

What About God's Chosen People?

Part XXI



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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 previous segment, we started down the line of those who ruled after the last son of the original Maccabees had died. In doing this, we begin to see just how political power corrupts and the reason why God never put secular leadership in the Law to begin with. In focusing on the things of God, the nation never really had the time to deal with the struggles secular leadership causes, and it was only after the nation demanded an earthly king God allowed them to have one. At the point in history we have made it to in our study, the Jews were under a leadership that consisted of those the nation had once approved of but whom were not of the line God had established through David to hold the position. In noting this, we've come to the more general question of how much better off the nation really was having this setup versus simply being under the rule of another power such as the Greeks or other empires.

Now, we did talk about some of the pros that still existed in this setup over having non-Jews rule the nation, but even with a Jewish ruler we still see the focus on expanding territory and a desire for power causing the Laws of God to take a back seat, at best, when it came to what the nation was able to accomplish as a whole. During the segment of this study where we discussed the

events which give us Hanukkah and culminated in the establishment of what would become known as the Hasmonean Dynasty, I made the statement that the Pharisees and Sadducees did not yet officially exist as a group but the predecessors of such groups did. Going back to that note, I should point out that some would argue it was at the time of Hanukkah these groups were established and even set the year of such groups' founding as pretty solid. However, I believe it is better to understand that religion does not develop overnight!

In most cases of official organizations of men there can be a date to which one will point to as the official establishment of the organization. In our modern world of official laws that make organizations file paperwork with the governing authorities, the date such paperwork was filed and/or accepted can be said to be the solid date. However, even if this is true, most groups, at least those of any size, do not start from that date, but out of conversations, discussions, and events of all kinds which often lead to the desire to form a specific entity that becomes the vehicle to go forward with the ideology, beliefs, and teachings which evolved out of the earlier events. This is what makes denominations and the like such a dangerous thing. No matter how good they may start out, more often than not they become the guardians of specific beliefs. In the cases where certain beliefs are not correct there can be damage done for obvious reasons. However, to change beliefs opens the door to the other side of the danger such organizations face, which is that leaders at certain levels gain the right to change whatever they want as they choose. This then leads to organizations following paths that make them most popular; and today more than ever, it brings in many compromises with worldly ideas in order to appease a broader base of people.

Setting a deeper discussion on such matters aside for now, the point I wish to make about the date of when the Pharisees and Sadducees began is one we can not pin down. While latter iterations of these groups may have pointed back to the events of Hanukkah as their starting point, that's casting a broad net over all the history of why such groups started in the first place and not really when they coalesced. Of course, all organizations that can, would like to say they came out of some major revival, restoration, etc. that is looked at as positive. They may even claim to be the "original" group responsible for the event and/or those who most faithfully represent the positive changes it brought about. In any case, it was not really until the time of Simon's son Hyrcanus, who took the leadership role and began to act more like a king, that these religious groups solidified into more of what we see them as by the time of The Messiah. This was, in no small part, due to the unpopular way Hyrcanus had handled the leadership role, and that in spite of the success his

leadership had in gaining and maintaining Israel's independence.

Why? Mostly because of the fact religious affairs were being neglected. As we went on in our last segment to look at those who directly followed Hyrcanus as “kings” of the Hasmonean Dynasty, we talked about how much anger there was at these leaders so freely taking the title of High Priest. As was mentioned, this might have seemed odd, but not when you consider again how clear it was becoming that getting back on the right track was not something really being looked at by these rulers, and which was the original intent for their appointment to the position. As the actions of the Hasmonean Dynasty started making the people feel more like they were no longer in this as a group but just, once again, Jews living under the rulership of a specific secular power, the people began to turn away from the dynasty and even the temple that once had been so hard fought for to get back. This is where the pieces which we have covered previously in this series start to come together and show their importance.

You see we talked about how popular the synagogue system had become, and remained even after and during times the temple, once again, was more available to all the Jews. We talked about the rise of understanding the need for copies of the Law to be more widely available, and the synagogue system facilitated this by each one having a copy of the Law and prophets. This need also gave rise to those known as scribes, who no longer worked for the king as they had in times gone by; but a scribe in Israel had become a religious authority group in their own right, as they were the ones who produced these copies. In being focused on copying the Law and prophets, they were, as a group, arguably the most familiar with the actual words God had given the nation. The synagogue system also gave rise to others whose focus was on teaching the words of God, and we should keep in mind we are far past the time it was more exclusively looked at as the job of the Levites to do the work of the ministry. This is why the term “Rabbi” is used so much by the time of The Messiah. This word/title basically means teacher and specifically refers to being a teacher of God's Word.

