

The Period between the Old and the New Testaments

Jewish History from Secular Sources

by John Brown of Haddington (1722-1787)

Judea continued subjects to the kings of Persia about two hundred years, but does not appear to have had a separate governor after Nehemiah. It was annexed to the province of Syria, and the administration of its affairs was left to the high priest, subject to the control of the provincial rulers. This raised the high priesthood to a degree of temporal dignity and power which very soon made an object of ambition to the different members of the family of Aaron, and gave rise to many violent and disgraceful contests among them for the office.

Upon the overthrow of Persian army by Alexander, Syria and the neighboring countries fell under his power, and Tyre was taken after an obstinate resistance. Alexander then marched into Judea to punish the Jews, who as faithful subjects of the king of Persia, had sent the Tyrians supplies of provisions, and refused them to him. But it is related that, as he approached Jerusalem, and saw the procession of the people clothed in white coming to meet him, headed by Jaddua the high priest, and all the priestly race, in their robes of office, his heart was turned to spare and favor them. He continued to them the free enjoyment of their laws and religion, and exempted them from tribute during the sabbatical years; and when he built the city of Alexandria, he placed a great number of Jews there, and gave them the same privileges as to his Greeks subjects.

After the death of Alexander and the division of his empire among his generals, Judea became a subject of contention between the kings of Syria and Egypt, which ended in its forming for a time of part of the monarchy of Egypt. Ptolemy Soter, the king of Egypt, brought many thousands of Jews into that country, settled them there and treated them kindly, placing them on equality with the Greeks of Alexandria. Greek being the common language of that city, it was quickly learned by the Jewish settlers, and became the native language of their children who were born there, and who on that account, in process of time, were called Hellenists or Gentile Jews, a name which afterward came to be applied generally to all Jews speaking the Greek language in foreign countries. (Acts vi:1;

ix.29; xi.20 etc.) These Grecian Jews had synagogues in Alexandria, in which the writings of Moses and of the prophets translated into Greek for this purpose were read every Sabbath day. This translation, which is called Septuagint, contributed much to spread the knowledge of true religion through the western part of the world. It came into common use among the Jews, and the quotations made from the Old Testament Scriptures in the New, by the evangelists and apostles are often, though not always, from this version.

Seleucus, king of Syria, about 800 B.C built numerous cities in Syria and Asia Minor, and regarding the Jews as good and faithful citizens, endeavored to attract them to his new cities by the offer of the same privileges as were enjoyed by the Greeks and Macedonians. They accordingly settled there in great numbers especially at Antioch in Syria.

It is worthy of notice that by these events the Jews were brought into contact with a new form of heathenism. They had already encountered its more ancient and more barbarous forms during their sojourns in Egypt and in Babylon, the headquarters and central seats of idolatry in their days. But now by their dispersion in Egypt, and the other countries bordering on the eastern end of the Mediterranean, they were everywhere brought into contact with the more cultivated and refined mythology and philosophy of the Greeks; and there are good ground for believing that they were the means of communicating to the more candid and teachable among them some knowledge of a purer religion.

During the reign of Ptolemy Soter the prosperity of the Jews was much promoted by the internal administration of an excellent high priest, Simon Just. He repaired and fortified their city and temple, and made a spacious reservoir of water, "in compass as sea."

After the Jewish nation had been tributary to the kings of Egypt for about eighty years, it became by the conquest of Antiochus the Great, subject to the kings of Syria, but the Jews were still governed by their own laws, under the high priest and council of the nation.

Judea, being situated between Syria and Egypt, suffered much during the whole of this period from frequent wars in which those countries were engaged, and was the arena of many bloody and destructive battles. Besides this, the peace of the nation was greatly disturbed by the claims of rival candidates to the office of high priest, which afforded to the kings of Syria frequent pretexts for interfering with the internal affairs of the nation. And all these evils were considerably

aggravated by the corruption and misconduct of the chief men, and the increasing wickedness of the people, who began to neglect the worship and the law of God for more than they had ever done since their return from captivity.

God saw fit to punish the Jews for this defection by the hand of Antiochus Epiphanes, who came with an army and plundered the city and temple of Jerusalem with every conceivable circumstance of cruelty and profanation. For three years and a half they were altogether deprived of their civil and religious liberties. The daily sacrifice was suspended; the temple itself was dedicated by Antiochus to Jupiter Olympius, whose statue was erected on the altar of burnt offering; the worship of Jehovah and observance of his law were prohibited under the severest penalties; every copy of the sacred writings that could be seized was burned; and people were required, under the pain of death, to sacrifice to idols. Never before had the Jews been exposed to so furious a persecution. The apostates were numerous, but a remnant continued faithful; and these events were doubtless useful in calling the attention of the heathen around to those great principles for which many of the Jews were willing to peril their lives.

