

Chapter 37 Addendum – Alexander the Great to Nero

Alexander the Great was destined for greatness at an early age. He was tutored by Aristotle and even in his teens he demonstrated remarkable abilities physically, mentally and administratively. At age 20, as king of Macedonia, Alexander began considering the conquest of Persia. In 333 BC Alexander marched along the coast of Syria and won his first battle against Darius III, king of Persia. He then moved west into Phoenicia where he captured the island city of Tyre by building a large causeway to it and initiating a siege. The city was previously considered impregnable and Alexander's actions fulfilled several ancient prophecies about the city.

Following the victory at Tyre, surrounding cities gave up without a fight. Alexander then marched south into Egypt where he was welcomed as a deliverer before turning east, again, into Persia in 331 BC. Sweeping victories over Persia resulted in Alexander gaining control of the entire region—reaching India—by 326 BC. He then turned his attention to administering his vast empire, but met an untimely death by malaria in 323 BC. Immediately thereafter, Alexander's empire was divided amongst four generals. Initially, Ptolemy, governor of Egypt ruled Palestine.

Memorize This:

The Greeks ruled Palestine under Alexander the Great (and most of the civilized world) starting in 333 BC until 323 BC. Despite this short rule, the effects of the Greeks were significant and lasting. The language and culture from this the Hellenistic Period, has affected the world ever since.

Important Information

The language spread by the Greeks, Koine Greek, was the language eventually spread throughout the Roman Empire. It was the language used by Jesus and the primary language of the New Testament.

Fascinating Facts:

Sometime between the exile into Babylon and the 3rd century BC the important institution of the synagogue—a place for study and worship--was established. The book of Ezra indicates the recognition of a need for regular reminding of the Jews of their law. However, the first written indication of synagogues dates to the 3rd century BC. By the first century BC, there are many references to synagogues and after 70 AD they are noted throughout the world.

Upon Alexander the Great's death, the Greek empire was divided into four regions. Two of these, the Ptolemy's from Egypt and the Seleucids from the east, would battle for control of Palestine. Initially, Egypt under the control of Ptolemy assumed control. The family of Ptolemy remained in power in the region of Egypt for about three centuries until the murder of Ptolemy XV, the seventeen year old son of Cleopatra and Julius Caesar, by order of Octavian in 30 BC.

From 323 BC until 165 BC the Ptolemy's fought over Israel against the Seleucids from the north in Syria. In 198 BC, the Seleucid king Antiochus III captured Palestine from the Ptolemy's. Most of the Jews welcomed the new leaders at the time however the government of Judea was dividing into "pro Egyptian" (Ptolemy), and "pro Syrian" (Seleucid) factions.

Scholars indicate that the canon of the Old Testament was informally established by 167 BC. This was the canon that was in existence and accepted by the Jews at the time of Jesus, and by Jesus himself who frequently referred to the Scripture of the time.

Other important biblical events during this period were (1) the translations of the Septuagint and (2) the writing of many of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

The Septuagint was a translation of the Holy Scripture from the original language of Hebrew into Greek by seventy esteemed scholars (hence the name "Septuagint"). This was necessary because the language of Koine Greek had come to dominate the region and the language of Hebrew was lost to all but a few.

Many of the Dead Sea Scrolls were written during this time—long before Jesus—which is of vital importance because we can verify the many prophecies made about him prior to his birth.

The Seleucid king Antiochus IV Epiphanes was originally welcomed into Jerusalem in 173 BC. However this quickly changed when in 167 BC, he banned obedience to Jewish law sending officers to enforce this decree, burned books of the Torah, and devoted the Temple to the worship of Olympian Zeus. During this time he sacrificed a pig (unclean to the Jews) on the altar in the Temple. The Jews were outraged and revolted from the Seleucids (the Maccabean Revolt).

