

## Part II

# From Ancient Israel to Rabbinic Jewry

# Jews in the Land During the Second Temple Period

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## Introduction

The period following the Babylonian Exile was one of renewal and rebirth for the Jews. During the Second Temple period (586 BCE–70 CE), the Jewish people coalesced under a centralized religion and an identifiable culture. The transformation from the biblical “Israelites” to the postbiblical “Jews,” however, did not happen overnight. It was a process that took several centuries of political turmoil and religious development, rooted in the biblical traditions.

The Second Temple period – that is, from the Babylonian Exile to the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans – was characterized by conflict, both internal and external. Jews during this postbiblical period struggled to construct and maintain their identity as they encountered foreign conquerors, including the Persians, Greeks, and Romans. Varying reactions to these encounters led to internal conflicts within Jewish society, as well. Questions arose among the people of Jerusalem regarding their level of integration into the increasingly international community: “Should Jews abandon the native tongue and speak Greek? Should we eat non-kosher foods, such as pig? Are we permitted to attend non-Jewish festivals, even if the worship of foreign gods is taking place there? How much is too far?”

Many of these questions dealt specifically with the Jerusalem Temple. Since the biblical monarchy under the House of David ceased to exist after the destruction of the First Temple in 586 BCE, the hierarchical priestly aristocracy of Jerusalem took on a political role alongside their religious duties. In the Second Temple period, it became nearly impossible to separate politics and religion in Jerusalem.

The Temple in Jerusalem was the center of public life. Jews from all over the Roman Empire would make pilgrimages to their only house of worship in order to participate in the annual festivals. Ancient historians described how the city would swell with visitors during the Jewish festivals of Sukkot, Passover, and Shevuot. And while the Temple was more regularly the scene of public worship, celebration, and offerings to God, periodically it became the scene of violent confrontation between the Jews and foreign rulers.

Toward the end of the Second Temple period, another institution existed alongside the Temple in Jewish life: the synagogue. Literally a “place of meeting,” the synagogue served a variety of functions, both religious and communal. Synagogues could never replace the Jerusalem Temple since sacrifices to God could only be carried out in the latter. Instead, synagogues were a way for Jews who did not live so close to Jerusalem to engage in a wholly different kind of religious experience, often involving the recitation and discussion of sacred texts and the chanting of liturgy. In addition, synagogues may have been used for local town meetings, as hostels for visitors, and as schools.

### Sources

To reconstruct the history, religion, culture, and politics of the Second Temple period, modern historians rely on a variety of sources. The most well known is the Bible. While the bulk of the Hebrew Bible (or Old Testament) informs us of “Israelite history,” – that is, the First Temple period and earlier – the later books, such as Daniel and Ecclesiastes, reflect the literary style and beliefs of Jews in the Second Temple period. But just because the biblical canon was closed does not mean that Jews stopped writing. In fact, many works that were written by Jews during the Second Temple period and not included in the Jewish Bible found their way into some Christian Bibles. For example, the Wisdom of Ben Sira (or Ecclesiasticus) and Tobit were included in the Catholic Bible in the section titled the Deuterocanon, or “second law” (what Protestant tradition refers to as the Apocrypha or “hidden works”). In addition, much of the New Testament was written by Jews (or more properly, Jewish Christians) and reflects life in first- and second-century Palestine.<sup>1</sup> The earliest rabbinic literature, most notably the Mishnah, also helps to paint a picture of Jewish religion and society toward the end of the Second Temple period.

By far, however, the most important historical sources for Jews in the Second Temple period come from the literary works of Flavius Josephus, a Jewish priest and aristocrat from Jerusalem. Josephus became somewhat infamous in Jewish tradition as a traitor for having surrendered to the Romans during the Great Jewish Revolt (66–70 CE). However, his historical works, especially *The Jewish War* and *Antiquities of the Jews*, provide valuable details and insight into the history, politics, and culture of the Second Temple period.

Lastly, archaeology has made important contributions to the study of the Jews during these formative years. Excavations over the past century have allowed us to confirm many of the details provided by our literary sources. Conversely, archaeology has given us the opportunity to reevaluate, question, and even refute many claims of the ancient texts. But most importantly, archaeological sources often fill in the gaps regarding daily life left by the ancient authors who were typically wealthy, well educated, and generally uninterested in the mundane details of Jewish life. For example, while Josephus imparts valuable insight into the politics of King Herod's court and Roman military strategy, he says very little regarding the eating habits, religious observances, or literacy rates among the farmers of Galilee. Archaeology provides a viewpoint for understanding the practices and lives of the common Jews and the masses. And if the last two thousand years of Western history are any indication, Jews of the lower socioeconomic strata are surely as important as kings and priests.

### **Hellenistic Palestine (332–167 BCE)**

With the arrival of Alexander the Great in 332 BCE, Greek culture began to seep into all aspects of life in the Near East. The term “Hellenism” comes from the word “Hellene,” meaning “Greek,” however, the Hellenistic period is better characterized by the mixing of Greek and Near Eastern cultures rather than domination. Nevertheless, the monarchs that ruled the Near East during the Hellenistic period were, in terms of language, religion, and tradition, Greek.<sup>2</sup>

In the decades following the untimely death of Alexander the Great, the massive empire stretching from Greece to Afghanistan was divided among the conqueror's former generals. Ancient Palestine sat on the border between the two largest kingdoms of the Hellenistic world: the kingdom of Ptolemy in Egypt to the southwest, and the kingdom of Seleucus in Mesopotamia to the northeast. As a result, Palestine was contested territory, and the Jews, living in Jerusalem and its immediate environs, found themselves under different overlords during the turbulent third and second centuries BCE.

