

## Lesson 7

# The Grecian Empire After Alexander

## *Judea under the Ptolemy I*

### **Introduction**

Alexander died on June 11, 323 BC. He was 32. Ten days before he had fallen ill after a night of heavy drinking. His death created a crisis in his empire, as he had no heir. Alexander's wife, Roxana, was with child when he died, and gave birth to Alexander IV two months later. Those around Alexander did not like the idea of one day being ruled by him as his mother was a Barbarian, therefore making him only a half-blooded Macedonian. So, for a time, Alexander's half-brother, Arrhidaeus, ruled as "Philip III" in a joint reign with Alexander's infant son, while one of Alexander's generals, Perdiccas, acted as regent on their behalf. This arrangement did not work well.

Within a few years, the far eastern reaches of the empire broke away, and soon, the Greek city-states found themselves in a civil war. Problems and consequences from this spread throughout the empire and led to decades of constant war, political turmoil, and the draining of resources, not to mention the number of deaths — leaders, soldiers, and common people. This went on for over two decades after Alexander's death.

### ***Hellenism***

Hellenism was the merging of the Greek ideas of religion, culture, ethics, philosophy, and science with local cultures. It pressed itself heavily on the Jewish culture, especially in matters of religion. The Greeks had hundreds of deities and a very complicated and contradictory mythology. Although their religion was not binding as far as a doctrine, the main expectation in Greek culture was to acknowledge and pay homage to the gods. There were ritualistic practices, such as animal sacrifice, but it also allowed freedom of religious expression, etc. This was quite different from Judaism, which was monotheistic and strict.

The Greeks were into sports and competitions, many of which were dedicated to honor the gods. Athletes competed in the nude as a celebration of the human body. Gyms were created, with those who did physical training doing so in the nude. Gyms were also places for education and socialization where men in the prime of their lives studied and socialized together. There was a sense of religious devotion, civic, and military life all mixed together. These practices were antithetical to the Jewish religion. The Greeks considered circumcision barbarism. They also viewed the dietary restrictions of the Jews as nonsense. Greek culture and religion tended toward freedom and had wide latitude, while Judaism tended toward restrictions and regulations. This led to a significant cultural clash.

### **Ptolemy I and Seleucus I**

For the first twenty years following Alexander's death, the Greek empire was characterized by war and rebellion. Two of the main figures who arose were Ptolemy and Seleucus.

## ***Ptolemy***

Ptolemy was born in Macedonia around 367 BC. He was a contemporary of Alexander, who was educated alongside him. The two became close friends. Ptolemy distinguished himself in battle, especially in India, where he became one of Alexander's generals.

## ***Seleucus***

Seleucus was also born in Macedonia. The son of a prominent noble, he was commander of a phalanx unit. He was never part of Alexander's inner circle. He and his wife, Apama had three children. It is said that he had a real affection for his wife, something that was uncommon at the time.

## ***The Empire Divided***

After Alexander's death, Ptolemy became the satrap of Egypt. The Middle East, up the Mediterranean coast to the Euphrates river basin, including Judah and Samaria, was granted to Laomedon, another of Alexander's childhood friends. This area was renamed Syria, in honor of the Assyrians who once ruled there. Seleucus was charged to handle the cavalry for the regent, Perdiccas. Before 323 ended, Ptolemy was in Egypt establishing his rule. When Alexander's embalmed body was being carried back from Babylon, Ptolemy had the hearse diverted to the new city of Alexandria, from which he now claimed to be the heir of Alexander's legacy.

In response, Perdiccas invaded Egypt in 321 BC and was assassinated by his own troops, with Seleucus being one of the chief conspirators. After this, Seleucus was promoted to the satrap of Babylon. After Perdiccas' death, Antipater became ruler of the empire, with Alexander's brother, Philip III and son, Alexander IV, under his charge. Antipater died in 319 BC, leaving a battle for who would control Alexander's brother and young son. Olympias, the mother of Alexander, had Phillip III assassinated and became regent for her grandson, 4-year-old Alexander IV. A few months later she was murdered by Antipater's son, Cassander, who took custody of the boy and proclaimed himself as regent.

If you think this is dramatic, just wait. Quickly after Cassander took over, the satrap of Phrygia, Antigonus, took it upon himself to annex Syria, Babylon, and Media, bringing Judah and Samaria under his control. Seleucus had to abandon Babylon and flee to Egypt, where he sought refuge from Ptolemy. Ptolemy believed Antigonus had become a threat to Egypt, so he invaded the Middle East, including Judah and Samaria, taking them over. The Jews refused to fight for him.

In 315 BC, Antigonus retaliated. He gained control over Judah and Samaria again. Later, in 312, Ptolemy responded and defeated the son of Antigonus, Demetrius, in Gaza. Ptolemy took control of Syria and forced Antigonus to give Babylon to Seleucus. But Ptolemy didn't give Seleucus Syria. This created a rift between them. Within a year, 311 BC, Demetrius took over Syria and returned the area to Antigonus' control.

