

Who Are the Jewish People? Their 4000-Year Story and Why It Matters to Everyone Lesson # 2 The Hellenistic Age

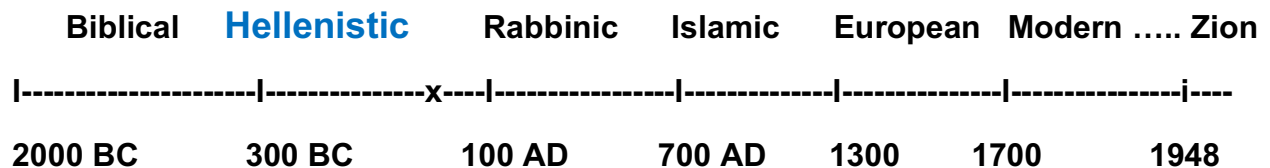
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Introduction

This lesson is an overview of the second era—**The Hellenistic Era**. We are dividing Jewish history roughly into seven eras, though these are necessarily fuzzy boundaries that overlap. This period covers about 400 years; from the rise of the Greek empire and the subsequent pervasive and powerful Hellenistic culture and concludes with the rise of Rabbinic Judaism. This era was climactic and pivotal for the Jewish people. **The era In brief—from the rise of Hellenism to the rise of Rabbinic Judaism.**

Major crises propelled the Jewish people through major changes. The deeply embraced Greek culture, revolted against their Roman overlords, and lost. This loss entailed the destruction of the Second Temple, the end of the Second Jewish Commonwealth, and the beginning of the Great Diaspora that has lasted now over 1900 years. The true and long-awaited Jewish Messiah appeared and most of the Jewish people did not embrace him. The destruction of the Temple forced a major reformulation of Jewish life and religion. The first coming of Messiah is marked with “x” on the line below.



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Each era has three developments in common: 1) Adoption of a new *Language*, 2) *Learning*; involvement in new realms of cultural activity, and 3) *Lasting Effects* on the Jewish mind and a lasting *Legacy* to the human race. Look for these as you read. Then after reading, fill in the blanks at bottom for the three developments for this **second** era.

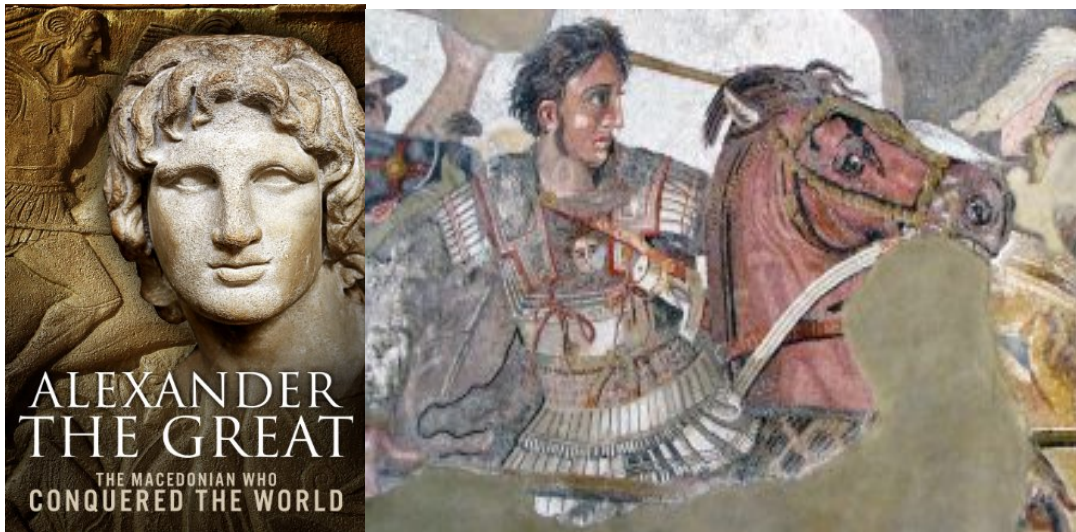
ERA 2) The Hellenistic Age: Hebrews and Hellenes - 300BC – 100AD

The second major encounter of the Jewish people with a major Gentile culture was with “the Hellenes”, that is the Greeks, from 300 BC to AD 100. This Intertestamental period included the time of the finishing of the Second Jewish Temple by Herod, and the coming of Jesus, the Jewish Messiah.

This was the period following the conquests of *Alexander the Great* and the Hellenistic cultural sweep he initiated. Alexander (tutored by the brilliant philosopher Aristotle) was one of the greatest military conquerors of all time. He envisioned bringing the Greek culture and language to the whole world, and he succeeded (to the known world of the time). For the first time a major European power appeared on the stage of world history. The ancient Eastern empires of Assyria, Babylonia and Persia would soon be eclipsed by Greece and Rome. After the Persian era came the Hellenistic era.

