

Between the Testaments¹

Charles F. Pfeiffer

The four hundred years between the prophecy of Malachi and the advent of Christ are frequently described as “silent,” but they were in fact crowded with activity. Although no inspired prophet arose in Israel during those centuries and though the Old Testament was regarded as complete, events took place which gave to later Judaism its distinctive ideology and providentially prepared the way for the coming of Christ and the proclamation of His Gospel.

THE PERSIAN PERIOD

The Jews fared well under Persian rule. Cyrus had given them permission to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their temple, and although they met opposition from the inhabitants of Palestine, it was dedicated during the reign of Darius the Great. Ezra the scribe and Nehemiah the layman sought to strengthen the Palestinian Jewish community and encourage their loyalty to the Law of God. For about a century and a half after Nehemiah’s time the Persian Empire exercised control over Judea, and the Jews were permitted to observe their religious ordinances without interference. Judea was ruled by High Priests who were responsible to the Persian government, a fact which ensured the Jews a large measure of autonomy. At the same time, however, it made a political office of the priesthood and sowed the seeds of future trouble. Contests for the office of High Priest were marked by jealousy, intrigue, and even murder. Johanan, son of Joiada (Neh. 12:22), is reported to have slain his brother Joshua within the temple precincts.

Johanan was succeeded as High Priest by his brother Jaddua, whose brother Manasseh, according to Josephus, married the daughter of Sanballat, governor of Samaria. It was at this time that a Samaritan temple was built on Mount Gerizim which, rather than Zion, was regarded as sacred by the Samaritan community. The sanctuary on Mount Gerizim was destroyed by the Hasmonaean ruler John Hyrcanus (134-104 BC),

but the mount itself continues to this day to be regarded as sacred by the Samaritans.² The woman of Samaria wished to dispute with Jesus concerning the merits of the rival holy places, but the Savior chose to emphasize the spiritual attitude of the worshiper rather than the place of worship (cf. John 4:20). The Sanballat of Josephus cannot have been the same individual as the man of the same name mentioned by Nehemiah (Neh. 4:1). Josephus does, however, appear to reflect a valid tradition, for a temple seems definitely to have been built on Mount Gerizim about this time.

Persia’s failure to conquer Greece encouraged subject peoples to seek their independence. Egypt was constantly attempting to throw off the Persian yoke: and Judea, geographically between the two powers, could not escape involvement. During the reign of Artaxerxes III (Ochus), many Jews were implicated in a revolt against Persia. When it failed, the Persians deported them to Babylonia and the southern shores of the Caspian Sea.

Jews had long been in Egypt. Following the murder of Gedaliah, the prophet Jeremiah was forced to join a group of refugees who sought asylum at Tahpanhes in the eastern Delta (Jer. 43:4-13), and other Judeans doubtless found their way to Egypt to avoid capture by Nebuchadnezzar. Migration continued during the Persian Period; and by the fifth century before Christ, a Jewish colony of mercenary soldiers was located at Elephantine Island, near modern Aswan, at the First Cataract of the Nile. Contrary to the Mosaic Law, these colonists built a temple for themselves, and they combined their devotion to the God of their fathers with pagan elements. The Elephantine Jews had correspondence, with the Samaritans as well as the Judeans.

ALEXANDER THE GREAT

Persia never succeeded in subduing the Greeks, but an heir of Greek culture, Alexander of Macedon, eventually brought to an end the Persian

Empire. Alexander was not simply a power-mad despot. A pupil of the philosopher Aristotle, he was thoroughly convinced that Greek culture was the one force that could unify the world. In 333 BC, he passed from Macedonia into Asia Minor and defeated the Persian armies stationed there; Then he moved southward through Syria and Palestine to Egypt. Tyre and Gaza each offered stubborn resistance, but delays did not discourage Alexander; they simply strengthened his determination to win. There was no need for a campaign against the Jews, and, indeed, legend makes Alexander a friend of the Jewish people; Jaddua, the High Priest, is said to have come out to meet Alexander, telling him of Daniel's prophecy that the Greek army would be victorious (Dan. 8). Although historians do not take the story seriously, it does illustrate the friendly feelings between the Jews and the Macedonian conqueror. Alexander permitted the Jews to observe their laws" granted them exemption from tribute during sabbatical years; and when he built Alexandria in Egypt (331 BC), he encouraged Jews to settle there and gave them privileges comparable to those of his Greek subjects.

