

“JERUSALEM MEETS ROME AND FINDS BABYLON: A STUDY IN CHURCH PURITY”

FALL 2022-SPRING 2023

February 08, 2023

“THE CONTEXT OF THE CHURCH”

I. SECOND TEMPLE JUDAISM

- A. *A period so named due to the Temple in Jerusalem being rebuilt and the doctrines of Judaism being more clearly written. It lasted until the Temple’s destruction in 70 AD or CE*
- B. *It was a period of the full recovery of all the Torah and the known books of the Tanakh. **Ezra, the scribe**, was the initiator of the movement to collect, edit and compile all the books considered holy to the Jewish people. This brought about a revival of interest in the Torah and its study.*
- C. *The revival of Torah reading and study, created the need for education and training in Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek but especially the study of Torah. That gave rise to the community centers known as **synagogues**. The synagogues served as schools to train young men and women in Torah, Wisdom and the Prophets. Reading and writing the language became important to all. Learning became an important part of the Jewish culture.*
- D. *For the synagogue to be an educational center of Torah and all things Hebrew, required teachers of higher caliber than those who attended. These synagogue teachers were scribes or lawyer or a third group that would come to be known as **Rabbis**. These teachers came from the lawyers and scribes and Levites at first. But the Levites had as their responsibility, the Temple. They dropped from the scene as the primary teachers and were soon replaced by a separatist group known as the **Pharisees**.*
- E. *The **Pharisees** could come from any tribe of Israel. These would be men dedicated to the study of and the practice of Torah. They hated the Greek influence over the Israeli people and resisted it by separating from that culture and practicing what Torah taught. Some areas of Torah were vague and difficult to make application of. The **Pharisees** took on the role of explaining the meaning of Torah and compiled action steps to*

make application of Torah in everyday living. These became the "traditions" of the elders and became "proof" of righteousness if practiced exactly.

- E. Because much of this period was during the Greek occupation, there was growing interest among some in the culture and learning of the Greeks. This move to model Greek culture is known as Hellenism. It was very popular among some and very hated among others. Those who wanted to adopt the Greek way of doing things were known as **Hellenists**. They tried to get rid of all things Jewish even down to reversing their circumcision to be a part of the popular Greek gymnasiums. The dress code for the gymnasium was naked. It is also true that the Jewish people living in the Diaspora in the Mediterranean and anywhere the Greeks had conquered were known as Hellenists since they live in Greek speaking, Greek practicing lands.
- F. The Romans also found the Greeks a model people and continued many Greek practices themselves. The Romans occupied Israel from around 44 BC or BCE until the fall of the Roman empire in the mid 400's. So the Greek influence was felt during all that time.
- G. This Hellenist occupation also brought an interest in Greek literature, philosophy and mythology. It was considered educated all around the Roman empire to be able to discuss knowledgably, Greek philosophy
- H. In the second century BCE a **Hasmonean** family rose up in rebellion against the Greek occupation of the time and retook the Temple from the Greeks. They cleansed it and made it functional again. The Levites claiming to be the heirs of Zadok the priest took charge of temple duties. They were known as the **Sadducees**. They became a strong political party but they were not deeply dedicated to the Torah faith and practice. This desire for power corrupted the Temple and its practices since its ministry was not seen as powerful of the political side of it with the Romans
- I. The Hasmonean family who helped overthrow the weakening Greek occupiers are more commonly known as the **Maccabees**. Their victories over the Greeks gave rise to a strong **Jewish nationalism** that would lead to multiple skirmishes and outright wars with the Romans in their quest

for a national Jewish state. Of course, a national Jewish state would require a king or leader who was a descendant of **David**. This person was revealed in the books of the prophets and of history as **Messiah or Christ**. This gave rise to a search for the Messiah and a **Messianic anticipation**.

- J. Some Jewish people grew very disappointed with the corruption of the Levites and the Temple practice. They saw it as blasphemy. They did not think the Pharisees had gone far enough in their separation from the Sadducees or the Greeks. Disappointed they fled to the wilderness as in the days of the Exodus to await the coming of Messiah and Elijah. Of course, this meant stricter adherence to the Torah and the Scriptures. One such group was a larger than the others and were known as the **Essenes**. It is believed that John the Baptist was a part of this group. Some have speculated that many in the area of Galilee, including Joseph and Mary were committed to the principles and practices of these wilderness separatist groups. They spent much time writing about a coming tribulation, about the Kingdom of God, about the Messiah and how to live repentant lives of faith as well as making copies of the books of the Tanakh. They focused much on prophecy. Several other groups, though smaller, contributed to the literature of the day and of the Messianic anticipation of the period. It is believed that it is groups like these who wrote and stored the documents that are known today as the **Dead Sea Scrolls**.
- K. Among the Jewish nationalist groups were radicals looking for opportunity to overthrow the Romans. One such group was known as **the Zealots**. At least one of Jesus' disciples was a member of such a group. Another was a group of assassins, known as the **Sicarii** whose goal was to assassinate Jewish collaborators with the Romans and Roman dignitaries. Some have speculated that Judas Iscariot was perhaps one of these assassins.
- L. This period is also called the **Intertestamental period** or the **Silent Years** because no God-inspired writings or prophets were known or spoke during that time. The people were studying God's word that had already been given to them. In His progressive revelation, He had given the people plenty of information that they did not need a prophet to give them more. They were seeing from the Word of God that Messiah

must be coming soon. Consequently, there was much anticipation and anxiety for the Messiah to come and get rid of the awful Gentiles who had oppressed them. Their national pride, their Messianic longing, their purity groups, the powerful learning of and love for the Holy Scriptures, the wilderness purists and the idea that the coming of the kingdom must be soon, contributed to the readiness for Jesus when He came. Yet the wandering heart of the Jewish people also found large numbers of Hellenists or Hellenistic sympathizers who wanted to be free of the strict bindings of the Jewish tradition. These influences would be strong among the people who were being called to follow the Savior who was promising them the Kingdom of God coming soon. With every year of His delay, with the destruction of the Temple and with the final displacing of the Jewish people from the Promised Land disappointment with the promises of Jesus gained momentum. As the believers in the Christ left what was thought to be the land to which Jesus would return and encounter more of the appealing Roman and Greek cultures with their prosperity and high society ideals. Some disillusionment among the believers was inevitable. How would those cultures affect the new fledgling church? What were the practices and teachings of those cultures?