



Walking in the *Foot Prints* of Jesus A Discipleship Journey

The OLD TESTAMENT- Their Story is Our Story

Turmoil in Judah

The Israelites lived in exile for 70 years. Under the benevolence of the Persian Empire, they were not only allowed to return to Jerusalem, the Persian King Cyrus provided financial support and other resources which enabled the Israelites to rebuild the Temple and the city walls. Now settled into their land once again, the Israelites lived in relative peace and remained faithful to the Covenant.

All that changed, however, around 336 BC when Alexander the Great swept across the region, conquering nations and extending the rule of the new power, Greece. Alexander the Great intended to unify the world under Greek language and culture, a process known Hellenization. The Israelites were forced to abandon their religion and allegiance to God and submit to Alexander the Great. As you can imagine, they refused. Intending to squash their rebellion, Alexander came to Jerusalem in 332 BC and miraculously changed his mind. Impressed by what he saw, he instead allowed them to keep their own laws. So, once again, the Israelites were able to live in relative peace.

Unfortunately, Alexander the Great died suddenly soon after and the region was suddenly thrust into chaos. Over the next 150 years, control over the region volleyed between two legions, the Ptolemies and the Seleucids; the Seleucides eventually won total control under Antiochus IV Epiphanes. An especially cruel ruler, Antiochus began a policy of radical Hellenization under which he determined to eradicate the Jewish religion. He introduced the first solely religious persecution that Judea had ever known, killing hundreds of Jews. He outlawed the practice of certain Jewish rituals, such a circumcision and observation of the Sabbath. He forced Jews to commit abominable acts, including sacrifice to idols and eating pork. In a final act of desecration, in the Temple he sacrificed pigs to a statue of Zeus set up on the altar. Needless to say, Antiochus became, for the Israelites, the defining icon for an evil enemy to God.

Is it even possible for us to imagine life as a Jew during the reign of Antiochus? What would we do to survive? Some Jews chose to make the best of a bad situation and tried to make alliances with the Greeks; they tried to fit in by joining the cultural and intellectual activities of the Gentiles, becoming more and more secular in the process. Some even went so far as to cover or reverse the mark of circumcision, which was the permanent sign of their covenant relationship with God, and abandon the covenant.

Some, however, revolted. During Antiochus' rule, the Hasmoneans, a Jewish family, rose up and led a successful revolt, first around the edges of Judea and eventually into Jerusalem itself. This is where our story will pick up next week.