Memorize This:

The canon of the Old Testament was unofficially accepted by 167 BC. This was the scripture that was accepted by Jesus, and it contained the exact 39 books of the Protestant Old Testament (although in the Jewish configuration). Despite the fact that the books of Apocrypha (contained in today's Roman Catholic Bibles) were often with holy scripture, they were not regarded as canonical. Even the Roman Catholics did not regard them as "deuterocanonical" until the 1546 AD.

In 164 BC Judas Maccabeus recaptured the Temple from the Seleucids. In December of that year—exactly three years from when the Temple was desecrated—it was rededicated to the Lord. This has become an annual Jewish celebration known as Hanukkah.

In 163 BC the Seleucids again recaptured control of the Temple, but the new leader, Antiochus V had rescinded the worship prohibitions of his father. Even so, he deposed Menelaus as high priest, had him executed, and appointed Alcimus (from the proper priestly family) in his place.

The Hasmon family combined the roles of a king and high priest into one position. In 161 BC, they appealed to Rome, who promised the family assistance in the event they were attacked by either the Seleucids or the Ptolemys. The Hasmoneans gradually came into power, and by 142 BC the line of Hasmonean kings had begun. The Hasmoneans ruled until 63 BC in relative peace.

The impact of the Romans began in the first century. The General Pompey was given control over the eastern region in order to hold important trade routes open. However, this eventually resulted in a power struggle between Pompey and Julius Caesar. Pompey attacked and captured Jerusalem in 63 BC. Ending Hasmonean rule, he divided Judea into five regions. In 54 BC Pompey went to war against Julius Caesar and was defeated. Antipater, Herod's father, was then made procurator of all Judea in 47 BC. In 40 BC Herod fled to Rome when the Parthians invaded Syria/Palestine. In 37 BC, Mark Antony defeated the Parthian backed Hasmonean king Antigonus and Herod's reign as king of Judea commenced.

The leadership void upon the death of Julius Caesar in 44 BC eventually led to war between Mark Antony (and Cleopatra) and Octavian—Caesar's grand-nephew and heir. Octavian won this conflict and Herod was able to maintain his leadership position by convincing Octavian—soon to become Emperor Caesar Augustus—of his devotion and allegiance.

Herod recognized the importance Rome placed on keeping the peace in its regions of control. This caused Herod to go to great lengths to attempt to appease the Jews. He embarked on vast building projects, the most important of which was expansion and beautification of the Temple. Herod also married a Hasmonean hoping to resolve some distrust he had endured.

Yet Herod's character was well known despite his attempts to hide it. He had his own son, Aristobulus, murdered simply because he became jealous of his growing popularity. He even had his beloved wife, Marianne, executed for treason. This, he regretted for the rest of his life. Therefore, it is not difficult to envision Herod ordering the death of all children in the region of Bethlehem once told by the Magi, that the new king of the Jews had been born there.

Fascinating Facts:

- Herod faced difficulty from bordering powers such as the Parthians. The Magi, from that region, were known as "king-makers" and influenced local politics. Therefore, it is no surprise that Herod would have granted the Magi an audience at the birth of Jesus, and would have taken them very seriously.

- The Magi may well have known about the birth of the child-king originally from the prophet Daniel, who when in exile, was placed in charge of Magi (Dan 2:48). His teaching may have been passed down through generations.

Antony defeated the Parthians in 37 BC and he settled in Jerusalem. Herod then returned from Rome and became king of Judea, ruling until his death in 4 BC. After that time, the bulk of his kingdom was divided amongst his sons: Archelaus (Judea, the core of the kingdom), Antipas (tetrarch of the region of Galilee, and Perea east of the Jordan), and Philip (tetrarch of an area north of Galilee). His sister, Salome, lay claim to a small coastal region.

Archelaus ruled the area of Judea so poorly that he was banished in 6 AD. Matthew even implies that Jesus' parents, Joseph and Mary, were afraid to settle in the area controlled by Archelaus (Matt 2:22) and decided therefore, to settle in Galilee which was ruled by Herod Antipas. After Archelaus, the area was ruled by prefects (appointed governors).

