

AN OLD TESTAMENT SURVEY;

From Abraham to Modern Israel

Lesson 11

We're arrived at a point in our survey that is well past the Bible era; that means that the writing of the Old and New Testaments had ended. The Biblical canon was completed (the term "canon" meaning a certain selection of documents were chosen from the many Hebrew and Greek documents, and these chosen documents were used to form an authorized Bible). And this is true for both the OT and NT. That doesn't mean that there wouldn't be controversy over the centuries over which books belonged and which didn't. In fact as Christianity splintered into scores, then hundreds, of factions there came to be a few different canons published as some books were tossed out and others added (and it remains so to this day). The Book of Esther and the Book of Hebrews, as well as the 15 Books of the Apocrypha are prime examples of this ongoing canon debate.

As we take up our study in the 4th century AD, the Roman Empire is still the world power and the religion of Jesus the Jew has changed drastically since its inception; in fact it is barely recognizable. One of the biggest changes is that no longer are Jews in control of the religion that declares Yeshua the Jew as its Messiah; now it is gentiles who run things. The religion of Yeshua is split into 2 major branches: the Jewish branch and the gentile branch. The Jewish branch is called The Way, and we would call its members Messianic Jews. The gentile branch is called Christian.

The Jewish branch whose power center at first was in Jerusalem and headed by Jesus' brother James (whose real name was Jacob) now has no center at all due to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple and exile of the Jews from the Holy Land. The Christian branch has its most influential power center in Rome. Neither the Jewish or Christian branch recognizes the validity of the other. But this early form of gentile Christianity was already lining up into two large and opposing factions due mostly to the politics of the day. In 285 A.D. the unified Roman Empire split into two, and essentially Christianity split along with it, generally in line with the boundaries of the two empires.. The newly formed Eastern Roman Empire established its capital in Byzantium (which is today called Istanbul, Turkey) and the remainder of the empire (the Western Roman Empire) at first established its capital in Milan, Italy. In a few years Constantine became Emperor and he would re-conquer the Eastern Empire and reunify it with the Western Empire. However politics being what they are, he was forced to split the unified Roman Empire into 2 governing districts that were essentially the same eastern and western regions that he had just conquered; however both remained under his firm rule. The western

governing district's capital was moved to Rome, and the eastern district's capital more or less remained the same as the former Eastern Roman Empire was, but the city was renamed to Constantinople. This change to Rome as the capital of the Western Empire no doubt had to do with the fact that the Christian Constantine had allied himself to the Bishop of Rome and was beholden to the particular brand of Christianity that was practiced there.

Here's the point I want to make by telling you all this: the gentile Christian religion's power centers, and thus their leadership, happened in direct correlation to the evolving make-up and location of the civil government. Thus the early gentile Christian Church split into one branch eventually called the Roman Catholic Church, which was headquartered in Rome. The other branch called the Christian Orthodox Church was located in Constantinople (also known as Byzantium). Even though the reality was that these two Christian branches each despised the other and created their own separate doctrines, they publically declared that they were still unified. However that charade ended in 1054 A.D. when the Pope of the Roman Catholic Church and the Patriarch of the Orthodox Church excommunicated one another and the several hundred year old informal split became formal and public.

With that context let's back up to 325 AD and the Council of Nicea. This was only a year after Constantine had reunified the Roman Empire, and only few years before he split the governing of his empire into 2 districts. Constantine met with the Bishop of Rome and a number of other church leaders at the council of Nicea in order to design the new religion he envisioned for the Roman Empire. At this meeting were also representatives of the most popular religion of the Empire, the Mithraists. The Mithraists were sun worshippers. A compromise was struck that allowed Christianity to become the sanctioned state religion, but with certain symbols and aspects of sun worship intertwined so as to prevent dissention and possible social upheaval. Thus we see from this time forward artworks, paintings and sculptures of the Roman Christian Godhead with a glowing disk, a halo, surrounding the heads of pious saints, apostles, even Christ Himself. This disk represented the sun, an accommodation aimed at appeasing the Mithraist sun worshippers. Jesus's mother Mary was also deified as the "Queen of Heaven", because the sun worshippers insisted that a Goddess figure in line with their religion needed to be honored. So we see civil politics and compromise having enormous influence on the doctrines and icons of Roman Christianity.

