

LESSON THREE

THE HISTORY OF PALESTINE

Before the student begins a study of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, he should have some idea of the events that took place during the four hundred years of time between the Old and New Testaments. These years were full of wars, uprisings, bloodshed, and tragedy for the Jews. We must remember that the little country of Palestine was a bridge linking three continents, and every army invading a foreign country had to pass over this bridge. During these four centuries armies tramped up and down the highways of Palestine and there was war and confusion without rest.

For the purpose of our study here we shall begin with the conquest of Alexander the Great.

A. ALEXANDER THE GREAT:

In the year of 333 BC Alexander of Macedonia became master of the Persian Empire, and a year later, he took possession of Palestine.

Alexander's aim seems to have been the spreading of Greek culture. Greek colonies were soon scattered all over the then-known world. Hellenism (the word comes from Hellas, meaning Greece) began to make itself felt in every walk of Jewish life, especially in the Jewish settlements outside of Palestine. Jews began to affect the use of Greek words in their conversation, and began to give their children Greek names.

Alexander treated with reverence the religion of the Jews, and later, when he had conquered Egypt and built the city of Alexandria, he invited the Jews to live there. His invitation was accepted and a large colony of Jews soon grew up in Egypt.

Alexander, while still a young man, died in Babylon, a victim of vice and drink. Alexander left no heir to his throne, and his empire was divided up into three kingdoms. Palestine became the scene of constant warfare. For a century the country was tossed back and forth between the Ptolemies, who ruled over Egypt, and the Seleucids, who ruled over Syria. Finally, in the year 198 BC, the Syrians drove the Egyptian army back to the Nile and formally annexed Palestine.

B. ANTIOCHUS EPIPHANES:

In 175 BC a ruler arose in Syria whom Daniel had foreseen. He was Antiochus Epiphanes and was known as Theophrastus, "The god made manifest." Everything Greek became a passion with Antiochus. Hellenism had proved very attractive to the worldly-minded Jews and many followed in its path. However, a sect arose in opposition to the Hellenists. They called themselves the Godly or Pious.

A false report came that Antiochus had been killed in battle and preparation was made in Jerusalem for a revolt. When Antiochus heard of the intentions of the Jews, he returned to punish the Jews mercilessly. The Pious was slaughtered, the temple was looted, and a sow was offered on the altar. Antiochus turned in fury against the Jewish religion. He proclaimed that all Jewish religious customs must cease. There would be allowed no more observance of Sabbaths, clean and unclean food, circumcision, no sacrifices to their God. Any person in whose possession a copy of the law was found was punishable by death.

Antiochus slaughtered 40,000 inhabitants of Jerusalem and sold many others into slavery. On another occasion the streets literally ran with blood, and the city was laid waste, as he slew the men and took the women and children captive.

Officers of Antiochus went everywhere seeking victims. They erected altars, called the Jews into a congregation, and then demanded them to sacrifice to Antiochus. At Modine there lived an aged priest named Mattathias and his five sons. When he was commanded to offer sacrifice, he refused. He killed a timid fellow who started to obey their orders, and then ran his sword through one of the Syrian officers.

C. JUDAS MACCABEUS:

Mattathias fled into the wilderness with his five sons and gathered around him a band of desperate zealots. They went up and down the countryside destroying the hated altars and putting to death the renegade Jews who had sacrificed on them.

Mattathias died soon after the beginning of the rebellion, and was succeeded by one of his sons, Judas, who proved a genius in warfare. Judas won for himself the name of Maccabaeus, "The Hammerer." Judas won his first victory over the Syrians as he surprised them in the hills north of Jerusalem. He armed himself and his men with weapons of the slain. He won four decisive victories and struck out at surrounding enemies as well. Antiochus Epiphanies died with the galling realization that Palestine had defied him and won.

In the year 143 BC, the Syrians were driven utterly from the land, and Palestine was at last free.

D. CONQUERED BY ROME:

His son, the High Priest, John Hyrcanus, succeeded Simon, the last of the five sons of Mattathias. Drunk with his newfound power, this man undertook cruel and costly wars against his neighbors. He invaded Samaria on the north and Idumea on the south. Forcibly he converted the Samaritans and the Edomites to his own sort of Judaism.

His son, Aristobulus, who continued the wars of conquest and added Galilee to the kingdom, succeeded John Hyrcanus.

His brother Alexander whose chief interests were war and pleasure succeeded Aristobulus. The Jews rebelled and drove him into exile but in a little while they called him back. Instead of showing gratitude, he crucified 800 Pharisees, after slaying their wives and children before their very eyes.

His widow Alexandra succeeded Alexander. When she was an old woman of 73, one of her sons, Aristobulus II, started a civil war. Hyrcanus, the rightful heir, lost in the first encounter. By taking the advice of a certain Idumean prince named Antipater, Hyrcanus tried to continue the conquest. He got an army of 50,000 Arabs and forced Aristobulus to take refuge in Jerusalem.

In 65 BC the Roman general Pompey defeated a large portion of the former Empire of Syria. He now turned to Palestine which was the bridge connecting Asia and Africa. The Jews, divided into three parties, played directly into the Roman's hands. Aristobulus was entrenched in Jerusalem under siege by Hyrcanus and his Arab army. The Pharisees were sick of the evils, which the kings had brought them and were ready to get rid of royalty entirely. All three sent deputations to Damascus where Pompey was encamped.

The three requests gave Pompey a perfect excuse for invading Palestine. The Arab army fled immediately. Aristobulus surrendered to Pompey, but his followers refused. They entrenched themselves on the Temple hill and it took three months to force them to surrender. Pompey took advantage of their religious scruples and attacked them on the Sabbath day when they would not strike a blow in their defense.

Pompey massacred 12,000 Jews. He entered the inner courts of the temple and tramped right into the holy place. For this the Jews never forgave him.

Finally Pompey lost his hold over the Roman Empire and was succeeded by the great Julius Caesar. Until now Antipater had largely remained in the background. Antipater was a man of great shrewdness. He had thrown in his lot with Caesar and now came in for a rich reward. He was made procurator over Judea. Four years later he was poisoned and his power fell into the hands of his son, Herod, one of the craftiest men that had ever ruled over Judea.

LESSON THREE

SELF HELP TEST

Fill in the blanks with the correct word:

1. Alexander the Great died in _____.
2. Judas _____ was called "The Hammerer."
3. _____ offered a sow on the altar in the temple.
4. Alexander crucified eight hundred _____.
5. _____ is a bridge connecting Asia and Africa.
6. _____ massacred twelve thousand Jews.
7. Julius Ceasar made _____ procurator over Judea.
8. _____ was the son of Antipater.
9. The _____ were driven from Palestine by Judas Maccabeus.
10. Pompey attacked the _____ on the Sabbath Day.

Use the following words for the above blanks:

Palestine
Maccabeus
Herod the Great
Antipater

Syrians
Pompey
Jews

Pharisees
Babylon
Antiochus