

What is the significance of the Greek Empire in biblical history?

Jewish history is indelibly marked by Alexander the Great's short rule over the Greek Empire. While none of the history of the Greek Empire is recorded in the Bible, we do have relevant prophecy. Another source of information concerning Greek influence on the history of the Jews is the Apocrypha, specifically 1 and 2 Maccabees.

Alexander's Conquests

In 336 B.C., a time when Greece consisted of city-states and their surrounding provinces, Alexander succeeded his father, Phillip, as king of Macedonia. Immortalized as Alexander the Great, he was second to none in the speed with which he conquered new lands. In only 13 years, Alexander defeated Syria and Egypt, brought down the Medo-Persian Empire, and went as far east as India.

The Greek kingdom was prophesied by Daniel in chapters 2, 8, and 11 of his book. Daniel 2 tells of the interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar II's dream, which foretold the Babylonian, Medo-Persian, Greek, and Roman Empires. Daniel 11 refers specifically to the kingdom of Greece. Alexander, though not named, is called "a mighty king . . . who will rule with great power and do as he pleases" (Daniel 11:2-3).

Daniel 8 is even more specific. The prophet has a vision of a ram with two horns (signifying Medo-Persia) attacked by a swiftly moving goat with a single large horn. After the goat kills the ram, its horn is broken "at the height of his power," and four other horns grow up in its place (Daniel 8:1-8).

The angel Gabriel explains the vision: the goat signifies Greece, and the prominent horn

is “the first king” (Alexander). The breaking of the horn signifies the untimely death of the king, and the four smaller horns represent a divided kingdom. The prophecy, which Daniel recorded 200 years in advance, came true in every detail: Alexander died in Babylon in 323 B.C. at the age of 33. His kingdom was then divided among his four generals, Ptolemy, Seleucus, Lysimachus, and Cassander.

The Divided Greek Empire and the Hasmonean Period

For the history of the divided Greek Empire and how it impacted Jewish history, we turn to the Apocrypha. Alexander the Great’s generals “put crowns upon themselves; so did their sons after them many years: and evils were multiplied in the earth” (1 Maccabees 1:9). The Selucid Empire ended up with control over Israel and Jerusalem. One of the Selucid kings was Antiochus IV, who called himself “Antiochus Epiphanes” (“Epiphanes” means “god manifest”).

In 167 B.C., Antiochus committed an “abomination of desolation”; specifically, he set up an altar to the Greek god Zeus inside the Jewish temple and sacrificed a pig on it. Antiochus proceeded to require pagan sacrifices in all Jewish villages. In the village of Modein, a Levite named Mattathias, who had five sons, was told to make the sacrifice. Mattathias refused and killed the troops and the villager who volunteered to do the deed. This sparked the Maccabean Revolt, led by Mattathias’s sons. Israel gained its freedom from the Selucids for a time and was later recognized as an independent state by the Roman Senate. The years that the Jews were led by Mattathias’s descendants are called the Maccabean or Hasmonean Period.

Hellenism

Perhaps as equally impressive as Alexander’s military success was his advancement of

Greek culture, called Hellenism. In every city Alexander conquered, he instituted schools to teach Greek philosophy and Koine Greek, which became the lingua franca of the known world. Alexander also had a penchant for renaming cities after himself: at least 11 cities are still called “Alexandria” today. The most famous is Alexandria, Egypt, which, along with Syrian Antioch, was a center of Hellenic thought. These hubs of Hellenism precipitated a major cultural change and had enormous impact on world history, especially biblical history. The New Testament was written in Koine Greek. The widespread use of the Greek language aided the sharing of the gospel from India to Spain. Greek philosophy gave us the concept of the logos, which John used as a way to communicate the nature of Christ (John 1:1). Antioch became the launching point for Paul’s missionary journeys, and “the disciples were called Christians first at Antioch” (Acts 11:26).