

What About God's Chosen People?

Part XX



By Philip E. Busby

Question #21 - *“Is it true that the Jews are God's chosen people? I have a Christian friend who says the Jews were not God's chosen people.”*

In our last couple of segments we left our step by step covering of history, and instead talked about how the events that culminated in 141 B.C. had a lasting impact and also an inevitable outcome in many ways. Thus, we covered a broad look at history as well as some of the reasons religious thought, which is human thought, interfered with the nation really getting back on track in the way they could have. All this spoke to the impact this had not just on the Jews but the non-Jews, in particular how those who became Christians have come around to thinking wrong about the Jews as the chosen nation. While, again, we have taken a good look at things that cause us to more clearly see the answer to our question, we do not want to end our more detailed historical look here, as it is important to our understanding that the chosen nation is not about the human leadership, but about the individuals of the nation striving to be a group tasked with enacting God's representational Laws in their everyday lives.

In this segment, we will attempt to get back to a more step by step historical look of what happened after the Maccabees became both the secular leaders as well as held the power of the High Priesthood. I have mentioned many times the fact this decision to establish what

became known as the Hasmonean Dynasty came with the declaration this would be the way things were until a faithful prophet arose who could set it all straight. This statement is, of course, important because no matter what the nation chose to do from there, this declaration was - for all intents and purposes - asking God to correct the situation in His timing, and that's exactly what set the stage for not just The Messiah to come, as was prophesied He would one day, but also how He would not come in force, but offering Himself to be the leader the nation should have been waiting for! All this shows us how much God does not set us up for failure, but at the same time knows we will get ourselves in deeper and deeper trouble the more we exercise our free will without yielding to Him. The history that takes us from this moment we have made it to in our historical overview, up to the coming of The Messiah, continues to show us God was allowing the nation to do what we all as individuals get to do, which is choose for ourselves whether to look to God or go our own way.

The important information about what has happened in the lead-up to where we've made it in our historical look is the time Judas Maccabee knew the Seleucid army was something he could not hold off forever on his own, and had asked the Romans to intervene. As we covered, the Romans did not send an army or anything directly helpful in the Maccabee's struggle against the Seleucid, but they did make a determination that would stay in their minds. At the time, the Romans very much liked the idea of using Judea as a wedge - or buffer - to keep the two remaining powers of the Greek empire that still had any significance from being able to meld together. One could say it took the Romans as long as it did to get directly involved, on the basis that the events taking place in Judea were creating this situation without Rome having to expend any of their resources to make it happen. Due to this, the Romans would stand by and allow events to unfold in Judea. They would eventually officially recognize the Hasmonean Dynasty; but when the time was right, they would more directly intervene to basically add Judea to their realm.

Realm is actually a good term when talking about the Roman empire, and this is what makes a study of the string of empires shown to Daniel so interesting. As each one progressed we see how they were well represented in the statue the king saw in his vision, and which Daniel interpreted. (Daniel 2) The Greeks were the brass, which is a metal very useful for many things, but at the same time has a more pleasant appearance like the precious metals of silver and gold that preceded them in the statue. The iron that represented the Romans shows how much Rome was really focused, not on any real purity in culture and beauty, but a focus on the workability of an empire.

They were trying to connect the world together in whatever way it was possible to do so. This they did by building roads and creating a system where people would become Roman citizens, while others under their rule were not forced to. Rome would not care so much about things the Greeks held in high regard, which would win people over through the beauty of their culture, but more by the prestige and privilege that came with being a part of the greater group or the “greatest civilization.”

