

## The Intertestamental Period

What is in your Bible between the end of the Old Testament and the beginning of the New? Nothing? A blank page or two? Most readers of the Bible are aware, of course, that some things must have happened between the end of the Old and the beginning of the New Testaments. But many regard those four centuries as the “silent years.”

According to the last three historical books of the Old Testament—Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther—and the last three books of prophecy—Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi—some of the Jewish exiles in Babylon returned to Palestine to rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple under the leadership of Zerubbabel beginning in about 539 BC and finishing the walls of Jerusalem under the leadership of Nehemiah around 450 BC.

Judah was a tiny province on the western edge of the vast Persian Empire. Jewish resettlement in Palestine was difficult, partly because many who attained some measure of privilege and wealth during the exile found it easier to remain in Babylon/Persia than to return to Jerusalem. The land was sparsely populated. There were disputes with the neighbors. The rebuilt second temple did not have the grandeur of Solomon’s temple.

However, when one turns the page from Malachi to Matthew, the reader sees a very different landscape than in the time of Nehemiah. In the intervening centuries, Palestine had become one of the most densely populated areas in the eastern Mediterranean world. Especially in the north, the areas once named for the tribes of Naphtali, Asher, Zebulun, and Issachar, but now known as the Galilee, contained hundreds of villages in which both Jews and non-Jews lived, worked, and conducted business. Immediately apparent also is that the Persian Empire is gone, and in its place the Roman Empire now occupies Palestine and controls the daily lives of the Jews.

The books of the New Testament were not written in Hebrew but in Greek. This was one of the results of the sweeping conquest of Alexander the Great in the fourth century before Christ, which spread from northern Greece to northern India. Although he died as a young man, Alexander introduced enormous changes wherever he conquered by bringing Greek language, architecture, philosophy, and religious ideas. It became fashionable especially among the upper classes to adopt Greek customs and language, but this caused difficulties for pious Jews who believed there was only one God. The presence of Roman soldiers in the streets and the Greek language in the shops and market places help to explain why many Jews longed for freedom and power as they had in the days of King David and King Solomon.

In time it became impossible for most Jews to remain neutral about Greek ideas and life. Four predominant groups arose in the centuries before the time of Jesus, all of them formed to respond to the question, “How much can a Jew become a Greek and still be a Jew?” A Jewish family of priests received the nickname of *Maccabees* (hammers) because they fought guerilla-type battles against the Greek rulers in the land, and their military mindset remained in the *Zealots*, who sought to overthrow the occupying Romans by revolt and terrorism. Another group, the *Pharisees*, disagreed with the Zealots over armed revolt but urged their Jewish countrymen to remain faithful to God through obedience to the many laws given at Sinai, and they added many layers of rules and traditions to the laws. A third group, the *Sadducees*, was composed of a smaller group of Temple priests and the wealthy aristocracy in Jerusalem. They advocated cooperation with, and even accommodation to, the occupying Greek and Roman forces. A fourth group, the *Essenes*, are not mentioned by name in the New Testament but were similar to

religious communes today. They accused most of the groups and people in Judah as hopelessly corrupt, and they waited for God to return in judgment, when they believed that they alone would be found considered righteous.

The clash between Jewish and Greek culture reached a crisis point in 168 BC when the Seleucid king Antiochus IV instituted an intense persecution of the Jewish religion. A long-running revolt sparked by the priest Mattathias and led by his sons Judah and Simon, who became known as the Maccabees (hammers), led to the establishment of a dynasty of priest/kings known as the *Hasmoneans*. From about 140 to 116 BC the dynasty ruled Judea semi-autonomously from Seleucid control. From 110 BC, with the Seleucid Empire declining, the dynasty became fully independent and expanded forcibly into the neighboring regions of Samaria, Galilee, Iturea, Perea, and Idumea, and they took the title king. This is sometime referred to as an independent kingdom of [Israel](#), but throughout this whole time Judea was, in fact, under the Romans' protective umbrella. The dynasty was plagued by infighting and was often oppressive and corrupt. The dynasty survived for 103 years before being displaced by the Herodian dynasty in 37 BC.

