

# Old Testament History

## Lesson #28

### The Hellenistic Period

**Introduction.** The Persian Empire lasted for a little over two hundred years. Its reign would close the time of the Old Testament. There is benefit to learning the background of the time in which Jesus was born because it can help us to better understand groups that we see and events which occur in the New Testament. This lesson will study the extraordinary career of Alexander the Great and how his kingdom was divided after his death.

#### I. **Alexander, The Apostle Of Hellenism**

##### A. Philip of Macedon.

1. Since the days of Xerxes, Greek power had been on the increase and Persia had trouble keeping its wide empire in submission. The city states of Greece, however, never formed a united government.
2. When a real union of Greek states was achieved, it was the genius of Philip of Macedon who brought it about. Philip was never able to include Sparta because he was murdered in 336 B.C., and the mantle of leadership fell to his son Alexander.

##### B. Alexander the Great.

1. Alexander was a Macedonian by nationality but culturally was a Greek, educated by Aristotle himself. He carried the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* with him on his campaigns.
2. With a small army, largely of Macedonians, and a staff of historians, geographers and botanists, Alexander crossed the Dardanelles by boat at the very spot where Xerxes had taken his army.
3. Darius III did not take this expedition seriously. He ordered that Alexander be seized and brought to Susa. It was a close fight, and Alexander nearly lost his life, but the Persians were defeated. With this victory, the way into Asia Minor lay open before Alexander.
4. In the fall of 333 B.C., Alexander met the Persian army which was estimated to be between 100,000 to 300,000 men. Despite the odds, Alexander won the battle of Issus through a triumph of tactics. The Persians had been so confident of victory that the officers brought their families to watch the spectacle; now Alexander captured them, along with a sizable portion of the Persian treasury, the king's wife, mother, and children, 360 of his concubines, 400 eunuchs and even the ambassadors to the Persian court from Athens, Thebes and Sparta.
5. Alexander's next battle was his longest. Tyre had withstood sieges from Sennacherib and Nebuchadnezzar that had lasted over a dec-

- ade; Alexander conquered it in seven months by building a causeway from the mainland and moving siege towers to the city walls.
6. Next he continued into Egypt, where the joyful Egyptians welcomed him as a liberator from the hated Persians. He accepted the crown of the pharaohs, started construction on Alexandria, and made a pilgrimage to the oracle at the Siwa oasis, Egypt's holiest shrine.
  7. Jewish traditions show Alexander in a friendly light, although Hellenism was to become the great enemy of orthodox Judaism. In 331 B.C., Alexander retraced his steps northward through Palestine and Syria. He then attacked the Persian army in its home territory. Alexander took the entire territory of Persia, and the capitals of the Persian Empire -- Babylon, Susa, Persepolis and Ecbatana -- were successfully occupied.
  8. With the conquest of Persia behind him, Alexander continued his eastern conquests. Bactria and Sogdiana cost him three years of bitter fighting. The Punjab region of India was the limit of Alexander's conquests. His army staged a sit-in and refused to travel further.
    - a) The trip home was the toughest part of the entire campaign. The army split into three groups. Alexander, aching from old wounds and sharing every hardship with his soldiers, led his group through the Baluchistan desert.
    - b) Alexander had gradually come to see that he could not simply rule the Persian Empire as a conquered territory of Macedonia -- both Asians and Europeans would have to share the tasks involved with running it. He took to wearing Persian clothes, which the Greeks regarded as silly and effeminate. He also seemed to enjoy the ceremonies of the Persian court. Three thousand Persians were taught Greek and instructed in western military science; a Persian noble was even promoted into his inner circle of advisors. The Greeks regarded this behavior as a betrayal.
  9. When he reached Susa in 324 B.C., he finally tried to consolidate his vast domains. He took Barsine, the daughter of Darius, as his second wife, and 80 officers and 10,000 other veterans took Persian wives on the same day in a ceremony portrayed as a marriage between east and west. He reorganized the army, issued coins, built a merchant fleet, dug new irrigation canals and made plans to explore and conquer Arabia. But while inspecting a drainage project near Babylon, a mosquito bit him and he contracted a fever, presumably malaria. He died in June of 323 B.C. at thirty-two years of age. In so short a life, Alexander conquered more territory than any of his predecessors. The eleven years of his amazing conquests changed the course of history.

10. Alexander never seemed to give much thought to the idea of his empire existing without him; at least he left it ill-prepared to face that situation. On his deathbed, when asked who should inherit the throne, all Alexander said was "the strongest."
- a) Alexander had many able generals, but there was not one that arose as his logical successor.
  - b) By 315 B.C., after seven years of struggle, four outstanding leaders appeared: Cassander retained his hold on Macedonia and Greece; Lysimachus held Thrace and the western half of Asia Minor; Ptolemy consolidated Palestine, Cilicia, and Cyprus with his Egyptian-Libyan domains; and Seleucus controlled the rest of Asia all the way to the Indus Valley.