#### **The Jews under the Ptolemies**

Under the Ptolemaic dynasty, the high priest of the Jerusalem Temple served as the political liaison between the Jewish people and the king in Alexandria, Egypt. The Ptolemies followed the precedent set by Alexander in allowing the Jews to live by their ancestral laws, including the freedom to conduct religious affairs as they saw fit. In exchange for general security and incorporation within the Ptolemaic kingdom, the duty of the high priest was to collect taxes from the landowners

in Judean territory and – after keeping a cut for himself – pass the sums on to the king. This *laissez faire* approach to imperial rule kept the Jews in relatively good relations with their overlords for the bulk of the third century BCE.

It was probably around this time that the Torah was first translated from its original Hebrew into a foreign language. The Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, including the Torah, is today referred to as the Septuagint. Although it was probably a work of necessity by the Greek-speaking Jewish community of Alexandria, the mere existence of such a translation suggests an amicable relationship between Jews and the Hellenistic monarchs. In a fictional account of the Septuagint's authorship, known as the Letter of Aristeas, composed by a Jew during the Second Temple period, King Ptolemy is depicted as requesting the translation just so he could possess a copy of such an important and ancient text for his library! It therefore seems that, in the first half of the Hellenistic period, the influx of Hellenism was not seen as an existential threat to Jewish traditions or life. The fear that Jewish practices and culture would be swallowed up by the sea of the Hellenistic world had not yet crystallized. Jews, it seems, were comfortable in the Greek world.

### The Jews under the Seleucids

By the beginning of the second century BCE, the Seleucid dynasty had wrested control of Palestine from the Ptolemies. Although the Seleucids at first maintained their predecessors' policies of local self-governance, the rise of Antiochus IV Epiphanes in 175 BCE brought about revolutionary changes. In an attempt to unify his empire under a single culture, Antiochus curtailed the rights of local religious authorities in favor of the cults of Greek deities, like Zeus and Apollo. To foment these changes among the stubbornly monotheistic Jews, Antiochus appointed Jewish aristocrats and priests who were open to his policies to the offices of tax collector and high priest. In effect, the king interfered with the high priest's line of succession as a means of enacting political and religious changes.

When the members of the Jerusalem aristocracy realized they could become religiously and politically powerful by allying themselves with the Seleucid king, infighting erupted, leading to several skirmishes in and around Jerusalem. As punishment, Antiochus, with the help of his "puppet" high priest, enacted the Hellenistic Religious Reforms (also known as the Antiochan Persecutions). These reforms attempted to enforce Hellenization by banning the study of the Jewish ancestral laws, i.e. the Torah, as well as the practice of circumcision. Most severely, the reforms mandated the worship of Zeus in the Jerusalem Temple, including the ritual offering of pig flesh in the Temple precinct. The consumption of pork was not only strictly forbidden by biblical dietary rules, but it was the archetypical food of aversion for Jews. As the most succulent of meats, pork was consumed all over the Mediterranean and Near East. Jewish avoidance of pork was among the more

peculiar – and therefore well known – aspects of their cultural and religious scruples. Offerings of pig in the Jerusalem Temple would therefore have been interpreted as the most vicious of affronts.

That said, the motives behind the Hellenistic Religious Reforms are a matter of debate. Jewish tradition has naturally viewed the changes as a form of religious persecution. By modern standards, such an interpretation is doubtless accurate. However, it is unclear as to whether Antiochus would have understood Jewish religious principles such as monotheism and dietary restrictions. Moreover, we should recall that Judaism – as a culture and religion – was in a state of flux at this time. From our perspective two thousand years later, we know that the stricter views toward issues like pork and the exclusivity of God would win out. But, at the time, this was not a foregone conclusion. To solidify and strengthen such convictions, blood would have to be shed.

### The Maccabean Revolt

The consequence of Antiochus' reforms was the Maccabean Revolt (167–142 BCE). While the Jerusalem aristocracy debated whether or not the reforms had gone too far, the rural communities of the Judean countryside – less acquainted with Hellenistic culture and politics than the urban elite – became enraged. A family of lower-order priests from the town of Modi'in, known as the Hasmoneans, led a guerrilla-style rebellion against the Seleucid armies in the Jerusalem area. The patriarch of the Hasmoneans died early in the revolt, and the leadership passed to his most charismatic son, Judah, nicknamed the "Hammer," or, in Hebrew, "Maccabee." Although Judah Maccabee was killed in battle in 161, the revolt continued for almost two more decades before the Seleucid king granted independence to the Jews. Nevertheless, Judah is remembered as the hero of the revolt, particularly because he led the capture of Jerusalem. The rededication of the Temple to the God of Israel following the battle is today commemorated by the festival of Chanukah.

How one judges the roles of the aristocratic and priestly Jews of Jerusalem who supported Antiochus depends largely on the interpretation of the sources. The events of this period are recounted in two books found in the Catholic and Orthodox Bibles that were written by Jews during the second century BCE. Both books – known as 1 Maccabees and 2 Maccabees – are highly polemical, glorifying the Hasmoneans and their followers as freedom-fighters and vilifying the Seleucids as oppressors. However, a careful reading of both texts suggests that the Jews were sharply divided on the issue of Hellenization. That is to say, there were some Jews who were willing to accept the Hellenistic Religious Reforms and become culturally integrated into the Seleucid Empire. Indeed, some scholars have argued that the Maccabean Revolt was more of a civil war than a rebellion (Bickerman, 1979). Despite this nuanced view of history, Jewish tradition tends to remember

the Jews as a united front against tyranny and oppression. In either case, though, the rejection of Hellenistic culture provided a model for Jewish nationalism and pride for centuries.