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At Right: Alexander the Great on the mosaic from the House of Faun in Pompeii, c.100 BCE, possibly based on a lost Hellenistic painting by Philoxenos of Eretria, The Battle of Issus, c. 315 BCE, Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples.

The Golden Age of Athens cast its shadow (and/or its radiance) in the Hellenistic world during the Second Temple period. Great thinkers, writers, and artists flourished in the city. Herodotus, the 'father of history', lived and wrote in Athens. Socrates, the 'father of philosophy', taught in the marketplace. Hippocrates, 'the father of medicine', practiced there. The sculptor Phidias created his great works for the Parthenon on the Acropolis. Democritus envisioned an atomic universe. Aeschylus, Euripedes, Aristophanes, and Sophocles wrote their famous plays there. This legacy would continue as, later, Plato would found his Academy outside the walls of Athens in 385 BC and, later, Aristotle's Lyceum would be founded in the city center.

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 *The Empire of Alexander the Great. Alexander's conquests united Eurasia from Greece to India into a cultural and, briefly, a political unity.*

Hellenistic Jews

Alexander's achievement was not only a military/geographical conquest, but a cultural conquest. The Hellenistic culture created a strong and attractive influence on Jewish people to assimilate into that culture. During this period the Jewish people were largely living in the *Diaspora* (the dispersion from the Land) people adopted the Greek language, which vied with Aramaic as the diaspora language of the Jews. Greek civilization had a strong allure and penetrated Jewish life. The Greek "polis" (city state) was an attractive ideal. Greek cities sprung up in the land of Israel, notably the "Decapolis" cities of the Galilee mentioned in the Gospels. King Herod the Great, a convinced Hellenizer, built in the Greek architectural style in Jerusalem.

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Greek art and sculpture was remarkably good and prized in the ancient world. However, due to the First Commandment, “*You shall not make graven images...*”, the Jews had resisted visual and representational art forms. Some Jewish use of graphic Greek symbols in synagogue decoration emerged at this time, a testimony to the power of Hellenistic influence. The lure of Greek wisdom and culture was very strong for the Jews, and it was the first of the historic Gentile cultural encounters whose study was approved by the rabbis. Though many Greek cultural forms were adopted, the core and content of the thinking remained Jewish.

Alexandria, Egypt, held the greatest concentration of Jews at this time. *Philo* of Alexandria (“Philo Judaeus”) (20 BC- 50AD), was the greatest Jewish scholar of this period, and his thought represented the first major synthesis of Greek and Hebrew philosophy. He lived in Alexandria, studied Greek philosophy and wrote about Jewish subjects. Influenced by Greek thought, he developed the allegorical method of interpretation and commentary on the Torah.

Greek thought stressed individual conscience, and so a greater individualism developed among the Jewish people, and with it more disagreement and sectarianism within Judaism. One group considered the Jerusalem priests to be corrupt (they were right), and so withdrew to the Judean desert and formed the fundamentalist Essene community at Qumran by the Dead Sea. This was where the famous “Dead Sea Scrolls” were discovered in 1947. These Hebrew scrolls confirmed the reliable transmission of the Old Testament from the first century BC up to our time. The ancient scrolls are virtually the same as the Hebrew manuscripts we have today.

As Greek was becoming the *lingua franca*, the international language of trade (like English is today), and most of the Jewish people in the Diaspora spoke Greek, Jewish leaders and scholars decided to translate the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek. So in the middle of the third century, BC, in Alexandria, Egypt, seventy Jewish scholars convened and translated the Hebrew Bible into Greek. It is called the Septuagint or LXX (from the Latin: *septuāgintā* literally “seventy”); sometimes called the Greek Old

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Testament. This was a huge gift of the Jewish people to the world—the Bible in the vernacular (common spoken language) of the world!

Greek military training began in the gymnasium, the primary educational form of the polis. The gymnasium promoted Greek culture, as did the stadium, the theatre (there are several well-preserved amphitheatres in Israel yet today), the lyceum and the agora.

The Greek “phalanx” was a fearsome new military formation of soldiers, unrivalled at the time, as were their towering siege engines, war ships and colossal forts. Daniel the prophet gives the Jewish image of the Greek militarism, “...*behold, I kept looking and another (beast) which had on its back four wings like a bird and the beast also had four heads and dominion was given to it.*” (Daniel 7:6).

