

## **Jews among Greeks and Romans**

### **1. Introduction**

By the first century CE Jewish Palestine was inextricably bound to the Graeco-Roman world in political, cultural and linguistic terms. Some knowledge is therefore required of the history and culture of Palestine within the context of the Greek and Roman empires.

**1.1 The Worlds of the New Testament** One should avoid the false distinction traditionally made between the Greek/Roman and Jewish environments, although the primary context of the New Testament writings is Judaism (= late Second Temple Judaism and beyond, after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE).

**1.2 Available Sources** There are many valuable sources in addition to the New Testament, including the writings of the Jewish historian Josephus (37-100 CE); the Alexandrian Jew Philo; the Dead Sea Scrolls (and other Palestinian Jewish writings); papyri and inscriptions; Graeco-Roman writings. None of these source materials is completely objective or comprehensive, nor do the New Testament writings represent all the many aspects and contexts of first-century Roman Empire. 'The narrative world' of the New Testament authors must be taken into account.

### **2. Mapping Out the History of Jews Among Greeks and Romans**

#### **2.1 Alexander the Great and the Hellenization of Palestine**

The period from the late sixth century BCE onwards is known as Second Temple Judaism, following the return of Jews to Judaea after the exile (586-539 BCE).

In 333 BCE, after Alexander defeated the Persians in Asia Minor, Palestine came under the rule of the Greeks. Alexander sought to unite his empire by spreading Greek culture throughout the lands; Greek was introduced as the common language ('koine'), and Greek influence on eastern regions came to be known as '**Hellenization**' and its product as **Hellenism**. Note, for example, the decision taken during this period to translate the Hebrew Scriptures (the Old Testament)

into Greek (Septuagint = LXX) in Alexandria for the benefit of Greek-speaking Jews.

## **2.2 The Maccabean Revolt and the Hasmoneans**

Following Alexander's death (323 BCE) his territories were divided between his generals. Judaea was first ruled by the Ptolemies, and then by the Seleucids; Palestine was of strategic importance because it was positioned as a corridor between Egypt and Syria.

Deterioration of relations happened when Antiochus IV Epiphanes came to power (175 BCE); he raided the Temple treasury, outlawed Jewish religious practices and dedicated the Temple to the Greek god Zeus (cf. Dan. 2; I Macc. 1). Jewish opposition to these developments came to the surface when a revolt erupted in 167 BCE; Mattathias and his five sons led what became known as 'the Maccabean revolt'. The aim of this revolt was to achieve religious freedom; the Temple was rededicated three years later (commemorated during the festival of Hanukkah). National independence was gained in 142 BCE and lasted for about eighty years. This is known as the period of Hasmonean rule; it was short-lived because of its leaders' obsession with dynastic lineage.

## **2.3 Roman Rule in Judaea**

In 64 BCE the Roman general Pompey besieged the Jerusalem Temple and made Judaea a subject of the Roman province of Syria. Julius Caesar's son (Octavian > Augustus Caesar) became the first Roman emperor in 27 BCE.

## **2.4 The Rule of Herod the Great and his Sons**

The Romans appointed Herod as a client king in 37 BCE. He embarked on a number of successful building projects (the renovation of the Jerusalem Temple, the palaces of Masada and Herodium), but he was also known for his violent removal of all possible rivals, including several of his sons (cf. Matt. 2:1-19; Luke 1:5). Upon Herod's death (4 BCE) his kingdom was divided among three of his sons.

- **Archelaus** received Judaea and Samaria, but he was later replaced by a series of Roman governors, including Pontius Pilate (26-36 CE).

- **Herod Antipas** governed Galilee and Perea (cf. Mark 6:17; Luke 23:6-7); he is also known for the beheading of John the Baptist (Matt. 14:1; Luke 3:19) and for being involved in Jesus' trial (Luke 23:6-12).
- **Philip** received north-eastern Palestine (Golan, Trachonitis and Batanea).
- Between 41 and 44 CE Palestine was governed by **Herod Agrippa I**; he was responsible for the execution of James and for the imprisonment of Peter (Acts 12:2-19).

## 2.5 Jewish Response to Direct Roman Rule

The Roman governors displayed a general lack of tolerance and sensitivity to Jewish concerns, particularly the imposition of tax (on agricultural produce, as well as a head tax). The financial burden often fell on the (poor) masses of the population (cf. Matthew 13:24-30; 20:1-16; 21:33-41 and Luke 17:7-10; 16:19-31; 21:1-4).

In 66 CE Florus, the governor of Judaea, demanded money from the Temple treasury. The Roman general Vespasian subdued the fighting in Galilee (67 CE) and in most of Judaea (68 CE). In 70 CE his son Titus resumed the war, culminating in the siege of Jerusalem. The Temple itself was burnt on the ninth and tenth of Av. The last resistance came to an end in 74 CE when the Romans took the desert fortress of Masada.

## Bibliography

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