

The Period Between the Testaments: I. Political Development

F.F. Bruce*

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The historical books of the Old Testament come to an end in the time of the Persian Empire. Ezra tells us how Cyrus the Persian, after subduing the Babylonian Empire and adding it to his own realm, issued an edict permitting the Jews who were in exile in Babylonia to return to Palestine and rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem. He goes on to narrate how, after temporarily successful attempts by the Jews' adversaries to hinder this work, the edict of Cyrus was confirmed and supplemented by Darius I (521-486 B.C.), so that the work of rebuilding the Temple was begun again in his second year and the house dedicated in his sixth year. The book of Esther tells us of the frustration of a plot against all the Jews in the Persian Empire in the reign of the next king, Xerxes (the Biblical Ahasuerus, 486-465 B.C.). And it is in the reign of his son Artaxerxes I (464-423 B.C.) that Old Testament history really comes to an end. It was he who in his seventh year sent Ezra to Jerusalem to deal with certain questions of the Jews' religious organization,¹ and in his twentieth sent Nehemiah as Governor of Judaea. But we have no Old Testament history after his reign. The genealogical records preserved in the book of Nehemiah take us down to the reign of "Darius the Persian" (Neh. 12:22)—either Darius II (423-404 B.C.) or Darius III (338-331). The Biblical history is not

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resumed until Caesar Augustus in Rome rules the civilized world (Luke 2:1), more than 400 years after the administration of Nehemiah.

But the clock of Jewish history did not stand still during these four centuries. Their events have passed unrecorded in Biblical history because no prophetic voice arose in Israel from the time of the prophets of the return from exile until the coming of John the Baptist. A knowledge of the political and religious developments of these centuries, however, is a great aid in understanding the New Testament by reason of the wealth of background information which it affords.

The Persian Empire lasted for two years after the time of Nehemiah. Two events are all that need be recorded of this century. One is the final schism between the Samaritans and the Jews, and the foundation by the Samaritans of their rival temple on Mount Gerizim, overlooking the ancient city of Shechem (modern Nablus, where a tiny remnant of the Samaritans still survives and carries on its distinctive worship). It was to Mount Gerizim that the woman of Sychar referred when she said to Jesus: "Our fathers worshipped in this

* It is some years ago since Mr. Bruce first contributed to the "B.S.", and it is a great privilege to have his help again. He is now head of the Department of Biblical History and Literature in the University of Sheffield.

The article is the first of two on the general subject mentioned; the second will deal with the religious features of the period. Too little attention perhaps is paid to this inter-Testament age, yet it contains a great deal of practical interest to the Bible Student because of the background it furnishes to the subsequent history of the beginnings of Christianity. No serious student of that history should fail to acquaint himself with at least the main features of the period to see how it leads up to the coming of Christ as Saviour.

¹ *The Date of Ezra's Coming to Jerusalem*, by J. Stafford Wright (Tyndale Press, London) [http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/article_ezra_wright.html].

mountain" (John 4:20). The other event is a revolt against the Persian rule by some of the states of Western Asia in the reign of Artaxerxes III (358-338 B.C.). It is likely that the Jews of Palestine were implicated in this revolt; at any rate, when it was put down, a number of Jews were deported to Hyrcania, by the Caspian Sea, where they formed a settlement. There is also some evidence that Jericho was destroyed and Jerusalem occupied at this time, and some have thought that two of the Psalms (74 and 79) express the dismay of the godly at the pollution of the Temple and the synagogues by the Persian army; this dating of these Psalms, however, is by no means certain.

It was only a few years after this that the Persian Empire crashed under the hammer-blows of the invading armies of Greeks and Macedonians led by the Macedonian king Alexander. Alexander's father Philip had brought the whole of Greece under his domination, and intended to lead the combined forces of his empire against the Persians, the age-long enemies of Greece. He was, however, assassinated before he could carry out his plan, and it fell to Alexander, his son and successor, to bring it to fulfilment. In 333 B.C. he led his armies into Asia. The battle of Granicus in that year laid all Asia Minor at his mercy; by his victory at

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Issus in 332 he opened the way into Syria. All Syria and Palestine passed peacefully under his control, except the city of Tyre, which resisted him and was not taken until after a seven months' siege. He marched southwards along the coastal road leading to Egypt, taking Gaza on the way, and in 331 he added Egypt to his empire. Meanwhile the Persian king raised another army to oppose Alexander's progress. Alexander, returning from Egypt, met this army at Arbela, east of the Tigris (331), and inflicted upon it the defeat which brought the Persian Empire to an end. Five years later he marched still farther east, and invaded India as far as the Punjab. He did not live to consolidate his empire, however. In 323 he died of a fever at Babylon, before he had completed his thirty-third year.