At that same Nicean council **Shabbat**, the Biblical Sabbath, was abolished. In the place of the Sabbath (this 7th day of rest) it was decreed that the 1st day of the week would become not a new and different day of **rest**, but rather the national day of **worship**. Please notice: the communal day of rest was replaced with a communal day of worship. Why? Because Rome did not recognize a day of rest, but they did recognize a day of worship that was part of their culture. Sun-day had for centuries been the Mithraist communal day of worship of the Sun-God. The Bishop of Rome called Sun-day the Lord's Day, declared this as the day all Christians were to gather together and worship, and so it has remained.

I want to make something quite clear because most Christians have no idea that this is the case: Sunday is sometimes erroneously referred to as the Christian Sabbath. Or that the Lord's Day and the Sabbath are simply two acceptable names for the same day. Not so and it has never been so. The Sabbath was, and has always been, Saturday (technically, from Friday sunset to Saturday sunset). Modern Christians have, for nearly 1700 years, *not* observed the Sabbath (the 7th day), but instead on the day (the 1st day) so ordered by the Bishop of Rome, and enforced by Constantine, observed a weekly day of worship.

This Church council also created the sacrament of Easter. Though we may think of the Easter Bunny, colored eggs, and such as a modern day commercial adaptation, it is not. Easter is simply the English translation of the word 'Ishtar'. Ishtar is the goddess of Fertility and wife of the Sun god, another important god in the Mithrain pantheon of gods. Anglo-Saxons called her 'Eostre'. So, Easter, although it was adopted and then modified by Constantine and the Bishop of Rome to represent the resurrection of Christ, was in fact taken from the worship of the goddess Ishtar so as to appease the sun worshippers. The rabbit has always been a symbol of fertility, and the ovum (egg) has been used as part of that celebration....hence Easter bunnies and Easter eggs as part of modern Christian observance of Christ's resurrection. And just so there is no misunderstanding: this is one of the two reasons that Seed of Abraham Ministries doesn't observe the manmade occasion of Easter. The second reason is that there was already a Biblical observance called Firstfruits (Bikkurim in Hebrew), as found in Leviticus, which is one of the 7 Feasts ordained by God. It was on Firstfruits that Christ arose from the dead, as the Feast itself prophesied. We do observe Firstfruits as the day of Messiah's resurrection.

What came from this momentous Council of Nicea cannot be overstated; it would forever change the direction of Christianity. It could well be said that out of the Council of Nicea came the birth of the Roman Catholic Church. Prior to the council, although Rome was the de facto center of Christian religious authority, it was the un-official center and there were other less dominant centers. The Church of Rome was at first not the Catholic Church as we think of it in modern times. It was simply where the most powerful Christian Bishop resided. And he was the most powerful because he had the support of the Emperor, Constantine. Christianity was fractured at this time, with the Christian bishops of various regions being more or less independent of one another in the formation of their doctrine and in worship practices. Catholic, which simply means 'universal', became the new name for the religion of Rome-based Christianity, and would be seen as the Christian Church in the Western world for the next 1000 years until Henry the 8th of England (who grew tired of being bossed around by a Catholic Pope) pulled away and started what at first was called the Church of England. It would become the root of what we now think of as the Protestant branch of Christianity in all its many forms and variations.

