

The Greatest Commandments and The Jews Under Foreign Rule

Still Missing the Plot

The Jews Return to Judea

- The Jews returning from exile were determined to dedicate themselves to God.
 - The synagogue system was founded either during Babylonian exile (6th century BCE) or by Jews in Egypt (3rd century BCE).
 - Intended as a central hub of prayer and study of Torah.
 - It was brought to Judea and firmly established by 1st century BCE
 - The Jews rebuilt the Temple (c. 516 BCE) and rebuilt Jerusalem's walls (c. 444 BCE)
 - Covered in Ezra and Nehemiah
- During their conquest of the Persian Empire, the Greeks captured Jerusalem about 184 years after the Second Temple was completed, and 112 years after the city walls were rebuilt.
 - Alexander the Great entered peacefully at the leave of the High Priest.
 - The Jews were allowed to continue their religious practice, but Hellenistic culture was established in Judea.

Hellenism – The Euongelion of Alexander the Great

- Alexander the Great brought a “euongelion” (gospel) to the lands that he conquered – Hellenism, or Greek civilization.
 - He flooded the conquered lands with resources and the means of establishing Greek civilization.
 - “Be like us and all will be well with you. You will become us.”
- Hellenism ran counter to the God-dedicated culture the Jews were trying to establish.
 - Centralized the individual, self-centered ambition; early post-exilic Jewish culture was highly communal.
 - Made gods in man’s image

The Pillars of Hellenism

- Education and cultural formation (language, reason, theatre, rhetoric)
 - The Greek proscenium theatre structure was eventually integrated into synagogue building structure.
- City life and civic identity (citizenship/city-states, assemblies and councils, the marketplace, festivals)
- Gymnasiums (athletic training, competitions and games)
- Polytheistic religion (a god for each aspect of life, city patron gods, assimilation of foreign gods)
- Commerce and trade (common coinage, trade routes)

The Partitioning of the Greek Empire

- Following Alexander's death in 323 BCE, Judea became a contested territory between the Ptolemies (Egypt) and the Seleucids (Syria)
 - Ptolemaic rule (301-198 BCE)
 - Seleucid Conquest (198 BCE)
 - Maccabean Revolt (began in 167 BCE) in response to religious persecution by the Seleucid King Antiochus IV Epiphanes.
 - The Abomination of Desolation (Daniel 9:27, 11:31, 12:11) – likely was the setting up of a pagan altar in the Temple; forcing the Jews to sacrifice pigs in the Temple.
 - Resulted in the Hasmonean dynasty (141 BCE)
 - The Sadducees came to political power during this time as allies of the Hasmonean rulers.
 - The Pharisees also gained power as they became favored by later Hasmonean rulers (Salome Alexandra 76-67 BCE)
 - Rome captured Jerusalem in 63 BCE, effectively ending the Hasmonean dynasty.
 - The Sadducees remained in power, but mainly as chief priests.
 - Herod the Great (37 BCE to 4 BCE) took power as client king of Judea, under Roman rule.

The Five Parties of Judaism

- The Jews who were in Babylonian exile and in the Jewish diaspora returned to a land rife with paganism.
- The Greek conquest only added to the paganism in the region and established a culture that was not in alignment with the culture of Mosaic law.
 - This culture was continued under Roman rule.
- Different ideologically-based and pragmatically-based parties/sects of Judaism formed in response to Hellenism.
- We will cover the five most influential parties, but there actually were more (e.g., Nazarenes)
 - Herodians
 - Sadducees
 - Essenes
 - Zealots
 - Pharisees

Herodians

- Jews who were aligned with the Herods, supportive of their rule
- Collaborators with Rome
- They were at times aligned with the Sadducees and Pharisees, so long as their purposes aligned.
- Their primary purpose was to maintain political stability.
- They fully embraced Hellenism.
- One could consider them “Jews in Name Only”.

Sadducees

- Leaders among the priests, chief priests.
- Descendants of Zadok, high priest during the reigns of David and Solomon (II Samuel and I Kings, Ezekiel)
- Embraced Hellenism
- Gained political power during the Hasmonean dynasty
- Reaffirmed as high priests during Roman rule, but also were political power brokers who grudgingly collaborated with Herod and Rome.
- They ran Temple worship like mobsters
 - Pocketed the offerings and temple taxes
 - Did not distribute resources to the Levites as was one of the roles of the chief priests
 - Jesus' cleansing of the temple was seen as a direct challenge to the power and resources of the Sadducees.
 - The Sadducees were arguably the primary culprits in Jesus' execution.

Essenes

- The most influential party you've probably never heard of... except you have.
- The Essenes were priests who rejected the corruption of the Hasmonean high priests (Sadducees); also sons of Zadok.
 - They thought the Sadducees illegitimately combined the role of king and priest.
 - Rejected Hellenism, which was embraced by the Sadducees and Herodians.
 - Isolated themselves from Jewish society; established a compound in Qumran (the location of the Dead Sea Scrolls)
- Sought purity (“knowing the path and walking the path”) as a way to “prepare the way of the Lord” (Isaiah 40:1-5)
 - Believed that if they did everything right, the Messiah would come to them.
 - Was John the Baptist aligned with the Essenes? Maybe.
 - Did the Messiah come to the Essenes? In a way, yes.

Zealots

- The Zealots rejected the leadership of the Sadducees.
 - Also rejected Hellenism and Roman rule
- Instead of exiling themselves and seeking purity as did the Essenes, they chose the path of the violence.
 - They constantly harassed the Roman government with assassinations and robberies.
 - They assassinated several high priests, one on the Temple grounds (Jonathan, 58 BCE); kidnapped and held for ransom another.
- Their goal was to cleanse the Temple and cleanse the land so that Messiah would come.
- They were frequent targets for execution by crucifixion
 - There is some thought that Barabbas was a Zealot, along with the two thieves on the cross next to Jesus.
- Jesus chose at least one Zealot to be an apostle, possibly two if some scholarly opinions about Judas are true (connections are weak).

Pharisees

- Rejected Hellenism; reluctantly accepted Roman rule
- Ideological rivals to the Sadducees
 - Resurrection, but also despised the Sadducees' corruption
- Dedicated to knowing and following the Law
- Though influential in the Sanhedrin and Galilee.
 - Capernaum, Bethsaida, and Chorazin were their primary settlements; also where Jesus spent most of his ministry.
- Not ideologically uniform
 - Hillel (liberal, progressive) and Shammai (conservative)
 - Shammai-aligned Pharisees were likely dominant numbers-wise during time of Jesus' ministry.
 - Hillel became more influential in later Judaism
 - The "circumcision party" we read about in Acts was probably Shammai-aligned Pharisees, as were most of the Pharisees who harassed Jesus and his disciples.
 - Gamaliel, Paul's rabbi, was of the school of Hillel; was a grandson of Hillel.
 - Some were friendly to Jesus' ministry (Nicodemus).
 - Many were hostile to it because Jesus' teachings threatened their hold on the people of Israel, which was maintained through strict enforcement of traditions.

Discussion questions

- When looking at each of the five parties of Judaism, what were some ways that each got loving God and loving neighbor right or wrong?