

The Intertestamental Period: Conflict Among Greeks and Jews

300-175 BC

Introduction:

1. Last week we got our bearings on where we are in history, looking at the incredible conquest of Alexander the Great and the beginning of the Hellenistic era.
2. This week will look at the political landscape in the aftermath of Alexander among the Greeks and the internal politics among the Jews.

I. The Death of Alexander

- A. Death of Alexander in 323 BC
 1. Alexander had no clear heir, which led to a power grab among his top generals.
 2. This time period is known as the Diadochi (Greek for “successors”).

II. Conflicts Among the Greeks

A. Civil War: — 323-301 BC

1. Antiochus, the most powerful of Alexander’s generals, sought to consolidate all of Alexander’s empire under his control.
2. Battle of Ipsus is the definitive battle where Antiochus dies.
3. The land is finally divided with some stability between his generals
 - a) Ptolemy I “Soter” — In Egypt
 - b) Seleucus I “Nikator” — In Syria
 - c) Lysimachus — In Thrace
 - d) Cassander — Greece and Macedon
4. Palestine changes hands 5x.

B. Ptolemaic Rule — 301-200 BC

1. Each of the Ptolemaic kings took the name of the founder of the Dynasty from Ptolemy I to Ptolemy XII.
2. Alexandria
 - a) Alexander’s body was taken and buried here.
 - b) The Library of Alexandria becomes a wonder of the world.
 - c) Alexandria, Egypt would become a major center for Judaism in the ancient world, second only to Israel.
 - d) The Septuagint
 - (1) Translated in Alexandria, Egypt in ~ 250 BC
 - (2) 72 translators from Israel produce a copy of the Hebrew Bible in Greek.
 - (3) Letter of Aristeas
 - (a) 72 Elders of Israel (6 from each tribe) are called to Egypt to translate the Hebrew Bible into Greek.

- (b) After food and drink, the translators are sequestered on the island, where 72 men translate the Torah in 72 days.
- (c) The translation is perfect, with absolutely no discrepancies.
- 3. A fairly pleasant time for the Jews as The Ptolemies were rather lenient. However, this time period saw a total of six wars waged between the Ptolemies, and the Seleucids called the Syrian wars.

C. Seleucid Rule over Palestine

- 1. Antiochus III “The Great”
 - a) He vastly expanded the borders of the Seleucid kingdom.
 - b) He was initially welcomed by the Jewish people.
- 2. Antiochus IV “Epiphanes”
 - a) He would lead a great persecution against the Jews that would spark rebellion for independence.
- 3. The Seleucid Rule over Palestine would be very tumultuous:
 - a) The Jewish people would be far more oppressed than under Ptolemaic rule.
 - b) Hellenism would be greatly expanded in comparison to Ptolemaic rule.
 - c) It would see the Maccabean Rebellion in response to this oppression.

III. Conflicts Among the Jews:

- A. While the Greeks war over total control over territory, the Leadership of the Jewish people falls upon the priesthood. The High Priest becomes not just a religious position but also a political position.
- B. High Priests in the Bible
 - 1. Qualifications for the High Priesthood?
 - 2. Jaddua, according to Josephus, was the last High Priest recorded in the Bible (Nehemiah 12:22).
- C. The conflict between powerful families over the High Priesthood.
 - 1. The Oniad Family**
 - a) The Proper High Priestly Family. Descendants of Zadok, the high Priest in David’s time. (1 Kings 1:44).
 - b) This family was conservative and mostly opposed to Hellenization.
 - 2. The Tobiad Family**
 - a) A Powerful and wealthy family, possibly descended from Tobiah (Nehemiah 2). (Both are associated with Ammon)
 - b) Held the power of taxation given to them by the Seleucids.
 - c) Very Hellenism friendly.
- D. Conflict, Coups, and Confusion.
 - 1. Onias III, who was High Priest, was assassinated by his brother Jason, who bribed Antiochus IV.
 - 2. Onias III’s son and rightful heir to the High Priesthood, Onias IV, fled to Egypt and built his own inconsequential temple.
 - 3. Jason was friendly toward Hellenism. This can be seen in his name, which was originally Hebrew “Jesus/Joshua” but then changed to the Greek “Jason”

4. An extreme Hellenist named Menelaus, a Benjamite, with the Tobiad family's funding, successfully bribed Antiochus and took the priesthood for himself.
5. Menelaus allowed Antiochus IV, to rob the temple treasury to help Antiochus finance his war against the Ptolemies.
6. Jason had heard a rumor that Antiochus had died in battle and attempted to retake the High Priesthood. Menelaus fled and found the alive Antiochus.
7. Antiochus, after fighting a costly war in Egypt, returns to Jerusalem, breaks down the walls, and erects an acra (military post) overlooking the temple.
8. Antiochus adds insult to injury by prohibiting Jewish practice, destroying scriptures, and sacrificing a pig on the altar of God as a sacrifice to the Greek God of Wine, Dionysus.

Conclusion:

1. Next week we will discuss the impact of the Seleucid persecution of the Jews and the beginnings of the Maccabean rebellion.