The influence of the Mithrain sun worshippers is most evident in Roman Catholic doctrine, and in the Catholic icons and symbols. The Eucharist is emblazoned with a sunburst, as is the Pope's staff. Most of the glorious attire of the Catholic ceremonial vestments was taken

directly from Mithrain design. The grotto in Rome that was the headquarters of the Mithraists was taken over and converted to what is now called the Vatican: the world center of Catholicism. The Mithraist statue of their sun god sits at the Vatican. The statue was first erected to the supposed likeness of Zeus, but later the Mithraists called him Mishra (their chief deity). Today, that same statue still exists in the Vatican, only the Catholic Church has re-named him St. Peter. Yes, the Peter of the Bible, Jesus' disciple whom He called the Rock, the man who the Catholic Church calls their first Pope, is depicted in the Vatican by the incredibly ancient statue of Zeus. There is much more of the sun worshippers' religious influence throughout the entire Christian Church, east and west, Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant, that is not appropriate for us to further explore due to time constraints. Suffice it to say it was Constantine who solidified and codified the separation of Jews from their Jewish Messiah and from gentile Christianity. But he should also be remembered as introducing elements of pagan sun-worship practices that have become intertwined and cherished parts of modern church traditions. Most churchgoers have no idea of this, and it's been my experience that the majority of those who are made aware prefer to ignore these realities and continue following these sad, but fun and comfortable, traditions and doctrines.

As a result of the firm hold gentiles had on the religion of Jesus, by 530 AD Jews were prohibited from holding any kind of government office, nor could they build any new synagogues. Eventually Jews could not bear witness in a court of law against a Christian. Any attempt at proselytizing of Christians by Jews was punishable by death (although it was NEVER a Jewish goal to convert Christians to Jews), and all marriages that had occurred years earlier between Jews and Christians were annulled and dissolved by the government.

ISLAM

Shortly after the beginning of the 7th century, 200 years of domination by Christianity would be challenged; not by Jews, the other great monotheistic religion, but by a new order, consisting initially of Arabs and founded by Muhammad Al-ilah. Muhammad was not a desert dwelling Arab nomad; he was a refined urban merchant. Born in 571 AD in Mecca, Arabia, his father died when he was but a child, his rearing being completed by his mother and an uncle. When he was 25, he married a well-to-do 40 year old widow. Many years later he began having revelations and would occasionally retreat to a cave to meditate. The story goes that the angel Gabriel appeared to him and began telling him of a God named Allah, his attributes, his laws, and Muhammad's mission. He called this new religion Islam and the first few converts were his wife, some cousins, and a handful of locals. He began to speak against the standard group of pagan gods common in his Arabic culture, and predictably was persecuted for his efforts.

On one occasion he claims to have been taken on a mysterious spiritual journey to heaven. But, it wasn't a non-stop flight. On the way to heaven there was a stopover in Yerushalayim (*Jerusalem*). Yerushalayim at that time was a Byzantine city, thoroughly

Christian. Although Muhammad never in his lifetime visited the Holy City, this mystical experience is what has elevated Jerusalem to the 3rd most holy city of the Muslims. Muhammad continued his efforts at conversion. Finally, the leader of a nearby Arab tribe accepted his teachings and invited him to leave the city of Mecca where he was under constant harassment, and come to live with them in Medina. A short time later Muhammad led an attack by his newfound followers on a large, well guarded caravan and defeated them. One Arab tribe attacking another to rob them of booty was a way of life and livelihood at this time. Like most cultures outside of the Roman Empire, Arabs were tribal. And, one tribe constantly seeking to pilfer the resources and kidnap the people of another tribe, and a continual push to become the most dominant regional tribe, was standard operating procedure. The success of his attack was regarded as a miracle and a sign of Allah's favor on Muhammad and his new religion of Islam. It also would change the message of the Koran, the Islamic holy book.

Emboldened, Muhammad attempted to proselytize some Jews as he felt they were brothers against paganism. It is with interest that we find **the first** one-third of the Koran, the Muslim holy book, indirectly in agreement with certain doctrines and principles of Judaism. It even speaks with a sense of respect and tolerance towards the "people of the book".....Jews and Christians. It would seem that due to being a merchant, and residing directly on the land trade routes that criss-crossed the Middle East, Muhammad was heavily influenced by direct contact with Jews and Christians. We also find that Muhammad built a works-oriented approach to achieving favor with Allah, however with no need for salvation as Christians would define it, and therefore no need for a savior. The notion of a works oriented approach much akin to the Levitical texts of the Old Testament would, to many, seem to be his model for the Koran. However, upon closer examination, the Muslim doctrine more represents the strict, legal approach of that Jewish body of law, called Tradition or Halakah.

