

HOW TO REACH THE JEW FOR CHRIST

by

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CHAPTER EIGHT

THE PERSIAN AND GREEK ERAS

In our bibles there is a blank page between Malachi and Matthew. The casual reader quickly turns this page and scarcely realizes that it represents four hundred years of history. During these twelve generations no prophet arose and no inspired writer added a word to the canon of Scriptures. Our only guides for the history of this important period are the Apocryphal books and the works of Flavius Josephus. This great epoch brought to the nation of Israel some of its greatest heroes and institutions.

The story of this period naturally divides into four periods according to the nations which in turn ruled Palestine. They are:

- A. The Persian Period
- B. The Greek Period
- C. The Syrian, or Maccabean, Period
- D. The Roman Period

In this lesson we will study the close of the Persian period and the Greek era.

A. THE PERSIAN PERIOD

At the close of the Old Testament, Persia held sway over Palestine.

During the two centuries of their rule the Persians, who were mild rulers, gave to the Jews an autonomous government. They had their own governors, who were mainly priests of the house of Aaron. During this time the order of the scribes arose. The scribes devoted their lives to the preservation, copying and the teaching of the holy writings.

From this time the intellectual life of the children of Israel was wholly devoted to the study of this book. The scribes and the synagogue welded the Jews into one people. The center of worship at Jerusalem brought the foreign Jews to Palestine, thereby increasing both the wealth and the population of the Holy Land.

B. THE GREEK PERIOD

With the victory of Alexander the Great, at the battle of Arabela in 330 B.C., the dominion of Palestine passed from Persian into Greek hands. Alexander made Greek the official language and tried to institute Greek customs among the Jews.

The Jews of Palestine had been kindly treated by their Persian rulers, and from gratitude as well as from the conservative instincts of their race; they remained faithful to Darius, the last Persian king. Alexander became angry with the Jews and marched to Jerusalem, intending to destroy that city as he had destroyed Gaza, but was met by the Jewish high priest, Jaddua, and turned from an enemy to a friend of the Jews. He respected their religion and continued their self-government which they had enjoyed under the Persians.

Alexander died only nine years after his great victory, before he could organize and assimilate his vast empire. The war between his generals resulted in the establishment of four kingdoms, but they were all under Greek kings, and were Greek in language and civilization. Palestine was on the border of Egypt and Syria, and both kingdoms struggled for its possession. Finally in 301 B.C., it was annexed to Egypt and continued under the mild rule of the Ptolemies for a little more than a hundred years. The parts of the land inhabited by the Jews were governed by the high priests, aided by a council of the elders.

One result of the union between Egypt and Palestine was that the Jews became numerous, wealthy and influential in Alexandria, the chief seaport of the Mediterranean. As Greek was the language of commerce and civilization, it soon became the language of Jews everywhere, except those who remained in Palestine, where a dialect arose blending the Old Hebrew with Chaldee and Syriac words. The lessons were still read in the synagogue from the ancient Hebrew text but as the people could no longer understand it, an interpreter stood by the reader to translate the reading into the popular language.

In Egypt, and among the Jews of the Dispersion, a demand grew for the sacred writings in the Greek language. By degrees, and through many scholars, the books were translated. The names of the translators have not been preserved, but a tradition that they were seventy men gave to the translation the name "Septuagint," from the Latin *septuaginta*, "seventy." The version was made between 285 and 245 B.C. It was widely welcomed by the Jews of the Dispersion, and now because it was in Greek, its teachings were studied by the Greeks themselves.

The position of Palestine as a frontier province between Egypt and Syria caused it to become, over and over again, a field of war. Fortunately, most of the Jews lived in the mountains and the battles generally were fought in the plain. The land passed back and forth between the two kingdoms and was finally annexed to Syria, about the year 198 B.C. Syria was also a Greek kingdom, with its capital at Antioch.

The change of masters brought no good to the Jewish people.

The Egyptian Greeks had been easy, asking nothing but the regular tribute, which the Jews paid, and then governed themselves.

Under Syria, however, this was to be changed: once more the house of Judah was to be threatened with destruction, and once more the Great One of Israel was to make His arm bare in behalf of His penitent people. The thrilling story of Antiochus and the Maccabeans will be the subject of our next lesson.

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THIS LESSON APPLIED TO JEWISH MISSIONS

Little did Alexander realize when he tried to make his name great by making Greek the world language that he was preparing the way for the Gospel of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Alexander the Great was merely a pawn in the hands of the Great One of Israel.

A. *Greek became the world language.* This made it possible for the first missionaries to bring the Gospel to the uttermost parts of the earth without preliminary language study whenever they went.

B. *It was through the Septuagint that the Old Testament Scriptures became the property of the world.*

C. *The Jews—who were given liberty and freedom of commerce—settled in many places throughout the world.* Their integrity and faithfulness in the worship of the Lord was the first witness which the heathen world received of the one true God. It was the descendants of these Jews of the Dispersion whom the first missionaries contacted as they went “**to the Jew first**” from city to city.

EXAMINATION

1. How many centuries elapsed between the Old and New Testaments?
2. What country ruled Palestine at the close of Old Testament history? Were the Jews well treated by them?
3. How did Palestine come under Greek control?
4. What work of worldwide importance took place at Alexandria during this time?
5. Who was Alexander the Great?
6. In what ways did God use Alexander the Great in the furtherance of His purpose?

~ end of chapter 8 ~

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