When we understand this, we should see why the Romans were not immediately interested in anything but keeping those powers which could be a threat to them, from remaining one or becoming one. As much as we tend to look at the Romans as brutal and powerful, the truth is, overall they didn't care to destroy, consume, or replace individual cultures when they didn't see it as necessary to maintain control. Their interest was in making all the pieces of their realm work together in a “profitable” way. As they took direct control of a region, they would use force when it was necessary to show they would not tolerate rebellion or unrest in general. However, before taking over a region, it could work in their favor to pit cultures against each other as a way to weaken them. In many ways, this is what we are seeing at this point in the lands held by the remaining pieces of the Greek empire. In short, it was not to Rome's advantage to use resources to stop the civil wars among what was left of the Greeks. The Greeks had a beautiful culture which the Romans could borrow from and overlay in order to add to the prestige of Roman existence, but beyond these kinds of things, Romans had little interest in the cultures they ruled. As the Greeks weakened, the time would come when it would not take much effort to simply annex the entire region.

As far as the humanistic view of things, the Jewish nation was simply one of many cultures and peoples intermixed with the events of all the Romans were keeping an eye on, but remaining very hands-off until the time was right and/or it served their interests. We later see a micro version of this attitude in the Roman mind as Pilate deals with Christ. It is the Jewish religious establishment that brings Jesus and asks for capital punishment. As long as the Romans saw no threat to themselves or the general peace, it was not really their desire to get involved. Pilate certainly did not see in Jesus a threat to the empire, so what ultimately led him to give in was first, he didn't really care to save the life of what he saw as an insignificant Jew; and second, sparing Jesus or prolonging the process of His trial seemed to be building a threat to the peace. This Roman attitude becomes important in looking at the time of the Maccabees taking power in Judea and even growing it to take in territory the

Seleucids had once indisputably held. The Romans would not be worried about the Maccabees until it came time to control them in some form so as to annex the region, especially if they could continue to be a thorn in the Seleucid's side. This brings us to a need to look at what the Maccabees became, and the first steps in this are to look at the way the Maccabees name/term gave way to the title “Hasmonean Dynasty.” This is not so much because we can with certainty nail down the name “Hasmonean,” but because the Maccabees, which were leading the people to fight for the religious freedom they needed in order to follow God's Laws, became a true ruling dynasty!

We've already covered how the five sons of Mattathias had come to only one surviving son by the point the Maccabees were put in charge of the leadership and High Priesthood while the nation waited for a faithful prophet. This son's name was Simon, and he had three sons. As with many families, names were passed down to later generations, and so one must not be confused by the reuse. Simon's sons were Judas, Mattathias, and John who was known as Hyrcanus. Hyrcanus would be the one to go on in importance to the dynasty. Simon would rule for about eight years in total, but at this point Simon stood in the place his father Mattathias was when the family made their first moves against the Greeks, in that Simon was now the one becoming too old to directly lead the army himself. Thus, during most of his time in power, it would be his son Hyrcanus who would lead the army into battle while Simon focused on diplomatic affairs. As with so many actions of the past, it can be easy to label Simon's actions as a mistake, but without being on the ground at the time this is truly unfair.

You see, the rightful heir to the Seleucid throne had awarded Judea its virtual independence in exchange for the support Simon gave to him as the Seleucid civil war raged on. In spite of this, Simon had good reason not to trust the Seleucid throne, and even as Judea had/was seeing successful expansion by taking back the territory the southern kingdom once consisted of, he would turn to the Romans, as his brother had, in an attempt to strengthen the relationship with that power. This was the real beginnings of what had started out focused on gaining the freedom the Jews needed in order to administer God's Laws, turning to being about secular affairs that any king might look after. If there was a “mistake” in Simon's thoughts, this was it. However, what most people are talking about in accusing him of making a mistake is that when Simon contacted the Romans, they issued a decree among the people of the eastern regions proclaiming a league of friendship with the Jewish people. This, as with other actions Rome had taken, was nothing but another inroad to the region for which Rome had to give nothing

in return. At the time, the only power the decree had to advance the Jews was the hope it would frighten other powers into not coming against Judea. In the end, it would seem just the opposite is actually what happened, because as Antiochus VII took the Seleucid throne in 139 B.C., he chose to exercise power over Judea, once again, by withdrawing rights and privileges he saw as only existing due to choices made by his predecessors. This is what Simon had feared.

