
Judea, a Short History

From Alexander to Herod the Great

Events of the 400 Silent Years

During the times of the Biblical patriarchs, the Canaanites dominated the land which would eventually become known as Judea, or Palestine, the promised homeland of the children of Israel. After the conquest of the land under Joshua, the land was parceled out to the twelve tribes according to the number of people in each tribe and the arability of the land. The tribe of Judah claimed the region from south of Jerusalem to the Negev desert. When David became king, he conquered Jerusalem, making it the capital of the united kingdom.

The kingdom split up after Solomon's death, and both Israel and Judah suffered continual deterioration for many generations. The Assyrians invaded Palestine in 721 B.C. and gained control of the north. In 606 B.C. and again in 586 B.C. the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar besieged Jerusalem, eventually bringing the whole land under their domination and taking many captives, including the prophet Daniel.

The Medo-Persian Empire under Cyrus overthrew the Babylonians, and later Persian kings allowed captive Jews to return from Babylonia to their native land to rebuild the Temple and the walls of Jerusalem (under Ezra and Nehemiah). The Jews remained under Persian protection from about 500 B.C. to 330 B.C., at which time Persia was taken by Alexander the Great and Judea came under Greek domination.

After the death of Alexander, Judea was ruled by the Greek families of the Ptolemies or the Seleucids, depending on which one was strongest in the area at the time. The Seleucid king, Antiochus IV Epiphanes, attempted to force Greek culture upon Judea, including the worship of the gods of the Greek pantheon. In December of 168 B.C., a sacrifice to Zeus was offered on the altar of burnt offering in the Temple in Jerusalem. Furthermore, an edict was sent out that an altar to Greek gods was to be erected in every town in Palestine. Officers were appointed to enforce the worship of Greek gods by every Jewish family, and the disobedient were punished.

In the town of Modein, an old priest of the Lord, Mattathias, was presiding over the religious affairs of the community. When one of the Jewish people who had changed over to the Greek religion tried to offer the first sacrifice to Zeus, Mattathias killed him. Mattathias then took off for the mountains with his five sons and their families.

Many Jews flocked to the banner of Mattathias who became almost overnight the leader of rebellion against the Greeks under Antiochus IV. Among these were also the most pious sect of Jews, the HASIDIM (the "pious ones"), who counted themselves champions of the Law, even unto death. In 166 B.C., Mattathias died, having appointed his third son, Judas, to lead the rebellion.

According to Josephus, Mattathias great-great-grandfather was called Hasmon, so the family is known as the Hasmonean family.

According to 1 Maccabees 2, the surname of this now famous family was Maccabee, or Maccabaeus. The name is taken by many to mean "the hammer", from the Hebrew word **maqqabi**. And so Judas was called, even before he began his military career. At first the name Maccabees was applied to the kinfolk of Judas, then to his close followers, and ultimately to all those who were champions of liberty and Jewish religion in the Greek period. Strictly speaking, the name should be applied only to the descendants of Mattathias and his five sons.

The military genius of Judas Maccabaeus made the next years the most stirring in Israelite history. In quick succession the army of the Maccabees overthrew Syrian generals Appolonius, Seron, and Gorgias. After the regent Lysias, ruling for the Seleucid kings, had been defeated, he restored Temple worship in Jerusalem. Lysias, having retreated back to HQ in Antioch, returned with a new army, and Judas had to fall back into the Temple area. He escaped defeat then only because there was a Greek insurrection at Antioch and another Greek was threatening to take over Lysias'

regency. Lysias granted the Jews religious freedom, but the Jews were still under Greek political rule.

Some of the Jews were satisfied with this and returned to their homes; but the hard core followers of the Maccabees wanted political freedom also. In 161 B.C., the Maccabees defeated a Greek army at Beth Horon, but they were defeated a few months later by a much superior force. Judas' brother Jonathan took over leadership of the Maccabees and made some progress through use of more diplomatic means; but he was made prisoner in 143 B.C. and executed. The leadership now fell to Simon, the last son of Mattathias still alive.

Simon succeeded in negotiating a treaty in May of 142 B.C., in which the political independence of Judea was secured. Simon was given absolute powers as both political leader and high priest of Judea. The first year of his reign was the first of a new era of prosperity. In 135 B.C., however, Simon and his two older sons were murdered by Ptolemy, who had married Simon's daughter. Simon's third son, Hyrcanus, who had been warned of the assassination plot, became the heir of Simon's kingship over the Jews, and he soon carved out for himself a large and prosperous kingdom. He ruled from 135 to 104 B.C., but during the later years the kingdom was split by rivalry between Pharisees and Sadducees.

