

Paradise to Promised Land

A Bible study about the history of the Old Testament

The Intertestamental Period

The intertestamental period or the deuterocanonical period is the time between Malachi and Mark (or Matthew). It is a time that sets the stage and context for much of the New Testament and can be helpful in understanding the New Testament.

- **How has the Old Testament to this point helped us to understand the setting of the New Testament?**

Persia falls to Greece

In the late to mid 400's BC, about the same time as the writing of the book of Malachi, Persia was beginning to experience pressure from several rebellious vassal states that we know as modern day Greece. These vassal states united in order to wage war against Persia. This war ended with Greece being victorious over Persia and essentially inheriting the territories that had been held by Persia. Greece goes on to claim much of the known world at the time and conquers not only in terms of military strength, but also in promoting a different mindset called "Hellenism".

- **If the United States were conquered by another country, how do you think it would affect our culture? Our church?**

Synagogues

It is unclear when Jewish people began building synagogues. Some think that they were introduced directly after the destruction of the temple by the Babylonians. Others point to a later date around the time of the rebuilding of the temple. However, by the end of the Persian rule of Israel, it is clear that synagogues are the primary method of instruction and cultural learning for Jews. This marks a great change in the sociological structure of Judaism, moving it from a central temple to a less centralized collection of cell groups.

- **The idea of a "church of small groups" is talked about in many Christian circles, sometimes under the heading of "micro-churches". How do you think this would affect University Lutheran, both in challenging ways and in helpful ways?**

Hellenism

Hellenism is the spread of Greek ideas and culture throughout the Near East at the time, including Judea. The difference between Hellenism and the standard thought of most cultures at the time is not to be minimized. Hellenism promoted ideas such as individuality over community, competition over equality, and thought over action. You could argue that while Greece does not currently hold much political sway over us today, we are still living in a Hellenistic culture. Hellenism had momentous effects on the areas surrounding Jerusalem, but Judea itself held out for the most part – partially because priests at the time were warning the people that it was because of foreign gods (a part of Hellenism) that the Judahites were taken into Exile in the first place.

- **Where in the Scriptures do you see evidence of a more communal, less competitive, and less "head-only" worship of God?**

Alexander and Ptolemy

Greece's ruler Alexander dies an early death at the age of 32 without an heir. As a result, the Greek empire is broken up between his generals. Ptolemy I receives the part of Alexander's empire that includes Judea. Judea is allowed to continue to practice their religion and cultural practices basically undisturbed, provided that they pay tribute. The tribute that is required of Judah, however, proves to be a massive economic strain and Judea struggles to survive under this taxation.

- **How has the political leadership of Christian nations made a difference in the leadership of the Church?**

The Septuagint

During the time of Hellenism, Greek began to be the spoken language of commerce throughout the empire. This meant that many Jews were not as familiar with Hebrew or even Aramaic as they were with Greek. Due to this fact, a great translation project started to translate the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek. Many stories and ideas exist about how or why the Septuagint was translated, but the effect of the Septuagint is perhaps a greater story than its origins. The Septuagint became the basic translated and known text for much of Judaism.

- **What is your favorite translation of the Bible and why?**

Seleucid Rule and the Maccabees

Many years passed under Ptolemaic rule until a Seleucid king (the descendant of one of Alexander's other generals) defeated a Ptolemaic king. This new king, Antiochus IV, was not as open to the Judean religious and cultural life, outlawing important Jewish things such as the circumcision of children and the keeping of the Sabbath. In an effort to force Hellenization on what was seen as an under civilized portion of his kingdom, Antiochus IV finally goes too far and orders a statue of Zeus to be placed in the temple and a pig (A PIG!) to be sacrificed on the temple altar. This action encourages a Hebrew priest named Mattathias to revolt against the Greek rulers. Soon Mattathias's son Judas becomes the leader of this revolt and is given the nickname of "Maccabeus" or "The Hammer". After 24 years of fighting, the Maccabees (Judas and his followers) eventually force a truce between the Greek Seleucids and the Judeans, giving them back cultural and religious control.

- **What would need to happen for you to revolt against the government on religious grounds?**

The Hasmoneans

Unfortunately, the descendants of Mattathias and the Maccabees end up causing problems once the Seleucids grant them independence. At this time there is no difference between the office of the High Priest and the temple courts and the political leadership of Israel. Because of this, the priesthood is a valuable commodity. The Hasmoneans end up allowing for the opening up of the priesthood beyond the "Sons of Zadok," the Levite priesthood. This had the unfortunate effect of weakening the position of the priesthood, allowing it to become more Hellenistic (the exact thing their ancestors fought against).

This weakening of the priesthood resulted in the creation of sects, such as the Pharisees and Sadducees (as well as the Essenes and Zealots) – who were all a part of the same religious system, despite having great differences in their theology.

- **Where have you seen weak leadership resulting in fracturing groups?**

The Romans and Herod

In 63 BC, the Roman general Pompeii defeats the final Seleucid hold out, making Judea a Roman province. After a period of about 100 years of relative freedom, the people of Judea strongly resent Roman rule. Uprisings are the norm until the Romans place a convert to Judaism on the throne as "King of Judea," in order to quell anymore uprisings. This king, named Herod, starts to try to make peace with the Jewish faithful by improving and adding onto the suffering Jewish temple. This is appreciated, but Herod is still largely seen as a false ruler and puppet of Rome.

- **The Roman occupation of Judea is a big part of the setting of the New Testament. How does the Roman occupation and other historical realities of the intertestamental period help us understand the setting of the stage for the New Testament?**

Next Sunday: Stump the Pastor

Thanks for being with us for this study. Next week we will play "Stump the Pastor," so bring your questions about the Bible and faith. We will also choose a new Bible study, so please be ready to bring suggestions.