

HISTORY OF JEWS SERIES – PROPHECY

“The Jews & The Greeks” (Malachi 3:7; Daniel 7:4-6)

About 100 years had passed since the return of the Jews to the Land recorded under Zerubbabel. The city and the temple had been fully rebuilt. Ezra and Nehemiah had sought to restore the broken spiritual condition of the people. The last prophet before the coming of the Messiah was Malachi. Malachi looks forward to the first and second comings of the Lord Jesus Christ. (Mal. 3:1-2; 4:2) However, the period from Malachi to the birth of Jesus Christ was around 4 centuries. Malachi marks the beginning of God’s 400 years of silence broken by John’s cry “*Behold, the Lamb of God*” (John 1:29; cf. Mal. 3:1).

We know from the writings of Malachi that the Jews were in a period of spiritual decline in his time. He rebukes the very same sins among the people that Nehemiah dealt with on his second visit to Jerusalem. Malachi’s prophecy is one that focuses on the sins of the saints, especially the priests. God called His people to repent from their sins, “*Return unto me, and I will return unto you, saith the LORD of hosts.*” (Mal. 3:7a) Despite the backslidden nature of so many, the people could not understand why God was dissatisfied with them, “*But ye said, Wherein shall we return?*” (Mal. 3:7b)

The most notable feature of this book is its repeated pattern of discourse. The prophet Malachi uses a series of rhetorical questions to expose the spiritual failures at the heart of the Jews. Their tithing and worship were corrupted by wrong motives and wrong actions. Divorce once again was common in their daily lives. The proud and stubborn hearts of the Jews contested every rebuke of the prophet. They challenged his condemnation with the question “Wherein?” or “What?”

- (1) “Wherein hast Thou loved us?” (Mal. 1:2)
- (2) “Wherein have we despised Thy name?” (Mal. 1:6)
- (3) “Wherein have we polluted Thee?” (Mal. 1:7)
- (4) “Wherein have we wearied Him?” (Mal. 2:17)
- (5) “Wherein shall we return?” (Mal. 3:7)
- (6) “Wherein have we robbed Thee?” (Mal. 3:8)
- (7) “What have we spoken so much against Thee?” (Mal. 3:13)
- (8) “What profit is it that we have kept His ordinance?” (Mal. 3:14)

Yet God sets forth His unconditional covenantal love for His people, “*I have loved you, saith the LORD.*” (Mal. 1:2) This book is filled with that love and hope centred on the Person of the coming Saviour,

**Could we with ink the ocean fill,
And were the skies of parchment made,
Were ev’ry stalk on earth a quilt
And ev’ry man a scribe by trade,
To write the love of God above,
Would drain the ocean dry.
Nor could the scroll contain the whole,
Tho’ stretched from sky to sky.**

INTERTESTAMENT PERIOD

During these four centuries before the birth of Christ, the Scriptures are silent. That does not mean that God was indifferent or inactive. Providence was working in the shadows to prepare the way for the Lord Jesus Christ. The Jewish people were divided geographically. There were the Jews who lived in the land of Israel and the Jews who were scattered throughout the rest of the world in the dispersion.

GREEK EMPIRE

The Persians ruled over the Jewish people for two centuries from the time that Cyrus overthrew the Babylonian Empire in 538 B.C. At its height the Persian Empire included more than 100 countries stretching from Afghanistan and India in the east to southern Ethiopia in the west. The Jews were generally well treated by the Persians, save for the threat from Haman during the reign of Ahasuerus. This is recorded in detail in the book of Esther and celebrated by the Feast of Purim even until today.