As we are now at a point some 600 years after Christ's death, a Judaism based almost entirely on Tradition and Rabbinical law bore even less resemblance to the Bible than it did in Christ's time. And if you'll recall, Jesus spent much time denouncing the Rabbis' and the Pharisees' penchant for substituting their man-made rulings and regulations for God's Word. So, even had Muhammad used the Jewish Tradition as his model, it would have had its problems. But that is not what he did. In essence, Muhammad took his tribe's family god, Al-ilah (which has since been contracted to Allah), and attempted to make it the highest god of the Arabians, and then he wrote his own holy book, the Koran, the last 2/3rds of which denounces, and declares war upon, Judaism and Christianity.

Al-ilah was formerly the name of the Moon God of the Nabateans and the Sabeans, the primary religions of the Arab peoples. In that era every religion, other than for Judaism and Christianity, was based on worship of multiple gods in some sort of hierarchy. The crescent moon, which is the age-old insignia of the Moon God, is the insignia of Islam. This makes perfect sense because the Moon God system of worship was prevalent in Muhammad's time, and was predominant among the Arabs. So while Muhammad attempted to persuade Jews that his new system was monotheistic and based on the Jewish system, he simultaneously told

the Arabs that Allah was the Moon God, and that Allah had a wife, the Sun, and many daughters, the Stars.

The Jews rejected him. He tried the same approach with Christians with the same results. Angry, he declared that Avraham (*Abraham*) was not the father of the Jews, he was the father of Islam through Yishma'el (*Ishmael*); and that Christians and Jews alike had corrupted the scriptural truth by their false claim that the one true religion had come through Yitz'chak (*Isaac*), by means of the Hebrews. This would soon prove to be an immovable stumbling block in relations between the now 3 great monotheistic religions of the world: Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. We can readily see why the Koran is often described by scholars, religious and secular, as having a somewhat disjointed quality and message: because Muhammad attempted to have a system that would appease Jew, Christian, and Arab by retaining some parts of each of their traditional worship systems.

In 630 AD Muhammad took an army of 10,000 and approached Mecca, his former hometown. The city surrendered. He led other campaigns, this time against Christians and Jews, who he summarily defeated. He made treaties with those he conquered and they paid Muhammad large sums of tribute. Two years later, he was dead.

The new leaders of Islam now required that all Arabs convert to Islam or die. Within 10 years, the Muslims had a huge army and conquered Palestine (the former Holy Land), Syria, and Persia. Next, they conquered Alexandria in Egypt, and then prepared to enter Europe. They crossed into Spain in 711 AD.

JEWS IN SPAIN

Spain, in the 8th century, was Christian; Catholic, of course, as that was the only representation of Christianity in existence at that time in Western Europe. Spain also had a sizeable number of Jewish communities. A few years prior to the Muslim armies entering Spain a Spanish king ordered all Jews to be baptized into Christianity or leave. The next king reversed that law, but in its place ordered all Jews to return any land, property, or slaves they had purchased from a Christian. The Jews resisted and rumors spread that they had formed a secret alliance with the Muslims. These Jews were arrested, had all of their properties and businesses confiscated, and were sold to Christians as slaves.

When the Muslims finally arrived in Spain in 711 AD, the Jews welcomed them, hopeful of liberation from the Christians. The Muslims at first used the co-operative Jews to fortify and govern many of the conquered villages of Spain. Soon, however, the Muslims did an about-face and required the Jews to join the Christians in paying the religious tax. In a few years

concerned Christian countries from northern and eastern Europe made what they considered to be pre-emptive attacks on Muslim strongholds in Spain. They won a few battles and lost a few more. Spain was now splintered into Christian and Muslim regions, with sizeable Jewish communities living in each. It is estimated that as of this time there were about 300,000 Jews living in Spain.

