

The Gospel of Jesus

Underground Institute - Feb. 1, 2017
Class 2: Coping with Empire, 587-63 BCE

1. The Babylonian Exile (587-539 BCE): “How can we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?”

- a. Background - *Dispersal*: With the destruction of the northern kingdom in 722 BCE, many Israelites were transplanted or fled to other parts of the ancient world. In 587 BCE, the elites of Judah who were not killed in battle were transported to Babylon.
- b. *Life in Babylon*: a spectacular city financed by conquest & tribute, staffed by slaves & the poor.
 - i. Around 20,000 Jewish exiles walk 800 miles from Jerusalem to Babylon. Along the way, they reflect seriously about their history, their faith, and what just happened to them.
 - ii. Allowed to live together in families and communities, even prospering. The prophet Jeremiah advised them to settle in and “seek the welfare of the city” (29:4-7).
 - iii. Asking questions: Why are we here? What went wrong? Will we ever go back? Are we Babylonians now? Was the temple/king/civilization project a mistake to begin with?
- c. *Struggle for national identity & the war of myths*: Babylonian myths like *Enuma Elish* portray the city as the center of the world (Babylon=“gate of the gods,” beyond=chaos), the king as embodiment of the chief god, equates hierarchy with “divine order,” makes violence redemptive, and makes humans slaves for the city.
 - i. *Genesis 1-11*: A counter-narrative answering key questions that some of the exiles are beginning to ask as they struggle to retain their identity.
 - ii. *Ezekiel*: Jerusalem priest & prophet exiled in 597. Privileged world collapses traumatically. Despair and lament, then hope for a renewed Israel (36:24-28).
 - iii. *Second Isaiah* (40-55): Second generation of exiles. Pastoral message of comfort. Hope of “New Exodus” (43:18-19; 55:1-2, 10-13). Anti-Babylon, experiences persecution (53).
- d. **Review: Who are we now?**
 - i. Big tradition: Assimilate? Yes. Many of the exiles are accommodationists who believe that their relative prosperity in Babylon is a sign of YHWH’s favor. They learn to “make it” in a foreign empire. Some are later chosen by Persian overlords to return to Judah and resettle/colonize.
 - ii. Little tradition: Assimilate? No. Other exiles become highly critical of the old temple and of civilization/empire in any form, whether the present Babylonian Empire or a rising Persia.

2. Return to Jerusalem (539-333 BCE): Life under Persian Rule

- a. *King Cyrus of Persia* captures the city of Babylon in 539 BCE. His reign elicits wide-ranging perspectives from the Jewish people.
- b. “*The Law of Your God*”: Cyrus announces divine authority from YHWH to rebuild the Temple.
 - i. *The Returning Exiles*: Many view King Cyrus as a “Messiah,” a liberator of the people from their captivity in Babylon (e.g., Isaiah 45). Persian leaders select loyal Jerusalem elites to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple and rule on Persia’s behalf.
 - ii. *The “People of the Land”*: During the Babylonian Exile a significant number of the surviving Judean population remained – mainly workers, poorer artisans, and farmers and shepherders of the countryside. They experienced the destruction of the temple and exile of elites as a type of Jubilee - restoration of their land, return to villages, etc. Many of these people oppose its rebuilding (Ezra 4:4-7). The returning exiles are ordered to preserve ethnic purity - specifically, to not intermingle with “the people of the land.” These commoners are shunned by the returning elites, intermarriage is forbidden (Ezra 9:1-4), and they are not allowed to help with the temple. There are several waves of returnees, but ultimately Ezra, a Jewish scribe & priest, and Nehemiah, a Jewish official in the Persian court, carry out the edict.
- c. *Third Isaiah’s Dissenting Voice* (Isaiah 55-66): The house of YHWH will be a “house of prayer for all peoples” (56:3a, 6-8). True worship and social justice are intertwined (58:3-9). Reclaims and proclaims the good news of the *jubilee tradition* (61:1-4).
- d. *Persia’s Motivation*: Why would Persia allow the rebuilding of Jerusalem - the temple and the wall? Persia needed a strong military base in Jerusalem to keep any revolts from Egypt at bay. The Temple was rebuilt as the symbol of Jewish identity, and the rebuilt wall around Jerusalem made the whole city a garrison of Persia. This ingenious strategy meant that when the Jews defended their temple and city, they were also defending the Persian Empire.