The great empire which he had brought into being did not survive him as a political unity. But the effects of his career of conquest were long-lasting and far-reaching. His followers carried the Greek language and something of the Greek way of life over all the Eastern Mediterranean and Western Asia. Alexander, all unknown to himself, was a most important instrument in the hand of God in preparing the world for the coming of Christ and the diffusion of Christianity. Alexander's Macedonian generals quarrelled over the succession to his empire, which fell between them into several parts. Of these parts only two concern us. These are the Macedonian kingdoms of Egypt, with its capital at Alexandria, and Syria, with its capital at Antioch. By 300 B.C. we find two Macedonian dynasties firmly established in these capitals. In Alexandria ruled the dynasty of the Ptolemies, so called from the founder of the dynasty, Ptolemy, one of Alexander's generals. The founder of the Macedonian kingdom of Syria, another of Alexander's generals, bore the name Seleucus, and from him the Syrian dynasty is called the dynasty of the Seleucids. All the kings of the Alexandrian dynasty bore the name Ptolemy; the Antiochene kings did not thus restrict themselves to one name, but most of them were called either Seleucus or Antiochus.

Palestine lay between these two kingdoms. To begin with it formed part of the Ptolemaic realm. Ptolemy I secured control of it by a victory at Gaza in 312 B.C. Under the Ptolemies the Jews of Palestine enjoyed much the same form of religious autonomy as had been granted them by the Persian kings. Many of them found their way to the capital. Alexandria had been founded by

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Alexander at the time of his invasion of Egypt, and he himself Brought a number of Jews into the city as colonists. Ptolemy I continued this policy, which indeed was not uncongenial to the Jews themselves because of the great commercial prosperity of the city. The Jews of Alexandria formed the most important section of the city's non-Greek population; they were accorded special privileges and had their own municipal constitution, distinct from that of the city as a whole. Alexandria remained for long the most important centre of the Jews of the Dispersion. Here the Jews soon gave up the use of their Palestinian tongue and spoke Greek like their neighbours.

Even the Jews of Palestine were not immune from Greek influences under the new régime. The Greek way of life was attractive to many, and slowly but surely it continued to make headway among large sections of the population, including even the great priestly families in Jerusalem. This tendency was inimical to the true calling of Israel, and tended to break down the wall of partition between Jews and Gentiles in the wrong way, by blurring the sharp distinction between Israel's revealed religion and Greek heathenism. Those who valued the ancestral faith and customs of their people were grieved at the prevalent trend but could do little to check it. They came to be known as the *chasidim*, or 'the pious'.

The two Macedonian kingdoms were continuously in a state of rivalry with each other. A truce was arranged in 250 B.C., when the daughter of Ptolemy II was married to Antiochus II, but it did not last for long (cf. the prophetic reference to this in Dan. 11:6). In 198 B.C. a victory won by the northern king Antiochus III at Panion, near the source of the Jordan (the Caesarea Philippi of N.T. times), gave him command of Palestine, which thus exchanged one Macedonian ruler for another.

The progressive Hellenization of Palestinian Judaism continued under the Seleucids as it had done under the Ptolemies, and there is no saving how far it might have gone but for the violent reaction against it which followed the mad attempt of Antiochus IV (175-164 B.C.) to impose it by force. Antiochus IV had something of the spirit of a missionary crusader on behalf of Greek ideals and religion, and was not content with the 'inevitability of gradualness'. Besides, he was engaged in war with the Egyptian kingdom, and was afraid that the Jews might engage in pro-Egyptian activity against him. He decided that the best way to

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prevent this was to root out all Jewish distinctiveness, abolish their customs and worship, and assimilate them completely and ruthlessly to the Greek way of life. In 168 B.C. the Temple worship at Jerusalem was stopped, and replaced by the cult of a pagan deity, whose image is referred to by the writer of I Maccabees as "an abomination of desolation" (quoting Dan. 11:31). This was not only unspeakably bitter for the *chasidim*, many of whom suffered martyrdom for their loyalty to the faith; it also stirred the patriotic spirit of many Jews who were not particularly religious. These patriots found leaders in a priestly family known from one of its ancestors as the Hasmonean family. An aged member of this family, Mattathias by name, raised the standard of revolt near Lydda; and he and his sons formed a nucleus round which other like-minded Jews gathered. Of these sons the outstanding one was Judas, surnamed Maccabaeus ('the hammer'), from whom the family as a whole is sometimes called the Maccabaeans. It gave great spiritual prestige to the Maccabean rising that it was support-