The following year, Alexander's son, Alexander IV, was poisoned, along with his mother, by Cassander. Alexander's royal line had come to an end. Upon his death, the remaining generals fought things out with no intention of keeping Alexander's kingdom together. Each of the 4 generals took their areas and ruled them independently. Lysimachus was over Thrace and wanted Asia Minor. Antigonus ruled Asia

Minor (including Judah and Samaria) and wanted Babylon. Seleucus ruled Babylon and the area all the way to India. He continued to claim Syria as his. Ptolemy reigned in Egypt, Cyrene, and Cyprus and also claimed Syria as his own. In 306 BC, Antigonos declared himself king. Ptolemy was formally recognized as the Pharaoh of Egypt in 305. Antigonos was killed in the battle of Ipsus in 301, after which most of his kingdom was split between Lysimachus and Seleucus. Finally, Seleucus gained control over Judah and Samaria. Once the battle of Ipsus had concluded, things settled into “peace” with the four separate kingdoms settling into order.

## **Judah Under Ptolemy**

Between 351 and 301 BC, Judah and Samaria were under 9 different reigns of power. There were constant incursions. The Jews suffered greatly, having to feed the armies, be forced into fighting, and suffer the damage and turmoil inflicted by them. The death toll was immense. As the battle of Ipsus was going on in 301 BC, Ptolemy was absent because he was invading Judah and Samaria. There were extreme terror tactics used, where the Jews in rural areas were forced into fighting against Jerusalem. He plundered Jewish crops and burned what was not consumed. Jerusalem soon fell to Ptolemy and the city changed hands for the 10<sup>th</sup> time in 50 years. He annexed the entire region to his own kingdom. Many Jews suffered the loss of life, and the temple took extreme damage. Many Jews who remained alive were conscripted into army service, and a large number were deported to Alexandria as slaves. Some have estimated over 100,000 Jews were taken, while Josephus says the number was more like “tens of thousands.” Soon Alexandria, Egypt, became the largest population center for Jews in the world. The fall of Jerusalem in 301 led to great grief and sadness for the Jews, who felt they had been abandoned by God.

### ***Greek Influence Continues to Grow***

Jaddua, the high priest of Jerusalem died around 325 BC. At his death, he was thought to be around 80 years old. Following him was Hezekiah (325-301 BC). His time was marked by a great influx of Greek culture upon the Jews. Hebrew names were changed to Greek names. There was great pressure to conform the Jewish religion to Greek practices. When Ptolemy took over Jerusalem in 301, Hezekiah was deported to Alexandria, where he became a prominent leader of the Jews there. In the subsequent years, Hellenism continued its march. Greek supplanted Aramaic as the primary language. Greek literature dominated, as well as Greek ideas and education. Greek institutions such as the gym, stadiums, and theaters became popular. Greek names were adopted. Greek cities sprang up along the Mediterranean. Further inland, existing cities were renamed with Greek names.

This also impacted religion, with many adaptations. In Egypt, two deities were blended in with two Greek deities, Zeus and Hades. Some Jews began to identify Yahweh as Zeus. Some welcomed these changes, others resisted. The Greek influence was a serious threat to Jewish identity.

### ***The Death of Ptolemy***

In 283 BC, Ptolemy I died in Alexandria at the age of 84. He gave the empire to his younger son, Ptolemy II. Cassander died in 297. After some wrangling over his territory, it wound up in the hands of

Lysimachus, age 78. Of the 4 generals under Alexander, only he and 75-year-old Seleucus were still alive. Seleucus and Lysimachus both laid claim to Syria and in 281, the two battled at the Field of Cyrus near Sardis. Lysimachus was killed. Seleucus traveled to Europe to take over Macedon and Thrace but was assassinated by Ptolemy I's oldest son, Ptolemy Thunderbolt. He ruled only two years before he was beheaded by the Gauls who ruled Greece for a while. Finally, Antigonos II regained control and created a dynasty that lasted until 148 BC.

## For Thought and Discussion

1. How did Alexander the Great's lack of a clear heir impact the political landscape of his empire after his death?
2. In what ways did Hellenism influence Jewish culture and religion during the reign of the Ptolemies?
3. What were the primary differences between Greek and Jewish religious practices and cultural values?
4. How did the rivalry between Ptolemy I and Seleucus I shape the geopolitical dynamics of the region?
5. What role did Ptolemy play in the division and governance of Alexander's empire, specifically in relation to Judea?
6. How did the repeated changes in rulership over Judea and Samaria affect the daily lives and culture of the Jewish people during this period?

7. Discuss the strategic importance of Judea and Samaria in the conflicts between the Successor Kingdoms.
  
8. How did Greek influence continue to grow in Judea under Ptolemy I's rule, especially in terms of language, education, and urban development?
  
9. In what ways did the death of Ptolemy I and the subsequent power shifts among Alexander's generals affect the stability of the region?
  
10. Reflect on the long-term consequences of Alexander the Great's empire fragmentation on the cultural and religious identity of the Jewish people.