Commentary: The temple was always bad for the common people. *Which* elites benefit from the temple system changes at this time. During the first temple, the beneficiaries were Judean elites. From here on, the *ultimate* beneficiaries will be a foreign colonial power, first Persia, then Greece & Rome.

e. **Who are we now?**

- i. **Big tradition:** The Jewish rulers, hand-picked by Persia, declare that Cyrus's authority comes from YHWH, so that rebelling against Jerusalem's leaders is to rebel against the Emperor and God together. The Second Temple built with Persian patronage/money means Empire is "good guys."
- ii. **Little tradition:** The "people of the land" contend that worship of YHWH is not in temple formality but wherever justice is proclaimed and lived out. True worship & imperial rule are not compatible.

3. **Greek Empire (333-167 BCE): Hellenization and Apocalyptic Resistance**

- a. **Conquest of Judea:** In 333 BCE, Alexander colonized Judah and Jerusalem, ushering in over 200 years of Greek rule, but continued the Persian policy of local rule.
 - i. **Cultural, Political & Military Supremacy:** Alexander, Aristotle's pupil (who was Plato's pupil), believed that Greek culture – architecture, religion, philosophy, language – was superior to all others. Non-Greeks were "barbarians." For Alexander, military supremacy = "might makes right."
- b. **Dividing the Empire:** In 323 BCE Alexander died suddenly, and after 20 years of power struggles, the massive Greek Empire was carved up into four Hellenistic (Greek) kingdoms.
 - i. **Ptolemies (301-198 BCE):** First Judah was ruled by the Hellenistic kings in Egypt (Ptolemies). The Ptolemies exploited Judah by demanding high taxes.
 - ii. **Seleucids (198-167 BCE):** Initially, overthrow of Ptolemies by Seleucids (based in Syria) was welcomed. But inept and bankrupt Seleucids doubled down on taxes and strict enforcement, esp. through the high priesthood, leading to power struggles. One king decides to end "revolt" by desecrating the Temple, persecuting the people, and outlawing traditional Jewish practices.
 1. **Daniel:** Written in 165 BCE during the persecution about an ancient hero of the faith living during the Babylonian and Persian empires. It "foresees" history unfolding under four kingdoms (Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome). Emphasizes final triumph of God's reign, a rising from the earth of the faithful, and a vindication of martyrs. (Daniel 11:31-35)

Commentary: This is the beginning of *apocalyptic resistance*. Apocalypse or "revelation" helps the reader to unveil the propaganda that props up empire. The heart of the apocalyptic worldview is profound disillusionment with the present order, a sense of political powerlessness, and a conviction that the present age is giving way to a new age.

c. **Who are we now?**

- i. **Big tradition:** Some Jewish elites, essentially secular now, try to curry favor with the Greek rulers for power, prestige and wealth at the expense of fellow Jews. For example, the Greek Empire often sold the Temple High Priest position to the highest bidder.
- ii. **Little tradition:** The common people found strength and hope in apocalyptic stories like Daniel, and struggled to remain faithful in the face of sacrilegious Greek rulers. Hellenization as imperial strategy was the single greatest threat in Jewish history as this could lead to cultural genocide.

4. **A Jewish Mini-Empire (167-63 BCE): The Hasmonean Dynasty**

- a. **War against Seleucids:** The political turmoil caused by Greek repression led to the rise of a family of resistors known as the Maccabees. They organize a guerilla force, and lead a "war of liberation."
 - i. In reality, they were just another rival priestly family seeking power. The leader Mattathias was known for his "zeal for the Torah," and operates within the tradition of Joshua and "holy war" in the name of YHWH. Purifies the temple and reestablishes traditional sacrifice.
- b. **The Hasmonean Dynasty:** A Jewish dynasty that sought to recreate the Solomonic Empire through conquest. Fraught with power struggle and corruption, and compromise with Rome. Members of this family operated as both High Priest and King, compromising temple legitimacy and brutalizing the people.
- c. **Roman Conquest (63 BCE):** Two Jewish brothers appeal to Roman general Pompey over ascension to the Jewish throne (High Priest/King combo). Pompey conquers Judea and serves as kingmaker.
- d. **Groups during this period:** Sadducees, Pharisees, Essenes.
- e. **Primary sources:** Apocrypha, Dead Sea Scrolls, the Jewish historian Josephus.
- f. **Who are we now?**
 - i. **Big tradition:** The Hasmoneans claim Solomon's legacy for the money & power that came with the high priesthood, cooperating with Greek & Roman rulers as needed. Sadducees gain influence.

