

## CHAPTER 1

# THE OVERLOOKED ERA LIFE BETWEEN THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS

*[The intertestamental period] was a crucial era, for this is when God was preparing the world for the coming of His Son as Saviour and Lord (read Gal 4:4). With the help of outside sources, study the religious, political, social, and secular preparations which were involved. Such a study will enhance your appreciation and understanding of the two Testaments and of the connections between the two.*

—I. L. JENSEN<sup>1</sup>

**T**o study the history of Israel and the Jewish people in the centuries preceding Christ's birth is hardly a pointless or boring exercise. Summaries of this period in our favorite study Bibles aren't, as I once suspected, filler to add heft to those works. Familiarity with the historical, religious, and cultural background of the New Testament helps us to understand the world Jesus entered, the context and setting of the Gospels, and the development of the early Church. It gives us a fuller comprehension of the Gospel writings, enhancing our appreciation of the events they relate and of Jesus' teachings. We will see the reasons for the mercilessness of Herod the Great, the reluctance of Pontius Pilate, and the

Apostle Paul's confidence in demanding that his case be tried before Roman authorities.<sup>2</sup> The historical events of the intertestamental years providentially laid the foundation for the rise of Christianity. This turbulent period—a hinge that connects the Old and New Testaments<sup>3</sup>—particularly affected the Jews as their land was conquered by various empires.

The intertestamental period spans roughly four hundred years, from the end of the Old Testament times around 400 BC—the approximate date of the writing of Malachi, the last book of the Old Testament in the Protestant canon—to about 4 AD and the birth of Jesus. Most Christian writers use the term “intertestamental period” while others refer to it as the “Second Temple period,” though this period is longer, stretching from 516 BC—the time of the building of the Second Temple—to about 70 AD, when the Romans sacked Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple.<sup>4</sup>

Some writers have called the intertestamental period the “dark period” or “silent period” of Israel's pre-Christian history because no prophets or inspired writers were active then, and also because the Jews remained dispersed among the nations.<sup>5</sup> The Jews in New Testament times believed that prophetic inspiration had ceased with Malachi.<sup>6</sup> Although no canonical books were written and no direct revelation came through prophets during this period,<sup>7</sup> there are sources that relate Israel's political history at this time.<sup>8</sup> The main ones are *Jewish Antiquities* by the Jewish historian Josephus; the apocryphal books including 1 and 2 Maccabees;<sup>9</sup> the pseudepigrapha (early non-canonical Jewish books written mostly before Jesus' birth);<sup>10</sup> and works by Greek and Latin historians such as Polybius, Tacitus, Livy, and Appian.<sup>11</sup>

During this period, the Jews who had returned to their land from captivity lived under the control of successive foreign kingdoms.<sup>12</sup> One writer contends that this bleak period was foreseen by the psalmist, who writes, “We do not see our signs; there is no longer any prophet, and there is none among us who knows how long” (Psalms 74:9).<sup>13</sup> Many Jews believed that after Malachi, prophecy would not resume until the coming of the Messiah and his kingdom.<sup>14</sup> Though no prophets of God spoke during this time, God was still sovereignly directing events, and history unfolded just as the prophet Daniel had predicted, with control of the land changing hands from Babylon to Medo-Persia, to Greece, and to

Rome—one of the Old Testament’s most amazing prophecies (Daniel 2:39, 40; 7:5–7).<sup>15</sup>

Readers open the New Testament and find an entirely different world from that which existed at the close of the Old Testament, so let’s review in broad strokes Israel’s history leading up to the intertestamental years and then examine the important events that occurred during that period.