In 334 B.C. the young Greek king, Alexander the Great rose to prominence and eventually brought to an end the mighty Persian Empire that had ruled the Middle East. Daniel predicted the coming of Alexander in the form of a leopard,

The first was like a lion, and had eagle's wings: I beheld till the wings thereof were plucked, and it was lifted up from the earth, and made stand upon the feet as a man, and a man's heart was given to it. And behold another beast, a second, like to a bear, and it raised up itself on one side, and it had three ribs in the mouth of it between the teeth of it: and they said thus unto it, Arise, devour much flesh. After this I beheld, and lo another, like a leopard, which had upon the back of it four wings of a fowl; the beast had also four heads; and dominion was given to it. (Daniel 7:4-6)

Daniel also predicted that in Nebuchadnezzar's dream, the third kingdom of the Greeks, "*shall bear rule over all the earth.*" (Daniel 2:39) Alexander the Great who died before he was 31 ruled from Europe to India by conquering rival kingdoms at an incredible rate. In Daniel 7 he is pictured as a leopard with wings because of the speed of his conquests. This, in fact, was how this ambitious young leader conquered the territory of the Persians.

Now Greek power, philosophy, poetry, art, customs, and language became widespread from Turkey to India. Greek culture and philosophy formed the foundation for much of what today is known as Western civilization. Even today, Westerners study epic poems of Homer like, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*.

Cities like Alexandria in Egypt became great centres of Greek culture and learning. This providentially introduced the Greek language to the whole region, which is why the NT was written in the Koine Greek language by the apostles. However, the Hellenistic process would provide a threat to the distinct identity of Israel, as it was an attractive one to the Jewish mind. Greek philosophy and religion was a very appealing way of life as it promised enlightenment and gloried in unrestrained sensuality. Their principle motto was to unashamedly "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die." Some estimate that as many as 30-40% of the Jewish people assimilated into the Greek identity as Hellenist Jews in this period.

According to Jewish tradition, Solomon interacted with the early philosophers of Athens. Hellenist Jews even claimed that Solomon was the root the Greek philosophers sprung from and that Plato built upon the foundations of Moses' Torah. Many Jews would succumb to the lure of Greek philosophy, laws, and customs and over time became assimilated and known as Hellenistic Jews. Others recognised that the so-called enlightenment offered by the Greeks only lead to philosophical darkness. This was not new. Solomon had exposed all philosophical systems without God as vanity centuries before when he wrote his autobiography *Ecclesiastes* at the end of his life.

Despite the Jews supporting the Persians over the Greeks in war, Alexander was favourable to the Jewish people and appreciated much of their identity and religion. The Talmud records how he came to a respectful accommodation with the High Priest, Simon the Just in 329 B.C. Josephus records of the encounter that the High Priest came out dressed in his priestly robe to meet Alexander to do reverence to the king. When Alexander met the High Priest he claimed that he had seen a vision of him dressed like this blessing his conquests. Josephus then records of Alexander,

And when he went up into the temple, he offered sacrifice to God, according to the high priest's direction, and magnificently treated both the high priest and the priests. And when the Book of Daniel was showed him wherein Daniel declared that one of the Greeks should destroy the empire of the Persians, he supposed that himself was the person intended. And as he was then glad, he dismissed the multitude for the present; but the next day he called them to him, and bid them ask what favors they pleased of him; whereupon the high priest desired that they might enjoy the laws of their forefathers, and might pay no tribute on the seventh year. He granted all they desired. And when they entreated him that he would permit the Jews in Babylon and Media to enjoy their own laws also, he willingly promised to do hereafter what they desired. And when he said to the multitude, that if any of them would enlist themselves in his army, on this condition, that they should continue under the laws of their forefathers, and live according to them, he was willing to take them with him, many were ready to accompany him in his wars. (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, VIII, 5)

Alexander permitted the Jews a certain degree of autonomy on condition that they were loyal to him and paid taxes. Because of his grace to them, the Jews agreed to name every child born the next year "Alexander." They also set up a tax collection system that eventually became a means of much corruption even up to the days of Christ.

AFTER ALEXANDER

When Alexander died suddenly at the age of 30 in 323 B.C. his Empire was divided among his four generals. This fulfilled the prophecy of Daniel,

And a mighty king shall stand up, that shall rule with great dominion, and do according to his will. And when he shall stand up, his kingdom shall be broken, and shall be divided toward the four winds of heaven; and not to his posterity, nor according to his dominion which he ruled: for his kingdom shall be plucked up, even for others beside those. (Daniel 11:3-4)

The northern empire was ruled by Seleucus and became known as the Seleucid Dynasty. He was headquartered in the city that is today Damascus. He ruled over Syria, Turkey and Greece itself. The southern empire over Africa was ruled by Ptolemy Lagus and was headquartered in the city of Alexandria in Egypt. These two Empires intersected over the land of Israel. They would rule the Mediterranean world until the rise of the Romans.

