

The Silent Years

Greece and Rome

Persia fell to Alexander the Great in 331 BC. When Alexander died in 323, his generals dismembered his empire, and the next century and a half saw the Middle East shredded as two Greek empires sparred for control. Judah (now called Judea) played pawn and trophy in this game, but was largely able to govern herself as one of the many sacred temple-states in the Greek domain.

But around 190 BC, Daniel's fourth beast — Rome — began to prowl eastward. Two Jewish priests took advantage of their Greek overlord's terror by taking turns offering bribes for the high priesthood. (The high priest was effectively the ruler of Judea.) Patriotic and godly Jews banded together in 168 BC behind the more legitimate of the two bribers, and their stance landed them in rebellion against their king. Guerrilla war and religious martyrdom followed for several years while the king, Antiochus IV, handed the Jewish temple over to the local cult of Zeus. A statue of Zeus (or rather his Syrian equivalent, Baal Shamem) was erected in the temple. To the distraught Jews this was a clear fulfillment of Daniel's prophecy that an "abomination of desolation" (*siqqus meshomem* in Hebrew, which sounds like a

pun on Baal Shamem) would desecrate the temple.

Eventually, though, Antiochus could no longer afford to bog his armies down in a pointless war with Judea. The ban on Judaism was lifted, and the temple was cleansed in a ceremony celebrated thereafter as the Feast of Dedication, Hanukkah. As Daniel had predicted, Yahweh came through for His people.

However, the guerrillas had no intention of settling for religious freedom. They fought for twenty years until they won control of a free Jewish state. Politically free, at any rate. For in the meantime, the legitimate line of high priests had all fled to Egypt, and the new Jewish governor was popularly acclaimed the first of a new dynasty of high priests. His sons took the title "king" as well as high priest and mimicked Greek kings in their despotism without mimicking any of the redeeming features of their culture. At length two sons of this dynasty fell into civil war and left the door open to a nonJewish politician named Antipater. Antipater cut a deal with the Roman general Pompey, and almost overnight in 63 BC, Judea became a Roman subprovince.

Roman rule may have been no worse than the graft-ridden Judeans deserved, but it was very bad indeed. Arrogant toward "inferior races" and gluttonous for plunder, the Romans did not endear themselves to their subjects. Antipater was assassinated in 43 BC for being Rome's toady, but his sons carried on his pro-Roman policy. They effectively ran Judea, the high priest having been reduced to a figurehead. After the elder son was killed in an invasion from Rome's enemies, the younger son, Herod, was named "king of the Jews" once he restored order. Herod was as good a friend to Rome as he was a stench in Jewish nostrils, so he retained his throne right through the transition from the Roman Republic to the Roman Empire under Augustus Caesar in 27 BC.

Hasids and Pharisees

Back in the time of Malachi, bands of faithful Jews started meeting together to support each other in resisting the general spiritual snooze. They called themselves Hasidim because they maintained *hesed*—covenant faithfulness to Yahweh. Psalm 119 reflects their twin passions for Yahweh and His laws:

I have sought your face with all my heart;
be gracious to me according to your promise.
(verse 58)

Oh, how I love your law!
I meditate on it all day long. (verse 97)

The Hasids strove in vain to keep their Jewish brothers from adopting Greek customs. They supported the guerrilla war against Antiochus but broke with the new Jewish kings when they proved to be no better than debauched Greeks. Those who broke away (around 145 BC) came to be called Pharisees, meaning "separatists." Their hallmark was ritual purity—strict adherence to the food laws, the Sabbath, and other practices that made it difficult to have normal social contact with nonJews. They invested incredible energy in studying the Law of Moses, and in the process developed a body of tradition about how to interpret and apply it. That tradition eventually came to rank as sacred as the Law itself.

In some ways, the tradition made it easier for the average person to feel confident about obeying Yahweh. For instance, Exodus 16:29 said, "no one is to go out" on the Sabbath. The Pharisees decided that Yahweh couldn't have meant to confine everyone to his or her house, so in light of Numbers 35:5 they concluded that one could go 2,000 cubits (about three-fourths of a mile) from wherever one designated as "home" for the day. If one wasn't sure what counted as "work" on the Sabbath, one could refer to the thirty-nine classes of work outlined by the Pharisees' rabbis.

But sometimes the interpretation pushed so far as to virtually nullify the original intent of a law. And more often than not, the tradition became so complicated that only an expert could remember it, let alone follow it. And the more one focused on getting all of the complex rules right, the less attention one tended to give to the other Hasid distinctive: "I have sought your face with all my heart."