Hyrcanus was succeeded by his son, Aristobulus, for one year, then by the brother of Alexander Jannaeus (103 to 76 B.C.) who was a friend of the Sadducees. The general population was aligned with the Pharisees, so they rose in revolt against Alexander; but the revolt was put down savagely. With the death of Alexander Jannaeus, his widow, Salome Alexandra, ruled as a friend of the Pharisees.

The Hasmoneans (Maccabees) thus spent two or three generations widening the borders of Judea by diplomacy and force. By 78 B.C. they had conquered Samaria, Edom, Moab, Galilee, Idumea, Transjordan, Gadara, Pella, Gerasa, Raphia, and Gaza. Palestine extended as far as it had under Solomon.

Salome's sons, Hyrcanus II and Aristobulus II, fought for the succession. They appealed to the Roman consul Pompey in 63 B.C., whose

victorious legions were in Damascus. Pompey decided in favor of Hyrcanus, whereupon Aristobulus fortified himself in Jerusalem. Pompey laid siege to Jerusalem, but the followers held out for three months, the priests offering prayers and sacrifices in the Temple. But there being no fighting on the Sabbath on the orders of Aristobulus, Pompey's troops were able to mine the walls and raise mounds for his battering rams, without being hindered by the defenders. When the city fell, twelve thousand Jews died; but Pompey left the Temple treasures intact (Roman policy) exacting only a tribute of 10,000 talents of gold. The territory conquered by the Hasmoneans was taken over by Rome. Hyrcanus was made high priest and nominal ruler of Judea; but the real ruler was Antipater of Idumea who had been appointed by Pompey as a reward for his help in the campaign. The independent Jewish monarchy was ended, and Pompey returned to Rome.

In 54 B.C., Crassus robbed the Temple of the treasures that Pompey had spared. When news came that Crassus had been killed in battle (by the Parthians at Carrhae in 53 B.C.), the Jews took the opportunity to reclaim their freedom. But Longinus, Crassus' successor in Palestine, suppressed the revolt in 43 B.C. and sold 30,000 Jews into slavery in Rome. Many of the Jews of the Roman Church were descendants of these captives. In the same year the Parthians came down across the desert into Judea, conquered the area, taking it from the Romans, and set up Antigonus II, the last of the Maccabees, as puppet king. The Parthians were Indo-Europeans from Russia and Turkestan, were kin of the Hittites, and had joined Mithridates in his revolt against Rome in Asia Minor (Pontus). The Parthian Empire had included Assyria and Babylonia by 100 B.C.

HEROD THE GREAT

Caesar Augustus (Octavian), now Princeps (first citizen) of the Roman Empire after the death of Julius Caesar, appointed Herod, the son of Antipater, king of Judea, and financed his Jewish army with Roman money. Herod drove out the Parthians, protected Jerusalem from pillage, sent Antigonus to Antony for execution, killed all the Jewish leaders who had supported the puppet

government, and entered into one of the most colorful reigns in history, from 37 to 4 B.C.

Herod possessed intellect without morals, ability without scruple, and courage without honor. He was like the Caesars in many respects. He overlaid freedom with dictatorial order enforced by the military. He beautified Jerusalem with Greek architecture and sculpture. He enlarged his realm and made it prosper, achieving more by subtlety and intrigue than by force of arms. He was broken by the treachery of his offspring. He married many women and unwisely; and he knew every good fortune but happiness.

According to Josephus, Herod had great physical bravery, strength, and martial skill. He was a perfect marksman with javelin and bow, a mighty hunter who killed forty wild beasts in one day. He was always able to wind up on top of the heap even though enemies sought to discredit him with Antony, Augustus, or Cleopatra. From every crisis he emerged richer, more powerful than before.

Augustus judged Herod too great a soul for so small a kingdom and restored all the cities of the Hasmonians to him and wanted him to rule over Syria and Egypt as well. He had become king by the help and money of Rome; and the Jewish people were working night and day to free themselves from Roman rule. So they hated Herod. Also, the fragile economy of the country bent and broke under the strain of the taxes used by the luxurious court and ambitious building program. He enlarged the Temple of Zerubbabel,

calling it too small, and enraging the people. His own Temple was destroyed by Titus Vespasian in 70 A.D.

Herod's sister persuaded him that his favorite wife, Mariamne, sister of Aristobulus, and granddaughter of Hyrcanus II, was trying to poison him. He had Mariamne tried and executed. Thereafter he was faced by continual plots by his family, and he jailed some and executed others. As an old man he broke down with sickness and grief. He suffered from dropsy, ulcers, convulsions, and probably cancer. He died at the age of 69 hated by all his people. It was said of him that he stole to the throne like a fox, ruled like a tiger, and died like a dog. The Jewish kingdom was divided among his three sons Philip, Herod Antipas, and Archelaus.

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