

Palestine Under Greco-Roman Rule

With the conquest of the Macedonian Empire and Alexander the Great in 332 BC, Palestine was subjected to the gradual process of Hellenization. Areas along the coast were settled by Greek colonizers, and the Greek language began to spread to parts of the interior. Yet, for the most part, the early periods of Greek rule (first under Alexander, then under the Ptolemies) were marked by relative economic prosperity and political autonomy. Local chieftains presided over a tribal society that preserved local culture.

The transition to Seleucid rule was not as peaceful. The empire adopted a policy of forced Hellenization, which was especially harsh on the Jews in particular. The emperor Antiochus, in a bid to restore the strength of his empire in the east, attempted to convert the temple in Jerusalem to an Olympic shrine, prohibited circumcision, forced Jews to violate their kosher dietary rules, forced Jews to labor on the Sabbath, and generally dismantled many long-standing Jewish laws.¹ Jerusalem was directly attacked twice, and many thousands were killed or enslaved. This triggered the Maccabean Revolt, in which Jewish rebels successfully established political autonomy in 140 BC under the Seleucids. The ruling Hasmonean dynasty that was established by the Jews in Judea (the former territory of the Kingdom of Judah, which geographically is in the approximate area of the southern half of the West Bank) would expand over the course of a century to include most of Palestine. The borders of the dynasty greatly influenced the Jewish perception of the borders “Eretz Israel” (the land of Israel) for many generations to come.²

¹ Grabbe, Lester L. *An Introduction to Second Temple Judaism: History and Religion of the Jews in the Time of Nehemiah, the Maccabees, Hillel and Jesus*.

² Krämer, Gudrun, and Graham Harman. *A History of Palestine: From the Ottoman Conquest to the Founding of the State of Israel*. 3rd ed., Princeton, Princeton UP, 2011, p. 12

This political autonomy would largely stay intact when the Roman general Pompey conquered Palestine for the Roman Empire in 63 BC, although the degree of it would fluctuate and change greatly over time. In the reign of the Roman-appointed king Herod the Great, Judea was allowed a high level of independence, whereas coastal cities were governed by Greek and Roman dignitaries. Despite this relative freedom, the Jews were often in conflict with the Roman Empire, participating in such conflicts as the Zealot Rebellion of 66-70 and the Bar Kokhba Revolt of 132 AD. In retaliation for the uprisings, the Romans punished the Jews severely.³ Roman forces forcefully suppressed each attempt at revolution, frequently destroying cities and towns with large Jewish populations. The Second Temple, which had been greatly expanded by Herod, was burned down and reduced to the famous Wailing Wall. After the particularly bloody Bar Kokhba Revolt, the Romans seized Jerusalem and recast it as a Roman city, in defiance of both Christian and Jewish outrage. The restrictions on Jewish worship and custom from the Greeks were brought back, and the province of Judea was renamed to Syria Palaestina. Over the centuries, Syria Palaestina would be subdivided and be renamed many times, but the label of Palaestina (in its various forms) would stick for more than a thousand years, even through Islamic rule. Although the situation improved slightly when the Byzantine Empire succeeded the Roman Empire, it was still uncomfortable: Jews were in fact banned from living in Jerusalem. Their religious freedom in this time period fluctuated greatly; it was largely dependent on the current emperor and his benevolence.

It is around here that the Jewish culture ceases to be the dominant one of the region. Through the Hellenization and later Christianization of the Roman Empire, Jewish influence was gradually reduced and marginalized. In its stead, a plurality of different ethnicities, cultures, and languages rose up: Greek, Egyptian, Phoenician, and Arabic influences gradually turned the

³ Ibid. 14

whole of Palestine into a diverse and multifaceted country. The Arab population in particular began to steadily grow.⁴ By 300 AD, Jews only made up a quarter of Palestine's population, the other three quarters being mostly Christian or pagan in religion and of the aforementioned ethnicities.⁵ It is true that Jews constituted a significant minority as a whole, and that the distribution of the Jewish presence was not uniform; some areas (particularly Samaria) were "more Jewish" than others. Yet, as a whole, it was in the first few centuries of the millennium that Palestine gradually became gentile. This process would only accelerate with the rise of Islam in the seventh century.

⁴ Krämer, Gudrun, and Graham Harman. *A History of Palestine: From the Ottoman Conquest to the Founding of the State of Israel*. 3rd ed., Princeton, Princeton UP, 2011, p. 15

⁵ Ibid.

Works Cited

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