- ii. Little tradition: The Pharisees, Essenes and other groups emerge as champions of ancient Jewish tradition, of Temple purity, *and of Jewish culture untainted by Hellenism*.

The Gospel of Jesus

Class 2:
Coping with Empire

Underground Institute

“Coping with Empire”

587-63 BCE

- Coping with the Babylonian Empire (587-539 BCE)
- Coping with the Persian Empire (539-333 BCE)
- Coping with the Greek Empire (333-167 BCE)
- Coping with an internal empire (167-63 BCE)

Central Question

Who are we now?

Can we maintain our values after being assaulted by Babylon, Persia, Greece, our own Hasmonean Dynasty?

THE BABYLONIAN EXILE

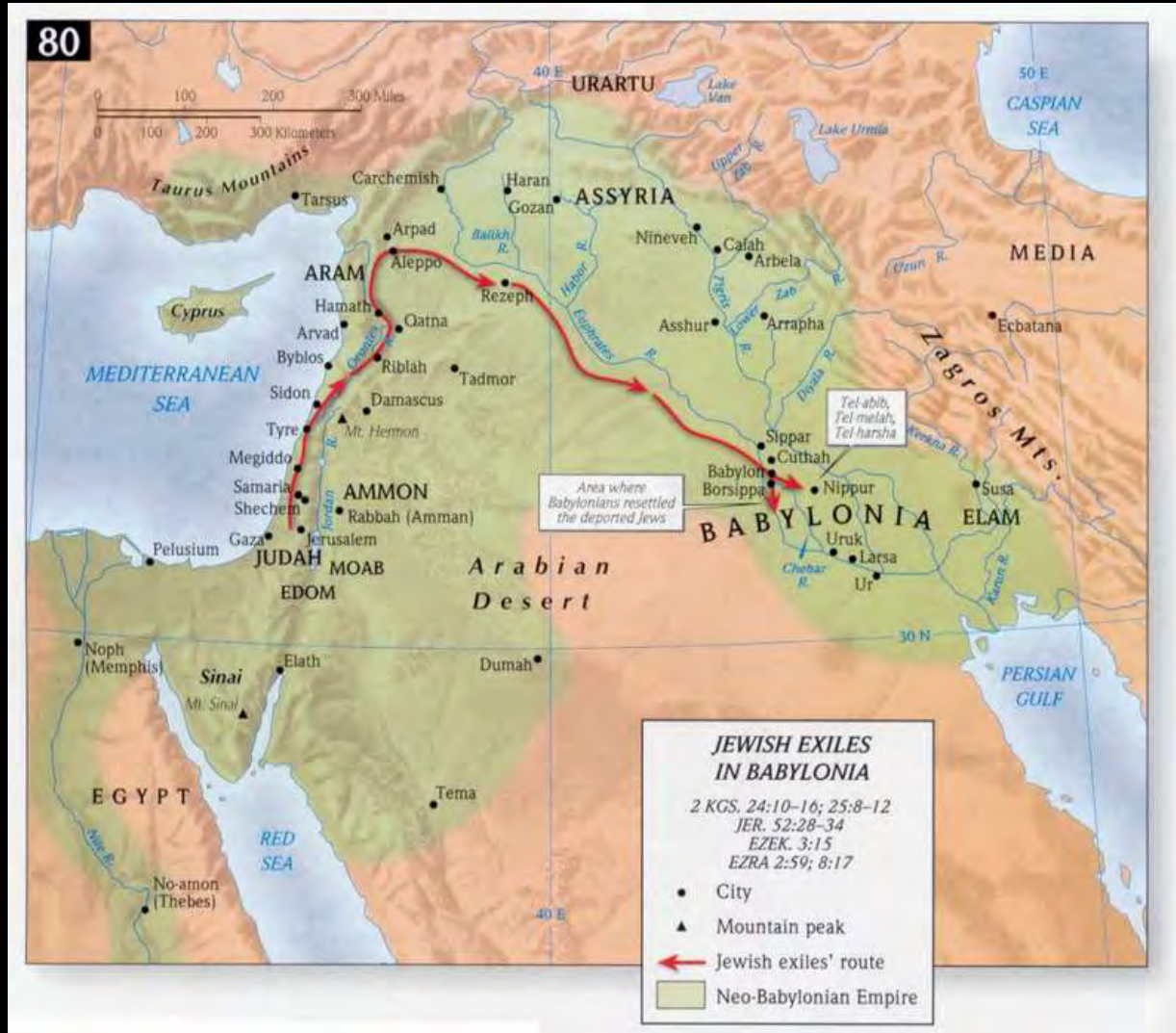
“HOW CAN WE SING THE LORD’S SONG IN A FOREIGN LAND?”