ed by the *chasidim*. These latter were not animated by nationalist sentiments; political independence was a matter of secondary importance in their eyes, so long as they enjoyed freedom to obey the divine law. But now they saw no other means of regaining this freedom than by aiding the Maccabean revolt. Judas and his followers succeeding in cleansing the Temple and restoring the worship of Jehovah in 165 B.C.; the anniversary of this restoration has been celebrated ever since then by the Jews as the Feast of the Dedication (cf. John 10:22). Dissension at the court in Antioch, which followed the death of Antiochus in 164, aided the cause of the Jews, and in 162 the regent Lysias found himself compelled to grant the Jews the full restoration of religious autonomy. This was the object with which the *chasidim* had joined the Maccabean insurgents; when it was gained, they were satisfied. But Judas and his followers aimed at political freedom as well, and continued the struggle. Judas fell in 160, and was succeeded as commander-in-chief by his brother Jonathan. Some years later a claimant for the throne of Syria, Alexander Balas, secured the aid of Jonathan by making him high priest. The Hasmoneans belonged to a priestly family, to be sure, but not to the traditional high-priestly line. Now, however, they secured the high-priesthood, and it remained in their family until the time of Herod.

Jonathan was succeeded as commander-in-chief and high priest in 143 by his brother Simon, who consolidated his position as

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civil ruler as well. In his days Judaea became politically independent, for the first time since the Babylonian conquest, and it remained so for some 80 years, under the rule of a Hasmonean dynasty of priest-rulers. These Hasmoneans paid but little attention to the spiritual ideals of Israel; their chief aim was secular power and aggrandizement. John Hyrcanus (135-105 B.C.), son and successor of Simon, conquered Galilee and Samaria, and destroyed the Samaritan temple on Mount Gerizim. To the south, he annexed Idumaea (Edom), and forced its inhabitants to be circumcised and become Jews. Aristobulus I, the son of John Hyrcanus, took the title 'king' and wore a royal crown. He did not enjoy this dignity for long, as he died the year after his accession and was succeeded by his brother Alexander Jannaeus (104-78 B.C.). Jannaeus ruled as autocratically as any Oriental despot, his treatment of opposing parties in the state (such as the Pharisees, of whom more will be said in the next paper) being outrageous in its ferocity. He continued his predecessors' career of conquest, and added several Greek cities to his kingdom. On his death he was succeeded as high priest by his son Hyrcanus and as civil ruler by his wife Alexandra. Her death nine years later was followed by rivalry for the supreme power between her two sons Hyrcanus (the high priest) and Aristobulus II.

The Roman Republic had secured its first footing on the Asiatic continent in 133 B.C., and the necessity of protecting its interests There led it to extend the sphere of its influence. In 63 B.C. the Roman general Pompey, who had just concluded a long-drawn-out war with the king of Pontus, in Asia Minor, came to Jerusalem in the course of reorganizing all Western Asia and bringing it in one form or another under the sway of Rome. He declared Hyrcanus to be the lawful ruler of the Jews. Aristobulus refused to accept his decision and held Jerusalem against Pompey. After a three months' siege it was taken; Judaea was now part of the Roman Empire.

During the next thirty years or so the Roman Empire was rent by civil war, but one remarkable family managed to remain throughout on good terms with whoever for the time

being represented Roman power in the East. One member of this family. Antipater, was appointed procurator ('lieutenant-governor') of Judaea by Julius Caesar in 47 B.C. After his death one of his sons, Herod by name, received from the Roman Senate the title 'king of Judaea', and after putting down an attempt by the survivors

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of the Hasmoneans to regain power with the aid of the eastern Parthian power, Herod ruled Judaea as 'friend and ally' of the Roman people from 37 to 4 B.C. The family to which he belonged was Idumaeen (Edomite), and his rigorous control of the Jewish people was a grim nemesis for the forcible incorporation of Idumaea in the Jewish kingdom by John Hyrcanus.

In 31 B.C. the civil wars which had raged in the Roman world for many years came to an end with the sea-victory won at Actium by Octavian, the adopted son of Julius Caesar, over his rival Antony and Queen Cleopatra, the last ruler of the Ptolemaic dynasty. With this victory Octavian had the whole Roman world at his feet, and he ruled it until A.D. 14 as first Roman Emperor, under the name Augustus (which means something like 'His Majesty').

And so it came to pass that when the fulness of the time came and God sent forth His Son, that Son "was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king" (Matt. 2:1), Joseph and Mary having travelled to that place because "there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled" (Luke 2:1).

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