An area of significant Greek influence on Jewish thought and literary style is how the Jewish people absorbed from the Greeks the value of systematizing doctrines. Doctrinal formulation had been foreign to the Jewish mind, which liked the concrete and shunned the abstract. The body of theological doctrine systematized by the Pharisees was a major result. The growing body of Jewish and rabbinic law (Mishnah and later Talmud) was influenced in its legal and prose form by the Greek way of writing.

The appearance at this time of many Jewish names that are Hellenized is reflected in the inscriptions and graffiti of the time. Two of Yeshua’s disciples have Greek names, **Andrew** and **Peter**. Also, early believers here in the Book of Acts,

“Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. ²And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. ³Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. ⁴But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” ⁵And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and **Philip**,

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and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch.” (Acts 6:1-5)

Note the Greek names of these Hellenistic Jewish believers in Messiah in verse five. Also, in the New Testament, Timothy, Apollos, Priscilla and Aquila-- all are Hellenistic Jews with Greek names.

The Temple and Hanukkah

Hellenism could be adopted by people as a cultural way of life without this being linked to something local and concrete. But at the heart of Judaism was something local (Jerusalem) and concrete, physical, and particular — The Temple. It was in the Temple on the Temple Mount (Mt. Moriah). Here the God of Israel was present in a manifest way. It was here only where the sacrificial system ordained to restore purity and holiness to the people of God when they lost it. It is important to remember that when the early Messianic Jewish movement and early Christianity began, the Temple was still up and running. It was the core and heart of Judaism.

Now, the successors of Alexander, the Ptolemies in Egypt (of Cleopatra fame), and especially the Seleucids in Syria were not friends to the Jewish people. This is the time of “the Maccabees”, or the Hasmoneans Jewish dynasty of rulers in Israel (a brief period of independence). A zealous Judean priestly family revolted against the Syrian Seleucid Greek ruler *Antiochus Epiphanes IV*. Antiochus sought to outlaw the Jewish religion and destroy the Jewish people. His troops desecrated the Temple, by offering a pig on the altar and erecting a statue of Zeus in the Holy Place. *Mattathias*, the head of the Hasmonean clan and his sons, the most flamboyant of which was “*Judah the Maccabi*” (Hebrew for “hammer”), led a victorious guerilla resistance movement against the invading Hellenized Seleucid invaders. To restore the Temple after it was defiled was the impulse of the Maccabean Revolt.

The Maccabees rededicated the Temple in 163 B.C., thus **beginning the Jewish feast of Hanukkah** (which means “dedication”). This feast is the lasting legacy

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of in the Jewish calendar from this Hellenistic period. For nearly every other Jewish feast, the Temple is the setting. For Hanukkah (the “Feast of Lights”), the Temple is the *object* of the feast.

(See: Skarsaune, Oskar. *In the Shadow of the Temple: Jewish Influences on Early Christianity*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press. 2002:44).

Light to the Gentiles

Two major contribution of the Jewish people to God’s salvific purpose for the world came into being during this era. The system of synagogues built by Jewish communities beginning from the Babylonian Exile spread around the Mediterranean world and the Middle East. These provided a circuit of known assembly places that the apostles, especially Paul, used in his missionary travels to advance the Gospel. The Sabbath gatherings provided the audience he needed to preach the good news that Messiah had come! This was a very strategic way for Paul to bring his message “to the Jew first and also to the Gentile” (Romans 1:16). Paul’s practice then was to always go first to the synagogue in every city, preach to the Jewish community, and then turn to the Gentiles.

Secondly, the movement of “God-fearers” reflects the influence of Second Temple Judaism in drawing pagan Gentiles toward the One God of Israel and leading them to where they could hear the Gospel of Messiah. Where Jewish communities lived in the Diaspora, the moral quality of life and the strong communal life of the Jewish people, based in their monotheism attracted many polytheistic Gentiles to Jewish worship and life practice.

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These Gentiles were not full proselytes on track to conversion to Judaism and circumcision but were semi-proselytes—they believed in the God of Israel and wanted to share the life and religion of the Jewish people. They were welcomed in the synagogues, to the Jewish people’s credit. Thus these “God-fearers” were perfectly prepared for and receptive to the Gospel. Note these references to Paul’s preaching in the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch,

“So Paul, standing up and motioning with his hand, said, “Men of Israel and *God-fearers*, listen. The God of this people Israel chose our fathers and made the people great during their stay in the land of Egypt. . .” (Acts 13:16-17 TLV)

“Brothers, sons of the family of Abraham and those among you who are *God-fearers*, it is to us the message of this salvation has been sent. (Acts 13:26 TLV)

When they heard from Paul they could come into right relationship and be fully accepted by the One God through faith in His Messiah—without having to be circumcised— most readily received the Gospel. What a marvelous way God used the Jewish people to win many Gentiles to the Faith!

