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Being Jewish in the Ancient World

The Greco-Roman era was a period of change for the Jews. Each ruler had their own way of dealing with the Jewish presence as well as differing levels of respect for their culture and religion. The attitudes and views of the leaders as well as the Gentiles, that the Jews lived among, influenced the thoughts and beliefs of the Jews.

The word influence hardly describes the level of sway that the various rulers had over the Jews. Likely subjected to torture if they did not worship and honor the ruler and the gods, the Jews would be forced into changing public worship to private reverence. Therefore, religious events that were done as entire nation or tribe now became private family affairs or were no longer held. In particular traditions that were usually held in Jerusalem such as the Passover shifted to a private practice. Also, after 70 CE without the temple in Jerusalem being present to sacrifice in, the traditional offering that was part of Judaic life ended.

But, the greater influences were not as obvious. Greek and Roman philosophies began to enter the mind of the Jews and the pride of the Jewish leaders. The Scribes and Pharisees began to adopt rulership strategies of their Greek and Roman counterparts. They built their power by setting ideals and morals in society through procuring guilt on those who did not follow, rather than by force. The Greeks were especially good at this, they took the wise from each of the various people they captured and persuaded their thought to Greek philosophies therefore subsiding intellectual thought of rebellion.

Others assimilated the business practices and lifestyles of those around them. This activity would be praiseworthy in the site of the rulers as these Jews could be called worthy citizens of the

respective empire of the time. However, there were also groups who wanted to keep with the law found in Torah and wished to remain as a subculture, separate from the rest of ancient society.

For those who were not able to become part the society at large or chose not to, life was not as easy. Their lives were full of scrutiny and objection by those around them. They quickly became the labor market of the society, serving foreign kings and emperors. It was these people who the prophets pointed towards as being punished for falling away from YHWH. They had realized their failing before YHWH and no amount of prayer was helping them. "For many nations and great kings shall make slaves of them also; and I will repay them according ot their deeds and the work of their hands" (Jeremiah 25:14).

This oppression created a need for a way out. Living in a land outside of Israel or in a much changed Israel from the days of the kings provided a yearning for the past. This influenced the Jews to desire more than ever for their Messiah to come. Many references are made by the prophets and other writers about such a person. As things became increasing difficult the Jews increased their hope and desire for deliverance by divine salvation. Other writings of encouragement were spread out among Jews living in various communities as well. These writings carried the theme that YHWH would be with the Jews no matter were they ended up. In the minds of the Jews YHWH's dominion spread from Israel to the entire world moving with YHWH's people, working in the minds of those who ruled of the Jews. YHWH's will would be manifested even though present situations looked unrelenting.

This mindset created a national identity without a nation. Practices such as circumcision still took place outside of Israel. These customs in the Ancient World are still thought of as essential for keeping the covenant alive between the Jew and YHWH. Purification and Kosher laws became fundamental parts of Judaism as it would keep the Jews undefiled in the foreign lands.

Prayer to YHWH was part of the Jewish tradition that did not die out during the years of

captivity. During ancient times Jews would generally pray towards Jerusalem, in solemn remembrance of the capitol city and center of worship that once stood as a meeting place of YHWH and Israel.

The heart of the Jewish people continued throughout the Ancient World in the past glory of Israel. Their hope rested in the covenants made to their traditional ancestors that the land which was lost would once again be their inheritance. Even though they were tossed from one empire to the next and varied their traditions and views they still remained one of the most stable groups never losing grip of their ethnicity.