Alexander was welcomed into Egypt as a deliverer from Persian oppression. His victorious armies retraced their steps through Palestine and Syria, then moved eastward. The cities of Babylon and Persia fell to Alexander, and he pressed on as far as the Punjab region of India. Although mighty in battle, it was Hellenistic culture rather than Macedonian rule that was Alexander's legacy to the Middle East. He determined in each country of his empire to found a new city which would serve as a model for the reordering of the life of the country as a whole along Greek lines. Materially speaking, this meant the erection of fine public buildings, a gymnasium for games, an open-air theatre, and whatever would approximate the life of a Greek city-state. Individuals were encouraged to take Greek names, adopt Greek dress and the Greek language—in short, to become Hellenized.

The material aspects of Hellenism must have seemed attractive for large segments of the population. Trade and commerce brought wealth to the new merchant class. Libraries and schools

were welcomed by the scholar. Better housing and better food brought about a rise in the standard of living. Many in Israel, as elsewhere, were glad to accept this veneer of Greek culture. If idolatry had been the stumbling block to Israel in the pre-exilic period, Hellenism was the great postexilic temptation. A third century BC writer observed, "In recent times, under the foreign rule of the Persians, and then of the Macedonians, by whom the Persian Empire was overthrown, intermingling with other races has led to many of the traditional Jewish ordinances' losing their hold." Many Jews took Greek names, accepted a school of Greek philosophy, and tried to combine the wisdom of Greece with the faith of their fathers. Others resisted Hellenism and became more and more engrossed in the study of their law.

At the age of thirty-three, Alexander died in Babylon. For a number of years the future of the Near East was uncertain, but the generals succeeded in dividing the empire among themselves, and the tide of Hellenism increased. While the Ptolemies of Egypt and the Seleucids of Syria fought among themselves for land and power, they were in complete agreement concerning their social and cultural mission. The historian W.W. Tarn says that Alexander "so changed the world [that] nothing after him could be as it was before."

THE PTOLEMIES

Following the death of Alexander, Judea was first subject to Antigonos, one of his generals, but it quickly fell to another general, Ptolemy I, surnamed Soter, "Deliverer," who seized Jerusalem on a Sabbath Day in 320 BC Ptolemy, whose kingdom centered in Egypt, dealt kindly with the Jews. Many of them settled in Alexandria which continued to be an important center of Jewish thought for many centuries. Under Ptolemy II (Philadelphus) the Alexandrian Jews translated their Old Testament into Greek. This translation was later known as the Septuagint from the legend of seventy (more correctly seventy-two, six from each of the twelve tribes) who were sent from Judea to produce the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures.

The Jews in Palestine enjoyed a period of prosperity during Ptolemaic times. Tribute tax was paid to the government in Egypt, but local affairs were administered by High Priests who had been responsible for governing their people since Persian times. The greatest figure among the Jews of the Ptolemaic period was Simon the Just, the High Priest who is the subject of highest praise in the Apocryphal book of Ecclesiasticus, which 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, and is said to have repaired the temple and directed the excavation of a great reservoir to provide fresh water for Jerusalem in times of drought and siege. In addition to his reputation as High Priest, Simon is also regarded as one of the great teachers of ancient Judaism. His favorite maxim was, "The world rests on three things, on the Law, on Divine Service, and on Charity" (*Pirke Aboth*, I, 2). The identity of Simon the Just poses a historical problem, however. A High Priest known as Simon I lived during the middle of the third century, and Simon II lived c. 200 BC. One of these is doubtless the Simon the Just of Jewish tradition and legend.

During Ptolemaic times the priestly families of Onias and Tobias became bitter rivals. The house of Tobias was pro-Egyptian and represented the wealthy class of Jerusalem society. It may have been related to Tobiah the Ammonite (Neh. 2:10; 4:3, 7; 6:1-19), who gave so much trouble to Nehemiah. A papyrus from the time of Ptolemy II speaks of a Jew named Tobias who was a cavalry commander in the Ptolemaic army stationed at Ammanitis, east of the Jordan. Archaeologists have discovered a mausoleum from the third century BC at 'Araq el-Emir in central Jordan, with the name "Tobiah." The Tobiahs are thought to have been tax collectors, having the same function as the New Testament publicans.

Josephus states that Onias II refused to pay Ptolemy IV twenty talents of silver, which was evidently the tribute tax demanded of the High Priests. By refusing payment, Onias seems to have renounced allegiance to Ptolemy. Joseph, a member of the house of Tobias, then succeeded in

having himself appointed publican for the whole of Palestine. The "publican" had to go to Alexandria each year to bid for the renewal of the license to collect taxes. Joseph held this influential post for twenty years under the Ptolemies and after the victory of Antiochus III, under the Seleucids.