587-539 BCE

Ruling class and elites exiled to Babylon



Walk from Jerusalem to Babylon



Life in Babylon



*By the rivers of
Babylon—
there we sat down
and there we wept
when we
remembered Zion.*

-Psalm 137:1



Enuma Elish

(Babylonian Creation Myth)



- Babylon means “gate of the gods”
- King is chief god
- Hierarchy is divine order
- Violence is redemptive
- Humans are slaves for city

Genesis 2-3: The Fall



Genesis 5-9: Noah & the Flood



RETURN TO JERUSALEM

LIFE UNDER PERSIAN RULE

539-333 BCE

Persian Empire

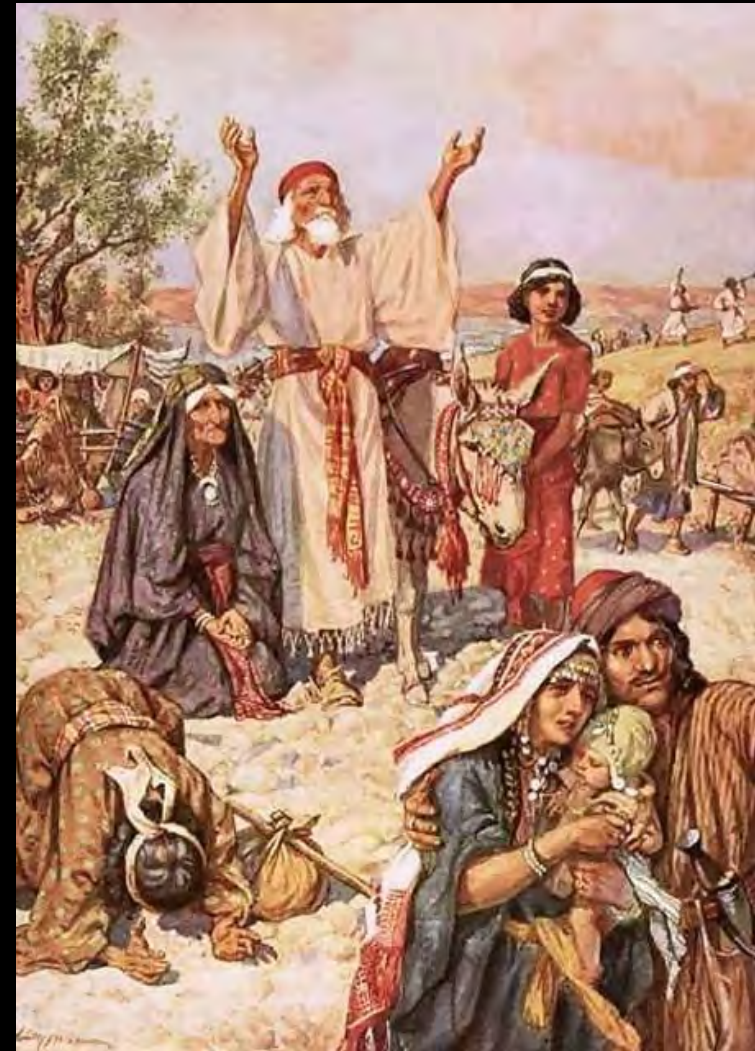
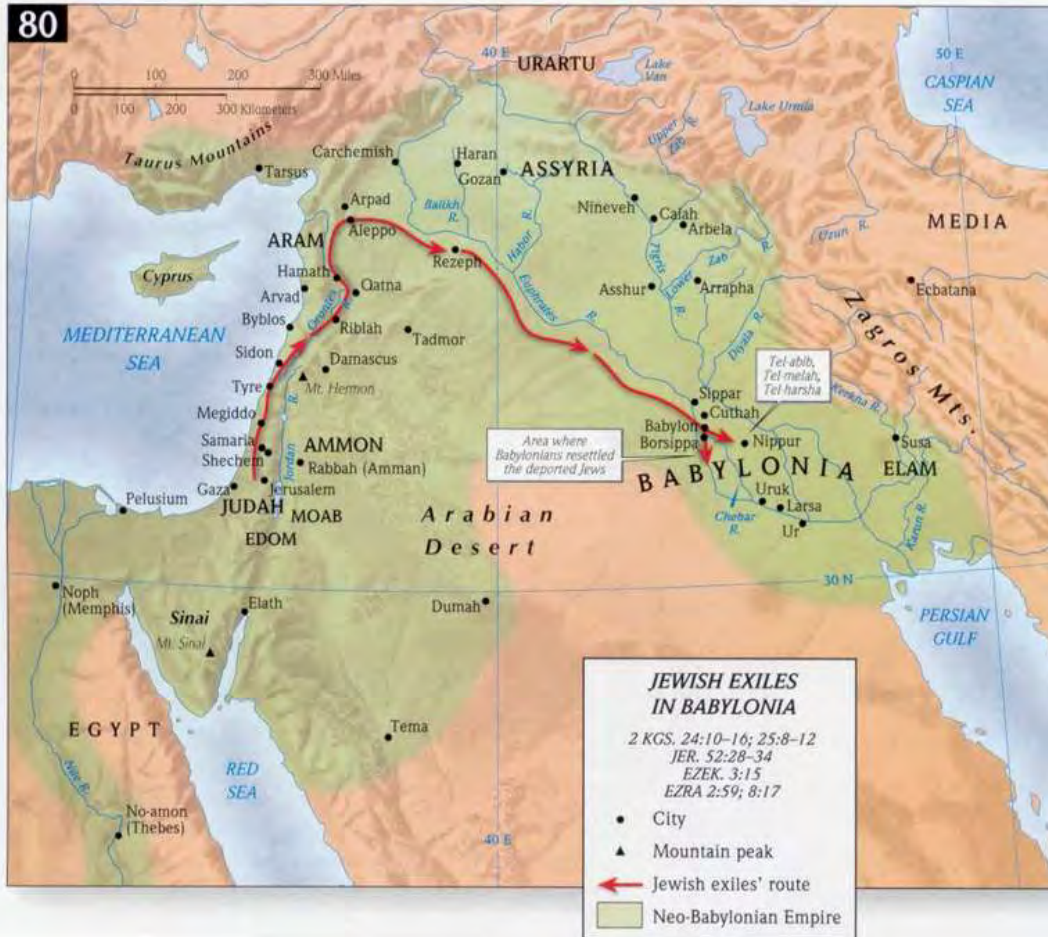


