

Chapter 9 "A Star Shall Rise in Jacob": The Age of Jesus Christ

Now another change was about to take place in world affairs. Persia – whose empire was more extensive than any before its time, covering Asia Minor, all the near east, touching and reaching into India - was about to be replaced by another power, this one arising in Macedon. With this shift the northern pole of mideast geopolitics moved from east to west, from Iran to Greece.

The catalyst for the shift was the of a father and a son: Philip and Alexander. Philip began the work. Greece had been a bother to Persia off and on during the fifth century, but Philip of Macedon was quickly pulling all the Greek states together under his own power. Before he could complete the task he was assassinated (in 336) and his son, Alexander, took control in his place. Alexander's augmented forces crossed the Hellespont in 334, and in 333 he met and mastered the main Persian army. The world was his! He marched into Egypt, back north into Babylon and Persepolis, on into India. In 323, weeping because he had no more worlds to conquer, Alexander died of illness in Babylon .

His empire fell apart. His generals seized control of various portions of it. For our purpose, we will follow two of these dynasties - the Ptolemies in Egypt and the Seleucids in Syria. Again, but on a minor scale, we have the same familiar situation recurring: two powers at polar ends of the Fertile Crescent fighting over Palestine. The Ptolemies took control in the 200's. Then, as the century turned, the Seleucids took control of Palestine. The Jews around Jerusalem welcomed the change, for the Seleucid rulers seemed to be operating under the same rule of toleration the Persians followed. The year was 198 B.C.

Far to the west war broke out between the cities of Carthage and Rome. Hannibal was ruler of Carthage, and with its history of economic and military power Carthage seemed to have little to fear from upstart Rome. But Roman might and Roman ingenuity asserted itself and, in 202 B.C. Carthage was seized and destroyed. Hannibal fled east. He had friends among the Seleucids, and it was a natural refuge for him to seek. The Romans followed his line of flight to the

east and suddenly found themselves involved in the affairs of Syria, Egypt, and all these ancient areas of empire; and Rome's long war to take control of the lands of the former Persian-Greek empire had begun.

This brought pressure on the Seleucids to exert more certain control over their own empire. The reigning king, Antiochus Epiphanes IV, attempted that. The result was to drive the Jews to rebellion. The key event took place in 167 B.C. That year Antiochus entered Jerusalem, took over the Temple, and made a sacrifice to his pagan god on that sacred altar and the sacrificial animal was said to be a pig! An unclean animal! Taboo in the House of the Lord and on the altar of sacrifice! "Abomination of Desolation!" Jews rose in revolt against Antiochus, and the Maccabean family led the revolt.

The generations-long battle between the Seleucids and the Jews under the Maccabeans was one of the most bitter in all history. Under Judas Maccabeus, Jerusalem was regained and the Temple restored. After the death of Antiochus in 163, the war continued with Lysias of Syria as the opponent of the Jews. His army boasted thirty two military elephants, and under their might Jerusalem was recaptured by the Seleucid power. When Judas died in 160, his brother Jonathan took over leadership of the Hasidim, the Pious, as these Jewish patriots termed themselves. He was followed by the last of the five brothers, Simon Maccabeus, in 142, and Simon succeeded in establishing the independence of Jerusalem. Simon had himself and his descendants declared high priest, civil ruler, and military commander - in perpetuity! But "forever" did not last long in those turbulent days. Within the year, Jerusalem was under attack again and, in 134, Simon and two of his sons were assassinated by a son-in law. The remaining son, John Hyrcanus, seized his father's authority and, by 128 B.C., the Jews had settled the protracted struggle and were once more able to claim self-rule over their own kingdom.

The rule lasted only until 65 B.C. Rome, under Pompey, entered Palestine and the Roman army moved on to Jerusalem. The city fell in 63 B.C. Rome had its own internal problems in the struggle between Caesar and Pompey and their successors and, during this time, a king named Herod was able to take and retain control of Palestine. Herod was an Idumean, a man of undoubted ability but of doubtful credentials for running a Jewish nation, who was placed by the Romans over Judea with the hope that he would integrate the territory more completely into the Roman empire; he built great buildings, including a rebuilding of the Temple; he built whole cities where no cities were before; he tried to turn the urban areas of Judea into tiny replicas of Rome. His reign was marked by his own egotism, by suspicion and violence. On his death, his kingdom was reorganized by Rome into provincial districts: one centering in Galilee and the north, a second in Samaria, and a third around Judea and Jerusalem. This brings us to the time of our New Testament.