Thus, the stage was set for the chosen nation to take on a whole different look than the Law had originally prescribed. This, again, was in spite of the fact the temple stood and was even being administered by those whom the Jews had chosen to take on the job until God sent the faithful prophet to set things straight. The fact the nation was religiously going about things in such a different way than was originally prescribed in the Law gave plenty of

room for not just the two major groups of the Pharisees and Sadducees to rise, but others as well. Such groups became more powerful and a far more respected authority on religious matters than the original Maccabees had ever been! In turn, this brought about the obvious issue of them being more respected than the Hasmonean Dynasty among the common people of the nation, and this meant the dynasty could not ignore them. This is why I pointed out last time that Hyrcanus, on a religious level, had been ideologically with the Pharisees and late in his life sided with the Sadducees.

One of the biggest reasons for this was likely because the dynasty was suppose to be caretakers of the High Priesthood; and the Sadducees were considered to be closer to the right bloodline, if not ideology, tasked with this job. The Pharisees, on the other hand, promoted more of the traditions of how people had come to religiously observe things without the temple. In a way, this made the Sadducees the main caretakers of the temple, which was still important to the people; while at the same time the Pharisees became the keepers of the religious ideology that was more widely accepted and daily followed among the people. This gave great power to both groups, and this is also the foundation of why they were seen as such rivals between each other, along with the amazing fact they became united against Jesus when He came on the scene!

In truth, it should not be so amazing they, along with other groups who were even more ideologically hostile toward those with differing religious thoughts, came together against Jesus. Jesus came offering Himself first and foremost as the restorer of religious purity. This was a greater threat to the religious groups, which felt they held the real power among the Jewish people, than it seemed to be to the more secular ruling dynasty. The power of the religious groups needed to yield to The Messiah long before any necessity to change the secular power might arise, and they clearly saw this truth in Jesus' work! What they basically observed was the Biblical purity of what Jesus was focused on, that being to restore the true Laws of God, not just in ceremonial actions but first and foremost as they related to the truths of righteous living. If we continue down our historical look at the Hasmonean Dynasty, you can see how by the time of Jesus there was layers of secular power over the Jews; but more so than ever, groups like the Pharisees and Sadducees held the real sway over the people of the chosen nation, and that's what Jesus was eroding very quickly!

Picking up where we left off our historical study, we had come to the rule of Alexander Jannaeus who was

the second son of Hyrcanus to hold the position due to the same kind of infighting for power among the Hasmoneans as there was among the Greeks. We should also not forget he married the wife of his late ruling half brother, and this gave both the Pharisees and Sadducees an ally among the ruling family. Alexander continued the favor his father, later in his life, had come to give the Sadducees. On the other hand, his wife Salome literally came from a family of Pharisees, her brother even being one of the groups most prominent leaders. If it had not been for this connection, the Pharisees might have had a hard time surviving this time period. Alexander would make no apologies in insisting on holding both the kingship as well as the position of High Priest. This combination of power continued to be very unpopular - as it should have been - in that it politicized the religious office in ways that made it all but meaningless. This point is why it was particularly something the Rabbis across the nation condemned.

However, the Sadducees supported it because Alexander supported them, and if this is not a political marriage, I don't know what is. This left the Pharisees as the major group to lead the condemnation of the handling of the priesthood; and thus, Alexander persecuted them all during his reign. If it had not been for Salome, the Pharisees surely would have faced an even harder time than they did. On top of that, this further alienated the people from the temple or, at least, its true predominance. This was bad because for all the bad we talk about in speaking of Sadducees and their humanistic thinking, one must keep in mind that, at least on an ideological level, they saw the Words of God alone as the correct foundation for being Jewish. For the Pharisees, and all the credit we can give them in various ways, their big sticking point was that they did not see the traditions their fathers had established as a way to continue being Jewish in the absence of the temple being just for that purpose alone. They saw those traditions as being much on the same level of importance as the pure words of the Law. From this, one can easily see why The Messiah was not going to agree with either of these groups; but for the time being, we are seeing a period where the people were being pushed further and further from the importance of looking to the temple as the center of the Law's administration.

What really made it obvious that Alexander only cared to hold the High Priesthood for the sake of power was that his true ambition was to continue expanding the territory of Judea, and he would spend many of his years at war. In a furtherance of what Daniel had seen in his vision concerning the king of the South and the king of the North, the power in Egypt would, once again, get involved in Judean affairs. If you try to thoroughly cover the wars Alexander got himself into, you understand why

all this Greek time period's history was only shown to Daniel in very broad strokes. One of the first pushes Alexander would make was to continue north into territory which by now had fallen into more local hands, as the Seleucids were fading away. In doing this, a lot of treachery would come into play on all sides with various rulers seeing various opportunities. One of the most interesting would be the son of Cleopatra III, the Queen of Egypt. He had been exiled from Egypt by his mother and set up his own kingdom in Cyprus. He was persuaded to fight against Alexander in hopes of gaining control along the Judean coast for the purpose of having a better point from which to strike his mother in Egypt.