### **The Hasmonean Period (167–40 BCE)**

Judah Maccabee was succeeded as the leader of the Maccabean Revolt by his brother Jonathan. Since the time of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, the office of the high priest of the Jerusalem Temple had been in turmoil. The ancient line of high priests, which was passed down traditionally within a single family, had been broken. When Jonathan succeeded Judah, he took the additional step of appointing himself high priest. Although his motives may have been to return stability to the supreme religious office, the decision had the practical effect of combining the roles of political, religious, and military leadership into a single position. The dynasty of the Hasmoneans had officially begun.

Jonathan was assassinated in 142 BCE, and he was succeeded by his older brother Simon. As the last of the original Hasmonean brothers, Simon continued to consolidate military and religious leadership. Simon was succeeded in 134 by his youngest son, John Hyrcanus. For thirty years, John Hyrcanus ruled as leader of the Jewish people and high priest of the Jerusalem Temple.

#### **John Hyrcanus**

John Hyrcanus's reign saw two important developments. The first concerned the non-Jewish inhabitants of the country. Until this time, the Jews had shared the "Land of Israel," that is, ancient Palestine – from the Mediterranean coast on the west to the narrow strip of land on the far side of the Jordan River in the east – with a variety of non-Jewish peoples. The Jews – or the "Judeans," as they were known in antiquity – lived primarily in Judea, the hilly, inland region around Jerusalem. Immediately to the north were the Samaritans, monotheists who also worshipped the God of Israel but considered themselves the descendants of the ten tribes of Israel that were *not* sent into exile by the Babylonians.<sup>3</sup> Despite their parallel traditions, the relationship between the Jews and Samaritans was frequently fraught with conflict and rivalry. To the south of Judea was the region of Idumea. The Idumeans – descendants of the biblical Edomites – were more typical of the Semitic peoples of the Near East. They worshipped a variety of deities and observed traditions of both local and Greek origin. Along the coast, Greek-speaking peoples from all over the Hellenistic world flocked to the various trade emporia. The result was a string of diverse, cosmopolitan cities from Tyre and Sidon in the north to Gaza and Ashkelon in the south. Among all these peoples, the Jews lived in a small

and somewhat isolated region in the center of the country – that is, until the time of the Hasmoneans.

With their unlikely victories over the Seleucids during the Maccabean Revolt, the Jews under John Hyrcanus began to expand their sphere of influence. Early in his reign, John Hyrcanus led military campaigns into Samaria and Idumea with the goal of subduing and incorporating these regions into the newly formed Hasmonean kingdom. In Samaria, Hyrcanus took the opportunity to destroy the temple on Mount Gerizim, the sacred mountain of the Samaritans (as Josephus related in his *Antiquities*: 13.275–283). On the one hand, it may seem strange that a Jewish ruler would destroy a temple dedicated to the God of Israel. However, the Samaritans were seen by the Jews as a schismatic group that worshipped the God of Israel in an inappropriate manner. To worship God incorrectly was impiety.

In Idumea, John Hyrcanus took a somewhat different approach by forcibly converting the Idumeans to Judaism (Josephus, *Antiquities*: 13.256–258). While his religious convictions no doubt played a role in this policy – as they had in his destruction of the Samaritan temple – we should not discount the political motives behind the forced conversion of the Idumeans. Unifying the kingdom under a single, centralized Temple cult, with Hyrcanus himself as high priest, might have helped to create regional cohesion over time. No doubt the historical irony – considering the cause of the Maccabean Revolt – was entirely lost on John Hyrcanus.

For those familiar with the process of conversion in modern Judaism, it may seem strange that John Hyrcanus forcibly proselytized the Idumeans. Indeed, in modern Judaism, conversion is considered a difficult venture of study and personal sacrifice that can take a year or more to complete. But the rigor of modern conversion to Judaism is the product of centuries of rabbinic discourse. In the age of the Hasmoneans, the tradition of the rabbis was barely in its infancy.

### Jewish sectarianism

Those forebears of the rabbis, however, are found in another development during John Hyrcanus' reign: Jewish sectarianism. The term “sect” should not be understood here in the modern sense of a fringe or schismatic group. In Second Temple Judaism, a “sect” was more akin to a modern political party or religious denomination. (Again, politics and religion in Second Temple Judaism cannot be separated.) The two most important sects were the Pharisees and the Sadducees.

John Hyrcanus began his career as a member of the Pharisees. According to the descriptions provided by the ancient historian Josephus, the Pharisees were relatively moderate and accommodating in their religious views. They believed that the Law of Moses, that is, the commandments in the Torah, were paramount, but that they needed to be interpreted in order to be observed correctly. For example, in the Torah, one is commanded not to “boil a goat in his mother’s milk” (Exodus 23:19). One could easily follow such a rule by interpreting the dictum literally. From the

Pharisaic perspective, though, that was not good enough. In order to be sure one was adhering to this commandment properly, the Pharisees – as known from the later rabbinic writings – interpreted this to mean that one should not eat *any* meat and milk products together. Thus they expanded the application of the biblical commandments in order to (i) make the Torah applicable in daily life and (ii) get it right in the eyes of God. Their predilection toward interpretation – or overinterpretation, depending on one’s perspective – is perhaps a clue to the origin of their name, Pharisee, from the same Hebrew root as the word for “specify” or “explain.”<sup>4</sup>

Midway through his reign, John Hyrcanus switched from the Pharisees to the Sadducees (Josephus, *Antiquities*: 13.293–298). According to Josephus’ descriptions, the Sadducees took a minimalist view of the Torah. For example, in the case of the “goat in his mother’s milk,” the Sadducees probably would have taken this literally and gladly have enjoyed milk and meat together. They held that the Torah was paramount, but need not be overinterpreted. From a theological perspective, extra-biblical beliefs – such as predestination, the afterlife, and angels – were of no value.

