

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

CHAPTER 90

The Hasmonean Dynasty,
Growth and Decay

1. John Hyrcanus

With the death of the last of the sons of Mattathias, in 135 B.C., the heroic age of the Maccabean struggle came to an end. The generation which had fought for religious liberty was dying out. The new generation was proud of the Maccabean victories and hopeful of even greater successes at home and abroad.

Syria had to respect the leadership of her neighbor to the south. Although powerful enough to conquer Jerusalem, she offered recognition to Hyrcanus on condition that Hyrcanus consider himself subject to Syria and promise help in Syrian military campaigns. Hyrcanus was also asked to give up the coastal cities which had been annexed by his father and Jonathan. He was permitted to keep Jaffa which served as the port of Judah. The Syrian king left Palestine, and the Hellenizing party disappeared from the Jewish political scene.

This change in political alignments is an important factor in the reign of Hyrcanus. Previously the lines were closely drawn. The Hasidim represented the conservative elements who wished to retain their religious liberty and resist Hellenism. The Hellenizers were willing to sacrifice their religious heritage in order to achieve the real or imaginary gains included in the concept of "the Greek way of life." The Maccabean struggle resulted in victory for the Hasidim, although the Hasidim did not wholly align themselves with the Maccabees. They were willing to stop short of political independence in their dealings with the Syrians.

With the recognition of the government of Hyrcanus by the Syrians, the older Hellenists were completely discredited. Their conflict with the Hasmoneans was ended, and they became loyal members of the Jewish community.

The adage, "If you can't lick them, join them," is illustrated in the subsequent history of this Hellenistic party. Its ideals were perpetuated in the party of the Sadducees, as the ideals of the Hasidim were perpetuated in the party of the Pharisees. These parties are first mentioned during the lifetime of Hyrcanus. Before his death he repudiated the Pharisees and declared himself a Sadducee.

The reign of John Hyrcanus began a policy of territorial expansion including the reconquest of the coastal cities ceded to Syria during the first years of his reign and the subsequent conquest of Edom, or Idumea.

The coastal cities were the commercial highways of Palestine. From time immemorial the roads of commerce and warfare passed up the Palestinian coastland from Egypt to Syria and Mesopotamia. Without the control of these commercial highways, Hyrcanus knew that Judea would sink into insignificance. As soon as Syrian internal affairs made interference from the north unlikely, Hyrcanus captured the cities and promoted the development of Jewish commerce.

Another ancient trade route passed south of Judea, through Idumea, to Egypt. Hyrcanus conquered this territory and compelled the Idumeans to be circumcised and accept Judaism. This action has been condemned by later Judaism. It even met opposition in his own lifetime. There is something ironical in the thought of a grandson of Mattathias forcing religious conformity on a people conquered by Jewish arms! Many historical parallels may be drawn. The oppressed frequently become the oppressors. That human nature frequently descends to such depths does not lessen the tragedy, however.

Hyrcanus' policy of conquest was supported by the men of wealth and the aristocrats who hoped to grow in power and prestige as a result of new commercial opportunities and larger territories to govern. Some support probably came from extreme nationalists who dreamed of glory and conquest.

The mass of the population, however, could not hope to profit from the policy of territorial expansion. On the contrary, they were alarmed at the growing secularism of the age. The High Priesthood had little semblance to a sacred office.

There were practical considerations, too. Wars are expensive -- in lives as well as money. The Jew might applaud the conquest of Samaria, whose rival temple on Mt. Gerizim always annoyed him. Perhaps he would even deem the coastal cities a rightful part of his Judean homeland. The annexation of Idumea, however, was something different.

Although there was difference of opinion, and the emergence of rival parties during the reign of Hyrcanus, the unity of the Hasmonean state was not threatened. The borders had been extended on all sides before Hyrcanus died in 104 B.C. Although devout Jews frequently differed with his policies, his personal life was free from suspicion. His devout,

Hasidic background bore fruit in a life which could not offend the most meticulous scribe. His children, however, had grown up in a palace and numbered themselves among the aristocrats. Their training was more in Greek than in Hebrew thought, and they looked upon the Pharisees with disdain.