Alexander attempted to get what he wanted through deceit, and this set off a war that might have cost Judea its independence but for the plea of Jews in Egypt that it was in Cleopatra III's best interest to help Alexander. After doing so, she felt it only right she then be the one to control Judea, but, once again, the Jews upon whom she depended for support in Egypt talked her down. This left Alexander free to continue his quest for more territory, and in doing so further risk Judean independence. In the end, he eventually expanded further south and even took most of the area that was once held by the Philistines, a significant portion of which we call Gaza today. This gave Judea control over important trade routes; and while in many ways this was returning Israel to its past glory, it was only in the ways of worldly affairs, not the true service of God!

That brings us to about 100 B.C., and talking about the service of God brings us to the real trouble Alexander brought to Judea. You see, the trade routes Alexander took control over during his conquests were traditionally held by descendants of Ishmael, known as the Nabateans. In the past, these were a people who had supported the Jews, but now were not so happy. Not only that, Alexander continued to push for territory and began attacking areas to the east of the Jordan River. This gave those he had already angered the opportunity to attack Alexander, a man whose reach had really exceeded his grasp at that point, and he was blessed to escape with his own life. Thus, he turned back to Jerusalem. However, the Jews at home had had just about enough of Alexander's ambition, and Judea was on the brink of civil war. Due to this, Alexander had to make peace with outside powers he had angered, and to keep them from joining the side of those who now openly opposed him at home, Alexander was forced to give back some of the territory he had gained.

Whether you want to call it an all out civil war right off or more of a civil conflict is up to you, but in many ways the lines got drawn between those on the side



of the Sadducees and those on the side of the Pharisees. Much of the details of what happened comes from an historian named Josephus who was born in Jerusalem not long after the lifetime of Jesus, which, just for the sake of perspective, means he was not an eye witness to these events. However, one account we are told is that during a temple ceremony for the Feast of Tabernacles, Alexander, acting as High Priest, chose not to correctly perform a specific ritual and was pelted with the traditional fruit the Jews in attendance had in their hands. This angered Alexander, and he ordered them all killed. It is said 6,000 people died there in the courtyard of the temple that day. After this, Alexander literally built a fence around the altar(s) so the people could no longer bring their offerings. Alexander would only allow the priests to do so, and this further alienated the common Jew from the temple and its service.

Ultimately this started the all-out fighting. Alexander would see success early on, and this would lead the opposition to call for the help of those they believed would be most eager for revenge against the Hasmoneans. They would call on what was left of the Seleucids! These combined forces were something Alexander did not have the manpower to hold out against, and he would flee to the mountains for refuge. However, the distaste of going back to being in any way under the thumb of the Seleucids was too much for some of the Jews, and this caused some 6,000 Jews to rejoin Alexander in order to counter attack and drive the Seleucids back home. This effort did just that but also gave power over Judea back to Alexander. This overall conflict lasted about six years, and the cost of Jewish lives reached into the 50,000 range. Sadly for Alexander, regaining control was not where it ended, as Alexander desired to take revenge on those who had defied him; and whether you believe Josephus' record of how he did it or not, a very brutal part of that revenge was accomplished by killing many Pharisees.

In the end of it all, Alexander became even more disliked than ever by both neighboring kings as well as many of the people in his own nation. Due to this, he would rely on an army of purchased foreign troops. However, initially they would not be enough to withstand an assault by neighboring Arab kings who would take back vital routes in Judea, and specifically a road leading to Jerusalem. Determined to put this behind him once and for all, Alexander would again cross the Jordan and spend three years defeating what he saw as petty kings and finally add more of that eastern territory to his realm. While this was a big risk and did nothing to make the Jews popular with their neighbors, he had, once again, taken steps toward returning the landmass of Judea back to what

Israel was before it separated into two kingdoms. It also did more to define what would be considered Judea, as Rome later came more fully into the picture.

In the last three years of his life, Alexander was not well due to his incessant fighting of wars and his abuse of alcohol. However, this did not stop him from continuing to go after even more territory. His life would end during a siege of a heavily fortified city, and it is said his wife Salome was there for his death. We are also told Alexander entrusted his power to her, but one should not discount Salome's earlier actions in assuring her political survival. One way or the other, as Alexander's 27 year reign came to an end in 76 B.C., Salome would become the next ruler in the Hasmonean Dynasty; but it is also said she hid the fact her husband had passed away until the siege was successful so as not to allow Alexander's death to be the reason it might fail. Alexander's body, for all he had done to be disliked by the people, and in particular the Pharisees, was brought to Jerusalem and buried with all the regular honors one would expect for a ruler of his day.