Considering their aversion to biblical interpretation, it may be surprising to learn that the Sadducees were made up mostly of the priestly aristocrats of Jerusalem. That is not to say that *all* priests were Sadducees, but rather that most Sadducees were either priests in the Jerusalem Temple or members of the upper-class urban elite who were closely allied with priests. Because the Sadducees constituted the powerful priestly aristocracy, they were politically conservative, mostly concerned with maintaining the status quo in Jewish society. Their political conservatism meant that they were always eager to play ball with those in charge, whether they were foreign rulers, like the Seleucids or (later) the Romans, or the indigenous Hasmonean kings. It is probably this conservative flexibility which moved John Hyrcanus to abandon his Pharisaic roots and join the Sadducees.

The Pharisees similarly had allies among the priesthood, though their primary power base came from the masses. While the Pharisees occasionally enjoyed the favor of the rulers, Josephus consistently depicts them as more populist than their Sadducean counterparts. Notions of a middle class are anachronistic for the ancient world, however, the Pharisees are usually considered the educated non-elite. Most Pharisees probably emanated from the skilled urban workers, though the most well-known Pharisees, like Simeon ben Gamaliel and Josephus himself, were surely aristocrats. But it was in Torah study and biblical interpretation that the Pharisees sought piety and gained credibility. For this reason, the Pharisees are considered to be the predecessors of the later rabbis.

Josephus devotes much of his discussion of Jewish sectarianism to a third group, which he calls the Essenes. While the Pharisees and Sadducees were active players in Jerusalem politics, the Essenes were mostly absent from the political arena. Josephus describes the Essenes as a celibate, monastic group, living an ascetic lifestyle in the desert. However, elsewhere he mentions Essenes who married and raised families in the cities and villages of Judea. It seems though that all Essenes spent at least some time in one of several isolated communities in the desert, where they lived in strict piety.

Theologically, the Essenes believed in the sorts of extra-biblical elements that the Sadducees neglected. They believed that all matters were preordained by God and that humans had no free will. They believed in the physical resurrection of the dead in the End of the Days, which, for the Essenes, was imminent. They believed that angels formed an extensive hierarchy of divine beings with God at the head, and that these beings affected life on earth on a daily basis. By all accounts, the Essenes believed that the “biblical period” was not a world of the past, but continued in their own day. For this reason, we refer to the Essenes as an “apocalyptic” group.

Contrary to modern usage, the term “apocalypse” does not necessarily refer to the End of Days. The word in fact comes from the Greek term for “revelation.” An apocalyptic group believes that divine information is being revealed to humans on earth. Frequently, this information concerns the End of Days, though it can often be simply a description of the heavens and divine beings or instructions for building a new divine Temple in Jerusalem.

The Essenes were doubtlessly eccentric and on the fringe of Jewish society. Nevertheless, Josephus praises them for their devout piety. But because the Essenes differed so markedly from the majority of Jews, Josephus felt that their peculiar practices deserved an exhaustive treatment in his books. For instance, he spends a considerable amount of time discussing the hyper-sanitary toilet practices of the Essenes, their strict hierarchy, their long process of initiation into the community, and their aversion to spitting and drinking alcohol.

Josephus also discusses the Essenes’ purity practices. Throughout the Second Temple period, ritual purity practices became increasingly popular among Jewish communities all over the country. Grounded in the laws of Leviticus, Jewish ritual purity took the form of bodily immersion in water (or “baptism”), whether in rivers or purpose-built pools. It also included the ritual washing of dishes and involved a stricter adherence to *kashrut*, or Jewish dietary rules. Impurity was considered a physical state brought on and spread by all sorts of normal life processes, such as birth, death, menstruation, and bugs. Even contact with parchment – including the Torah! – could render one in a state of impurity. Ritual purity was by no means a measure of one’s moral state. That said, most Jews of the Second Temple period probably would have wished to be in a state of purity as often as possible. (It is somewhat analogous to how we in the modern world might want to be physically clean as often as possible, hence our daily showers.) Although most Jews practiced some form of purity, the Essenes took the matter to more extreme levels. By immersing themselves multiple times per day, they aimed to keep themselves in a perpetual state of purity.

### The Dead Sea Scrolls

Much of our knowledge of the Essenes is supplemented by a body of writings known as the Dead Sea Scrolls. Numbering over nine hundred separate scrolls, these documents were mostly found during the late 1940s and 1950s in 11 different

caves near the ancient site of Qumran just to the northwest of the Dead Sea in the Judean Desert. The Dead Sea Scrolls form a library of religious literature that apparently served the community living at Qumran from the second century BCE to the first century CE (Magness, 2002).

About half of the documents are various books of the Hebrew Bible, each book written on an individual scroll, the practice before the codex that could bind all the books of the Bible together. There are also translations of the Hebrew Bible into Greek (known as the Septuagint) and into Aramaic, the language commonly spoken by Jews in the Second Temple period.<sup>5</sup> Also included among the Dead Sea Scrolls are various works of the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha.

