the intrigue and complex power struggle involved continued until ca. 277 BC, when three Hellenistic kingdoms had stabilized from the four divisions (cf. Dan 11.4-35).¹²
 - a) Antigonid Dynasty (Macedonia).
 - b) Ptolemaic (Ptolemies) Dynasty (Egypt).
 - c) Seleucid Dynasty (Syria).
- B. The Ptolemies and Seleucids are our concern in this discussion.
 1. Israel was caught in the middle of a power struggle in the eastern Mediterranean.
 2. The land was coveted because of its location and potential riches from taxation and natural resources.

VI. Ptolemaic Rule (301-198 BC).

- A. In practical terms, from 311 BC onward, Israel was securely controlled by the Ptolemies; this was a time of relative peace and freedom for the Jews.¹³
- B. The most famous and powerful ruler was Ptolemy III (246-222 BC) who promoted scientific investigation.
 1. A large Jewish colony arose in Alexandria, the city that, by 200 BC, was the greatest metropolis of the Mediterranean world until Rome surpassed it.
 2. A famous library and museum helped make Alexandria the intellectual and spiritual center of the Greek world.
 3. The Septuagint (LXX) was translated in Alexandria, completed from about 285-257 BC (the Roman numeral LXX is used as the translation's abbreviation because of the tradition that there were seventy translators who began the work).
- C. The Ptolemies contended with the Seleucids for control of Palestine, eventually losing Israel in 198 BC at Paneas to Antiochus III of Syria. We'll begin part 3 with the rule of the Seleucids.

November 20, 2019

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Endnotes

¹ The crises are delineated by L. R. Helyer, *Exploring Jewish Literature of the Second Temple Period: A Guide for New Testament Students* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 18-24; cited in Andreas Köstenberger, L. Scott Kellum, and Charles L. Quarles, *The Cradle, The Cross, and The Crown: An Introduction to the New Testament* (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2009), 60.

² Regarding the reference to 424 BC, recall from part one that we can speak of the *intertestamental* period, the time *between the testaments*, from the time of the cessation of prophecy (Malachi, ca. 433 BC) during the reign of Persia's Artaxerxes (d. 424) until its resumption with John (born ca. 6-5 BC; began prophesying ca. 26-29 AD).

³ J. Julius Scott, Jr., "The Time Between the Testaments," in *ESV Study Bible*, ed. Lane T. Dennis (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 1785.

⁴ The rebuilt temple was a disappointment to older members of the community who, remembering Solomon's temple, wept when they saw the foundation of the reconstructed one; see Ezra 3.12.

⁵ Ahashuerus (Xerxes in NIV), king in Esther, ruled Persia 486-465 BC; Artaxerxes, king in Ezra-Nehemiah, ruled 465-424.

⁶ See Craig L. Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels: An Introduction and Survey*, 2nd ed. (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2009), 12-14. Additional ideas in this section are drawn from T. C. Smith, "The Religious and Cultural Background of the New Testament," in *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, vol. 8, ed. Clifton J. Allen (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1969), 1.

⁷ "Hellenistic" is derived from the Greek word *Hellas*, the original word for Greece.

⁸ Blomberg, 13.

⁹ "The importance of the Septuagint for New Testament studies . . . can scarcely be overestimated. In a substantial majority of cases, the LXX (as it is customarily abbreviated) is often the version quoted in the New Testament, even when the Greek rendering varies from the Hebrew in some significant way. The Septuagint was clearly 'the Bible' for most first-century diaspora Jews" (Blomberg, 14).

¹⁰ Köstenberger, 66.

¹¹ For a summary of the complexity and intrigue involved, see Harold W. Hoehner, "Between the Testaments," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 1, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1979), 180-182.

¹² See the "Intertestamental Events Timeline" in Scott, 1788.

¹³ Blomberg, 15, notes two important developments in this period as regards first century Judaism. (1) The development of the institution of tax-farmers, local people co-opted to collect taxes as go-betweens for the Hellenists. Rome retained this practice and the NT provides evidence of the hatred the Jews had for these agents. (2) A rivalry that developed in the second half of the third century BC between the households of Onias and Tobias. The Oniads were high priestly families who objected to the growing Hellenism of Jewish life; the Tobiads were wealthy supporters of the Ptolemies who were more favorably disposed to Greek culture. This tension also continued into the first century.