The main objective of Roman rule was to keep peace. The region of Palestine was considered a minor area of the Roman Empire. And since Judea was a lower rank province, it could be ruled by a military-oriented prefect instead of a senator, such as Pontius Pilate. However, the region was potentially volatile because of the Jewish religion.

Early in the first century the Syrian governor Quirinius was attempting to obtain Jewish cooperation with the Roman tax laws. The 19.3% requirement was deemed very high for an agrarian society however also of concern was that taxes had to be paid with Roman coinage that showed emperor-god images in violation of at least two of the Ten Commandments¹. Enormous tension between the Jews and Romans resulted.

Years of high-tax tension combined with unemployment and distrust of the high priesthood, finally erupted into war. Many peasants having sent a high percentage of potential income to Rome were forced to mortgage or sell their land. Also, many artisans and labors were suddenly out of work when the Temple expansion was completed in 63 AD. The high priests had been able to quell the people's discontent, although there was a growing suspicion that the high priesthood was corrupt.

Finally, Nero attempted to increase revenue from the region by taking funds from the Temple treasury. The Jewish people mocked this effort by taking a pseudo-collection for the poor Roman government—an action that resulted in crucifixion of innocent people. This enflamed the emotions of the people, and ignited an attack on Masada, and led to destruction of a Roman garrison in Jerusalem in 66 AD.

By 67 AD a full-fledged war had begun. It took three years for the Romans to subdue the Jews culminating with the destruction of Jerusalem and Temple in 70 AD.

Memorize This:

Following the divided kingdom, the Jews were ruled by –

1. The Assyrians (722 BC)
2. The Babylonians (586 BC)
3. The Medo-Persians (538 BC)
4. The Greeks (333 BC)
5. The Ptolemy's/Seleucids (323 BC)
6. The Hasmoneans (164 BC)
7. The Romans (63 BC)

Important Information:

The Romans destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple in 70 AD.

The Apostles and the Start of the Church

The Romans had set the stage for the most important event in the history of the world—the coming of Jesus Christ. It was a period of general peace throughout most of the civilized

¹ http://www.livius.org/ja-jn/jewish_wars/jwar02.html

world known as Pax Romana—a peace that had never been known before or since. An extensive network of roads had been built by the Romans, and trade routes had been developed making transportation and communication easy throughout the Empire. In addition the world was unified with the common language of Koine Greek which had been first introduced by Alexander the Great. In short, it was the ideal timing for rapid and easy spreading of a message that would change Mankind forever—the gospel.

The ministry of Jesus was itself, significant. All of the details surrounding the coming of Jesus were important to the overall message. His humble birth in an animal stable, his parents who were peasants and the obscure region of the world where he ministered--all indicated the relationship of God Almighty to everyone including the meek. When the time came for Jesus to teach, his words carried great power that surprised the religious leaders and drew much of the public to him. Importantly, Jesus demonstrated his divine nature by performing miracles that the Jews believed could only be performed by God himself.

Memorize This:

The word “Christ” was a title from the Greek work “*Christus*” which is a **title**, meaning the “Anointed One” as in Jesus, the Christ. It is **not** a last name as many people think.

At the end of Jesus’ ministry, he commanded the disciples to “Go and make disciples of all nations” (Matt 28:19). He indicated that the Holy Spirit would come upon the disciples and that they would become his witnesses to all people (Acts 1:8). Jesus also indicated that an institution he described as the “Church” would be the organization that would assist believers in worship, in helping them grow in the faith and in helping prepare Believers to spread the gospel. Peter was designated as the “rock” upon which the Church would be built (Matt 16:18).

In fact **Peter** became the early Church leader. Fifty days after the crucifixion (and ten days after the ascension), the day of Pentecost came and the Holy Spirit rested upon the disciples like “tongues of fire.” Peter assumed the leadership role and in a stirring speech he inspired some 3,000 to become Believers which signified that the beginning of the Christian Church had begun. In the following days and months, the Church grew rapidly with all of the Apostles spreading the gospel message exactly as Jesus had commanded. The Apostles were well aware that spreading the gospel would result in persecution, something that Jesus had repeatedly warned them of.