Many of the documents preserved in this library are what we refer to as “sectarian documents.” They are known only from this collection and were written by members of the community living at nearby Qumran. These sectarian documents describe the rigorously pious lifestyle of the community, their origin, and their apocalyptic beliefs. The sectarian documents include detailed discussions and interpretations of biblical texts, liturgy and religious poetry, and even calendars. The Scrolls describe how the community was formed by priests who broke off from the Jerusalem priesthood during the Maccabean Revolt. They describe their opposition to the Hasmonean seizure of the high priest’s office and how the community would one day reclaim the Temple. The Scrolls give detailed accounts of the End of Days, as the authors believed it had been revealed to them. They envisioned a forty-year battle between the “Sons of Light” (themselves) and the “Sons of Darkness” (everyone else), from which they would emerge victorious. The community would then be led by two messiahs: a priestly messiah descended from Moses’ brother, Aaron, and a militaristic messiah descended from King David. The Scrolls also include various instructions and rules for living in a perpetual state of ritual purity, ready to recommence their role as priests in the Jerusalem Temple.

The excavations of the small site of Qumran revealed various aspects that help illustrate the practices described in the Scrolls. Ten large ritual pools – known as *miqva’ot* – were discovered, all connected by an elaborate water system that moved fresh rainwater through the compound. A large communal dining room was uncovered, where, according to the Scrolls, the community would gather for ritual meals. And a long room with a plastered brick table was discovered, within which were small ceramic inkwells, an extremely rare find that allowed archaeologists to identify the room as a “scriptorium” – the birthplace of many of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Since the discovery of the Scrolls, scholars have debated the connection between the community at Qumran and Josephus’ Essenes. Because the Scrolls never use the term “Essene,” preferring to call themselves simply “the community,” it is difficult to make a direct connection. Although there are many similarities between Josephus’ accounts and the descriptions provided by the Scrolls, there are also some differences. For example, both descriptions indicate a belief in predestination, angels, and resurrection; both indicate that the groups gave up their possessions and wealth to the community; both consider oil to be ritually impure; and both indicate

that spitting in public was forbidden. However, Josephus' description of the toilet practices indicates that the community members had to march outside the compound in order to "go to stool," while archaeologists discovered evidence for a toilet within the site.

Scholars have proposed various solutions to the discrepancies. It may be that the groups are the same and Josephus just got some of the details wrong. Or that the group changed over the period of their existence. Or that the group at Qumran was simply a subgroup among a more general sect known as Essenes. But even the few scholars who believe that the Essenes and the Dead Sea Scrolls community are distinct admit that they are similar. Both fall into the broader category of apocalyptic groups in Second Temple Jewish society.

### The Hasmonean monarchs

The death of John Hyrcanus was followed by the brief reign of his son, Aristobulus. Like his father, Aristobulus had a traditional Jewish name, Judah, but he was better known by his Greek name. Although his rule lasted for little more than a year, Aristobulus' legacy was marked by his unprecedented proclamation of himself as "king." Up until this time, the Hasmonean rulers had enjoyed the title of high priest, but none had the impunity to adopt a title that recalled both the honored kings of the biblical House of David and the hated kings of the Seleucids. Armed with his new title of royalty, Aristobulus expanded the bounds of his kingdom into the northern country, areas that today include the Golan Heights and parts of southern Lebanon.

Following Aristobulus' untimely death, his brother, Alexander Jannaeus, assumed the throne. Alexander Jannaeus' long reign (103–76 BCE) was similarly marked by territory expansion, this time to the wealthy Greek cities along the coast. But the king himself went down in history for his brutality. One of the more vicious incidents recounted by Josephus occurred following an impromptu mob riot at the Temple while the king was presiding as high priest. Six thousand rioters were executed as a result (Josephus, *Antiquities*: 13.372–373). In another incident, Alexander Jannaeus rounded up eight hundred of his enemies and had them crucified while their wives and children were slaughtered before their dying eyes. The king meanwhile presided over the crucifixions as he "feasted with his concubines" (Josephus, *Antiquities*: 13.380).

Alexander Jannaeus was succeeded by his wife, Alexandra. Noted for her temperance and evenhanded rule, the queen secured her kingdom's borders without expanding them. Moreover, she gave preference to the Pharisees for the first time since the reign of John Hyrcanus. Because a woman could not serve as high priest, she appointed her eldest son, Hyrcanus II. However, Alexandra's younger son, Aristobulus II, was the more ambitious and impetuous of the brothers. When the queen died in 67 BCE, Aristobulus II moved immediately to wrest the throne from his older brother. The mild-mannered Hyrcanus II might

have simply stepped aside had it not been for the prodding of a shrewd advisor named Antipater.

Antipater was an Idumean by birth, but his father had converted to Judaism and served as regional governor under the reign of John Hyrcanus. Realizing that Hyrcanus II was susceptible to manipulation, Antipater encouraged him to fight for the throne. As a Hasmonean civil war loomed, both sides sought assistance beyond their borders. By this time though, the Seleucid kingdom was crumbling, and a new empire was emerging from the west.

### Roman influence in Judea and the rise of Herod

The arrival of ambitious Roman generals in the eastern Mediterranean brought strong armies and potential allies. Both Hasmonean claimants to the throne of Judea sent delegations to the Romans asking for assistance. Support from the Romans wavered from one brother to the other for several years. Finally, Rome decided to dismantle the Hasmonean kingdom altogether, absorb several non-Jewish cities into the Roman province of Syria, and limit Jewish autonomy to Judea, Samaria, Idumea, and Galilee. The older brother, Hyrcanus II, was named high priest and official representative of the Jews (“ethnarch”), while the younger brother, Aristobulus II, along with his sons, was imprisoned in Rome. Recognizing his political fortitude, the Romans assigned Antipater to the role of governor, in part as a reward for his support of Julius Caesar in his wars in Egypt. Antipater, in turn, appointed his two sons regional administrators: the older son was assigned to Jerusalem, and the younger son, Herod, at just 17 years of age, was assigned to Galilee.