Granada was a Christian held city; Cordova was Muslim. Some tolerance and co-operation had grown between Jew and Muslim when in about 950 AD a Jewish scholar and physician named Hasdai Ibn Shaprut became part of the royal court of the Muslim caliph (the ruler) of Cordova. In time this scholar earned the favor of the caliph, and was able to help his people, the Jews, to a better life. This favorable atmosphere attracted more Jewish scholars and, within a few years, Cordova rivaled Babylon and Alexandria (in Egypt) as centers of Jewish religious authority and learning.

Spain had become a haven for Judaism, while other parts of the world were persecuting Jews. One Jew who journeyed into Constantinople (today called Istanbul, Turkey), an Orthodox Christian enclave, reported: "... the Greeks hate the Jews, good and bad alike, and beat them in the street... Jews are not allowed to ride on horseback". Word spread and Jews flocked to Spain.

Despite the widespread anti-Semitism, Jews continued as they had for several hundred years in their traveling merchant role. Then, as now, people tended to put aside their sometimes strong religious beliefs when it comes to buying, selling, and profit. The Jews learned this lesson well and found that by becoming traders of goods from distant lands they could cross borders, bringing desirable merchandise of all sorts to those of most any religious conviction, and make a good living in the doing. Few occupations were open to Jews, as property ownership for them was outlawed in most regions. The political realities of the times, where Christians vied with Muslims for world religious domination, afforded the Jews the position of being neutral emissaries of commerce. Therefore, they could freely cross national boundaries with their caravans of goods that were needed by members of both religious factions. Selling goods and making money became so closely associated with Jews that it was understood that if you needed something, go see a Jew. What irony: a few centuries earlier, before their exile to Babylon, the occupation of merchant was nothing a good Jew would ever have considered as a respectable means of making a living. Now the Jews were known for it.

THE CRUSADES

Early in the 11th Century AD, the nomadic and warlike Turks from central Asia invaded and took Persia, Iraq, Armenia, and Asia Minor. They overran Jerusalem in 1070, and then set their sites on Constantinople, the bastion of Orthodox Christianity. For several years the succession

of Roman Catholic Popes had pled with the lords and kings of Europe to fight the Muslims that had captured, and converted to Islam, so much of the world. Their words had fallen on deaf ears. But with the capture of **Yerushalayim** by the Muslim Turks the time was right, and the cause supreme: Christians must take back the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, now in the hands of the evil Turkish Muslims.

In 1095 in Clermont, France, Pope Urban II delivered a stirring speech to scores of lords and nobles that had been urged to attend this church council meeting at the behest of their bishops. The Pope offered remission of sins and eternal life to all the aristocrats who would participate in a Holy War to reclaim the world for Christ. He also offered territories within the Holy Land that would become their own divine kingdoms. That did the trick; this was the beginning of the Crusades.

Such was the sentiment of the times that peasants from France and Germany wanted to join the fight. These poor misinformed serfs had no idea what they were getting themselves into. Nor did they know they were simply pawns being used by a corrupt and devious church leadership, and by greedy lords and kings. They had no way of understanding that what they were about to enter in to had nothing to do with the will of God. For no one but clergy was allowed to read, let alone possess, Holy Scripture. Further, by law, Bibles in Europe could only be written in Latin, a language understandable by that time only by Catholic priests and physicians. What the average Believer knew of God's Word, or, what passed for God's Word, was given to them by the Catholic Church structure, directed from Rome. Reading Scripture was cause for excommunication. Owning a Bible, even a page with but a few verses brought with it the death penalty: usually by being burned-at-the-stake.

Thousands of peasants loaded their families and possessions onto wagons and headed south. Many had been convinced by the Church that they were preparing for the 2nd coming of Christ. Knights, noblemen, lords, even sorcerers led various groups in their march to battle the Muslims. The Jewish population of Europe must have been terrified at what they saw, as thousands upon thousands of armed peasants and soldiers became joined under the sign of the cross in a Holy War. Not only were Jews specifically excluded, Jewish villages unlucky enough to have fallen on the chosen routes to the Holy Land were burnt to the ground, and thousands of Jews forced to convert to Christianity or die. Jews by the thousands fled to Catholic Churches where sympathetic local priests and bishops tried to protect them from the fanatical hordes. Many also fled to sanctuary in their own synagogues, which were torched with them still inside while encircled with Christians signing hymns to the Lord.