Salome would become the ruler in Judea, but not without the support and really the consent of the Pharisees. The power struggle between the Pharisees and Sadducees had finally turned in favor of the Pharisees, and they practically took charge at this point. In spite of this fact, Salome was responsible for bringing some healing to the land after her husband's death. She was able to bring a quiet that had been missing for many years and even kept the peace with Judea's neighbors, which is a considerable feat when one thinks about how much Alexander had constantly angered so many of them. She would not attempt to take on the High Priesthood, and it is doubtful the Pharisees, or Sadducees for that matter, would have allowed such a thing. Instead, she appointed her son Hyrcanus II as High Priest, and he was a man who followed the ideology of the Pharisees completely. This total shift of power from the Sadducees to the Pharisees brings us to a conversation about another body familiar to students of the New Testament, but of which many have no idea as to why it existed.

In truth, it is not entirely clear as to exactly when this body, known as the Sanhedrin, might have been started; but just as with the Pharisees and Sadducees themselves, it likely was not founded as any specific idea at a specific point. Rather it grew out of actions taken along the way of the history we've been covering and became more important due to the change in the nature of what the Hasmonean Dynasty turned out to be, as well as the more solidified establishment of groups such as the Pharisees and Sadducees. As with the two religious

groups, some say the Sanhedrin dates back to the events of Hanukkah, but, again, this is just a way of speaking broadly about why it came to be. What would appear to be the more logical truth is the issue we talked about earlier, which is that the rulers of the Hasmonean Dynasty could not hold the sway of the people without the support of the religious leaders. As they became more unpopular in their actions, it became downright necessary to have the support of at least one of these religious groups and/or give credit to the legitimacy of a variety of such groups in some form.

These facts, combined with the fact there very well may have been a council of some sort set up at the same time the Maccabees were named rulers of the land and administrators of the High Priesthood until God set things right, give us a view on the bodies' formation. Such a body may have, at its beginnings, been nothing more than a way for the newly minted rulers to get advice from and/or get a handle on continuing public opinion. What seems clear is that it's not likely any such body would have held any real political power until around the time of Hyrcanus, who was the first in the line to really need the support of some segment of the religious rulers. This would have made the body a real mixture, at times, of those with varying ideology in an attempt to show no favoritism, but at other times it would have been filled mostly with those whom the ruler favored. In this, one can see how the Sanhedrin we know by the time of the New Testament, was both political and religious. It also speaks to the fact there is a very thin line between what we call the two, for so many reasons I will avoid getting into them here.

No matter when it started or how uninterrupted its existence may have been, by the time of Alexander Jannaeus there would seem to have been a version of the Sanhedrin in existence. As he began his reign, it might very well have still consisted of a mixture of ideology; but if it continued to exist, it must have come to be packed with only members of the Sadducees. The fact there was one religious wing so greatly favored during Alexander's rule is why there is a good possibility that no such group was maintained during at least parts of his reign. Alexander knew what he was going to do and who he might listen to, if anyone at all. However, after his death, it is hard to believe Salome operated, even for any short time in power, without such a body standing behind her! That being said, her success in bringing back some peace to Judea and its people may very well have had a great deal to do with making this body a more balanced one, rather than it just being filled with Pharisees. Some will go so far as to say she reestablished the Sanhedrin, but Salome ruled from 76 to 67 B.C., and the earliest record

of what would seem to be a more official convening of the Sanhedrin given to us by the historian Josephus is not until the year 57 B.C.

In the end of it all, we could debate dates and terms all day, but as I said before there's no reason to doubt at least the idea of having a Sanhedrin grew out of earlier times where a similar body was a good idea. The reason to credit Salome with the reestablishment, or establishment, of the Sanhedrin in any way, lays in the fact the body of religious leaders that stood behind her was a good idea to have in order to settle many issues and arguments about how to handle the mess the nation was in when it came to who should hold what power and why at this point. We should also keep in mind, when Josephus speaks of the convening of the Sanhedrin, he is doing so at a time when it served the Romans' purpose. The Romans wanted to find a way to bridge the gap between what had by that time become a despised (at least by the Jewish people) local secular power but whom the Romans would support to enforce their laws, and a Jewish population that held onto strict religious rights the Romans really never understood!

This speaks to the difference we discussed some in our last segment. The Greeks were more heavy handed about changing the Jews, where as the Romans were more about trying to find a way to make things work together. This is in no way to praise the Romans for their conduct, but it should be kept in mind by all true students of the Bible as we see yet another piece of why The Messiah came when He did. The time for the Jews was growing desperate, as the history leading up to The Messiah shows us, but there was also an open door for the Jews to be given the first shot at recognizing and being willing to accept The Messiah as their true leader!

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

