

Old Testament History
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Part Eight
Between the Testaments:
The Hellenistic Period

INTRODUCTION TO PART EIGHT

Alexander the Great was an apostle of Hellenism. His teacher, Aristotle, helped Alexander appreciate the literature and cultural institutions of Greece. A conqueror and empire-builder often has little time for the "finer" things. But this was not so with Alexander. Convinced of the superiority of Greek institutions, Alexander spread Hellenism so effectively that it continued to be the dominant pattern of life long after his death and the disintegration of his kingdom.

The Dead Sea Scrolls have done much to quicken an interest in the literature of the Jews during the inter-Testament period. It is the purpose of Part Eight of this volume to outline the broader background necessary for the appraisal of those movements which immediately precede the advent of the Savior.

CHAPTER 85

Alexander, the Apostle of Hellenism

Since the days of Xerxes, Greek power had been on the increase and Persia had trouble in keeping its wide empire in submission. The city states of Greece, however, never formed a united government, and the wily Persian kings were able to play off one state against another.

When a real union of Greek states was achieved, it was the genius of Philip of Macedon -- not, strictly speaking, a Greek at all -- that brought it about. The Hellenic League, comprising all the Greek states except Sparta, became the instrument which gave the Persian Empire its death blow.

Philip was unable to bring his plans to fruition. He was murdered in 336 B.C., and his mantle fell on his young son Alexander. Like most great leaders, Alexander represented a mass of conflicting strands. He was a Macedonian by nationality, and he dreamed of national glory as the heir of Philip. Culturally he was a Greek, educated by Aristotle himself. He carried the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* with him on his campaigns. Alexander was thoroughly sold on the excellences of the Greek "way of life," although the Greeks gave

him little support. When the people of Thebes assassinated the Macedonian garrison, Alexander burned the city and sold its inhabitants into slavery. This was to serve as a warning that the "alliance" between the Greeks and Macedon must be respected.

The apostle of Hellenism had a very humble beginning. With a small army, largely of Macedonians, and a staff of historians, geographers, and botanists, Alexander crossed the Dardanelles by boat at the very spot where Xerxes had taken his army across on a carefully prepared bridge. Alexander captured Troy and sacrificed to the *manes* of the Greek heroes, thereby proclaiming the fact that a new war had begun.

The Persian sovereign, Darius III, did not take this expedition seriously. He ordered that Alexander be seized and brought to Susa. An army of Persian cavalry, Greek mercenaries, and native troops was sent by Darius to stop Alexander. Expecting an easy victory, the Persians clashed with Alexander at the river Granicus. It was a close fight, and Alexander nearly lost his life, but the Persians were defeated. Alexander did not pursue the retreating Persian cavalry, but he ordered the Greek mercenaries massacred as traitors to the Greek cause. With the victory at the Granicus, the way into Asia Minor lay open before Alexander.

The Greek cities of Asia Minor were taken and "liberated," in many instances against their will. Halicarnasus remained loyal to Persia, and was burned during a siege. Alexander was able to move eastward, conquering and organizing the districts that fell before him, with no serious challenge until he came to the Cilician Gates at Issus. Here Darius advanced with his Persian army to stop the Macedonian. Instead the Persians fell back before Alexander. Damascus was taken by surprise. The family of Darius, immense stores of booty, and ambassadors from Sparta, Athens, and Thebes were captured.

Alexander decided not to pursue Darius. Military tactics demanded that Alexander secure his rear. The Phoenician cities, except Tyre, surrendered and were occupied. On two occasions Darius offered to negotiate with Alexander, offering him territory, a large sum of money, and the hand of his daughter in marriage in return for the return of his family. By this time, however, Alexander had decided upon a policy of world conquest, and Darius' offer went unheeded.

The resistance of Tyre occupied Alexander for seven months. The persistence of Alexander is seen in the causeway which he built from the mainland city to the island city of Tyre, in order to bring the Tyrians into submission. The very map of Phoenicia was changed during this siege of Tyre. The city finally fell, and with the fall of Tyre the maritime and commercial predominance of the Phoenicians came to an end.