In 1097, several of these armies met up at Constantinople and merged into a single army of 150,000. Within 2 years, a contingent of 40,000 well-armed Crusaders attacked Jerusalem. The carnage was unimaginable. Anyone, everyone, within the walled city was a target. Never mind that a full year before the Crusaders' arrival the city had already been liberated by Egypt which had put a stop to the persecution of Christians and re-opened the Churches; even

allowing Christian pilgrimage to the city's holy sites. These European Crusaders had marched a long way, for a long time; the lords and kings still wanted the territories and kingdoms promised them by the Pope. The soldiers and the knights wanted the glorious battle they had been primed for; and they were going to save Jerusalem whether it needed it or not. Records indicate that hacked-off heads and arms of the city's inhabitants were piled taller than a man; Christian, Jew, Muslim, pagan, it didn't matter. All who were inside the city were considered guilty and therefore a target.

The Crusader's attack of Jerusalem is considered one of history's most infamous massacres. It is of little wonder that to this day Muslim and atheist alike points to the Crusades and the attack upon Jerusalem, all done with the Holy Cross as its emblem, all murder accomplished in the name of the Holy Church of Jesus Christ, as representative of the true nature of the Church. And this is also why Muslims feel that for the Church to speak against the unfathomable violence of Jihad, Holy War, and of modern Islamic terrorists is the ultimate hypocrisy.

JEWS IN EUROPE

Despite the Crusades, nearing 1300 AD Jerusalem was back in the hands of Muslims. Europe was now fanatically Christian, and Christianity had taken on cult-like form. The Inquisition, a permanent part of the Catholic Church, had been established. The purpose for the Inquisition was to stamp out heresy. Of course what heresy amounted to, and what it consisted of was determined solely by bishops and the Pope, so it changed and evolved. Any means necessary to root out heretics was employed: torture, bribery, false witness, it didn't matter. Execution and imprisonment were the punishments for heresy, and of course, the ubiquitous threat of excommunication from the Church. In southern France the Inquisition determined that Jews were to be looked upon as demon possessed, evil, a thing to be exterminated. Jews, for their part, looked upon Christians as idolaters for their worship of a man: Jesus of Nazareth. Thousands of Jews chose suicide over forced conversion to Christianity. During this same time, anti-Semitism reached such a fury that the era of the traveling Jewish merchant ended.

The Church then evoked a ruling that forbade Christians to loan money to other Christians and charge interest. Jewish religious authorities had, for centuries, forbid Jews to loan money to other Jews and charge interest. Jews, formerly merchants, had money and no place to invest it. But there were no Rabbinical rulings against Jews loaning money to gentiles, nor did the Church say that Christians couldn't borrow money from non-Christians, and have interest added. Preparation met opportunity and the Jews became Medieval bankers. Who needed money and could repay it? Lords, kings, nobles and businessmen. The Jews now had a new way to make a good living. It might be interesting to note that eventually Christians got into the act and became the large bankers, forcing Jews to become lenders to peasants who put up collateral of some sort for their loans. This was the beginning of the Pawn Broker business.

In the mid 1300's the Black Death spread throughout Europe. With no better answer at hand the majority Christian population, guided by Church policy, decided the plague was the result of Jews poisoning water wells. Others believed Jews had cast magic spells, so they were ejected from their countries. The church, which by now looked more like organized sorcery and witchcraft than the body of Christ, used the office of the Inquisition to hunt down and punish those who they considered the very embodiment of evil: the Jews. By the late 1400's the Inquisition had spread to Spain. Jews were arrested and burned at the stake. In a 12 year span 13,000 Jewish men and women were executed for "converting" to Catholicism, but secretly practicing Judaism. In 1492, the same year Columbus set sail for the New World, the Spanish monarchy ordered the expulsion of all Jews from the country. Nearly 200,000 left for destinations throughout Europe. Thousands more converted to Christianity in order to stay. Later that same year, the Pope declared victory: Spain was now 100% Jew-free.