THE SELEUCIDS

The Syrian rulers are termed Seleucids because their kingdom, one of the successor states to Alexander's empire, was founded by Seleucus I (Nicator). Most of the early rulers bore the names of Seleucus or Antiochus, and they ruled from Antioch on the Orontes River. The energetic ruler Antiochus III, surnamed "the Great," waged a series of battles with Egypt until, in 199 BC, he wrested Palestine from the Ptolemies after the Battle of Panion, near the sources of the Jordan River. This marked the beginning of a new era of Jewish history for, while the Ptolemies had been tolerant of Jewish institutions, the Seleucids determined to enforce Hellenism on the Jews.

The crisis came during the reign of Antiochus IV, surnamed Epiphanes, who found allies in the Hellenistic party in Judea. 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, a strictly orthodox Jew. The Jews who looked with favor on Greek culture opposed Onias and espoused the cause of his brother Jason. By promising large tribute to Antiochus, Jason succeeded in having himself appointed High Priest. Although Antiochus looked upon the High Priesthood as a political office which he had a right to fill as he pleased, pious Jews thought of the priesthood as divine in origin and considered its sale to the highest bidder a sin against God.

Jason encouraged the Hellenists who had sought his election. A gymnasium was built in Jerusalem, Greek names became commonplace, and Hebrew orthodoxy was considered obscurantist and obsolete. Yet Jason argued with his close companion and fellow-Hellenist, Menelaus, of the tribe of Benjamin, who offered higher tribute to Antiochus than that paid by Jason, and had himself installed as High Priest.

The orthodox Jews, who had been scandalized when Jason was named High Priest, were more deeply disturbed when Menelaus, a Benjamite with no claim to priestly office, was installed. Jason raised an army to back his claim to the High Priesthood, and Menelaus courted the favor of Antiochus. The Syrians, who were campaigning against Egypt, felt it essential to maintain effective control of Palestine. Antiochus staged a sneak attack on Jerusalem one Sabbath Day (when the orthodox would not fight), and slaughtered a large number of the enemies of Menelaus. The city walls were destroyed, and a new fortress, the Akra, was built on the site of the citadel.

Antiochus was determined to remove all traces of orthodox Jewish faith. Israel's God was identified with Jupiter, and a bearded image of the pagan deity (perhaps in the likeness of Antiochus) was erected on the temple altar, where swine were offered in sacrifice. Jews were forbidden, under penalty of death, to practice circumcision, Sabbath observance, or the celebration of the feasts of the Jewish calendar. Copies of the Scriptures were ordered destroyed. The laws were enforced with the utmost cruelty. An aged scribe named Eleazar was flogged to death because he would not eat swine's flesh.

By force of arms Menelaus continued as High Priest, and the Hellenizing party gained a victory. Yet the Hellenizers had gone too far, and their very zeal to annihilate the old order proved their own undoing. The orthodox were willing to die for their faith, but not all were convinced that they should die passively.

THE MACCABEAN REVOLT

The oppressed Jews were not long in finding a champion. When the emissaries of Antiochus arrived at the village of Modin, about fifteen miles west of Jerusalem, they expected the aged priest, Mattathias, to set a good example to his people by coming forward to offer a pagan sacrifice. When Mattathias refused, a timid Jew came forward to perform the sacrifice. The enraged priest approached the altar and killed both the apostate Jew and the emissary of Antiochus. With his five sons, Mattathias destroyed the heathen altar and

then fled to the hills to avoid reprisal. Others of orthodox persuasion joined the family of Mattathias in waging guerrilla warfare on the Syrians and the Hellenistic Jews who supported them. The orthodox would not fight on the Sabbath Day, with the result that they were at a distinct military disadvantage. On one Sabbath, a group of the orthodox was surrounded and murdered, for they would not defend themselves. Following this episode Mattathias suggested the principle that fighting in self-defense was permissible on the Sabbath Day.