Anyone who visits Israel today will soon come to know the name *Herod the Great*. New Testament readers consider him to have been a ruthless murderer, guilty of slaughtering baby boys in Bethlehem in a futile effort to get rid of a rumored new king. Extra-biblical history confirms his ruthlessness and murderous ways, but it also reveals that Herod was a clever politician, an able administrator, and a genius builder. He greatly increased the size and majesty of the Jerusalem Temple, and he undertook other impressive building projects in Jericho, Herodium, Caesarea, and Masada. His goal was to turn Judea into a Greek-like architectural jewel. Most Jews hated him because he ruled Judea on behalf of Rome, and he did not have a pure Jewish background.

The New Testament mentions several other men by the name Herod, but none possessed the genius or political skill of their ancestor. The story of the Herodian dynasty is told in Appendix 7.

It soon became clear to Rome that the area required the presence of Roman governors or *procurators*, usually career military men assigned to keep the peace and control the land for Rome's benefit. By far the most famous of these Roman procurators was Pontius Pilate.

While the Jerusalem Temple remained the center of Jewish worship life and featured regular sacrifices performed by the priests, local religious activity centered in the many *synagogues*. The Gospels mention synagogues in Capernaum and Nazareth, and in the book of Acts, Peter and Paul visited numerous synagogues in the Mediterranean world. Synagogue worship did not feature sacrifice but focused on reading and explanation of Scripture, prayer, education, and even a gathering place for Jews living outside Palestine in predominantly non-Jewish environments.

Synagogue worship became so ingrained in Jewish religious habits that by Jesus' time several synagogues thrived within walking distance of the Temple. Many Jews had moved out of Palestine throughout the Middle Eastern and Mediterranean worlds. Alexandria in Egypt was believed to have had more than a million Jewish residents in the first century. The Apostle Paul was a child of the synagogue in Tarsus and visited synagogues in southern and western Turkey and throughout Greece. Peter said that Moses was read "in every city" (Acts 15).

Various books written between the Old and New Testaments were gathered into a collection often called the *Apocrypha*. Some Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Bibles include some or all of these books, but Protestant Bibles generally omit them. Several of the books of the Apocrypha are history (*1 and 2 Maccabees*). Others are works of religious fiction (*Judith, Tobit*), legendary additions to the accounts of biblical characters (*Susannah, The Prayer of Azariah, Bel and the Dragon, Additions to Esther, The Prayer of Manasseh*), wisdom literature (*Sirach*, also known as *Ecclesiasticus*), and works that present themselves as having been written centuries earlier by long-dead biblical figures (*The Wisdom of Solomon, Baruch, The Letter of Jeremiah*). Protestants have omitted these books from the Bible because they contain numerous historical errors and some questionable doctrinal statements and were not recognized as part of the Hebrew text of the Old Testament, yet Protestants also consider these books “useful to read” because they fill in the historical gaps between Malachi and Matthew.

Religious life during Jesus’ time seems to have been weighed down with bewildering combination of rules, traditions, and expectations. Jesus frequently came into conflict with religious leaders over questions of Sabbath behavior and the meaning of certain laws. “What is the greatest commandment of the Law,” a question put to Jesus during the last week of his life on earth, is highly relevant in a religious environment that included more than 600 rules and traditions designed to direct people in observing God’s laws. Jesus frequently criticized the Pharisees for insisting on hair-splitting interpretations of these rules.

There was, finally, great expectation for change when the Messiah would come, but various ideas of what the Messiah would be like. The promise of a champion who would crush the serpent’s head went back to the Garden of Eden. Isaiah voiced the hope that a divine intercessor would appear to make the earth tremble before him. The succession of brutal foreign invaders in Palestine—Assyrian, Babylonian, Greek, Roman—caused many Jews to envision the Messiah as military and political champion, a new King David. The Old Testament prophets picture the coming age of the Messiah as one of great harmony, safety, and fruitfulness of the land, but the prophets also pictured in stark detail a Messiah who would suffer and die as a substitute for the people to free them from the consequences of sin and fear of death.

“When the time had fully come,” Paul wrote, “God sent his Son ”(Gal 4:4) Much of what made that time the right time was because of people and events in the time between the testaments.

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