2. Aristobulus

The death of John Hyrcanus precipitated a dynastic struggle among his children. His eldest son, who preferred his Greek name, Aristobulus, to his Hebrew name, Judah, emerged as the victor. As a typical tyrant, he cast three of his brothers into prison, where two are thought to have starved to death. Another brother was murdered in the palace.

Aristobulus continued the policy of territorial expansion begun by Hyrcanus. In his short reign he pushed his borders north to the territory around Mt. Lebanon, and took to himself the title "King." Drink, disease, and the haunting fear of rebellion brought death after only a one-year reign. There was little mourning among the masses of the Jews.

3. Alexander Jannaeus

At the time of Aristobulus' death he had but one brother alive in prison. His Hebrew name was Jonathan, and his Greek name, Alexander. History knows him as Alexander Jannaeus.

Any who hoped for a change in policy when Alexander Jannaeus assumed office were bitterly disappointed. The policy of territorial expansion continued. Although not always successful on the battlefield, Jannaeus extended his frontiers along the Philistine coast, toward the frontiers of Egypt and in the Trans-Jordan area. The size of the Jewish state was comparable to that of the glorious days of David and Solomon. It incorporated the whole of Palestine proper, with adjacent areas, from the borders of Egypt to Lake Hulah. Perea in Trans-Jordan was included, as were the Philistine cities of the coastal plain, except Ascalon. The Hasmoneans aspired to become a maritime power. Ships were sculptured on the family tomb near Modein and were depicted on the coins minted by successive Hasmonean rulers.

The territories incorporated into the Hasmonean Kingdom were, with some exceptions, quickly Judaized. The Idumeans came to exercise an important place in Jewish national life. Galilee became one of the principal centers of Judaism. The Samaritans, however, resisted assimilation. Cities like Apollonia and Sythopolis, with only a small Jewish element in their population, likewise retained their non-Jewish character.

The rift between the Pharisees and the Hasmonean rulers, first noted in the reign of John Hyrcanus, reached its climax during the days of Alexander Jannaeus. Jannaeus kept the Pharisees in subjection by the use of foreign mercenaries.

Open rebellion broke out at a memorable Feast of Tabernacles when Jannaeus was officiating in the Temple as King-Priest. Showing his contempt for the Pharisees, Jannaeus poured out a water libation at his feet instead of on the altar, as prescribed by Pharisaic ritual. The people in the Temple, enraged at this impious act, pelted Jannaeus with the citrons which they were carrying in honor of the feast. Jannaeus called upon his soldiers to restore order. Hundreds of defenseless people were killed in the process.

The result was open civil war. The Pharisees invited the king of Syria to aid them. War brings strange allies! The descendants of the Hasidim asked the descendants of Antiochus Epiphanes to aid them against the descendants of the Maccabees.

The Syrians came and, aided by the Pharisees, forced Jannaeus into hiding in the Judean hills. The Pharisees did some serious thinking. Fearing that the Syrians would claim Judea as the fruit of victory, and thinking that Alexander Jannaeus and his Sadducean sympathizers were sufficiently punished, thousands of the Pharisees deserted the Syrian army and went over to Jannaeus. The Syrians were defeated by this realignment of forces.

Jannaeus was not content to learn from his near-defeat, however. He instituted a hunt for the leaders of the rebellion, and made a horrible example of those he caught. He gave a banquet to the Sadducean leaders to celebrate his victory. Eight hundred Pharisees were crucified in the presence of his celebrating guests. Alexander Jannaeus thus goes down in history as a tyrant. Compromise between the Pharisees and the Sadducees was rendered impossible. Many students of the Dead Sea Scrolls identify Jannaeus as the Wicked Priest who persecuted the pious leader known as the Teacher of Righteousness.