Soon after the beginning of the revolt, Mattathias died. He had urged his followers to choose as military leader his third son Judas (Hebrew Judah) known as "the Maccabee," a word usually interpreted to mean "the hammer." The choice was a good one, for more and more Jews rallied to the cause. The Maccabees, as the followers of Judas were called, were able to hold their own against a series of Syrian armies thrown against them. By a surprise night attack, Judas annihilated an army of Syrians and Hellenistically-minded Jews at Emmaus, and then marched toward Jerusalem with the booty he had seized. The Maccabees entered the city and took everything except the Akra. They entered the temple and removed all the signs of paganism which had been installed there. The altar dedicated to Jupiter was removed and a new altar erected to Israel's God. The statue of Jupiter was ground to dust. Beginning with the twenty-fifth of Kislev (December), they celebrated an eight-day Feast of Dedication, known as Hanukkah, the Festival of Lights. In this way they marked the end of the three-year period during which the temple had been desecrated.

Peace was short-lived, however. The Syrian general Lysias defeated the Maccabees in a battle near Jerusalem, and besieged the city itself. During the siege, however, Lysias learned of trouble at home and made an offer of peace to the Jews. The laws against the observance of Judaism would be repealed and Syria would refrain from interference in the internal affairs of Judea. Menelaus was to be removed from office and the high priesthood given to a mild Hellenizer named Alcimus. Lysias

promised that Judas and his followers would not be punished. The walls of Jerusalem would be destroyed, however.

A council comprising Maccabean army officers, respected scribes, and elders of the orthodox party was convened at Jerusalem to determine the action to be taken. Against the counsel of Judas, the peace terms were accepted. Alcimus became High Priest, Menelaus was executed, and Judas left the city with a few followers. The fears of Judas proved correct, however, for Alcimus seized and executed many of the orthodox party. Loyal Jews again turned to Judas, and civil war was renewed. Judas, with an ill-equipped army of eight hundred men, met a large Syrian army and died in battle. Thus, the first phase of the Maccabean struggle was ended.

Jonathan, a brother of Judas, fled across the Jordan with several hundred Maccabean soldiers. They were ill-equipped to wage battle, but the next victories were in the field of diplomacy. Two pretenders to the Syrian throne each sought help from the Jews. They saw in Jonathan the man best able to raise and lead a Jewish army. By playing a delaying action, Jonathan was able to support the winning candidate and at the same time make treaties with Sparta and Rome. Before the war was over, Jonathan was High Priest, governor of Judea, and a member of the Syrian nobility. His brother Simon became governor of the Philistine coastal area. Jonathan was able to promote the internal prosperity of Judah; and when he died, his brother Simon succeeded him as ruling High Priest.

Simon was advanced in years when he came to the throne. His major victory was in the field of diplomacy, for by recognizing Demetrius as rightful king of Syria, he secured for the Jews immunity from taxation, which amounted to an acknowledgement of independence. Simon was able also to starve out the Syrian garrison at the Akra and to occupy the cities of Joppa and Bethsura. In recognition of his wise rule, the leaders in Israel named Simon, "leader and High Priest for ever" until there shall arise a faithful prophet." Simon was the last of the sons of Mattathias, and this act legitimized a new dynasty which is termed Hasmonaean, presumably

derived from an ancestor of the Maccabees named Asmonaeus or, in Hebrew, Hashmon. In 134 BC, Simon and two of his sons were murdered by an ambitious son-in-law. A third son, John Hyrcanus, managed to escape and succeed his father as hereditary head of the Jewish state.

THE HASMONAEEANS

The Syrians recognized the government of John Hyrcanus on condition that he consider himself subject to Syria and promise help in Syrian military campaigns. Certain coastal cities annexed by Jonathan and Simon were also to be relinquished. The efficient rule of Hyrcanus, however, quickly effected the re-conquest of these cities and the addition of Idumaea (Old Testament Edom) to Judean territory. These conquests ensured the use of ancient trade routes by the merchant class, but they posed problems to the religiously oriented Jews. Hyrcanus compelled the Idumaeans to become circumcised and accept the Jewish faith, a practice which later Judaism disavows. There is something ironical in the thought of a grandson of Mattathias forcing religious conformity on a people conquered by Jewish arms! Hyrcanus also campaigned in Samaria, where he destroyed the temple on Mount Gerizim. The success of Jewish arms might be applauded by the nationalistic element in Judea, but the religious fervor of the earlier Maccabees was no longer evident.

Before John Hyrcanus died in 104 BC, the borders of the state had been extended on every side. The Maccabean struggle was long past and new rivalries developed. The older Hellenists were discredited, but their ideas were perpetuated in the party of the Sadducees. The orthodox of Maccabean times became the Pharisees of pre-Christian Judaism and the New Testament. Hyrcanus, himself, was devout and law-abiding, but his children had little sympathy with traditional Hebrew thought. They numbered themselves among the aristocrats, and they came to look with disdain on the rigidly orthodox Pharisees. Ironically these heirs of the Maccabees became thoroughly Hellenized.

