

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

**CHAPTER 86**

***The Jews Under the Ptolemies***

When Alexander died in 323 B.C., he left no heir. A son was posthumously born to Roxana, Alexander's Bactrian wife, but the *diadochoi*, or "successors" of Alexander, seized power before he could reach maturity. One of the *diadochoi*, Cassander, murdered Roxana and her son.

Alexander had had many able generals, but there was not one that arose as his logical successor. By 315 B.C., after seven years of struggle, four outstanding leaders appeared: Antigonus, who occupied the country from the Mediterranean to central Asia; Cassander, who ruled Macedonia; Ptolemy Lagi, who ruled Egypt and Southern Syria; and Lysimachus, ruler of Thrace. Ptolemy's foremost general was Seleucus who occupied an important role in the subsequent history of Palestine.

In 315 B.C., Ptolemy, Cassander, and Lysimachus formed an alliance to check Antigonus, who aspired in his own right to be a second Alexander. Ptolemy demanded that Antigonus yield part of the Asiatic territory which he had conquered. Seleucus was to receive Babylon, from which he had previously been driven out. When Antigonus failed to heed Ptolemy's demands, fighting broke out. Ptolemy and Seleucus defeated an army led by Demetrius, Antigonus' son, at Gaza in 312 B.C. They pressed on, taking the important Syrian cities, including Zidon.

Josephus quotes Agatharchides' account of Ptolemy's capture of Jerusalem:

The people known as Jews, who inhabit the most strongly fortified of cities, called by the natives Jerusalem, have a custom of abstaining from work every seventh day; on those occasions they neither bear arms nor take any agricultural operations in hand, nor engage in any other forms of public service, but pray with outstretched hands in the temples until the evening. Consequently, because the inhabitants, instead of protecting their city, persevered in their folly, Ptolemy, son of Lagus, was allowed to enter with his army; the country was thus given over to a cruel master, and the

defect of a practice enjoined by law was exposed. That experience has taught the whole world, except that nation, the lesson not to resort to dreams and traditional fancies about the law, until its difficulties are such as to baffle human reason.<sup>1</sup>

The *Letter of Aristeas* says of Ptolemy:

He had overrun the whole of Coele-Syria and Phoenicia, exploiting his good fortune and prowess, and had transplanted some and made others captive, reducing all to subjection by terror; it was on this occasion that he transported a hundred thousand persons from the country of the Jews to Egypt. Of these he armed some thirty thousand chosen men and settled them in garrisons in the country.<sup>2</sup>

Egyptian inscriptions and papyri indicate the presence of large numbers of Jews in Ptolemaic Egypt. Some of these had come earlier, but there is no reason to doubt that large numbers were brought to Egypt by Ptolemy Lagi.

Our sources of information concerning life in Palestine during the century of Ptolemaic rule are very scanty. For the most part the Jews were permitted to live in peace and in accord with their religious and cultural traditions. There are no records of tyranny such as characterized the Seleucid rule of Antiochus Epiphanes. Tribute was paid to the Egyptian government, but local affairs were administered by the High Priests who had been entrusted with responsibility for the government of the Jews since Persian times.

The one great figure among the Jews of the Ptolemaic period is Simon the Just, the High Priest who is the subject of the highest praise in the post-Biblical writings. Ecclesiasticus calls him "great among his brethren and the glory of his people." He is credited with rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem which had been demolished by Ptolemy I. He is said to have repaired the Temple and directed the excavation of a great reservoir which would provide fresh water for Jerusalem even in times of drought or siege.

In addition to his office as High Priest and head of the community, Simon was reputed to be the chief teacher of the people. His favorite maxim was, "The world rests on three things, on the Law, on Divine Service, and on Charity."<sup>3</sup>

The identity of Simon the Just is a historical problem. Simon I lived during the middle of the third century, and Simon II lived around 200 B.C. One of these is doubtless the Simon the Just of Jewish tradition and legend.

Nothing is known about the High Priest Onias I, but the house of Onias and the house of Tobias were to become bitter rivals. The house of Tobias was pro-Egyptian and

1 Josephus, *Contra Apion* i. 209, 210.

2 *Aristeas to Philocrates*, 12,13. Translation of Moses Hadas.

3 *Pirke Aboth* i. 2.

represented the wealthy class of Jerusalem society. The Tobiads may have been related to "Tobiah the Ammonite" who gave so much trouble to Nehemiah (Neh. 2:10; 4:3,7; 6:1-19). A papyrus from the time of Ptolemy II speaks of a Jew named Tobias who was a cavalry commander in the Ptolemaic army stationed in Ammanitis, east of the Jordan.<sup>4</sup> A third century B.C. mausoleum with Aramiac letters "Tobiah" was discovered at 'Araq el-Emir in central Jordan.

The Tobiads are thought to have been tax collectors, occupying the same function as the "publicans" of New Testament times.