One tradition that may date back well before the Pharisees emerged as a party had to do with Yahweh's name. Exodus 20:7

declared, "You shall not misuse the name of [Yahweh] your God." His name deserved honor because it expressed the essence of His character. It was not to be used flippantly, and certainly not in false oaths, magic, or fake prophecy. But the Jews came to feel that it was really too holy to be used at all. So when reading the Law and the Prophets, they would substitute the title "Lord" for the name "Yahweh." They referred to Him as "Lord" or "our Father in Heaven" or even as "Heaven." When the Scriptures were rendered into Greek, the translators used the Greek word for Lord, *Kyrios*. In keeping with that practice, we will from now on call Him "the Lord" or "God."

Sadducees and Common People

Over against the Pharisees stood the Sadducees, whose name probably comes from their having been members of the *syndike*, or ruling council. They were the favored party of the Jewish kings, so although they comprised only a few of the richest priestly families, they held great political power. They controlled the high priesthood and the temple with its lucrative treasury. On the religious side, they rejected the Pharisees' tradition and claimed to hold the old, pure doctrine. They accused the Pharisees of getting many beliefs—such as bodily resurrection, rewards and punishments after death, predestination, and angels and demons—from Persian religion. They had a much more tolerant, expedient attitude toward pagan overlords than the Pharisees.

While the Sadducees dominated the temple and the ruling council, the people endorsed the Pharisees. This gave the Pharisees enormous influence beyond their numbers (there were only about six thousand of them even in the first century AD).

The quarrel could get hot; around 90 BC one high priest-king was pelted with citrons (similar to lemons) on the Feast of Tabernacles because he poured the holy water on the ground next to the altar like a Sadducee instead of on the altar as the Pharisees taught. He later dealt with the opposition by having eight hundred of the rebellious rabbis crucified.

However, the Pharisees and Sadducees were forced to tolerate each other when both sat on the Sanhedrin, the national ruling council. This was easier once Herod and Rome had reduced

both to carving out turf under foreign rule. And Pharisees and Sadducees could agree on one thing: the common mob of artisans and peasants were barely Jews, either because they were disgustingly lax about keeping the laws and traditions, or just because they were rabble. This rabble, who formed the largest segment of the population, had neither time nor education for doctrinal debates. They were just trying to survive under a crushing load of taxes levied by Rome and priestly Jerusalem.

Essenes, Qumran, and the Zealots

Three other groups filled out the Jewish landscape at the turn of the first century AD. The Essenes were basically monks—they lived in monastic communities, avoided sex and other forms of physical indulgence, and maintained their devotion to the Lord through strict separation from the world. Their brotherhoods grew because families would give them sons to raise. Even Herod held them in high esteem because they had the only prophets whose words came true.

A similar community, or network of communities, is best known by its main settlement at Qumran. This group was dedicated to the study of and adherence to prophetic writings, especially the book of Daniel. They went to the desert to prepare to be the Lord's instrument when He would come to judge the earth. Their mandate was Isaiah 40:3:

In the desert prepare the way for the LORD;
make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God.

Purity, common property, menial labor, self-denial, and ritual cleansing were key features. The Qumranites criticized the Pharisees for supporting the sacrificial worship at the Jerusalem temple, even though the high priest there was no longer of the branch of Aaron's family to whom King David had assigned the high priesthood. In fact, they considered the Pharisees generally lax about the Law. These were serious spiritual Green Berets.

The Zealots turned up as a formal party around 6 BC just after Herod's death. They held that it was against God's law to submit to a Gentile ruler. They adhered to most of the Pharisees'

doctrines, but while the Pharisees were content to let the Lord break the foreign yoke in His own time, the Zealots felt called to be the instruments by which He would accomplish that purpose. Depending upon your point of view, they were freedom fighters, guerrillas, or bandits.

The Silence Breaks

*Matthew 1:1-4:11, Mark 1:1-13,
Luke 1:1-4:13, John 1:1-51*

Shadow Hopes

On the evening of earth's great disaster in Eden, the Lord promised that a Son of Eve would someday crush the Snake who had led humankind into misery. As time went on, the Son of Eve was revealed to be a Son of Abraham, Son of Judah, Son of David. Isaiah saw him as a Warrior King, full of the Spirit of God. But he also gave him titles no man could claim for himself: Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Isaiah also glimpsed someone whom he dubbed "the Servant of the Lord." Like the Son of David, He would establish a regime of justice. It would be not just a Jewish nation, for He would also bring the Gentiles the same deliverance from darkness. Yet somehow, before He attained His glory He would suffer unspeakably, bearing in His body the full cost of His people's crimes. He would die and yet reign – a paradox.

Daniel saw another kingly figure: "one like a son of man" who would receive dominion over the whole earth forever. One like a man? He glimpsed the coming of the King who would suffer and reign, and even heard a timetable that might pinpoint the King's arrival within a decade or so. Micah learned the King