The death of John Hyrcanus precipitated a

dynastic struggle among his children. His eldest son, who preferred his Greek name Aristobulus to his Hebrew name Judah, emerged as victor and threw three of his brothers into prison—two of whom are thought to have starved to death. Another brother was murdered in the palace. In his short reign of but one year, Aristobulus pushed the borders of Judea north to Mount Lebanon and took the title of king. His life was cut short, however, by drink, disease, and the haunting fear of rebellion.

At the time of Aristobulus' death, he had but one brother living, and he was in prison. Although his Hebrew name was Jonathan, history knows him by his Greek name Alexander Jannaeus. Under Jannaeus the policy of territorial expansion continued. The frontiers of Judea were extended along the Philistine coast toward the Egyptian frontier and in the Trans-jordan region. The Jewish state approximated the territory controlled by Israel in the days of David and Solomon. It included the whole of Palestine and adjacent areas from the borders of Egypt to Lake Huleh, north of the Sea of Galilee. Perea in Trans-jordan was subject to Jannaeus, as were the cities of the Coastal Plain except for Ascalon.

The territories incorporated into the Hasmonaean kingdom were for the most part, quickly Judaized. The Idumaeans came to exercise an important place in Jewish life, and Galilee became an important center of Judaism. The Samaritans, however, continued to resist assimilation; and cities such as Apollonia and Scythopolis (Old Testament Beth-shean), with only a small Jewish element in their populations, kept their non-Jewish character.

Partisan strife, however, marred the reign of Alexander Jannaeus, who showed open contempt for the Pharisees, precipitating civil war. The Pharisees accepted aid from the Syrians in their conflict with Jannaeus, and for a time Jewish independence was in the balance. When the Pharisees felt that they had gained their point, they withdrew their alliance with Syria and hoped for a Jewish state that would be both free of foreign control and tolerant of their viewpoint. Jannaeus, however, sought out the leaders of the rebellion

and crucified eight hundred Pharisees. Tradition says that Jannaeus repented on his death-bed, instructing his wife Salome Alexandra to dismiss his Sadducean advisors and reign with the help of the Pharisees. The tradition may have no historical basis, but Alexandra did turn to the Pharisees for support.

Salome Alexandra had been married successively to Aristobulus and to Alexander Jannaeus. The widow of two Hasmonaean rulers, she reigned in her own right for seven years. She was a woman of seventy when she came to the throne, dividing royal responsibilities between her two sons. Hyrcanus, the elder son, became High Priest, and his brother Aristobulus received the military command. Her brother, Simeon ben Shetah, was a leader among the Pharisees, and this fact may have disposed her to seek peace between the opposing factions of Judaism.

Under Alexandra, the Pharisees had their opportunity to make a constructive contribution to Jewish life. In many areas, particularly education, they were eminently successful. Under the presidency of Simeon ben Shetah, the Sanhedrin (the Jewish Council of State) decreed that every young man should be educated. A comprehensive system of elementary education was inaugurated so that the larger villages, towns, and cities of Judea would produce a literate, informed people. This education was centered in the Hebrew Scriptures.

The wounds of earlier strife were not healed during Alexandra's reign. Although the Pharisees were happy in their new-found recognition, the Sadducees were resentful of the fact that they had lost power. To compound the problem, the Pharisees sought to avenge the massacre of their leaders by Alexander Jannaeus. Sadducean blood was spilt, and the makings of another civil war were in the air.

The Sadducees found in Aristobulus, the younger son of Jannaeus and Alexandra, the man they could support as Alexandra's successor. He was a soldier and appealed to the party that dreamed of imperial expansion and worldly power. Hyrcanus, the elder brother and rightful heir, was acceptable to the Pharisees. With the

death of Alexandra the partisans of the two sons were ready for a showdown.

When his mother died, Hyrcanus II, who had been serving as High Priest, succeeded to the throne, but his brother Aristobulus led an army of Sadducees against Jerusalem. Neither Hyrcanus nor the Pharisees were ready for war, and Hyrcanus surrendered his honors to Aristobulus II, who became king and High Priest. Hyrcanus and Aristobulus thereupon vowed eternal friendship, and Aristobulus' eldest son Alexander married Hyrcanus' only daughter Alexandra. Peace between the brothers was short-lived, however. Hyrcanus had to flee and Antipater, governor of Idumaea, espoused his cause. With civil war threatening, Pompey appeared with his Roman legions to ensure the peace of Judea and further the aims of Rome.