Josephus states that Onias II refused to pay Ptolemy IV twenty talents of silver, which seems to have been a kind of tribute demanded of the High Priests. By refusing payment, Onias appeared to be renouncing allegiance to Ptolemy. Joseph, a member of the house of Tobias, thereupon succeeded in having himself appointed tax farmer for the whole of Palestine. The "tax farmer" had to go to Alexandria each year and bid for the renewal of the license to gather taxes. Joseph held this influential post for twenty years, under the Ptolemies and, after the victory of Antiochus III, under the Seleucids.

Ptolemy's triumph in Palestine was short-lived, for Antigonus promptly drove him out of Syria and held it firmly. Seleucus also gained strength as an independent conqueror, no longer subject to Ptolemy. Antigonus tried to check Seleucus, but was unable to do so. In 311 B.C. Seleucus conquered Babylonia, marking the beginning of the Seleucid dynasty. Antigonus, however, continued to hold Syria, which served as a wedge between the holdings of Ptolemy and Seleucus.

In 301 B.C. Lysimachus, Seleucus, and Cassander with their combined forces met and overcame the forces of the empire-conscious Antigonus at Ipsus, in Phrygia. Antigonus died on the battlefield, and his Asiatic empire came to an end, although his son Demetrius Poliorketes managed to retain Macedonia and the Phoenician coast of Syria.

Ptolemy had remained on the sidelines during the fighting at Ipsus. It had been agreed that Coele-Syria, or Palestine, would be assigned to Ptolemy in the event of victory over Antigonus. Since Ptolemy had not taken an active part in the fighting, the other three allies decided that the territory should be assigned to Seleucus. In the meantime, however, Ptolemy had taken possession of the land. Diodorus describes the problems involved:

When Seleucus, after the partition of the kingdom of Antigonus, arrived with his army in Phoenicia, and tried, according to the arrangements concluded, to take over Coele-Syria, he found Ptolemy already in possession of its cities. Ptolemy complained that Seleucus, in violation of their old friendship, should have agreed to an arrangement which put territory governed by Ptolemy into his own share. Although he (Ptolemy) had taken part in the war

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<sup>4</sup> Zenon Papyri, No. 13 publication by C. C. Edgar, in *Annales Serv.*, Vol. xviii (1919).

against Antigonus, the kings had not, he protested, assigned him any portion of the conquered territory. To these reproaches Seleucus replied that it was quite fair that those who fought the battle should dispose the territory. With regard to Coele-Syria, he would not, for the present, for the sake of friendship, take any action; later on he would consider the best way of treating friends who tried to grasp more than was their right.<sup>5</sup>

Syria was nominally a part of three domains after the battle of Ipsus. Demetrius Poliorketes, son of Antigonus, occupied the Phoenician coast. Seleucus possessed northern Syria where he built Antioch as his capital. Syria south of Aradus (Arvad) was retained by Ptolemy, who was able to encroach on the claims of his northern neighbors. While Demetrius was busy elsewhere, Ptolemy quietly occupied Phoenicia. Seleucus made no attempt to occupy Coele-Syria, so that Ptolemy remained its *de facto* ruler.

Ptolemy Lagi was succeeded by his son Ptolemy Philadelphus in 283 B.C. Seleucus was murdered in 281 B.C. and succeeded by his son Antiochus I. In the years that follow, three great powers shared the empire of Alexander. The Ptolemies of Egypt, the Seleucids of Syria, and the house of Antigonus in Macedonia were rival powers. The Seleucids and the Antigonids were either singly, or unitedly, at war with the Ptolemies during most of the third century B.C.

In 275 B.C. Ptolemy invaded Syria and was repulsed by the Seleucid forces. Ptolemy's naval power, however, enabled him to prolong the war. Hostilities ceased in 272 or 271 B.C. without a decisive victory for either side.

When Antiochus II succeeded his father to the Syrian throne in 261 B.C., war broke out again. The results were indecisive, and peace was concluded in 252 B.C. Ptolemy's daughter, Berenice, was betrothed to Antiochus II, thus uniting the two rival houses by marriage.

In 246 B.C. Antiochus died, being succeeded by his son Seleucus II. The following year Ptolemy II died and was succeeded by Ptolemy III, Euergetes, who had been joint-ruler since 247 B.C.

War broke out between the Seleucids and the Ptolemies when it was learned that Berenice had been murdered, with her infant son, though the intrigue of Laodice, half sister and wife of Antiochus II. Laodice wanted to insure that her own son, rather than the son of Berenice, would succeed to the Syrian throne. The murder of the daughter and grandson of Ptolemy II, however, was an outrage to the honor of the Ptolemies and resulted in the "Laodicean War."

After a series of brilliant victories in which northern Syria was completely subjugated,

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5 Diodorus, *Histories*, xxi, 5.

Ptolemy III was called back to Egypt to care for a local problem. Seleucus was able to regain lost territories as far south as Damascus, but attempts to take Southern Palestine were futile. Peace was concluded in 240 B.C., and no further attacks were made on Syria during Ptolemy III's reign. He died in 221 B.C. and was succeeded by Ptolemy IV Philopater, one of the worst of the Ptolemaic house. Seleucus II was succeeded, in 226, by Seleucus III who died by poison, according to Appian. He was succeeded by his younger brother who is known as Antiochus III, the Great.