## ISRAEL BEFORE THE INTERTESTAMENTAL PERIOD



Israel transitioned from a group of disorganized tribes under the leadership of various “judges” to a united kingdom in 1050 BC, then remained unified for some 120 years under the consecutive kingships of Saul, David, and Solomon. The Israelites had come out of Egypt almost five hundred years earlier, and now that they had conquered the Promised Land and all the tribes were settled, it was time to build the Temple to God and centralize their worship.<sup>16</sup> David wanted to construct the Temple, but God prohibited him because he had shed so much blood and waged so much war (1 Chr. 22:7–8). Instead, his son Solomon would build it, as he was “a man of rest” (1 Chr. 22:9). Around 964 BC, Solomon completed the historic project (1 Kings 6:37–38).<sup>17</sup>

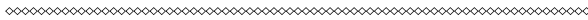
Shortly after Solomon’s death in 931 BC, Israel divided into two separate kingdoms, the Northern Kingdom (Israel) and the Southern Kingdom (Judah). In 722 BC the Assyrian Empire conquered the Northern Kingdom and took thousands of its people into captivity. The Assyrians partially repopulated Israel with Gentiles from other countries. Some married Jews who had remained in the land, and others married those who later returned.<sup>18</sup> These couples’ interracial offspring, known as Samaritans, intermixed Judaism with pagan religions and earned the Jews’ disdain for adulterating their ethnicity and religion. The Southern Kingdom remained intact for another century and a half. The Babylonian Empire conquered it and took its people captive beginning in 605 BC, and destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem in 586 BC.

Around 539–536 BC, the Persians conquered the Babylonians. In fulfillment of another astounding Old Testament prophecy, in which

Isaiah specifically mentioned “Cyrus” by name more than 150 years earlier (Isaiah 44:28; 45:1, 13), King Cyrus freed the Jews to return home and rebuild their Temple: “That the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing: ‘Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the Lord, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem’” (Ezra 1:1–4).

By 516 BC, over fierce opposition from those who had remained in the land during the exile (Ezra 4:1–6),<sup>19</sup> the people had rebuilt the Temple. In 458 BC, the scribe Ezra returned to the land along with a few thousand Jews and their families, and reinstated the Law and the religious rituals (Ezra 7:21–25). In 444 BC, Nehemiah returned to the land with another group of exiles and was appointed governor of Judah. By the authority of Persian King Artaxerxes (Neh. 2:6), Nehemiah organized the rebuilding of the city’s walls, fulfilling Daniel’s century-old prophecy (Daniel 9:25). He completed the project in fifty-two days despite persistent opposition from neighboring non-Jews (Neh. 2:10, 19–20; 6:15).

## THE INTERTESTAMENTAL PERIOD



The first part of the intertestamental period (400 BC to 331 BC), when the Persians ruled Israel, was by most accounts uneventful for both the Persians and Jews.<sup>20</sup> Persia was quite tolerant of the Jewish people, leaving them largely undisturbed and allowing them to retain considerable autonomy over their own religious affairs under the authority of the Jewish high priest. But Israel had not suddenly become free—it remained under the direct authority of a Persian governor, who on one occasion partially destroyed Jerusalem due to a rivalry over the high priest’s office.<sup>21</sup>

Persian rule over the Jewish state ended around 331 BC, when Alexander the Great defeated Persian King Darius III and gained

control of the Persian Empire.<sup>22</sup> In some ways Alexander, like the Persians, was permissive toward the Jews, allowing them to observe their laws and rituals, and giving them a tax exemption during their sabbatical years.<sup>23</sup> As a result of Alexander's efforts to spread Greek culture throughout his empire, Koine Greek (common Greek as spoken by non-native Greeks) eventually became the main language of the eastern Mediterranean as well as the language of the New Testament.<sup>24</sup>

Alexander's precipitous death in 323 BC at age thirty-two resulted in a struggle for succession among his generals, as he left no heir to inherit his kingdom. At first the empire was divided into four parts, then three, and finally just two—the Seleucids and Ptolemies. The Seleucids were based in Syria and controlled the northern part of the empire, and the Ptolemies, in Egypt, controlled the southern part. Seleucid rulers were usually named Seleucus or Antiochus, and those of Egypt used the title Ptolemy. Located between the two powers, Israel was under constant threat of expansionism from both.<sup>25</sup>