THE ROMANS

When Pompey suspected Aristobulus of planning to rebel against Rome, he besieged Jerusalem and, after three months, breached the fortifications, entered the city, and reportedly murdered twelve thousand Jews. Pompey and his officers entered the Holy of Holies in the temple, but he did not touch its costly furnishings and allowed temple worship to continue. Jerusalem, however, was 'made tributary to the Romans and the last vestige of Jewish independence was removed. Judea was incorporated into the Roman province of Syria and lost the coastal cities, the district of Samaria, and the non-Jewish cities east of the Jordan. Hyrcanus was named Ethnarch of Judea, including Galilee, Idumaea, and Perea, and was confirmed again as High Priest. A yearly tribute was due Rome. Aristobulus and a number of other captives were taken to Rome to grace Pompey's triumph. During the voyage, however, Aristobulus' son Alexander escaped and attempted to organize a revolt against Hyrcanus. With the aid of the Romans, however, Hyrcanus was able to meet this challenge to his authority.

During the years of strife between Aristobulus II and Hyrcanus II, the Idumaeen governor Antipater (or Antipas) took a lively interest in the politics of Judea. Antipater was bitterly opposed to

Aristobulus, partly through fear and partly because of his friendship for Hyrcanus. It appears that Hyrcanus relied much on Antipater and that he was virtually the power behind the throne of Judea. The Jews resented the influence of Antipater almost as much as they smarted under Roman sovereignty. Although the Idumaeans had been incorporated into the Jewish state by John Hyrcanus, they had never been assimilated, and ancient rivalries were not forgotten.

In the crisis which followed the murder of Julius Caesar, Antipater and his sons showed loyalty to the new regime of Cassius by zealously collecting tribute taxes. Herod, a son of Antipater, was given the title Procurator of Judea with the promise that he would one day be named king. When Anthony defeated Brutus and Cassius at Philippi, Asia again fell into the hands of a new regime. Herod, however, quickly changed loyalties and bribed his way into favor with Anthony.

The eastern part of the once mighty Persian Empire was occupied by a people known as Parthians who had never been subdued by Rome. In 41 BC, they attacked Jerusalem and made Antigonus, son of Aristobulus II both king and High Priest. Herod, the son of Antipater, who had inherited the throne of Judea at the death of Hyrcanus, was forced to flee to Rome. There he won the favor of Anthony and was officially named "King of the Jews," although the title would have meaning only after the Parthians were driven out. Herod returned to Judea with Roman arms and triumphantly entered Jerusalem as king.

Herod's rule spanned the eventful years from 37 BC to 4 BC. He is best known as the king who feared the birth of a rival "King of the Jews" and decreed the murder of infants in Bethlehem at the time of the birth of Jesus. While that act of Herod cannot be documented from secular records, his other atrocities are well known. He had ten wives in all, and the 'Emperor Augustus' is reported to have commented on his family life, "I'd rather be Herod's hog than his son." The hog was an unclean animal, and would not be butchered, but Herod's wives and children were violently removed when they interfered with his plans or were suspected of disloyalty.

Although detested by his Jewish subjects, Herod did seek to win their favor. He built and rebuilt cities throughout the land: Samaria became Sebaste in honor of Augustus; Straton's Tower became Caesarea with a harbor protected by a moat, and a wall with ten towers. Fortresses, baths, parks, market places, roads, and other luxuries of Hellenistic culture were part of his building program.

In the eighteenth year of his reign (20-19 BC), Herod began the work of rebuilding, on a grand scale, the Jewish temple in Jerusalem. The main edifice was built by priests in a year and a half, but the work on the entire complex of courts and buildings was not completed until the procuratorship of Albinus (AD 62-64), less than a decade before it was totally destroyed by the armies of Titus (AD 70).

Herod's death followed quickly the birth of One who was to challenge Herod's right to the title "King of the Jews." With the death of Herod—which no one mourned—the intertestamental period comes to an end, and the New Testament period begins.

THE JEWISH SECTS

The Pharisees, Sadducees, Herodians, and Zealots, who play so important a part in the Gospel records, all have their origin during the two centuries before the birth of Christ. They represent different reactions to the continuing clash between Hellenism and Jewish religious life. While the Maccabean struggle had settled the political problem of the relationship between the Syrian Seleucids and Judea, it forced upon Judaism the necessity of determining its own relationship to the outside world.

