

5. The Rebirth of Israel

I. Seleucid Rule (198–143 BC)

A. The Maccabean Revolt

In 167 BC Seleucid ruler Antiochus IV Epiphanes (r. 175-164) had desecrated the temple and tried to obliterate Jewish religion and culture, in favor of Hellenism, i.e. cultural genocide.

Mattathias, an old priest in the village of Modiin, refused to offer a pagan sacrifice, killing both a Jew who was about to do so and the supervising Seleucid officer. He fled to the hills with his five sons, sparking the Maccabean Revolt.

When Mattathias died in 166, leadership was taken up by his son Judah, nicknamed ha-Maccabee, “the hammer” (יהודה המכבי, Gk Judas Maccabeus). After three years of guerilla warfare he captured Judea, Jerusalem, and the temple. On 25 Kislev 164 the temple and altar were rededicated; commemorated ever since in Hanukkah (הַנִּסְחָה *dedication*), the Feast of Dedication, or Festival of Lights.

When Antiochus IV died in 164, Lysias, the Seleucid commander in Syria, granted the Jews religious freedom. This satisfied many Jews, but Judah wanted full political independence. He was succeeded by his brothers:

- Jonathan (160-143): appointed high priest (152), then governor (150) of the province of Judea, an autonomous province under Syrian rule.
- Simon (143-135). In 142 Seleucid ruler Demetrius II gave Judea independence; the people proclaimed Simon ruler and high priest. Israel independent for first time since 587.

II. Hasmonean Rule (142–63 BC)

In 140, Simon’s position as ruler and high priest was made a hereditary office, though descended from neither David nor Zadok. 140–63 Judea ruled by the Hasmonean line of high priests (named after Mattathias’ great grandfather). Under Simon “each man sat under his vine and his fig tree, and there was none to make them afraid” (1 Macc 14:12).

The next three leaders expanded the territory till it was as large as the united Israel in the days of David and Solomon.

- John Hyrcanus (135–104) subjugated the Idumeans, forcing them to accept Judaism and be circumcised.
- Aristobulus I (104–103) was the first to call himself “king.”
- Alexander Jannaeus (103–76): 6-year civil war between Jannaeus with Sadducee support and the Pharisees; Jannaeus killed 800 Pharisees and their families.

Salome Alexandra (76–67): as a woman she couldn’t be high priest, so she appointed her son Hyrcanus II; her other son Aristobulus II commanded the army. When she died, civil war broke out between the two sons: Aristobulus II (67–63) backed by the Sadducees and Hyrcanus II backed by the Pharisees. Both brothers appealed to the Roman general Pompey. In response to rebellion by Aristobulus II, Pompey attacked Jerusalem; Hyrcanus’s followers opened the gates but Aristobulus’s followers held the temple for 3 months. Finally Pompey captured the temple and entered the Holy of Holies. He made the Hasmonean kingdom into the Roman province of Palestine. Israel’s independence was over.

III. Religious Groups

The Sadducees and Pharisees emerge soon after the Maccabean Revolt

A. The Sadducees

Closely associated with Hasmonean priest-kings. Herod later reduced their power and manipulated the office of high priest for his own ends, but they regained power when the Roman governors allowed the high priest and Sanhedrin greater autonomy.

The Sadducees were the aristocracy—wealthy landowners and the religious leaders. The high priest, chief priests (leading priestly families) and elders (leading lay families) were all Sadducees. In order to retain their power and maintain the status quo, they collaborated with the Romans, for which the people despised them.

Distinctive beliefs:

- rejected the oral law of the Pharisees, accepting as inspired only the written Torah of the Pentateuch.
- emphasis on the freedom of human will over against the sovereignty of God—their focus on this world and concern for political power led them to grab and maintain political power for themselves.
- NT notes that the Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection (Matt 22:23, Acts 23:6-8). Their emphasis on power, position and wealth in this world left no room for eschatological hope of a coming kingdom of god.

B. The Pharisees

Heb. *perushim* (פְּרֻשִׁים, separated ones). Origins probably pre-Maccabean Revolt in the *hasidim* (חַסִּדִּים, pious ones) who opposed Hellenism. Some Pharisees were scribes—professional Torah scholar-teachers—but many were just laymen. By NT times the Sadducees were unpopular with the people, but the Pharisees enjoyed great public support.