Herod made a name for himself early on in Galilee. Ruling with an iron fist, Herod rounded up brigand groups who had been terrorizing the Galilean countryside. However, when he overstepped his authority by executing a brigand chief, he was recalled to Jerusalem to appear before the Temple’s high court of priests. Rather than pleading with the court for forgiveness, Herod arrived in regal attire and with an armed escort, making it clear that he had no intention of capitulation. Before the matter turned ugly, the Roman provincial governor in Syria defused the situation by ordering Hyrcanus II to have the court exonerate Herod of any wrongdoing (Josephus, *Antiquities*: 14.163–180).

The episode left a distinct distaste for the young upstart among the Jerusalem aristocrats. But the stage had now been set. Herod had shown how he would deal with any challenges to his authority. More importantly, he had shown that he wielded the strong support of the Romans.

In 43 BCE, Antipater was assassinated, leaving Herod and his older brother the sole governing authorities. At this time, the younger son of Aristobulus II, named Matthias Antigonus, escaped from jail and took advantage of the political turmoil to make a play for the throne of Judea. After amassing an army, he captured Herod’s older brother and Hyrcanus II. The former committed suicide in prison. Matthias

Antigonus then had the ear of Hyrcanus II cut off in order to disfigure him and thereby officially disqualify his uncle from ever serving as high priest again. Now, only Herod stood in Antigonus' way of reestablishing the Hasmonean kingdom.

Fearing for his safety, Herod fled the country. He traveled first to Alexandria in order to enlist the help of the Roman general in charge of the eastern provinces, Mark Antony. After agreeing to aid Herod, Mark Antony brought the aspiring ruler to Rome to receive official sanction from the Senate. In 40 BCE, Herod received more than he could have imagined. He emerged from the Senate hall, flanked by Mark Antony and Octavian Caesar, having been granted the title, "King of the Jews." Armed with fresh Roman troops, Herod made his way back to Jerusalem to claim his throne and expel Matthias Antigonus, the last of the Hasmonean challengers (Josephus, *Antiquities*: 14.348–491).

### **Herod the Great (40–4 BCE)**

After three years of war, Herod successfully ascended the throne in 37 BCE. Herod owed his rule to the Romans, and his loyalty to Rome kept him on the throne. This loyalty was tested at a key turning point in Herod's career. When Roman civil war broke out between Mark Antony and Octavian Caesar, Herod supported the former. Mark Antony's defeat in 31 BCE put Herod in an unfortunate position. Upon hearing the news of Octavian's victory, Herod immediately traveled to meet with the victor. He then delivered a speech – preserved in Josephus' writings – in which he assured Octavian that he would be as loyal to him as he had to Mark Antony (Josephus, *Antiquities*: 15.187–201). The daring move of political sidestepping impressed Octavian. When the dictator was named emperor for life and honored with the title of "Augustus" three years later, he increased Herod's land holdings to include all of Palestine, parts of Transjordan, and territories to the northeast in modern Syria. The Jewish kingdom, under the reign of an Idumean whose grandfather had converted to Judaism, now stretched farther than it ever had before.

The relationship between Herod and Augustus is somewhat peculiar by modern standards, since both were rulers in their own right. Herod is often referred to as a "client-king" of Rome, meaning that he was king of his own territory, but only by virtue of Roman support. To be sure, there were no Roman troops stationed in Judea during Herod's reign, and Herod maintained his own standing army. From Josephus' testimony, we can see that the Romans benefited from having a local king in charge of the country's affairs, much in the same way that the Ptolemies and Seleucids sought local aristocrats to manage Jerusalem. Sums were probably given to Augustus by Herod in the form of "gifts" that were essentially payoffs to ensure peace in the region. The peace maintained by Rome under Augustus allowed a free flow of trade through Palestine, from the east to the Mediterranean and along the coast. Indeed, Herod's wealth was probably maintained and increased through

the taxation of goods traveling through and being traded in his kingdom (Richardson, 1999).

The prosperity under Herod's rule allowed him to embark on a grandiose building project, the likes of which the country had never seen, nor would ever again. Massive structures built by Herod still dot the landscape, from Herodium – an artificial mountain that served as a palace and mausoleum for the king – to the incredible tiered palaces draped over the cliffs of Masada, a natural fortress in the Judean Desert. Some structures were built to honor the Romans, such as the temple to Augustus and Roma in the newly built harbor city of Caesarea. Others were built as luxury villas to escape the cool winters of Jerusalem and impress his royal guests from abroad, such as the palaces of Jericho.

But Herod was careful always to remember his Jewish subjects. Indeed, he spent much of his reign in a state of paranoia, believing that the Jews would one day rise up against him. It is perhaps for this reason that he chose to entirely rebuild the compound of the Jerusalem Temple. The project was undoubtedly Herod's most ambitious, ostensibly continuing for decades after the king's death, and employing Jewish masons and builders for two generations. Raising the highest hill in Jerusalem, Herod built a broad platform – encompassing almost one third of the city at that time – to accommodate pilgrims and tourists from all over the Roman world. The massive limestone blocks used in the structures of the compound are today still impressively displayed throughout the Temple Mount (Richardson, 1999: 174–215).