THE PHARISEES

A party bearing the name of Pharisee is first mentioned during the reign of John Hyrcanus (134-104 BC), and it is evident that even then there was an antagonism between the "orthodox" Pharisee and the more open-minded Sadducee. The word Pharisee means "separated one," and the name probably meant, in the first instance, one who had separated himself from the corrupting

influence of Hellenism in his zeal for the biblical Law. Josephus says that the Pharisees "appear more religious than others, and seem to interpret the laws more accurately."

Pharisees were punctilious in observing the laws regarding ceremonial purity. For this reason they could not purchase items of food or drink from a "sinner" for fear of ceremonial defilement. Nor could a Pharisee eat in the house of a sinner, although he might entertain the sinner in his own home. Under such circumstances the Pharisee would provide the sinner with clothes to wear, for the sinner's clothes might be ceremonially impure.

With a sincere desire to make the law workable within the changing culture of the Greco-Roman world, the Pharisees developed systems of tradition which sought to apply the law to a variety of circumstances. During the first century BC, two influential Pharisaic teachers gave their names to the schools of legal thought. Hillel was the more moderate of the two, ever considerate of the poor and willing to accept Roman rule as compatible with Jewish orthodoxy. Shammai, on the other hand, was more strict in his interpretation and bitterly opposed to Rome. His viewpoint ultimately found expression in the sect of Zealots, whose resistance to the Romans brought on the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. The Talmud preserves the record of three hundred and sixteen controversies between the schools of Hillel and Shammai.

Tradition, in Pharisaic thought, began as a commentary on the Law, but it was ultimately raised to the level of law itself. To justify this teaching, it was maintained that the "oral law" was given by God to Moses on Mount Sinai along with the "written law" or Torah (*Pirke Aboth*, 1.1). The ultimate in this development is reached when the Mishna states that oral law must be observed with greater stringency than the written law, because statutory law (i.e., oral tradition) affects the life of the ordinary man more intimately than the more remote constitutional law (the written Torah) (*M. Sanhedrin*. 10.3).

In addition to the charge that Pharisaism involved little more than a concern for the minutia of the law, the New Testament affirms that

tradition had largely neglected the real intent of the law (Matt. 15:3). As in many worthy movements, the early piety of those who had separated themselves from impurity at great cost was exchanged for an attitude of pride in the observance of legal precepts.

Men such as Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea, Gamaliel, and Saul of Tarsus represent some of the nobler souls from the Pharisaic tradition in the New Testament. To Saul, later Paul the apostle, the Pharisee represented the epitome of orthodoxy, “the most straitest sect of our religion” (Acts 26:5). Pharisaism began well, and its perversion is a constant reminder that self-complacency and spiritual pride are temptations to which the pious are particularly susceptible.

THE SADDUCEES

Although Pharisees and Sadducees are frequently denounced together in the New Testament, they had little in common save their antagonism to Jesus. The Sadducees were the party of the Jerusalem aristocracy and the High Priesthood. They had made their peace with the political rulers and had attained positions of wealth and influence. Temple administration and ritual was their specific responsibility. The Sadducees held themselves aloof from the masses and were unpopular with them.

The Pharisaic attempts at applying the law to new situations were rejected by the Sadducees, who restricted their concept of authority to the Torah, or Mosaic Law. They did not believe in the resurrection, in spirits, or in angels (cf. Mark 12:18; Luke 20:27; Acts 23:8). Their faith was largely a series of negations with the result that they left nothing positive in the religious or political systems.

While the Pharisees welcomed proselytes (Matt. 23:15), the Sadducean party was closed. None but members of the High Priestly and aristocratic families of Jerusalem could become members. With the destruction of the temple in AD 70, the Sadducean party came to an end. Modern Judaism traces its roots to the Pharisees.

THE ESSENES

Essenes and Pharisees both trace their roots to

the orthodox leaders of Maccabean times who stood their ground against Hellenism. Pharisees maintained a strict orthodoxy within the framework of historical Judaism. They maintained their separation from defilement, but not from the Jewish community itself; Even though the temple worship was conducted by Sadducees, the Pharisees esteemed this worship a basic part of their religious inheritance. While the Pharisee might hold himself aloof from “sinners,” he lived among them and coveted their esteem.