Distinctive beliefs:

- *oral law*: in addition to the written Torah, god had given Moses oral law (*halakah*, from *halakh*, to walk) which had been handed down through the generations (ἡ παράδοσις τῶν πρεσβυτέρων, “the tradition of the elders,” Matt 15:1-9; par. Mark 7:1-13). This tradition was received (παραλαμβάνω) from the previous generation and handed on (παραδίδωμι) to the next. This *halakah* guided the Pharisees in living daily life. They considered this oral law a fence around the Torah. Keeping the law was not a matter of salvation but of sanctification: God had called Israel to be holy.
- *emphasis on purity*. Though only a few Pharisees were priests, they all tried to keep the purity laws required of the priests in the temple. They formed brotherhoods (*haburot*; members *haberim*), eating only with those who had a similar level of purity (cf. Mark 7:3-5).
- *God’s sovereignty vs. man’s free will*: Josephus says the Pharisees took a middle position between the Essenes (all was fate, determined by God) and the Sadducees (all was up to man). God will intervene to restore Israel but faithful Jews should be ready to help. On this, as on several other issues, the Pharisees split into two groups: the school of Shammai (ca. 50 BC–AD 30) and the school of Hillel (ca. 60 BC–AD 20).
 - *active opposition*: school of Shammai; politically active and favored revolution.
 - *passive acceptance*: Hillel and followers (see the speech of Hillel’s son/grandson Gamaliel in Acts 5:33-39). Although Saul of Tarsus studied under Gamaliel, he favored active opposition.
- *resurrection*: God would vindicate Himself and his people, restoring a reconstituted Israel.

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C. The Essenes

Perhaps came into existence after the Hasmoneans gained political independence. Viewing the Hasmonean priest-kings as unlawful, the Essenes retreated to the wilderness where they saw themselves as the true, uncompromised Israel waiting for God to vindicate them. They kept very strict purity laws, had communal property, many were celibate.

The Qumran community (located next to the caves of the Dead Sea Scrolls) was probably an Essene community.

Distinctive beliefs:

- *Emphasis on God's providence*: although the Essenes longed for the restoration of Israel, they were waiting for God to perform it in his own time. However, many of them believed that God had already started to act by calling them out as the true Israel.
- *Exclusive claims*: Calling themselves the sons of light they saw all other Jews as sons of darkness, no longer part of true Israel. The Sadducee high priests were false, the temple corrupt, the Pharisees loose in following the purity laws.
- *Strict purity laws*: frequent immersion in a *mikveh*, a pool for ritual cleansing.
- *Messianic expectation*: expected two Messiahs—a true Davidic king, and a true Zadokite priest.

IV. Rome

Rome, *urbs aeterna* (eternal city), was founded in 753 BC. In the third century BC, Rome expanded its power: in 272 Rome conquered the Greek cities of Lower Italy; in 202 Scipio defeated Hannibal of Carthage in the Second Punic Wars (218-201) and Rome became dominant in the western Mediterranean; in 188 it became dominant in the eastern Mediterranean.

In its first few centuries Rome was ruled by kings. After the abolition of the monarchy, power technically rested in the Assembly of the People. In practice, power rested in the Senate, an assembly of the wealthiest men. The Senate elected two consuls each year to run affairs. In times of emergency a dictator would be appointed for six months and given absolute power.

A. Julius Caesar (100-44 BC)

Highly energetic and hard-working, a superb general. In 60 he formed with Pompey and Crassus the First Triumvirate, an unofficial agreement of mutual support, mostly in the face of opposition from the Senate. After appointment as governor of Gaul, he conquered all of Gaul (58-51). In 52 Pompey was elected sole consul to restore order to Rome which had dissolved into anarchy. Instead, the Republic degenerated into Civil War (49-46) between Caesar and Pompey. Caesar crossed the Rubicon river, the boundary of his territory, and marched on Rome. Pompey fled to Greece, and then Egypt where he was killed. Caesar pursued Pompey to Egypt, where he took Cleopatra as his mistress and installed her as queen of Egypt, before returning to Rome in triumph in 46. He adopted the title Imperator; formerly this meant "general," but he took it as "The General." He had himself appointed Perpetual Dictator in 44. Perhaps influenced by Cleopatra's tradition of divine kings, he had himself enshrined into state worship with a priest devoted to his cult. His portrait appeared on Roman coinage, a first for a living Roman. On the Ides of March (March 15) 44 he was assassinated by a senatorial conspiracy led by Cassius and Brutus.