At length God raised up a deliverer for his people in the noble family of the Asamoneans. Mattathias, a priest eminent for his piety and resolution, and the father of five sons, encouraged by his example and exhortations, "to stand up for the law," and having collected around him a large number of faithful men, he undertook to deliver his people, and to restore the worship of the God of Israel. But being very old when he engaged in this arduous work, he did not live to see its completion. At his death his eldest son Judas succeeded to the command of the army, in which he was greatly assisted by his brother Simon, a man of remarkable prudence. The motto on his standard was Exodus XV.11, "Who is like unto thee among the gods, O Jehovah?" The Hebrew words being *Mi Camoka Baalim Jehovah*; and from the initial letters of these words, *M C B I*, is said to be derived the word *Maccabi* or *Maccabee*, which became the surname of the family.

After several victories over the troops of Antiochus, Judas Maccabees gained possession of Jerusalem; and his first care was to repair and purify the temple for the restoration of the Divine worship. This re-consecration of the temple and revival of its worship was ever after celebrated by an annual feast of eight days. It occurred at the time of the winter solstice (165 B.C) and was called the Feast of the Dedication. (John X. 22)

The war was carried on for twenty six years, with five successive kings of Syria, and after many sanguinary battles the Syrians were driven out of the country, and the Jews, under their Maccabean princes regained for a time their independence and the free exercise of their religion, which they commemorated by commencing a new epoch in 143 B.C as the year of "the freedom of Jerusalem." They had given regular troops, strong garrisons and alliances with other powers, including even Rome, and the boundaries of state were extended by subjugation of the Idumeans and Philistines as well as Moab, Ammon and Arabia Petres. Previously to this, in the ear 153 B.C as the Asamonean family were descended from the eldest branch of the race of Aaron, the office of the high priest was assumed by Jonathan, the then reigning prince, and it remained in the family until the usurpation Herod.

This season of prosperity was however, of short duration. The nation was exceedingly troubled by internal dissensions, especially of the part of the Pharisees, who first appear prominently in history in the reign of John Hyrreanus, as forming a large and powerful body, of turbulent character and lofty pretensions, and carrying on fierce quarrels with the rival sect of the Sadducees, which led upon one occasion to a dreadful civil war. There were also violent contests for the throne between rival members of the royal family, which greatly weakened the nation, and it was ill prepared to withstand the extending power of Rome, which in the year 65 B.C subjugated Syria, and soon afterward conquered Egypt. In the year 63 B.C Pompey marched his army into Judea, besieged and took Jerusalem and made the country tributary to the Romans thought it was still governed by the Maccabean princes. During the reigns of latter princess of this family, Herod Antipater, an Idumean by birth, obtained a position of power and influence in the land, and after his death, his son, Herod the Great, so ingratiated himself with the Romans that he obtained the appointment of king of Judea in the place of Antigonus. He had, however, soon difficulty in obtaining possession of his kingdom, as the people were greatly attached to their Maccabean kings. But he came against Jerusalem with a Roman army of 60,000 men and, after a siege of above half a year, took the city by storm, and massacred many of the inhabitants. Shortly afterward he put to death Antigonus, and thus ended the Asamonean dynasty, after it had subsisted a hundred and twenty six years.

Herod was a man of great abilities and of indomitable resolution, but an ambitious and cruel tyrant, unscrupulous as the means by which he gained his ends. He persecuted to death all the members and adherents of the Asamonean house, and even put to death his wife and two of his own sons. He degraded the

high priesthood by making the tenure of the office dependent on his own pleasure. In order to gain popularity with his subjects, as well as to increase his own fame, he greatly enlarged and beautified the temple of Jerusalem, making it, in some respects, more magnificent than that of Solomon. He also erected in neighboring cities many heathen temples, and constructed numerous public works, such as bridges, roads, baths aqueducts and harbors, the cost of which he defrayed by heavy exactions upon his subjects.

In the thirty sixth year of the reign of Herod, while Augustus was emperor of Rome, THE SAVIOUR OF THE WORLD WAS BORN.

Herod was succeeded in the government of the greater part of Palestine by his son Archelaus, who acted with great cruelty and injustice, and in the tenth year of his reign, upon a complaint being made against him by the Jews, he was banished by Augustus to Vienne, in Gaul where he died. Publius Sulpitius Quirinius (who is called in Greek Cyrenius, Luke ii.2) The president of Syria, was then sent to reduce the countries over which Archelaus had reigned to a Roman province, and a governor of Judea was appointed under the title of Procurator, subordinate to the president of Syria. But the Jews were still permitted to exercise their religious worship without molestation or restraint.

Meanwhile, in the Gentile world, the old systems of idolatry had fallen into disrepute, partly through the extreme corruptions of worship and morals connected with them, and partly through the cultivation of Grecian philosophy, the conflicting theories which, however, utterly failed to satisfy the wants of mankind, as they afforded little solid truth and produced no moral renovations. At the same time, the universal prevalence of the Roman power, ensuring internal peace and facilitating communication between different parts of the world, together with its indifference to the various forms of religious belief and worship, opened for a time, wider field for the diffusion of the gospel. So that Providence combined with prophecy to mark this as the "fullness of time." When the expected SAVIOUR should come into the world.

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