King Cyrus of Persia



The Returning Exiles

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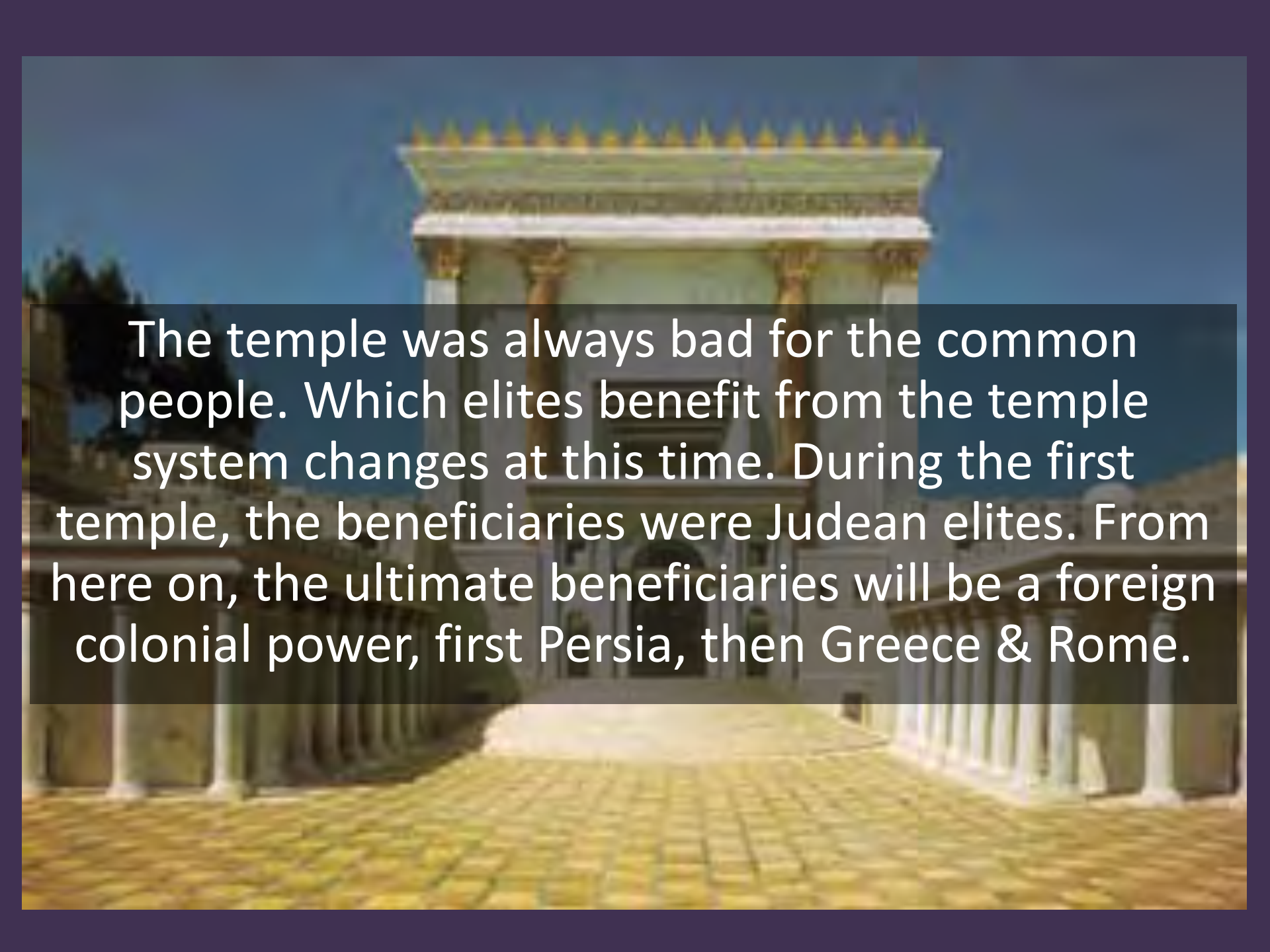


“People of the Land”



Threat of Egyptian Revolts





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GREEK EMPIRE

HELLENIZATION & APOCALYPTIC RESISTANCE

333-167 BCE

Greek Empire, 333 BCE



Alexander the Great



- Student of Aristotle
- Greek culture superior to all others
- Spread Greek culture (Hellenization)
- Non-Greeks are barbarians

Abomination of Desolation



Apocalyptic Resistance

Apocalypse means “revelation.” Its purpose is to help the reader unveil the propaganda that props up empire.

The heart of the apocalyptic worldview is “profound disillusionment with the present order, a sense of political powerlessness, and a conviction that this age is passing away while a new age is being birthed.”

A JEWISH MINI-EMPIRE

THE HASMONEAN DYNASTY

War Against Seleucids



The Hasmonean Dynasty

- Wanted to recreate the Jewish kingdom as it was under Solomon
- Full of corruption and compromise
- Merged the office of king and high priest
- Brutality toward common people

Roman Conquest of Jerusalem