In Antiochus VII's eyes, Judea was not truly independent but only as free as the Seleucids allowed them to be, and he would send an army to Judea to back up what he had declared concerning the change in attitude. This army's main objective for coming was to collect what the Seleucid throne saw as back taxes owed by Judea. Two of Simon's sons, Hyrcanus and Judas, would lead the defense against this army and defeat them. The fact this all arose in the first place is often blamed on Simon for seeking closer ties with Rome; but the question is, was it because of Simon's actions this happened or because Simon was wise enough to know such a thing would happen that he was hoping to gain Roman support? Another question, of course, we can ask is, should he simply have trusted God for his defense? The answers to all this we'll never truly know. All we do know is that Rome, once again, left Judea to defend itself likely hoping ongoing battles would keep both powers weakened. The bigger problem that came upon Simon was an internal one. As with all the other powers of the region, this time in history was very much a time of constant survival for only those leaders who were alert to everything going on, on every side of them. Simon was attempting to get Roman help against the Seleucids, but his biggest problem would come just as it so often did among the Seleucids, it would come from within his own house.

The fact Simon was the last son of the original Maccabees did not matter to his son-in-law, who likely was married into the family due to the humanistic view of the right way to build political ties. This son-in-law would assassinate Simon, along with two of his sons, in 135 B.C. This man's attempt to take power would not be successful, as Hyrcanus was not there to be killed along with his father and brothers. While a separate attempt was made on his life, Hyrcanus would eventually prevail and take his father's position. While Judea could breathe a sigh of relief that the first direct internal threat to the Maccabees' leadership was overcome, the overall fight for the survival of Judea's freedoms had been made more difficult. Hyrcanus would have to take the direct leadership of Judea just as Antiochus VII sent yet another army against it. Not in a position to focus on meeting this challenge, Hyrcanus' only recourse was to make his stand at

Jerusalem itself. The city was besieged, and he made some specific choices during this siege that caused him to lose favor with the Jewish people. The situation became so desperate in Jerusalem, Hyrcanus was finally forced to end it by agreeing to terms with the Seleucid power. Heavy tribute would be asked for, and Hyrcanus' way of funding what was owed added to his unpopularity, as it is said he raided the tomb of King David. Also, the fortifications of Jerusalem would once again be torn down, and Hyrcanus had to agree to help the Seleucids fight the Parthians.

Hyrcanus was now left in no position to do much of anything but fulfill his obligations to the Seleucid throne. These conditions continued until Antiochus VII was killed in battle in 129 B.C. The fact transition in power was never easy among the Seleucids is something Hyrcanus could take advantage of. Hyrcanus would not accept Judea was nothing more than a vassal of the Seleucids, and this is where we really see secular rulership taking shape. During his reign, Hyrcanus would again try to further a relationship with Rome and send ambassadors to them. As usual, the Romans would be all talk and no action, but it shows the diplomatic ties he wished to further. Among the Jews, Hyrcanus would again choose a very unpopular course of action and hire an army that would answer strictly to him. This would, of course, cost more than Hyrcanus had available; he also knew he could not raise the money through taxation of the Jewish people, so he would fund this endeavor by again raiding the tomb of David. Allowing no Jewish criticism of his actions to change his mind, Hyrcanus' new army would have great success. His success would also be furthered by the Romans, but not because they directly helped him. The Romans were taking the opportunity to attack what was now a truly decaying Seleucid power. The Romans likely became particularly interested in further inroads to the region because what had once been the eastern part of the Seleucid Kingdom, which had indirectly helped the Jew's cause at the time the Maccabees first rose in revolt, would once again help by also taking advantage of the Seleucids. The Romans no doubt did not want what came to be known to history as the Parthian empire to simply become the new power over what the Seleucids once were.

All this allowed Hyrcanus to begin expanding his power, and once again establish a truly more independent nation. He would take the area to the north and destroy the false temple the Samaritans had built at the time they were told they could not take part in the new temple being built at Jerusalem by the Jews returning from Babylon. He would also push southward into what had been the territory of the Edomites and take the land that by then was known as Idumea. All this, of course, angered what

was left of the Seleucid powers, but their final days were upon them and their armies were permanently recalled from fighting Hyrcanus. As we near the end of his life, we see Israel had truly gained an independence and freedom that made them a land-holding nation again in a way it had not been since before the first attacks of the Babylonian empire. In all, Hyrcanus would rule for about thirty years, and there is little doubt he began to truly see himself as a king.