After a two-month siege of Gaza, during which Alexander was wounded, the victorious Macedonians pressed on to Egypt. The Egyptians hated the Persians, and welcomed Alexander as a deliverer. Alexander entered the temple of Ammon where the oracle

announced that Alexander was the son of Ammon and that he would conquer the world. The Hellenism of Alexander must have worn thin when he accepted the role of a son of Ammon, but he gladly did so, being recognized as a legitimate Pharaoh with a chapel in the temple at Karnak. The administration of Egypt was reorganized. Egyptians were given a large share of the control of their country, but Macedonians were placed in charge of the army. The new city of Alexandria was the enduring monument to the Macedonian conquest of Egypt. It replaced Tyre as the commercial metropolis of the eastern Mediterranean. Jewish colonists were encouraged to settle in Alexandria, and their presence there had an important bearing on the subsequent history of Judaism and Christianity.

Jewish traditions show Alexander in a friendly light, although Hellenism was to become the great enemy of orthodox Judaism. Josephus tells a story of Alexander's coming to Jerusalem and offering sacrifice in the Temple "according to the High-priest's direction." Although regarded as unhistorical, it shows the friendly attitude of the Jews to Alexander.

In 331 B.C., Alexander retraced his steps northward through Palestine and Syria. He now felt ready to meet the Persian army in its home territory. At the battle of Gaugamela, in the Mesopotamian plain, Alexander outmaneuvered and defeated the "Grand Army" of Darius. The Persian monarch escaped, however. With no army to impede his progress, Alexander marched on until he had taken the entire territory of Persia. The capitals of the Persian Empire -- Babylon, Susa, Persepolis, and Ecbatana -- were successively occupied.

The conquest of Babylon was reminiscent of the days of Cyrus. Alexander was welcomed as a liberator. The priests of Marduk and the nobles of the city brought gifts and promised to surrender the treasures of Babylon to Alexander. The garrison commander ordered flowers for the streets and crowns to honor the new Great King. Costly perfumes were burned on the altars. Magi chanted hymns. Alexander responded by ordering the rebuilding of temples which had lain waste since the days of Xerxes. The temple of Bel Marduk was to become the glory of Babylon again.

Twenty days after he left Babylon, Alexander entered Susa where the treasure of the palace of Darius I was his for the taking. Having plundered Susa, Alexander went on to Persepolis which was reported to be the richest city in the world. Historians are puzzled by the cruelty of Alexander at Persepolis. The men were all slain, and the women enslaved. The Macedonians fought one another over the plunder. By 330 B.C., Darius was dead, and Alexander assumed the title *Basileus* (Great King). The sack of Persepolis was probably designed to mark the end of the Persian monarchy.

With the conquest of Persia behind him, Alexander continued his eastern conquests. Bactria and Sogdiana (Russian Turkestan) cost him three years of bitter fighting. As a gesture of reconciliation, Alexander married Roxana, a Bactrian princess. The Punjab region of India was the limit of Alexander's conquests. His army refused to travel further.

Alexander began his career as an apostle of Hellenism. Completely convinced that the Greek way of life was superior to any other, he began his crusade with a missionary zeal. When he was recognized in Egypt as a son of Ammon he took a major step away from Greek ideology. In Persia, Alexander decided to adopt Persian dress, and he began to rule as an oriental despot. A conspiracy against Alexander was said to implicate the son of one of his most able generals, Parmenion. Father and son were both put to death.

Tragedy crowned the last years of Alexander. Half of his army took the return trip from India in a navy of newly built ships. From the Indus Delta the fleet successfully made the voyage to the Persian Gulf. The rest of the army traveled by land. In 324 Alexander arrived in Susa to find misrule on the part of the officials left in charge of the city. He also found that resentment to his own rule was growing. In Greece many were scandalized when they heard that Alexander had executed his own nephew, the historian Callisthenes. The Greeks were angered at the report that Alexander wished to be treated as a god. Alexander's Macedonian officers resented his commands to mingle with the Persians and take Persian wives. The orientalizing ways of Alexander resulted in a mutiny, which was put down.

In 323 B.C. Alexander planned a sea voyage around Arabia, but he died of a fever before the voyage was accomplished. He was only thirty-three years of age. His only son was born to Roxana after Alexander's death. In so short a life, Alexander conquered more territory than any of his predecessors. Although he had not had time to mold the government of his empire into a cohesive whole, the eleven years from the time that Alexander crossed the Dardanelles until his death in Babylon changed the course of history. Hellenism was to outlive its militant apostle.