But the Inquisition continued. Convinced that many Jews had disguised themselves as Christians and Muslims, or had faked conversion and were still in Spain, the Inquisitors set up a spy network to root them out. That the authorities of the Inquisition were able to keep the confiscated properties and money for themselves of those found to be demon possessed Christians, or Devil Jews or even Jewish sympathizers no doubt had something to do with their persistence, and the near 100% guilty verdicts for the accused. More than 30,000 accused Jews after the time of the Spanish expulsion were tortured to death or burned at the stake. Most of them were actually Christians and Muslims.

In the mid 1500's the Pope declared the Jewish Talmud (a huge compilation of Jewish religious commentary) a blasphemous work, and thousands of copies of it and every other type of Jewish religious document, were piled high in the streets of Rome and burned. In Spain, a Catholic Archbishop instituted what was called a "purity of blood" provision. That is, only gentile Christians with no Jewish blood in their veins could hold Church office. This notion quickly spread to public and civil office, merchant and trade guilds, school teaching, etc. Proof of genealogy, free of Jewish blood, was now needed to qualify for these positions. Conversions from Judaism to Christianity were, in essence, annulled. The impenetrable wall between Jews and Christians was complete. The Church now allowed worship of Jesus Christ only by gentiles; and only those gentiles who could prove they had no Jewish ancestors.

Much further north in Europe was a place of more favorable prospect for the thousands upon thousands of seemingly constantly displaced Jews: Poland. In 1600 AD Poland and Lithuania formed a united nation. It was an enormous territory ruled by feudal kings and aristocrats. The Jews became revenue collectors and managers for these Polish noblemen and rulers. It was a highly lucrative deal for the Jews. The system was generally that the Jews would pay the nobleman an agreed to sum representing taxes owed for a village or a crop, and then collect from the people who actually owed the tax. The difference between what the Jews paid to the nobleman and what was owed became the collection agent's profit, and it was almost always sizeable. Interestingly, this system was not unlike the one imposed by the Romans upon the

Jews of Yeshua's time; the same system that created the hated "tax collectors" of NT infamy. It may well even be where the Jews got the idea!

Further, these Polish noblemen were not businessmen; they had inherited their lands and had little understanding of, or interest in, anything except enjoying the trappings of luxury and self-indulgence. Therefore in between the wealthy landed aristocrats and the dirt poor ignorant peasants that belonged to the land, stood the Jewish businessmen who set up shops, inns, markets, and all manner of local commerce. They did very well for themselves and provided needed services for the local gentile society.

Religious Jewish life in Poland was governed by Rabbis and their rulings covered every spiritual, moral, behavioral and cultural issue. Here Rabbinically controlled Judaism reached its peak. Prior to Christ's time, the High Priesthood was the legal body that controlled all Jewish moral, civil, and religious matters. During Jesus' time a transition began in which the High Priesthood, in its corruption, effectively became outlawed by the Roman edicts forbidding organized Judaism. The pendulum of authority swung to self-appointed, but widely scattered, Rabbis. And now the Polish Jews, having formed a powerful, wealthy, autonomous society (even though it lay within a predominately Catholic country), had re-established a central governing religious body; this time officially ruled by Rabbis.

In 1654 the Jews actually found themselves fighting side by side with the Polish Christians against Ukrainian Cossacks, who were slaughtering Poles, Jews and gentiles by the thousands. The Ukrainians wanted freedom from Polish rule, the Poles wanted to put down this rebellion, and the Jews wanted things to stay the way they were. Why? Because if Poland slipped from its feudal system the Jews would surely lose their lucrative livelihoods. By the time a peace agreement was reached with Ukraine, approximately one-fourth of the Polish Jew population had been killed in the war. Thousands more left for Germany and Prussia to escape the bloodbath.

We'll continue our march towards modern Israel next week.