Not surprisingly, persecution happened precisely as Jesus had warned. Stephen was the first in a long line of people who were martyred simply for telling others the good news of Jesus’ death and resurrection. As the years went on, the frequency and intensity of persecution increased.

Paul, a Pharisee (Pharisees and Sadducees were groups of religious leaders), was present at the stoning of Stephen and had decided to take the persecution of Christians outside of Jerusalem, to Damascus. On the way, he encountered the risen Christ, who changed Paul from a leading enemy of Christians to a leading Apostle. As a result, Paul gave up a life of wealth and prestige for a life of poverty and persecution.

From about 46 AD until about 58 AD, Paul undertook three major missionary journeys to Macedonia and Asia Minor where he established many local churches. Also during this time and afterwards during his imprisonment in Rome, Paul wrote many letters to the churches he established, which became many of the books of the New Testament.

In the early days, Peter was the leading spokesperson of the disciples and started his evangelism in Jerusalem, but he soon traveled elsewhere. History indicates that he traveled to preach in Corinth shortly after Paul established a church there (1 Cor 9:5). James, the brother of Jesus became the leader of the early church in Jerusalem (Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18-24).

Since persecution was most intense in and around Jerusalem, it helped motivate the disciples to scatter to foreign lands to preach the gospel and establish new churches. **James, son of Zebedee**, was one of the few that didn’t make it out of Jerusalem. The early Christian writer Clemens Alexandrinus documents his death in which one of the executioners converted to Christianity on the spot when witnessing James’ strong faith.

Andrew is said to have began his ministry in Scythia (an area now in southern Russia) after which he traveled through Asia Minor on his way to Greece, where sources agree that he ended his ministry.

Philip and **Bartholomew** both evangelized in Scythia. Thomas journeyed east through Babylon and eventually beyond India, founding the church of the east. Ancient records indicate that Thomas didn't want to serve in that region of the world due to the harshness of the environment, but decided it was more important to follow Jesus' calling. **Matthew** is said to have traveled to Ethiopia where he became associated with Candace (Acts 8:27). **Jude Thaddaeus** ministered in Syria, Arabia, Mesopotamia and Persia. **James, the son of Alphaeus** traveled to Syria where he founded and became the first bishop of the church there. **Simon the Zealot** began his ministry in Egypt and North Africa, but also worked in Spain, North Briton and eventually Persia.

All of the apostles, except John, suffered horrible martyr deaths because they freely evangelized. Most were crucified; some were stoned, or beheaded or sawn in two. However the testimony of the courage of these martyrs, in light of their involvement with Jesus was very powerful. After all, these were people that lived with Jesus on a daily basis during the period of his ministry. They would know virtually everything about him and who he claimed to be. And when Jesus rose from the dead, there would be no question in the disciple's minds whether or not it was actually Jesus who appeared to them.

The fact that all disciples faced a virtually certain, painful, martyr death is powerful testimony that they—the ones in the best position to know—truly believed that Jesus had risen from the dead. After all, why would they die for a lie? A dead Messiah would do nobody any good. Some spread a rumor that the disciples stole the body. But would that make any sense? Being an Apostle was horrendous work with persecution as the earthly reward. Surely if the body was really stolen, one of the disciples would have confessed to the crime in hopes of securing a better position in the establishment.

Memorize This:

All of the disciples except John died a horrible martyr's death to spread the gospel. All would be in a position to know the accuracy of the resurrection. Dying for a lie would serve no purpose.

Important Information:

The Christian faith is based on the foundation of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. These are historical facts. Without the truth of these facts there would be no Christian faith. The Apostles and the other witnesses who died to defend these facts help ensure their veracity.

Fascinating Facts:

When Clement wrote of James of Zebedee as a martyr and of the executioner who immediately decided to follow Jesus based on the witness James gave, it provides insight into the power of testimony. In this case, the person who was part of the group that was executing James made an immediate, radical decision to accept his own horrible death in order to follow someone who could provide eternal life.