## II. ***The Jews Under The Ptolemies***

### A. The early Ptolemaic rulers.

1. For the most part, the Jews were permitted to live in peace and in accord with their religious and cultural traditions. Tribute was paid to the Egyptian governments, but local affairs were administered by the High Priests who had been entrusted with responsibility for the government of the Jews since Persian times.
2. The one great figure among the Jews of the Ptolemaic period is Simon the Just, the High Priest who is the subject of the highest praise in the post-biblical writings. Ecclesiasticus calls him "great among his brethren and the glory of his people." He is credited with rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem which had been demolished by Ptolemy I. He is said to have repaired the temple and directed the excavation of a great reservoir which would provide fresh water for Jerusalem.
3. Ptolemy's triumph in Palestine was short-lived, for Antigonus drove him out of Syria and held it firmly. Seleucus also gained strength as an independent conqueror, no longer subject to Ptolemy. Antigonus tried to stop Seleucus but was unable to do so. In 311 B.C. Seleucus conquered Babylonia, marking the beginning of the Seleucid dynasty. Antigonus, however, continued to hold Syria, which served as a wedge between the holdings of Ptolemy and Seleucus.
4. In 301 B.C. Lysimachus, Seleucus and Cassander with their combined forces met and overcame the forces of the aggressive Antigonus at Ipsus. Antigonus died on the battlefield and his Asiatic empire came to an end.
5. It had been agreed that Palestine would be assigned to Ptolemy in the event of victory over Antigonus. Since Ptolemy had not taken an active part in the battle with Antigonus, the other three decided that the territory should be assigned to Seleucus. In the meantime,

Ptolemy had taken possession of the land and Seleucus made no attempt to occupy Palestine.

B. The war between the Seleucids and the Ptolemies.

1. This war broke out when it was learned that Berenice had been murdered, with her infant son, through the intrigue of Laodice, half sister and wife of Antiochus II.
  - a) Laodice wanted to insure that her own son, rather than the son of Berenice, would succeed to the Syrian throne.
  - b) The murder of the daughter and grandson of Ptolemy II, however, was an outrage to the honor of the Ptolemies and resulted in the "Laodicean War."
2. After a series of brilliant victories in which northern Syria was completely conquered, Ptolemy III was called back to Egypt to care for a local problem. Seleucus was able to regain lost territories as far south as Damascus, but attempts to take southern Palestine failed. Peace was established in 240 B.C., and no further attacks were made on Syria during Ptolemy III's reign.
3. He died in 221 B.C. and was succeeded by Ptolemy IV Philopater, one of the worst of the Ptolemaic house. Seleucus II was succeeded in 226 B.C. by Seleucus III who died by poisoning. He was succeeded by his younger brother who is known as Antiochus III, the Great.

### III. ***The Jews Under The Seleucids***

A. Antiochus III and the conquest of Palestine.

1. Antiochus III was only eighteen years of age when he came to the throne of Syria in 223 B.C. He had experience in government, however, having served as ruler of Babylonia under his brother Seleucus III.
2. In 221 B.C., Antiochus began a campaign to conquer Palestine. After having gotten as far as Philistia, he met Ptolemy Philopater south of Raphia. Here the armies of Antiochus met a disastrous defeat. For a number of years Antiochus was busy in the East, but he never gave up his plans for conquering Palestine.
3. At the death of Ptolemy IV, Philopater, in 203 B.C., Egypt was rent with turmoil and rebellion. In the spring of 202 B.C. Antiochus launched an attack which accomplished nothing. The following spring another attack was launched and Antiochus was finally victorious in the spring of 198 B.C. In passing through his newly acquired territories, Antiochus came to Jerusalem where, according to Josephus, the inhabitants gave him a cordial welcome.
4. When Antiochus invaded Greece, the Roman forces moved into Greece, defeated Antiochus, and forced him to retreat to Asia Minor. The younger son of Antiochus the Great, later to rule as Antiochus

Epiphanes, was taken to Rome as a hostage for the payment of the indemnity. His twelve years in Rome gave him a healthy respect for Roman power and Roman procedures.

B. Antiochus Epiphanes and the persecution of the Jews.

1. The fall of Palestine into Syrian hands, following the victory of Antiochus III at Panion (198 B.C.), ushered in a new era of Jewish history. The rule of the Ptolemies had been tolerant, but the Seleucids forced the Jews to accept Hellenism.
2. Antiochus IV bore the surname Epiphanes ("the illustrious"). But the Jews gave him the nickname Epimanes ("the madman"). Antiochus Epiphanes was not a foreigner intent on enslaving a persecuted minority group. On the contrary, a sizable number of Jews were impressed with the possibilities of greater conformity to the Hellenistic manners and customs.
3. In the early days of the reign of Antiochus IV, Jerusalem was ruled by the High Priest, Onias III, a descendant of Simon the Just, and a strictly orthodox Jew. The Jews who looked favorably on Greek culture opposed Onias and espoused the cause of his brother, Jason. By promising larger tribute to Antiochus, Jason succeeded in having himself appointed High Priest.
4. Jason encouraged the Hellenists who had sought his election. He began to introduce many Greek elements into Jewish society. With the developing tide of Hellenism, however, there developed a resistance movement. Menelaus took over as High Priest and courted the favor of Antiochus Epiphanes.
5. One of Israel's darkest periods began. A systematic attempt was made to Hellenize the country by force. A bearded image of Jupiter was set up on the temple altar. Greek soldiers and their lovers performed licentious heathen rites in the temple courts. Swine were sacrificed on the altar. The drunken orgy associated with the worship of Bacchus was made compulsory. Conversely, the Jews were forbidden, under penalty of death, to practice circumcision, Sabbath observance, or the observance of the feasts of the Jewish year. Copies of the Hebrew scriptures were ordered destroyed.
6. By force of arms the Hellenizing party had gained a victory. Menelaus continued as High Priest. Where once his worship was directed to Jehovah, now he served Jupiter. Yet the Hellenizers had gone too far. Their very zeal for a quick defeat of the "old order" evoked a reaction which drove the Hellenizers out of power and brought into being an independent Jewish state.

**Conclusion.** Alexander the Great accomplished what no other conqueror has ever accomplished. But within just a few years after his death,

Alexander's dreams of a worldwide empire lay in ruins. The Seleucid rulers, particularly Antiochus Epiphanes, ruled with such an iron fist regarding the Jews that they eventually revolted.