

# Old Testament History

## Lesson #30

### The Hellenistic Period

**Introduction.** With the death of the last of the sons of Mattathias, in 135 B.C., the heroic age of the Maccabean struggle came to an end. The generation which had fought for religious liberty was dying out. The new generation was proud of the Maccabean victories and hopeful of even greater successes at home and abroad.

#### I. ***The Growth And Decay Of The Hasmonean Dynasty***

##### A. John Hyrcanus.

1. Although powerful enough to conquer Jerusalem, Syria offered recognition to Hyrcanus on the condition that Hyrcanus consider himself subject to Syria and promise to help in Syrian military campaigns. The Syrians left Palestine, and the Hellenizing party disappeared from the Jewish political scene.
2. This change in political alignments is an important factor in the reign of Hyrcanus. The Maccabean struggle resulted in victory for the Hasidim, although the Hasidim did not completely align themselves with the Maccabees. They were willing to stop short of political independence in their dealings with the Syrians.
3. In the subsequent history of the Hellenistic party, its ideals were perpetuated in the party of the Sadducees, and the ideals of the Hasidim were perpetuated in the party of the Pharisees. These parties are first mentioned during the lifetime of Hyrcanus. Before his death he repudiated the Pharisees and declared himself a Sadducee.
4. The rule of John Hyrcanus was one of territorial expansion. Although devout Jews frequently differed with his policies, his personal life was free from suspicion. His devout, Hasidic background bore fruit in a life which could not offend the most meticulous scribe. His children, however, had grown up in a palace and numbered themselves among the aristocrats. Their training was more in Greek than in Hebrew thought, and they looked upon the Pharisees with disdain.

##### B. Aristobulus.

1. The death of John Hyrcanus precipitated a dynastic struggle among his children. His eldest son, who preferred his Greek name, Aristobulus, to his Hebrew name, Judah, emerged as the victor. As a typical tyrant, he cast three of his brothers into prison, where two are thought to have starved to death. Another brother was murdered in the palace.

2. Aristobulus continued the policy of territorial expansion begun by Hyrcanus. In his short reign he pushed the borders north to the territory around Mt. Lebanon, and took to himself the title "King." Drink, disease and the haunting fear of rebellion brought death after only a one-year reign. There was little mourning among the masses of the Jews.

#### C. Alexander Jannaeus.

1. At the time of Aristobulus' death he had only one brother alive in prison. His Hebrew name was Jonathan, and his Greek name, Alexander. History knows him as Alexander Jannaeus.
2. The policy of territorial expansion continued. Although not always successful on the battlefield, Jannaeus extended his frontiers along the Philistine coast, toward the frontiers of Egypt and in the Trans-Jordan area. The size of the Jewish state was comparable to that of the glorious days of David and Solomon.
3. Open rebellion broke out between the Pharisees and the Hasmonean rulers at a memorable Feast of Tabernacles when Jannaeus was officiating in the Temple as King-Priest. Showing his contempt for the Pharisees, Jannaeus poured out a water libation at his feet instead of on the altar, as prescribed by Pharisaic ritual. This led to an open civil war.
4. The Syrians came to the aid of the Pharisees and forced Jannaeus into hiding in the Judean hills. Fearing that the Syrians would claim Judea as the fruit of victory, and thinking that Alexander Jannaeus and his Sadducean sympathizers were sufficiently punished, thousands of the Pharisees deserted the Syrian army and went over to Jannaeus. Jannaeus gave a banquet for the Sadducean leaders to celebrate his victory and had 800 Pharisees crucified for their rebellion in front of the guests.

#### D. Alexandra.

1. Salome Alexandra had been married successively to Aristobulus and Alexander Jannaeus. The widow of two Hasmonean rulers, she succeeded to the throne as queen in her own right.
2. Under Alexandra, the Pharisees had their opportunity to make a constructive contribution to Jewish life. In many areas, particularly that of education, they were eminently successful.
3. The reign of Alexandra was peaceful in comparison with the years which preceded it. Her reign did not answer her country's problems, however. It did not even heal its wounds. If the Pharisees were happy in their new-found recognition, the Sadducees were resentful of the fact that they were deprived of power.
4. The Sadducees found in Aristobulus, the younger son of Jannaeus and Alexandra, the man they would support as Alexandra's succes-

sor. He was a soldier and he appealed to that party which dreamed of imperial expansion and worldly power. Hyrcanus, the elder brother and rightful heir, was congenial to the Pharisees. With the death of Alexandra, the supporters of the two were ready for a showdown.

E. Hyrcanus II.

1. At the death of Alexandra, her older son Hyrcanus, who had been serving as High Priest, succeeded to the throne as Hyrcanus II. Immediately Aristobulus led an army of Sadducees against Jerusalem.
2. Hyrcanus and the Pharisees had neither enthusiasm for, nor ability in war. Declaring that he never really desired the throne, Hyrcanus surrendered all his honors to Aristobulus who became king and High Priest under the name Aristobulus II.

F. Aristobulus II.

1. By right of conquest, the Judean throne was safely in the hands of Aristobulus II, backed by the Sadducees. Hyrcanus and Aristobulus vowed eternal friendship.
2. Aristobulus' eldest son, Alexander, married Hyrcanus' only daughter, Alexandra. Peace between the brothers was short-lived, however. Hyrcanus found it advisable, or necessary, to flee to Aretas, king of the Nabatean Arabs.