Despite the peace and prosperity enjoyed under Herod, the man himself has become historically infamous for three reasons. First, Herod is vilified in the Gospel of Matthew for having ordered the mass execution of the babies of Bethlehem at the time of Jesus' birth. Although the episode is historically implausible, such a tale could not have been told of a king unless he had been unpopular in the first place. Second, Herod's personal life is undoubtedly one of the most dramatic soap operas told by a classical author. Treacherous sons, conniving wives, a vicious mother-in-law, and a seemingly endless string of banishments, assassinations, and executions all contributed to Herod's paranoia and reported madness toward the end of his reign. It is difficult to say how much ancient historians embellished these stories for entertainment value. Indeed, Herod's persona, as presented by Josephus, fits neatly into the literary model of the outwardly successful protagonist plagued by personal tragedy (like *King Lear* or *Citizen Kane*). But while the stories certainly make for good reading, they are unlikely to have been fabricated entirely.

The third reason for Herod's infamy concerns his strained relationship with the Jewish people. Despite Herod's attempts to appease his subjects, he could not escape the facts that (i) his family's "Jewishness" was in question, (ii) he had supplanted the "purely" Jewish Hasmoneans, and (iii) he ruled by the grace of the much-hated Romans. Although his "acts of piety" in reconstructing the Jerusalem Temple were viewed with suspicion, Herod's strong rule maintained peace in his kingdom and brought prosperity to his people. The physical remains of his

incredible building projects continue to serve as points of pride for Jews today. The long reign of Herod the Great marked an important turning point in Jewish history, as the Jews were ushered into the world of the Romans.

## **The Jews under Roman Rule (4 BCE–70 CE)**

### The problem of succession

When Herod died in 4 BCE, the problem of succession was immediately clear. First, Herod had not left any suitable successors. The king had emended his will numerous times, right up to his final days when he had his eldest son executed for treason. Although Herod had numerous sons from his nine wives, he had killed off several of the more capable heirs out of paranoia. He had also executed most of the remaining members of the Hasmonean clan, fearing that they might attempt to overthrow him. The surviving potential successors left much to be desired in a ruler.

Second, Herod had left some rather big shoes to fill. As a charismatic king with both political savvy and economic foresight, Herod had fostered personal relationships with his Roman overlords and the neighboring monarchs. Although his grandiose style and iron fist rule were not unique in the ancient world, he could not be easily replaced from the viewpoint of Rome. After much debate, Augustus divided up the kingdom among three of Herod's sons. The difficult rule of Judea and Samaria went to Archelaus, however, he proved to be an inept administrator and was replaced in 6 CE by direct Roman rule.

### The Roman prefects

The Romans considered Judea to be a small and unimportant kingdom. As a result, low-level military officials were appointed to administer the country. Because Judea was part of the province of Syria, rather than a province of its own, the number of Roman troops stationed there was limited. Thus the prefects and procurators – as the Roman governors were called – were not well supported by a strong military presence.

The Roman prefects tended to be entirely ignorant of, or at least insensitive toward, Jewish customs. The Romans did not fully comprehend or appreciate the distinct aspects of Jewish culture, including their strict monotheism, abhorrence of foreign cults, and detestation of figural imagery. Josephus recounts several incidents during the tenures of the numerous Roman administrators in which the Jews' literal interpretation of the Second Commandment – forbidding graven images – was altogether ignored. For example, Pontius Pilate (of New Testament fame)

sought to erect military standards depicting the bust of the emperor in Jerusalem (Josephus, *Antiquities*: 18.55–59). The mere image of a human was an offense to Jewish sensibilities. A massive crowd of Jews came before Pilate in protest, bearing their throats for execution rather than tolerate such an act of impiety. Pilate acquiesced and the volatile relationship between the Jews and their Roman rulers was eased for the moment.

With each decade of the first century CE, though, the relationship grew increasingly strained. The Roman administrators went from ineffectual to outright corrupt. Emperor Nero in the 50s and 60 CE assigned a series of prefects, each more corrupt than his predecessor. Since these administrators knew that their prefecture would last no more than two years, they each resided to abuse the populace as a source of personal wealth before being recalled to Rome.

### Messianism and religious zealotry

The political drama and national despair catalyzed the development of several messianic and apocalyptic groups at this time. We have already discussed the Essenes, who continued to live as a monastic group, awaiting the End of Days, in the desert. Other groups, led by charismatic individuals, are known from Josephus. Some – such as the Egyptian Prophet and Theudas the Magician – commanded a strong following and, since they were seen as threats to the Roman hegemony, were eventually executed. The circumstances surrounding their ministries may not have been too dissimilar to those of the better-known John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth. The former led Jewish followers to the Jordan River for purification rituals, while Jesus of Nazareth was known for his critical views toward the Pharisees’ overinterpretation of the biblical commandments. All of these individuals catered to the masses, in particular the lower strata of Jewish society. They tended to be highly critical of the Jerusalem priests and Jewish aristocracy, while they thrived on the unstable national psyche.

Messianic and apocalyptic groups occasionally offered legitimacy to political dissidents. (Again, religion and politics were inseparable.) In Jerusalem, an urban terrorist group, known as the Sicarii (or “dagger men”) carried out concealed assassinations of the Jerusalem elites and priests, particularly those who worked with the Roman administrators. However, their true nature as murderous thugs was revealed when members of the Sicarii were hired by the Roman prefect himself to assassinate the high priest of the Temple (Josephus, *Antiquities*: 20.160–163)!