The Jews in Israel were part of a disputed border between the two Greek rivals, Seleucus and Ptolemy. For nearly two centuries they would fight over the Promised Land. Generally, the Jews favoured the southern empire, the Ptolemaic because Alexandria had a large, wealthy, and influential Jewish community. Some say that as many as a third of the population were Jewish. The Jews there reveled in their exalted status. Alexandria had one of the most magnificent synagogues that seated 8-10,000 persons. So influential and respected were the Jews in Alexandria that Ptolemy commissioned the Hebrew Scriptures to be translated there into Greek, which became popularly known as the *Septuagint*. There was clearly a sharp dichotomy in the Jewish people between those who assimilated into the Greek identity and those that resisted. Those who assimilated were known as *Misyavnim*, or Hellenists. Such persons were, effectively, self-hating Jews who ate non-kosher foods, took Greek names and Greek dress, engaged in idolatry, and even sided with the enemies of Israel.

We know nothing of the Bible of this period, save for the predicted rise of Alexander and the subsequent division of his Empire. The main sources of Jewish knowledge are from the writings of the Jewish historian, Flavius Josephus and various apocryphal sources such as the First and Second Book of Maccabees.

MACCABEAN PERIOD (c175-63 B.C.)

Jewish historians often divide this time for the Jews in Israel by the terms: Pre-Maccabean and Post-Maccabean periods. This is because of the profound influence of a priest called Mattathias and his family, known as the Hasmoneans. Mattathias' third son, Judah Maccabee famously led the revolt against the Seleucid Empire led by Antiochus IV Epiphanes (c. 215 B.C. – 164 B.C.).

The background to this incident is a forced Hellenization attempt on the Jews from the Seleucid Empire. Around 190 B.C. the northern Seleucid Empire invaded Israel. The Seleucids heavily taxed the Jews, defiled their women, instituted a Greek education for children, and forced them to provide accommodation for the Greek soldiers in their homes. They also sought to destroy the Jewish religion by banning Sabbath observance, circumcision, and Scripture reading. A statue of Zeus was mounted in the courtyard of the Temple. They also demanded that altars to Greek idols be raised up in every Jewish town and regular sacrifices made. Jerusalem became effectively a Greek city. Indeed, Antiochus Epiphanes renamed Jerusalem as Antioch in Judea after himself. Some Hellenist Jews even became priests on behalf of the Greeks. A man called Jason reputedly bought the High Priest office from the Greeks. Apostasy was widespread and growing among the Jews. The Jewish apocryphal books record,

Not long after this the king sent an Athenian senator to force the Jews to abandon the customs of their ancestors and live no longer by the laws of God; also to profane the temple in Jerusalem and dedicate it to Olympian Zeus, and that on Mount Gerizim to Zeus the Hospitable, as the inhabitants of the place requested...They also brought into the temple things that were forbidden, so that the altar was covered with abominable

offerings prohibited by the laws. A man could not keep the Sabbath or celebrate the traditional feasts, nor even admit that he was a Jew. At the suggestion of the citizens of Ptolemais, a decree was issued ordering the neighboring Greek cities to act in the same way against the Jews: oblige them to partake of the sacrifices, and put to death those who would not consent to adopt the customs of the Greeks. It was obvious, therefore, that disaster impended. Thus, two women who were arrested for having circumcised their children were publicly paraded about the city with their babies hanging at their breasts and then thrown down from the top of the city wall. Others, who had assembled in nearby caves to observe the Sabbath in secret, were betrayed to Philip and all burned to death. (2 Maccabees 6:1–11)

This came to a crisis during the reign of Antiochus Epiphanes when he attacked Jerusalem in 167 B.C. killing 40,000 and selling into slavery another 40,000. The streets of Jerusalem were red with the blood of the slain Jews. He looted the temple of much of its wealth including the golden altar. Antiochus attacked on the Sabbath as he knew the orthodox Jews would not take up arms on that day. The Greeks then offered pigs as sacrifices on the altars in the temple to their gods. Fornication and prostitution was practiced in the sacred temple precincts.