Tradition suggests that Jannaeus repented on his deathbed. It relates how he instructed his wife, Salome Alexandra, to dismiss his Sadducean advisers and reign with the aid of the Pharisees.

4. Alexandra

Salome Alexandra had been married successively to Aristobulus and Alexander Jannaeus. The widow of two Hasmonean rulers, she succeeded to the throne as queen in her own right. Alexandra was nearly seventy years of age when she began her reign. Being a woman, she could not officiate as High Priest. Her elder son, Hyrcanus, assumed the priesthood, and his brother Aristobulus received the military command. Alexandra's brother, Simeon ben Shetah, was a leader of the Pharisees, a fact which may have disposed Salome Alexandra to seek peace between the opposing factions.

Under Alexandra, the Pharisees had their opportunity to make a constructive contribution to Jewish life. In many areas, particularly that of education, they were eminently successful. Under the presidency of Simeon ben Shetah, the Sanhedrin (the Jewish Council of State) decreed that every young man should be educated. This education was, of course,

primarily in the Hebrew Scriptures. The importance of training the young was emphasized in the Old Testament, and the successors of Ezra had stressed the necessity of becoming acquainted with the sacred Scriptures. Under the leadership of Simeon ben Shetah, a comprehensive system of elementary education was inaugurated, so that the larger villages, town, and cities of Judea would produce a literate, informed people.

The reign of Alexandra was peaceful in comparison with the years which preceded it. Her son Aristobulus led an expedition against Damascus, which proved futile. A threatened invasion from Armenia was averted by bribes and diplomacy.

Alexandra's reign did not answer her country's problems, however. It did not even heal its wounds. If the Pharisees were happy in their newfound recognition, the Sadducees were resentful of the fact that they were deprived of power. To make matters worse, the Pharisees used their power to seek revenge for the massacre of their leaders by Alexander Jannaeus. Sadducean blood was spilt, and the makings of another civil war were in the air.

The Sadducees found in Aristobulus, the younger son of Jannaeus and Alexandra, the man they would support as Alexandra's successor. He was a soldier, and appealed to that party which dreamed of imperial expansion and worldly power. Hyrcanus, the elder brother and rightful heir, was congenial to the Pharisees. With the death of Alexandra, the partisans of the two sons were ready for a showdown.

5. Hyrcanus II

At the death of Alexandra, her older son Hyrcanus, who had been serving as High Priest, succeeded to the throne as Hyrcanus II. Immediately Aristobulus led an army of Sadducees against Jerusalem. Hyrcanus and the Pharisees had neither enthusiasm for nor ability in war. Declaring that he never really desired the throne, Hyrcanus surrendered all his honors to Aristobulus who became king and High Priest under the name Aristobulus II.

6. Aristobulus II

By right of conquest, the Judean throne was safely in the hands of Aristobulus II, backed by the Sadducees. Hyrcanus and Aristobulus vowed eternal friendship. Aristobulus' eldest son, Alexander, married Hyrcanus' only daughter, Alexandra. Peace between the brothers was short-lived, however. Hyrcanus found it advisable, or necessary, to flee to Aretas, king of the Nabatean Arabs.

7. Antipater

Antipater, an Idumean by birth, saw in the position of Hyrcanus an opportunity to fulfill his own dream of being a political power in Judea. It was not difficult to persuade Hyrcanus that he had been unjustly deprived of his hereditary rights by his younger

brother. The Nabatean Arabs would come to Jerusalem, drive out the usurper, and restore Hyrcanus to his rightful position. Such was the suggestion of Antipater. Hyrcanus agreed. Aretas and his Nabatean Arabs invaded Palestine and besieged Jerusalem. Aristobulus was caught by surprise. He shut himself up in Jerusalem and both sides prepared for a long siege.

8. Enter the Romans

Learning about the quarrel between the brothers, Pompey, who was in the East in the interest of building up the Roman Empire there, took an immediate interest in Jewish politics. Under the guise of a willingness to arbitrate the difficulties, Rome became the force which was to determine the future of Palestine.