As was mentioned, during his time Hyrcanus had made choices that had displeased many, and at other times pleased the people in serving as both the ruler and acting High Priest. On a religious level he had been ideologically with the Pharisees, and late in his life sided with the Sadducees. By the end of his life he was able to leave his son a considerable nation, but he had also successfully turned the Maccabees' cause into a new ruling power over Israel that did not really match up with or prioritize looking outside its own power and ability for God's help, and the faithful prophet the nation was to be looking to arise! As for the name of this dynasty, there are many debated explanations. Some say it went all the way back to the great-grandfather of Mattathias. Others believe it references the name of a place, and there are other thoughts on this as well. However, where the name came from is not as important as the fact there came about a dynasty that ruled in Israel, which was not of the line of David, but which began to see itself as the rightful rulers of the nation. The question at this point becomes, was Israel, as the chosen nation of God, really in a much better position than it had been while under other secular rulers? To this, there are many arguments we can look at. First, it is true this was still the family whom the Jews had chosen to hold power; and as we have touched on, it seemed inevitable that if it lasted any time at all this setup was going to become a power of its own. The fact this is exactly what happened is where a lot of the trouble begins, but certainly not where it ends. The second factor is that the Jews did enjoy great freedom to set their own course, which they had often been deprived of by the other secular powers.

This opened the door to go forward with the worship of God in a way that was fairly unhindered by outside influence, the ramifications of which are a big part of where we want to get to in order to understand why conditions were what they were by the time of The Messiah. The problem was that the Maccabees had been named both princes and High Priests until God replaced them with what was right; and while it's true Mattathias was a priest to begin with, by the time of Hyrcanus the religious goals of this agreement being to truly restore the nation as one that lived by the Laws of God seemed to be

lost in a tumult of secular power struggles and expansion of territory. When it came to the dynasty's actions, this might not have been such a bad thing, but the fact the knowledge of who was the rightful High Priest had mostly been lost, meant focus on secular power left a religious vacuum in general! This was only made worse by the fact Hyrcanus had achieved what he had through methods that were by no means as democratic as the choice to put his family in power had been. By hiring an army, he took the struggle that was very personal to the Jews and made it one that seemed no more than what every other power player in the region was looking for. Funding the endeavor the way he did was not just unpopular but a symbolic blow to the idea the Maccabees had been given a position of trust.

It was as if stealing from David's tomb to pay for an already unpopular choice, set a tone for a future that not only would not yield to the past but showed blatant disregard for all they started out trying to defend! Upon his death in 104 B.C., the events leading to how the eldest of Hyrcanus' five sons, named Judah Aristobulus I, took power is where we see the dynasty take a hard turn in acting in the same way most other ruling parties of the day/region went about their business. Aristobulus I would be the first in the dynasty to truly hold the title of king of Israel, a title that was never really to be used to describe anyone not of the line and lineage of David! Aristobulus I would also officially take on the title of High Priest; and while this may seem a technicality in that this family had already been given the stewardship of the position, taking on the title itself was another indication of disregarding the truth of God's Law. When all was said and done, Aristobulus I's reign was short, but the reasons for it being short are worth looking at in this study. The simple fact that by Simon's grandson the Maccabee's line had become so unpopular with the Jewish people, who had made the agreement for them to hold this power, is in and of itself so telling of how much secular power was never something God wanted the nation to be focused on, one hardly knows where to start. Thus, we can only continue to see all this as an example of what happens when men choose to follow their own thoughts instead of seeking God on a continual basis.