Eventually a group of Jews revolted against this action led by the Hasmonean family of Mattathias and his five sons. This family lived in a small town called Modin, which was about 12 miles northwest of Jerusalem. A contingent of Greek soldiers came to Modin and demanded that they sacrifice a pig to Zeus on their altar. The aged priest, Mattathias stabbed the first Jew that volunteered and a revolt broke out. All the Greek soldiers were killed. This began a period of guerilla warfare between the revolting Jews of around 12,000 men and the Seleucid army. The Jewish soldiers hid in the caves and the mountains making things difficult for the Greeks. The leader of the Jewish Army was Judah Maccabee (“Maccabaeus” is the Greek word for hammer) who was a brilliant war strategist and inspirer of men. He organised daring raids to attack the Seleucid army. The Greeks underestimated the Jews’ determination and courage. Despite being greatly outnumbered, Judah Maccabee defeated the Greeks over a period of many years. Judah was killed himself in one of the battles. Indeed, only one brother, Simon survived the conflict.

In one of the last great battles, the Jews recaptured the temple in Jerusalem. They broke the statue of Zeus and cleansed the temple from the defilements of the Greeks. Any Hellenist priests were either executed or expelled. According to Jewish tradition there was left only a day’s supply of consecrated oil to burn in the temple *Menorah* (Candelabrum) and it would take eight days to produce a new batch of pure oil. When they lit the one day’s supply of oil it was said to miraculously burn for eight days. That is why the Feast of *Chanukah* (or *Hanukkah*) lasts eight nights.

This period of Jewish history is celebrated even today in the Feast of *Chanukah*, also known as the Festival of Lights (generally coincides with the Christmas season). The name derives from a Hebrew verb meaning “to dedicate.” According to Josephus, Judah Maccabee ordered lavish yearly eight-day festivities after rededicating the Temple in Jerusalem that had been profaned by Antiochus Epiphanes. Josephus records,

Now Judas celebrated the festival of the restoration of the sacrifices of the temple for eight days, and omitted no sort of pleasures thereon; but he feasted them upon very rich and splendid sacrifices; and he honored God, and delighted them by hymns and psalms.

Nay, they were so very glad at the revival of their customs, when, after a long time of intermission, they unexpectedly had regained the freedom of their worship, that they made it a law for their posterity, that they should keep a festival, on account of the restoration of their temple worship, for eight days. And from that time to this we celebrate this festival, and call it Lights. I suppose the reason was, because this liberty beyond our hopes appeared to us; and that thence was the name given to that festival. Judas also rebuilt the walls round about the city, and reared towers of great height against the incursions of enemies, and set guards therein.

Jews revere the Feast of *Chanukah* today as a time when the Lord providentially delivered them from the overwhelming Greek forces that attempted to first assimilate them and then destroy them by force. Biblical scholars should not be surprised at this as God promised that they would always remain a distinct nation on the planet,

**...the people shall dwell alone, and shall not be reckoned among the nations.
(Num. 23:9b)**

And that which cometh into your mind shall not be at all, that ye say, We will be as the heathen, as the families of the countries, to serve wood and stone. (Ezekiel 20:32)

God also warned those who attack the Jews that they are touching something very special to Him, "*For thus saith the LORD of hosts; After the glory hath he sent me unto the nations which spoiled you: for he that toucheth you toucheth the apple of His eye*" (Zech. 2:8). He also promised to judge the opponents of Israel, "*And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed.*" (Gen. 12:3)

Today the Seleucid Empire of the Greeks has dissolved. Their records are just a few museum pieces and some crumbling monuments. This incident is another reminder that God can always be trusted to keep every last one of His promises.