In this way the Jewish people were fulfilling their call to be “a light to the Gentiles [nations]” (Isaiah 49:6; Luke 2:32; Acts 13:47). Note well: it cannot be said (as it often has in Christian history and theology) that the Jewish people utterly failed to fulfill their calling.

The Parting of the Ways

Twenty years after the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70 the rabbi *Yochanan ben Zakai* called a great council at Yavneh (Jamnia) on the coast of Israel, near Jaffa (about 90AD). The remnants and rabbis of the Pharisaic party met there to regroup and

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formulate a Judaism without the Temple. The emerging religious formulations became the religion of those Jews who didn't accept Jesus as the Messiah, known as Rabbinic Judaism.

Thus, the parting of the ways between the early Messianic Jews and those Jews who did not embrace Jesus happened during this period and shaped the Jewish mind very significantly. Messianic Judaism is the true heir and continuation of Biblical Judaism. Rabbinic Judaism that denies the Messiahship of Jesus represents an aberration from the Way of the Jewish Messiah. The faithful remnant among God's chosen people are the Messianic Jews.

Summary: Language, Learning and Legacy of the Era

Greek was the major and dominant language acquisition in this era. New learning for the Jewish people was Greek culture in various forms. A valuable **lasting gift** to the world by the Jewish people in this period was **the "Septuagint"** (from the Greek for "70") abbreviated as LXX, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, done by seventy scholars in Alexandria. This allowed the majority of the then known world access to the Scriptures, because Greek was the lingua franca (the common and commercial language). The Bible in Greek!

The Feast of **Hanukkah** is a **lasting legacy** that entered Jewish history during this period.

Another wonderful gift of the Jews during this period was the synagogue circuit and the "God-Fearers" movement, which strategically advanced the Gospel. But the greatest gift of all by the Jewish people to the world during this era was **Jesus the Jewish Messiah and the Savior of the world.**

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Think about these quotes about apply to the essay you just read. Write out an insight you received:

“... *Salvation is of the Jews.*” - Yeshua of Nazareth (John 4:22).

“What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” - (the famous question of Latin church father - Tertullian)

Review of the Three Developments of Each Era:

- 1) **Language:** adoption of a new one.
- 2) **Learning:** Involvement in new realms of cultural activity
- 3) **Legacy:** to the world and/or the retained **Lasting Effects** (on the character or culture of the Jewish People).

The Hellenistic Age (Hebrews and Hellenes) – 300 B.C. -100 AD

Fill in the blanks :

1) Language - _____

2) Learning - _____

3) Lasting Effects/Legacy – _____

Jewish Humor - “How do we know Jesus was Jewish?”

1. He was thirty, unmarried, and still living with his mother.
2. He went into his father's business.
3. He thought his mother was a virgin.
4. And his mother thought he was God.”

Reflection: Though this joke could be taken as irreverent, when you interpret it as I will here, one actually finds lessons from the life of Yeshua often missed by individualistic Americans. Let's look at the four characteristics of Jesus listed in the joke:

1. “He was thirty, unmarried, and still living with his mother.” Today, in the USA and the West, we think of a single man who remains unmarried and lives at home to the age of 30 to be some kind of misfit or a loser, suffering from prolonged adolescence, an irresponsible, immature kind of mama's boy. Yet Yeshua did just this, and he was none of those things. And often, traditionally this would be the practice in Jewish families. The cultural values here are strikingly different from those in the postmodern West.

Modern American culture is highly individualistic. The modern individual is likely to move toward increasing degrees of detachment. “Nuclear families,” rather than extended families or clans are the basic social unit. And even the nuclear family seldom stays intact, given the high divorce rates and the alienated children of those divorces. Young people are expected to leave home at age 18, choose a career of their own, and often choose their own set of values separate from their family. Marriage is viewed as two individuated people falling in love and deciding to marry, regardless of what their parents or extended family may think; marriage is about their love alone, without reference to the community, or to any higher calling or purpose.

In contrast to this, the Jewish kinship and “*mishpachah*” (family) structure was and is a strong social unit (though there has been erosion in the Jewish family also here in the late modern West, i.e. post-1960s). Note the structure reflected in Joshua 7:1, “*But the people of Israel broke faith in regard to the devoted things, for Achan the son of Carmi, son of Zabdi, son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, took some of the devoted things. And the anger of the Lord burned against the people of Israel.*” Here Achan, the son of Carmi belonged to the clan (“*mishpachah*”) of Zabdi, who belonged to the clan of Zerah, a clan of the tribe of Judah. There were no “rugged individualists” or “unencumbered selves” who stood alone. One's identity was constituted in relationship to one's community and family. The modern notion of the autonomous self was unknown.