The Persecution

Apart from the apostles, there were countless Christians that were rounded up and mercilessly slaughtered for their beliefs. Records of these courageous people abound in ancient historical literature and art. Christians were crucified, beheaded, and stoned. They were fed to the lions, shot with arrows and speared. They were burned at the stake, dragged through the streets and impaled on poles. In almost all cases, all the Christian martyrs had to do to escape such horrible death was to recant their faith in Jesus. Essentially this meant denying that the resurrection of Jesus—claimed as a historical fact--never happened.

Early Christian martyrs were close to the time of the events of the crucifixion and resurrection. Some were even eyewitnesses. Nero was the first to encourage persecution on a

mass scale. Nero, who had been blamed for the great fire of Rome, attempted to shift the blame to the Christians when he was condemned. Many unimaginable and cruel executions of Christians were devised. Some Christians were sewn inside skins of wild animals and torn at by fierce dogs. It was also recorded that some Christians were dressed in a wax-type shirt, then impaled on poles and set afire to provide light for orgies held on Nero's behalf.

As tales of horror spread throughout the Roman Empire Nero's strategy to break the spirit of the Christians backfired. Rather than melt away in fear, the spirit of early Christians was strengthened—a sign of their enormous conviction and belief in Christ. Many of the seventy appointed by Jesus (Luke 10:1) were martyred including such people as Erastus (Romans 16:23), Aristarchus (Acts 19:29), Trophimus (Acts 21:29), Barsabas (Acts 1:23), and Ananias (Acts 9:10).

Ignatius is one later martyr recorded by early church historians. He was a courageous church leader who ministered to many Christians in hiding during the persecution. However, like many Christians at the time, he welcomed the chance to joyously give his life for Christ. When Ignatius realized that he would soon be executed for spreading the gospel of Christ, he was quoted as saying:

"(As for the lions...) I will entice them devour me quickly... Let come on me fire and cross and conflicts with wild beasts, wrenching of bones, mangling of limbs... only let me reach Jesus Christ."²

Later the inevitable happened, and Ignatius was captured and rushed to the coliseum to be executed. He stood spellbound before a bloodthirsty crowd hungry for his demise. Then he looked to the heavens and said,

"I am the wheat of Christ: I am going to be ground with the teeth of wild beasts that I may be found pure bread."³

The gates were opened and the lions bounded towards him, seemingly in slow motion. Ignatius looked up and joyfully sang songs of praise until the claws finally reached him and the end came, and he was silent. It was 107 AD.

Fascinating Facts:

Key events from Alexander the Great through the Apostolic Period are:

- 323 BC – The Ptolemy's control Palestine
- 280 BC – Septuagint written
- 280 BC – Early Dead Sea Scrolls written
- 198 BC – Seleucid king captures Jerusalem
- 167 BC – Canon of (Old Testament) Scripture unofficially established
- 167 BC – Antiochus IV Epiphanes desecrates Temple by sacrificing pig on altar.
- 164 BC – Maccabean Revolt overthrows Antiochus IV (Hanukkah)
- 63 BC – Pompey captures Jerusalem
- 44 BC – Julius Caesar assassinated
- 40 BC – Herod flees to Rome when Parthians invade Syria/Palestine
- 4 BC – Herod dies. Palestine divided into leadership under his sons
- 33 AD – Crucifixion of Jesus
- 44 AD – James (brother of John) martyred, Peter imprisoned
- 46 AD – Paul's first missionary journey
- 50 AD – Jerusalem Council
- 50 AD – Paul's second missionary journey
- 53 AD – Paul's third missionary journey

² Moynahan, Brian, The Faith, A History of Christianity, New York, NY: Doubleday, a division of Random House, Inc., 2002, p. 52.

³ Ibid, p. 14.

64 AD – Nero establishes mass persecution
70 AD – Jerusalem and Temple destroyed by Romans