When Hyrcanus died, he actually did not leave the rulership of the nation to his son, but had declared his wife, the mother of Aristobulus I, as the nation's leader. He had declared his son would be in charge of the High Priesthood, but Aristobulus I did not agree, and with the help of his brother, who had the familiar Greek name "Antigonus," put his mother in prison where she was allowed to starve to death. With the exception of Antigonus, he also imprisoned his brothers. During his

short one year reign, Aristobulus I did succeed in expanding the nation further north by taking the area on the west side of the Sea of Galilee. This, again, set the precedence that this region where Jesus would grow up and begin his ministry was a rightful part of the nation of Israel. However, the more shocking part of the history of this era is that it was becoming a common practice to act in yet another way, just as the Greek overlords the Maccabees had originally fought to cast off. When territory was taken there began to be forced conversions to Judaism. While the Greeks had attempted to outlaw circumcision, the Hasmonean Dynasty began forcing it on the people they ruled. This was certainly not in God's plan, and it is a pure example of how much religious thought patterns can be so very corrupting!

The fact God did not bless and allow the continuance of this kind of action among the Jews should have served as a clear warning to the later group(s), which called themselves the church, that attempting to use force to convert people to be "Christians" was not an acceptable way to go about spreading the Gospel! This is certainly true in light of the false idea, which prevails in the church, that before Jesus' sacrifice on the cross the way to be saved was to become a part of the Jewish nation. If God was not in favor of using force to make people follow the representational Laws He gave the chosen nation during the time before Christ's first appearing, whatever would make one believe forcing Christianity as a religious practice upon people had/has value? To this point I'd also like to add the fact, the history we are covering here was not just more recent to those in the Christian religion who first attempted such stupidity, but also that the authority of the Christian religion perpetuating these actions, then as well as now, believed the books known as the Apocryphal were/are of the same level of divinely inspired Scripture as the Old and New Testaments. While many who are not of a Christian religious branch very closely related to Catholicism do not know well, if anything at all about these books, they cover much of the history where the Jews tried such things. This leaves no room for the excuse of being ignorant to the fact Jews had once taken on this practice.

Getting back to the history at hand, in spite of his "accomplishments," Aristobulus I was not in good health, and this may have had some to do with why his father did not name him as successor, along with the idea of getting back to having a separation in who was leader and who was concerned with the High Priesthood. In any case, Aristobulus I's health led to a small group, which included his wife Alexandria Salome, being in charge of the daily affairs of running the nation, and we see again how much power corrupts. Having this power was not something

Salome wanted to give up, but Aristobulus I favored his brother, and had already given him a share of the governing power. Salome knew this meant Antigonus was set to take charge when her husband died, so when it became apparent Aristobulus I's life was not to last long, she began to convince him that his brother Antigonus was plotting against him. When she felt the time was right, Salome told Antigonus that Aristobulus I wanted to see him, while she told her husband his brother was coming to kill him. When Antigonus came in to see the king, the king's guards killed him before he could reach his brother.

Aristobulus I would die just a few short days after this in the year 103 B.C., and the Jews at large took his death as a sign of God's displeasure with him. Salome would release her husband's younger brothers from prison, and his half brother Alexander Jannaeus, being the next oldest, had the right to both the throne of Israel as well as Salome to be his wife. As marriage and power were often even more importantly connected in days gone by than they are now, Alexander Jannaeus would marry Salome, and it appears she would get what she desired, at the very least, in continuing as "Queen." As Aristobulus I and Salome had had no children, there was no threat to Jannaeus from an heir of his half brother. This meant he and Salome had a clean slate - if you will - to continue the dynasty fairly undisputed. One would think this would settle things down a bit, but, in truth, even more troubling times lay ahead.

Alexandar Jannaeus would turn out to be a very cruel leader, and this would further that question of whether the Jews were really better off having the Hasmonean Dynasty as their leaders than they had been under other secular powers. Jannaeus and Salome would also go on to have two sons, Hyrcanus II and Aristobulus II. The later events of Jannaeus' rule, and those following concerning the actions of his sons, would in many ways make the years of prior war, conflict, and struggle seem very righteous and almost subdued in comparison!

Until next time, may we each continually choose to be the people God wants us to be!