G. Antipater.

1. Antipater, an Idumean by birth, saw in the position of Hyrcanus an opportunity to fulfill his own dream of being a political power in Judea. It was not difficult to persuade Hyrcanus that he had been unjustly deprived of his hereditary rights by his younger brother.
2. Antipater suggested that the Nabatean Arabs come to Jerusalem, drive out the usurper and restore Hyrcanus to his rightful position. Hyrcanus agreed. Aretas and his Nabatean Arabs invaded Palestine and besieged Jerusalem. Aristobulus was caught by surprise. He shut himself up in Jerusalem and both sides prepared for a long siege.

## II. ***The Romans Take Over***

A. Roman beginnings.

1. About three decades before Samaria fell to the Assyrians, legend states that Romulus and Remus founded the city of Rome (753 B.C.). Among the nations of antiquity, Rome was a newcomer. In the fifth century B.C. the city state of Rome was a thriving republic. By the middle of the third century a series of wars with the Etruscans and other tribes made the whole Italian peninsula subject to

Rome. After three wars with the Carthaginians, Rome gained control of the western Mediterranean in 146 B.C.

2. The wars between Rome and Carthage are known in history as the Punic wars. In 146 B.C. Carthage was completely destroyed by the Roman general, Scipio Africanus, who put an end to a power which had threatened Rome itself when Hannibal invaded Italy.
3. Turning toward the east, Rome was able to add to her territories with little opposition. Shortly after the destruction of Carthage, Roman rule was extended over Macedonia, Corinth and all Achaia. In 135 B.C., Attalus, king of Pergamum, bequeathed his territory to the Romans. The Roman province of Asia was then organized.

#### B. Pompey enters Palestine.

1. Learning about the quarrel between the brothers, Pompey, who was in the east in the interest of building up the Roman Empire there, took an immediate interest in Jewish politics. Under the guise of a willingness to arbitrate the difficulties, Rome became the force which was to determine the future of Palestine.
2. When Pompey personally intervened to get at the root of the quarrel between Aristobulus and Hyrcanus, he observed evidences of the plan of Aristobulus to revolt against Rome. A Roman army besieged Jerusalem. Hyrcanus supported Pompey against his brother.
3. Jerusalem was besieged for three months. Finally the fortifications were breached. Twelve thousand Jews are said to have been slaughtered in the battle which followed. Pompey, with his officers, entered the Holy of Holies in the Temple.

#### C. The power of Antipater.

1. During the years of strife between Aristobulus II and Hyrcanus II the Idumean governor Antipater, or Antipas, took an interest in the politics of Judea. Antipater was bitterly opposed to Aristobulus, partly through fear and partly because of his friendship with Hyrcanus.
2. The Jews resented the presence of Antipater almost as much as they resented the fact that they were subject to Rome. Antipater was an Idumean, or Edomite according to Old Testament nomenclature. The Edomites had been the hereditary enemies of the Jews. Under John Hyrcanus the Idumeans had been forcibly incorporated into the Jewish nation.

#### D. Herod the Great.

1. In the crisis which followed the murder of Julius Caesar, Antipater and his sons showed their loyalty to the new regime of Cassius by zealously collecting tribute. Herod was given the title "Procurator of Judea," with the promise that he would one day be named king. When Anthony defeated Brutus and Cassius at Philippi, Asia fell into

- the hands of a new Roman regime. Herod, ever an opportunist, quickly changed his loyalty and bribed his way to favor with Anthony.
2. The Parthians, who occupied a part of the eastern territory of the once mighty Persian Empire, had not been subdued by Rome. In 41 B.C. they attacked and took Jerusalem and made Antigonus, son of Aristobulus II, king and High Priest. Herod, the son of Antipater, had inherited the throne of Judea at the death of Hyrcanus and was forced to flee Rome. There he won the favor of Anthony who bestowed upon him the title, "King of the Jews."
  3. To make friends with the Hasmoneans, Herod married two of them: Mariamne, the granddaughter of John Hyrcanus II, and Miriam, the granddaughter of Aristobulus II. Though they had children they never got along well, probably because Antipater had killed Aristobulus.
  4. Although Herod's reign was one of trouble, there are accomplishments for which he should be given credit. Foremost among these was his building program. Whole cities were built or rebuilt by him: Samaria, Caesarea, Antipatris, Phasaelis and Anthedon. Fortresses were also built: Herodeion, Alexandreion, Hyrkania, Machaerus and Masada. His greatest accomplishment was the construction of the temple in Jerusalem, which was still being constructed in the time of Jesus (John 2:20). But the Jews also distrusted Herod when they thought about the temple. If King David could not build the first temple because his hands were too bloody, then how clean could the hands of Herod be? When Herod set a golden eagle, the symbol of Imperial Rome, on the temple gate, the Jews called it proof that Herod served not God but Augustus, and tore it down at the cost of their own lives.
  5. Despite all he did, Herod remained an unpopular king. His paranoia and personal cruelties outweighed his piety, and his Idumaeon blood made him suspect anyway. As he grew older, Herod grew more mentally unstable. Domestic troubles plagued him; even the crown prince, Antipater III, hated him. He murdered Mariamne, the favorite of his ten wives, her grandfather John Hyrcanus II, her brother Aristobulus, and several of his own children. The massacre of the infants in Bethlehem when he heard of the birth of Jesus was only the last of many atrocities that he committed (Matthew 2:16). When Augustus learned of these acts, he noted that Herod did not eat pork, in observance of Jewish law, and remarked, "It is better to be Herod's hog than to be his son!"

**Conclusion.** Herod died on April 1st, 4 B.C. Cancer of the intestines and dropsy were suggested as its causes. Herod left behind a reputation of infamy. He allowed his passions to master him and he must go down in history as one of the world's great failures. That he was jealous even of the infant Jesus shows the extent to which the desire for worldly sovereignty may lead a man astray.