B. Augustus (b. 63 BC, r. 27 BC–AD 14)

Born Gaius Octavius, and known as Octavian, his mother Atia was Caesar's niece. Though he had been adopted as Caesar's heir, Antony grasped the inheritance. Octavian sided with the Senate against Antony, but when the Senate snubbed him, he formed in 43 a Second Triumvirate with Antony and Lepidus. In 42 this Triumvirate declared Caesar a god, allowing Octavian to call himself "Caesar, son of a god." The three men divided the Republic's territories between themselves. In 36 Antony married Cleopatra after divorcing Octavian's sister. War broke out. At the Battle of Actium in 31, Octavian's fleet defeated Cleopatra's fleet. The next year Antony and Cleopatra committed suicide. In 27, Octavian resigned his powers, ostensibly enabling the full restoration of the Republic. But the Senate gave him the honorific title Augustus and acclaimed him as Savior. In 17 world peace (*pax Augusta*) was proclaimed. Augustus worked hard to rebuild the Empire, which prospered greatly under his care. Upon death in AD 14 he was deified.

Subsequent Emperors

- Tiberius (r. AD 14–37)
- Gaius (Caligula, 37–41): presented himself as a god; ordered a statue of himself installed in the Jerusalem temple; the Governor of Syria delayed; Caligula was assassinated.
- Claudius (41–54): expelled Jews from Rome; murdered by his fourth wife, Agrippina (Nero's mother).
- Nero (54–68): the final emperor of the Julio-Claudian dynasty. After being declared a public enemy, he fled Rome and committed suicide.

V. The Herodian Line

Pompey made Palestine a Roman province in 63 BC. Hyrcanus II was reappointed high priest, but, behind the scenes, the strings were pulled by Antipater whom Alexander Jannaeus (103–76) had appointed governor of Idumea (Edom). Julius Caesar made Antipater II procurator of Judea, and gave Hyrcanus the title of Ethnarch of the Jews, but Antipater II was the effective ruler.

A. Herod the Great (r. 37–4 BC)

Appointed governor of Galilee by his father Antipater II in 47. Fled to Rome where the Senate declared him King of the Jews (40); he returned (37) and captured Jerusalem. Married into the Hasmonean line: Mariamne, granddaughter of both archrivals Aristobulus II and Hyrcanus II; the first of ten wives. Paranoid and ambitious, he killed numerous rivals, including Mariamne and several sons. Rome divided his kingdom between surviving sons Archelaus, Antipas, Philip.

Herod was a great builder:

- Caesarea Maritima: turned the small village of Strato's Tower into a major town and port (22-10 BC).
- Jericho
- Jerusalem: temple
- Hebron: tomb of the Patriarchs
- Palace/Fortresses: Masada, Machaerus, Herodium

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B. Subsequent Herods

1. Herod Archelaus (r. 4 BC–AD 6)

Governor of Idumea, Judea and Samaria 4 BC–AD 6. A tyrannical ruler (Matt 2:22). Deposed by Augustus; Judea made a minor Roman province, governed by a prefect appointed by the emperor, ruling from Caesarea, and subject to the governor of Syria—incl. Pontius Pilate (26–36). Later a procurator: Felix (52–60), Festus (59–62).

2. Herod Antipas (4 BC–AD 39)

Tetrarch of Galilee and Perea (4 BC–AD 39). Imprisoned and killed John the Baptist; tried Jesus, while visiting Jerusalem for Passover. Exiled by Caligula (37).

3. Herod Philip (r. 4 BC–AD 34)

Ruled what is now Golan Heights and beyond to n.e., from Caesarea Philippi.

4. Herod Agrippa I (37–44)

Caligula gave him the territory of Philip the tetrarch (37), the territory of Antipas (39); Claudius added Judea and Samaria (41). He now had the whole territory of Herod the Great. He killed James, and put Peter in prison (Acts 12).

5. Herod Agrippa II (r. 48–70)

Educated in Rome, was only 17 when father Agrippa I died, so Claudius kept him in Rome. Returned to the Land in 48, and given more and more territory. Paul appeared before him and Berenice at Caesarea (c. 59). Tried to avert war with Rome; rejected by Jews, took Roman side then fled to Rome (70). The last Herodian ruler.