

What's the Message – Lesson 88

In this lesson we focus on the empire created by Alexander the Great.

Greetings in the name of Jesus, our Savior. Once again we pray that You would open our hearts and minds to see that in this secular history Your hand is at work, shaping events and controlling the world to meet Your eternal plan. Amen.

In our last lesson we saw the army of Alexander the Great bring the power of the Persian kings to an end. Jerusalem had been a subject of Persia for a little over 200 years, years of relative freedom to worship Yahweh in accordance with the Torah, and for their law community to grow. Now they were the subjects of the even greater Greek empire. What would happen next? This would be an even more disturbing question when Alexander suddenly died, and his top generals divided the kingdom among them.

Years of fighting and jockeying for power among these generals took place, as would be expected, and for a while there were 5 kingdoms, or parts of Alexander's kingdom, recognized. Two of these were the largest partitions – also the most powerful – and played important roles in the life of the people of Judah, or as the Greeks called them, the people of Judea. One of the partitions went to one of Alexander's most trusted commanders, a man by the name of Ptolemy I. His was what once had been the kingdom of Egypt, and he made Alexandria his capital. Judea was now under his control.

The other major partition went to a man that had served as a general in Alexander's army. His name was Seleucus Nicator and the territory he claimed was once the kingdom of the Babylonians. He was regarded as a beneficent king, was a patron of the arts and sciences, founded the Grecian city of Antioch (in Syria) in 300 B.C. and made it his capitol. Once again, Judea was caught between two competing factions: the kingdom of the south (the Ptolemies in Egypt) and the kingdom of the north (the Seleucids in Syria).

So what is the significance of all this . . . the Jews had traded Persian masters for Greek ones . . . isn't that all there is to it? Well, for the first 100 years (from 300 to 200 B.C.) it more-or-less seemed that way. But in the division

of Alexander's empire among his generals were planted seeds that later bore bitter fruit in Judea.

To understand this better, we need to see Alexander as more than a one-dimensional warrior. We need to see him as a person who had determined to create a "one-world" condition – a condition that would establish the Greek culture and all it stood for as the standard for the world. The word "Hellenism" is commonly used to describe this culture and all it entailed in its religious and social life.

One major condition is that Greek became the language of trade, much as English is today. It became the common language of the time to the point that many Jews no longer knew Hebrew, and especially those living in the Dispersion had less and less knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures. Greek became the language of scholars and the repository of knowledge and wisdom. For example: Ptolemy II (also known as Philadelphus) was very proud of his great library at Alexandria in Egypt – one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World – and he set out to collect the finest writings of all nations. As part of this program, the Torah was translated into Greek.

According to legend, this was done in just 72 days, and thus this translation was given the name Septuagint. This is the document that Jesus and his disciples frequently quoted from, and it was the common reference in early Christian times. In the creation of the Septuagint we see God at work preserving His Word, which is a very positive thing.

But there were other negative aspects of Hellenism that followed in the footsteps of Alexander and it was these aspects that led to one of the severest tests Judaism ever faced. This situation took years to develop and involved the continuing struggle between the Ptolemies in Egypt and the Seleucids in Syria over the control of Judea.

The details of this period are too much for us to treat here, but the bottom line is that when all was said and done, Antiochus IV, who called himself "Epiphanes" – which means: a god in the visible flesh – now had control over Judea and was determined to bring it into line with Alexander's goal of Hellenism for everyone . . . whether they wanted it or not. All of his subjects, including the Jews, would be unified under Greek culture, and that

also meant the pagan religion of Greece. The temple in Jerusalem was robbed, and a statue of Zeus was set up in the Holy of Holies. All the sacred books that could be found were burned. Circumcision and observance of the Sabbath were forbidden on the pain of death. The sacrifice of swine on the altar of the Lord, a most abhorrent act to all Jews, became mandatory.

It was too much for all Judeans! So what did the people do about Antiochus and his abomination? They started a revolution. And into this scene of defamation comes the motivational message of a prophet we have not yet reviewed, the book of Daniel.

Now the setting of the book of Daniel is during the time of Nebuchadnezzar, some 500 years earlier, but its message was very pertinent to this scourge of Antiochus. This book is the only example in the Old Testament of being written entirely in the apocalyptic style. Like the Revelation of St. John in the New Testament, it is full of strange visions and dreams. Also like the book of Revelation, the message of all this imagery can be condensed into just these few words: "Hold fast to your faith."

Think of the familiar stories recorded in the book of Daniel; the challenge of either being faithful or being burned in a fiery furnace, the challenge of being faithful or being thrown into a lion's den, the challenge of interpreting a dream that the king will not tell you about. Yet failure to restate the dream and interpret it correctly will result in your death. All of these instances, and more, have one common thread. The message is simply this: no matter what confronts you, Yahweh is mightier still, and will come to your aid. So have faith! Antiochus, and all such challenges to God, will be overcome.

Next time we will see the revolt of the Maccabees and its outcome.