In describing this period, I hope I can correct a misconception about the New Testament era. We tend to think that in the time of Jesus the religious-political situation was static, fixed; that there was an established group, quite secure in its own power, which soon joined hands with sympathetic allies to destroy Jesus. This is an error. The religious-political situation at the time

of Jesus was much more fluid than that. Various parties, positions, and ideas were struggling for supremacy among themselves and were often entering into alliances with each other to perform one or another specific task at hand.

The starting point in understanding what was going on has to be the fact that the former nation of Judah, now simply the province of Judaea, contained a subject people. This, of course, was in antithesis to all that the scriptures of the Jewish people had been telling them. The scriptures seemed to speak of a Messiah who would come to set things right, who would end the period of Roman rule and let the people of God have their own independence in the land of God. But the hard fact was that Rome was present and its evidences were everywhere. There were Roman-appointed governors and kings over the provinces, Roman taxes had to be paid constantly, there were the ensigns of Rome flapping insolently over Jewish heads at every turn. How were the people of Judea to respond to that kind of situation? A variety of religious-political parties rose up to shape their own answers to this unsought dilemma.

One of the parties, the most conservative, was the Sadducees. Its members were drawn from the upper class of Jerusalem: the hereditary priesthood, the bankers, the commercial people, the ones who had everything to gain from an alliance with Rome and nothing to lose by it. The Sadducees therefore were always trying to find a way to work with Rome. At the same time, they were holding to their faith as best they could. They would read their Torah; they would sacrifice in the Temple; they would celebrate the feasts of their people. But in none of this did they want to upset the present accommodations with Rome.

The second party was that of the Pharisees. They decided that it was not merely enough to accommodate with Rome; what they really had to do was to keep the law of the Jews, the Torah, as completely as possible. To this end they tried to establish an elite and privileged community in Judea right in the presence of Roman power. They said to themselves, "We will observe the festivals, the sabbath, the tithes and offerings, the food laws and circumcision, and as we act in this way, it means that the kingdom of God is already present despite the Roman power." There was even a strain in the party which believed that if all Israel would keep one sabbath perfectly, God would intervene in God's might and power, would drive the Romans out, and would establish the kingdom of God in this land; and this, of course, was what they desired above all.

A third party was the Herodians. This was the party that grew up around King Herod the Great. Politically, the Herodians were purely creatures of Roman power. Culturally, they were Hellenists, dedicated like Herod himself to bringing the culture of Greece to the benighted Jews. It was a culture of reason, poetry, buildings and cities, of easy toleration in matters of religion, a life-style built around the Forum and the Colosseum. It was also foreign to basic

Jewish life and its presence was bound to cause conflict with the representatives of Jewish nationalism.

Another group in existence at this time was known as the Essenes. They are best known through their library which was left after their destruction and which we now call the Dead Sea Scrolls. It appears that they were an outgrowth of the Pharisaic movement in that they tried to keep the law even more rigorous than the Pharisees did. They decided that the law could not be kept by their continuing to live in the cities and villages of Judea and Galilee but only by establishing a monastic community. So this group of men (no women were admitted to the community) withdrew themselves from their villages and cities, went out onto the very banks of the Dead Sea, and built a community that came to be known as Qumran. There they rigorously held to the law, kept the festivals, performed the baths of cleansing and celebrated a common meal. There is evidence that there were follow in the various villages and cities, but even these villagers looked to the monastic community as the center of their life, for it was there that a few already were living the life that the many would have when the Kingdom of God came in power.