### The Great Jewish Revolt (66–70 CE)

The socioeconomic and religious divisions within Jewish society, along with the absence of Jewish leadership, the corruption of Roman prefects, and the spread of

religious zealotry, created the perfect storm. In 66 CE, the inevitable revolt began with mob riots in Jerusalem and Caesarea. The few Roman troops in Jerusalem were overcome and massacred. Eventually, the Roman provincial general arrived with his legion from Syria, however, when he underestimated the Jewish response in Jerusalem, his forces were repelled. Nero then appointed the Roman general Vespasian to suppress the uprising.

Over the course of three years, Vespasian, with his second-in-command and son, Titus, marched among the villages and cities of Galilee and Judea, quashing the insurrection. By the time the siege of Jerusalem had begun, the city was chaos. The various Jewish factions that had developed over the short period of independent rule had taken to violent infighting. Their final effort to unite ultimately proved futile against the insurmountable Roman troops besieging the city. In the summer of 70 CE, the Romans, now under Titus' sole leadership, finally forced their way into the city, waging utter destruction and cutting down any opposition. In the upheaval of the battle, the Temple caught fire and was destroyed entirely. With Jerusalem in ruins, the aristocracy scattered, and the Jewish masses disillusioned, the Second Temple period came to a bitter end.

### **Life after the Great Revolt**

The failure of the Great Revolt – or the First Jewish Revolt, as it is sometimes called – was felt throughout Jewish society. Politically, the Jews no longer had any voice in the administration of Judea. The country was officially turned into a Roman province and the Tenth Roman Legion was stationed permanently in Judea, encamped on the ruins of Jerusalem.

Not all consequences of the Great Revolt, however, were felt so immediately. The loss of the Jerusalem Temple was of course seen as a disaster for the Jewish people, partially because it posed a distinct theological problem. The Temple was the means by which Jews communicated with God. Worship had, for the previous half-millennium, consisted of offerings made by the Temple priests on behalf of the people. Such offerings were an integral part of the Jewish religion. Without the Temple, how would one worship and make expiation for transgressions of the Laws of Moses?

But despite the theological dilemma thus presented, the situation may not have seemed quite so dire at the time for two reasons. First, it should be recalled that the Jerusalem Temple had been destroyed once before. In 586 BCE, the Babylonians razed the Temple to the ground, but within a generation, the Jews had begun rebuilding it. In 70 CE, most Jews probably believed that the Temple would be rebuilt in the near future. Indeed, it is very likely that no Jew living in the late first century would ever have imagined that almost two thousand years later Jerusalem would *still* be without a Temple! For this reason, it was probably

not for many years that the Jews began to realize the Temple's permanent state of ruin.

Second, the Jewish religion had developed in part to prepare, albeit inadvertently, for such a catastrophe. The broadening of the borders of the Hasmonean and Herodian kingdoms meant that Jews now lived far from Jerusalem. The numerous Diaspora Jews living throughout the Roman Empire and Near East had little contact with the Jewish Temple. Their religion had become more personal, involving the observance of purity rites, dietary regulations, and the weekly Sabbath, all centered around the home and the synagogue, rather than the Temple. For these Jews, the Temple's destruction was a symbolic loss and an emotional blow rather than a real logistical dilemma.

For those Jews living in the Land of Israel, the loss of the Temple required a new focus for society's leadership. Until this time, the Temple's priests had been the de facto leaders of the nation, with the Sadducees representing the philosophical perspective and political establishment of the Jewish aristocracy. But without a central institution like the Temple, the Sadducees all but ceased to exist. The Pharisees, who had spent the late Second Temple period catering to the masses and developing a religion based on biblical interpretation, were now poised to emerge as the new leaders of the Jewish people. Ultimately, the term Pharisee disappeared, and the teachers and religious scholars of Judaism, who provided religious leadership, moral guidance, and, eventually, a voice for their nation, would be known simply as the Rabbis. These teachers based their traditions in the study of the Torah and proper observance of the commandments, or *mitzvot*. By refocusing the nation away from the Temple and the priesthood, the Rabbis helped establish the Jewish people on a road toward religious and national survival beyond the walls of Jerusalem.

## Notes

- 1 The geographic name "Palestine" is most often used by modern, English-language scholarship to designate the Jewish homeland during the Second Temple period and later. It was first used to refer to the land between the Mediterranean and the narrow strip along the eastern shore of the Jordan River by the Greek historian Herodotus. In the second century CE, "Palestine" became the Roman name for the province. Other terms, such as "Israel," "Judah," or "Judea" are less precise or otherwise confusing from the perspective of both ancient and modern geography. With the changing use of "Palestine" in modern geopolitics, scholars may yet again have to adjust their terminology. However, for our purposes the term will suffice.
- 2 Alexander the Great and his successors were from the region of Macedonia to the north of Greece. Although they followed Greek customs and traditions for the most part, the more traditional Greeks, like the Athenians and Spartans, probably did not consider the Macedonians to be the proper heirs of the Greek heritage. For our purposes though, it will suffice to consider the Hellenistic monarchs "Greek."

- 3 These ten tribes are sometimes referred to as the “Ten Lost Tribes of Israel.” A very small community of Samaritans still lives at the base of their sacred mountain, Mount Gerizim, just outside the modern city of Nablus.
- 4 Alternatively, the term “Pharisee” may be related to the Hebrew word for “separator,” suggesting that the Pharisees deliberately separated themselves from those who followed the commandments in a less precise manner.
- 5 Hebrew had ceased to be a spoken language by the beginning of the Second Temple period. Most Jews in antiquity did not read or speak Hebrew, but rather used Aramaic, a Semitic language related to, but very different from, Hebrew. Hebrew became a language used primarily in liturgical settings, as it was right up until its rebirth in the nineteenth century and later adoption by the State of Israel.

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