A more extreme reaction against the influences which tended to corrupt Jewish life was taken by a sect which the ancient writers Philo, Josephus, and Pliny call the “Essenes.” They seem to have lived for the most part in monastic communities, such as the one which maintained headquarters at Qumran, near the northwest corner of the Dead Sea.

In seeking to explain Judaism to the Greek-speaking world, Josephus spoke of three “philosophies”—those of the Pharisees, Sadducees, and the Essenes. The term “Essene” seems to have had quite an elastic usage, including various groups of monastically-minded Jews who varied among themselves in certain of their practices. Pliny says that the Essenes avoided women and did not marry, but Josephus speaks of an order of marrying Essenes. The excavations at Qumran indicate that women were enrolled in the Qumran community.

Ancient writers speak favorably of the Essenes, who lived a life of rigor and simplicity. Members of the community studied Scripture and other religious books. Each Essene was required to perform manual labor in order to make the community self-supporting. Community of goods was practiced, and strict discipline was enforced by an overseer. Those groups which renounced marriage adopted boys at an early age in order to inculcate and perpetuate the ideals of Essenism. Slavery and war were repudiated.

The Essenes welcomed proselytes, but the novice was required to undergo a period of strict probation before he could become a full-fledged member; Numerically the Essenes were never large; Philo says that there were four thousand of

them, and Pliny speaks of a community north of En Gedi, corresponding to the Qumran area. That there were other settlements is clear, for we are told that all members of the sect were welcome in any of the Essene colonies.

Nothing certain is known of the early history of the sect, for, like all reform movements, it traces its origins back to remote times. Philo states that Moses instituted the order, and Josephus says that they existed “ever since the ancient times of the fathers.” It is certain that the Essene movement was at one time an extreme protest against the corruptions which were apparent in pre-Christian Judaism, and that ultimately many members withdrew from the Palestinian community life and sought spiritual purification in places such as the Qumran area.

Regarding themselves as the only true or pure Israel, the Essenes refused to cooperate with what they believed to be the corrupt religious observances at the Jerusalem temple. The carefully regulated life at the Essene center seems to have served as a substitute for the temple in the eyes of pious Essenes. The strictness of Essene discipline and the rigidity with which the Law was enforced are stressed by all who write about them. Josephus says that they were stricter than all Jews in abstaining from work on the Sabbath Day. A passage in the Damascus Document (which seems to be Essene in origin) says that it is unlawful to lift an animal from a pit on the Sabbath Day. Such a view was considered extreme even by legalistic Pharisees (cf. Matt. 12:11).

The absence of Essenes from the main streams of Jewish life doubtless accounts for the fact that they are not mentioned in the New Testament or in the Jewish Talmud. Although the high morality of the Essenes is indeed commendable, the teaching and practice of Jesus was diametrically opposite to the legalism and asceticism of the Essene teaching. Although the Essenes considered that contact by a member of their own group with a lower order was ceremonially defiling, Jesus did not hesitate to eat and drink with “publicans and sinners” (Matt. 11: 19; Luke 7:34). Although obedient to the Mosaic Law, Jesus had no sympathy with those who made of the Law a burden instead of a blessing. The

Sabbath, according to Jesus, was made for man, and it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath Day (Matt. 12:1-12; Mark 2:23-28; Luke 6:6-11; 14:1-6).

Jesus denounced abuses in the temple and prophesied its destruction, but He did not repudiate the temple services. He came to Jerusalem for the great Jewish feasts, and after His resurrection, disciples still made their way to the temple at the hour of prayer (cf. Acts 3). While asceticism and monasticism early gained a foothold in Christian thinking, Christianity in its earliest period was in no sense an ascetic movement. The ministry of Jesus was largely to the “common people” who were rejected by Pharisee and Essene alike. Jesus was not ashamed to so associate with the people of His generation. The self-righteous called Him “a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners” (Matt. 11:19).

OTHER SECTS

The New Testament mentions Herodians (Mark 3:6; Matt. 22:16) and Zealots (Luke 6:15), groups of Jews at opposite ends of the political spectrum. The Herodians appear to have been Jews of influence and standing who were well disposed to the Herodian rule and, as a result, to the Romans who supported the Herods. The Zealots, on the other hand, were super patriots who determined to resist Rome at all costs. Their fanaticism brought on the war during which the army of Titus destroyed Jerusalem and its temple (AD 70).

¹ *The Criswell Study Bible*. W.A. Criswell, Ph.D., ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1979), 1083-1090.

² In 1969 they numbered fewer than 300.