The fifth group, not yet fully organized. came later to be known as "Zealots." Guerrilla warriors drawn from the lower classes of society, the peasants and the urban proletariat, they were determined to drive the Romans from their lands. As guerrillas, these revolutionaries lived off the land and they were not above robbing and stealing from their own people in order to maintain themselves. These were the men known in the New Testament as "the robbers"; when it was said that Jesus was crucified between two robbers, it did not mean that he was crucified between two petty thieves but between two revolutionaries. These incendiaries were constantly ready escalate any little incident into full-scale warfare and they were the ones who were later to initiate the revolt which led to the destruction of Jerusalem.

In addition to these five parties, there were many people who were not associated with any organized group. These were the people of the land, devout God-fearing patient people who were waiting for God to act decisively in their life. It was from these people as well as from the parties that Jesus began to draw his followers for he too, in the midst of this fluid religious-political situation, had to work out his own position on his place in God's kingdom.

We will spend only a short time on the final days of Judea. After Jesus' time, Zealots more and more took control until Rome felt challenged again. Roman armies under Titus moved from Galilee to Jerusalem in A.D. 67. In the spring of the year 70, Titus began his attack on the holy city. He had at his disposal four legions of soldiers. He planned his attack from the vulnerable north side. His cause was aided by the constant fighting taking place between the various factions of Jewish defenders. The barbarities of these internecine struggles were even more cruel than the punishment

inflicted by the Roman soldiers. Titus surrounded the city completely - the embankment he built can be seen yet today- no personnel, no supplies could enter or leave Jerusalem. Rome brought up its most advanced weaponry and most seasoned troops. These easily penetrated the third and second walls. Titus did his best to induce the defenders to surrender before they were destroyed. Refusing this offer, they determined to fight on and to make their final stand at the Temple itself which they turned into a citadel. By July the Roman forces had driven to the very gate of the Temple. In August the Temple went up in flames. In September the Jewish generals were captured. They were taken to Rome in triumphal procession and marched under an arch which still stands today. Jerusalem had fallen to its enemies once more.

Even this was not the end. For half a century longer, the Zealot fire continued to burn. Simon Bar Kokhba ("son of the stars") became the leader of the movement. Simon sought to revive Judaism on Jerusalem soil. He fancied himself the new king of Israel, its Messiah even, and he struck coins commemorating his liberation of Jerusalem. When the Roman emperor Hadrian decided to build a heathen temple on the very site where their sacred temple had stood, the Jewish call to arms was sounded one final time. Rome moved again and drove Simon from Jerusalem. This time the city was completely razed, only smoldering ruins remaining. Simon and his band fought a delaying battle as they moved west toward the Dead Sea. On a little hill the final siege took place. Simon and his men held out bravely, but thirst, starvation, and the Roman cohorts emerged the victors. This was the end of Judaism in its native soil. A new and Roman city was built on the site of Jerusalem; the Israelite population was frightfully decimated; the land became merely a Roman province, and as a final indignity it was renamed by the Romans "Palestine," a Latinized form of "Philistia," the hated enemy of Israel. The year was A.D. 135.

Of all the religious-political parties existent in A.O. 60, only two survived the destruction of Jerusalem, one being the Christian movement and the other Pharisaic Judaism. The Sadducees had disappeared around A.D. 61 in a dispute over the law. The Herodians collapsed when Herod was deposed, the Zealots died in battle, and the Essenes were destroyed as a side-effect of the revolt.

It was from the Pharisees that the form of Rabbinic Judaism that we still know emerged. Rabbinic Judaism developed around the synagogue. The synagogue movement may have begun as early as 200B.C. but it was after the destruction of Herod's temple that the synagogue became the chief center of Jewish religion: there Jewish men read their scripture, studied, offered their praises to God and instructed their children. Whether the Christian church

consciously borrowed from the model of the synagogue, we do not know. We do know, however, that the church took over some of the synagogues in the name of the Messiah Jesus; and that the later churches established themselves in a pattern that was close to that of the synagogue. It was in their churches that the Christians sang their hymns, read their scriptures, prayed to God through Jesus Christ, and ate their common meal; there they instructed one another and their children. This final destruction of Jerusalem was a critical event in religious history, for from it rose both the synagogue and the church, each of whom claimed to be the fulfillment of the life of the People of God which we have traced through this millenium.