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Biblically, the self is constituted within an authoritative community, Israel, or the church. And for community to exist and endure it must have constituting authority. The fifth through the tenth of the Ten Commandments (obedience to parents, murder, adultery, theft, false witness, coveting) are community-based ethics. Breaking them destroys community, and in fact they have no application and hence no meaning outside of community. In turn, their authority, when embraced, creates community. And the self is constituted in orientation to them.

As Samuel said to Saul, “*And on whom is all the desire of Israel? Is it not on you and on all your father’s house?*” (I Sam. 9:20). In ancient Israel, the “*beth av*” (father’s house) was a multi-generational unit that included all the descendants of a single living ancestor in a single lineage, often including male and female servants and their families. Married daughters were excluded because they entered the “*beth av*” of their husbands, along with their families. David’s *mishpachah* held a family reunion in Bethlehem each year. It was clearly for his whole clan, but the Hebrew text used the word “*mishpachah*” in I Sam. 20:6, 29. Family was surely more than the modern American “nuclear family,” a man and woman and one, two or three children, or the ideal 2.2 children per couple.

In Yeshua’s time, and through much of Jewish history until modern times, marriage was at a quite early age, especially for women. The onset of puberty and age of marriage were much closer together than they are in the late modern West (thus avoiding the long period of adolescence with its accompanying sexual temptations). Usually when the young couple married, they would remain a part of the larger extended family, clan and tribe. The new wife of a young man would join the extended household of his father and mother. Economic responsibility was closer also to the age of marriage. However, if there was a reason for a young person to delay marriage, or forego marriage, there was no shame in the young person remaining a functioning part of the family household of his/her parents. Jesus had a calling that prevented him from marrying, so he remained at home, until his ministry calling propelled him out to the public, the people of Israel.

Restoring multi-generational households of this sort would be a wise move to alleviate some of the consequences of the isolated individualism of our times.

2. “He went into his father’s business.” And the adult members of younger generations would share economic responsibilities in the family. Yeshua learned the trade of his father-guardian Joseph, which was carpentry. As long as he was part of the household, he shared in the economic responsibilities of the household. Additionally there has been a long Jewish tradition of respect for the family business. Part of this was a respect for the father, the head of the household. His children respected his trade or calling. It was often very good business for a son to go into the father’s or the family

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business. It was often the most financially prudent thing to do. Late modern American young people often feel like they must choose some career different from their parents, just to be individualized, or just for the experience or adventure. Unless the call of God leads one differently, there is no shame in taking up the family business, or taking after one's father it is a noble trade or calling.

3. “He thought his mother was a virgin” – This is of course hyperbole, and irony. Hyperbole in that Jewish young men, even if they may idolize their Jewish mother as a paragon of purity and virtue, know she is not a virgin. It is ironic because Miriam the mother of Yeshua *actually* was a virgin when he was conceived by the Holy Spirit. But to traditional Jewish people, this is a humorous and exaggerated way of expressing this oft penchant of Jewish sons to idolize their mothers.

An application for modern Americans is one of the need for respect and honor for our mothers (and fathers). The Apostle Paul said, “*Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. “Honor your father and mother” (this is the first commandment with a promise), “that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land.”* (Ephesians 6:1-3). This “first commandment with a promise” means it is especially significant in that a feature of a good social order is respect for the older generations. Americans often think, “*The newer the truer,*” and “*the latest is the greatest.*” Respect and honor for the elderly is often neglected in late modern American society. The elderly are shoved off into nursing homes, neglected by their adult children, while a cult of youth prevails, an idolization of youth in which the dignity and wisdom of the elders is despised.

4. “And his mother thought he was God.” When applied to Jewish culture this is again hyperbole. This expresses the traditional “Jewish mother” stereotype. The Jewish mother is oh-so protective of her children, so concerned about their health, whether or not they have enough food, their well-being, and of course her pride in her son's giftedness and talents, his accomplishments, success. She believes his moral character is so high as to be over the top—“his mother thought he was God.” The irony of course here is that Yeshua actually is God, Incarnate.

Accompanying Stories/Studies to Period #2

Athens or Jerusalem? – Hebraism and Hellenism

Hanukkah

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Yeshua the Jew from Nazareth—Or That Jesus was not a Christian

The Cutting of the New Covenant: The Lord's Supper in its Original Jewish Context

Parting of the Ways, Part 1: Temple and Torah

Parting of the Ways, Part 2: Election and the One True God.

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