Israel was ultimately absorbed into Ptolemy's Egyptian empire around 321 BC. The Jewish people lived peacefully in this period except during periodic conflicts between the Ptolemies and Seleucids, which diminished their quality of life and prosperity.<sup>26</sup> At this time, Alexandria, in Egypt, became an important center of Judaism.<sup>27</sup> Ptolemy Philadelphus (285–247 BC) had Jewish scholars begin translating the Old Testament into Greek for the benefit of Greek-speaking Jews in Egypt.<sup>28</sup> The Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament) was translated into Greek around 250 BC and the remainder of the Old Testament by about 130 BC.<sup>29</sup> This version of the Old Testament, called the Septuagint because seventy-two scholars compiled it, was invaluable to Jews living outside Palestine, as the land of Israel was called during various historical times beginning with the ancient Greeks. The Septuagint also later became the Bible of the early Christian Church.<sup>30</sup>

The Seleucids gained control of Israel in 198 BC, when their ruler Antiochus III defeated Egypt.<sup>31</sup> At first, the Seleucids were tolerant of Jewish customs and religious practices, but tensions later mounted between Jews supportive of Hellenistic (Greek) culture and those hostile to it.<sup>32</sup> In 167 BC, Seleucid ruler Antiochus IV Epiphanes ordered the Hellenization of the land as a means to unite all the peoples of his

kingdom. A brief review of his persecution of the Jewish people gives us a flavor of what this beleaguered people has endured through the ages. He commanded the Jews to follow customs “strange to the land,” prohibiting them from observing their Sabbath, ancestral laws, festivals, sacrifices, and circumcision rituals. He destroyed and burned copies of the Torah, built altars, sacred precincts, and shrines for idols, and ordered the Jews to offer unclean sacrifices and eat swine’s flesh.<sup>33</sup> He even dedicated the Temple to the Greek god, Zeus.<sup>34</sup>

Furthermore, the Jews were to make themselves abominable by everything unclean and profane, so that they would forget the Law and change their ordinances. Anyone who disobeyed would die. Antiochus appointed inspectors over all the people and ordered all the towns of Judah to offer sacrifices. Anyone found in possession of the Torah, or who adhered to the Law, was condemned to death by the king’s decree. Women who had their children circumcised were killed, and their infants were hung from their mothers’ necks. Many in Israel resisted and chose to die rather than to profane their laws (1 Macc. 1:44, 48–51, 56–57, 60–63; 2 Macc. 6:2).

Mattathias, an elderly Jewish priest, refused to obey a Seleucid official’s order to offer a pagan sacrifice. “Even if all the nations that live under the rule of the king obey him, and have chosen to obey his commandments, everyone of them abandoning the religion of their ancestors, I and my sons and my brothers will continue to live by the covenant of our ancestors,” Mattathias proclaimed. “Far be it from me to desert the law and the ordinances. We will not obey the king’s words by turning aside from our religion to the right hand or to the left” (1 Macc. 2:19–22). When a renegade Jewish bystander came forward to make the sacrifice, Mattathias, in a righteous rage, killed him and the king’s official and tore down the altar (1 Macc. 23–25).<sup>35</sup> Mattathias cried out, “Let everyone who is zealous for the law and supports the covenant come out with me!” Then he and his five sons fled to the hills with their followers, who joined them in a rebellion known as the Maccabean revolt (1 Macc. 2:27–28).<sup>36</sup>

When Mattathias died, his son Judas took over the rebellion. He came to be known as Judas Maccabeus or just Maccabeus (the “hammer”) because of the guerilla warfare tactics he employed.<sup>37</sup> In 165 BC, an army led by Judas recaptured the Temple area and other parts of Jerusalem, an event Jews commemorate in the festival of Hanukkah.<sup>38</sup>

Some twenty years later, in 142 BC, the Jews became independent and self-governing under the Hasmoneans, the descendants of Judas' older brother Simon.<sup>39</sup>

Though Mattathias and Judas Maccabeus were committed to following God's law, the Hasmonean kings were enticed by competing Hellenistic ideas and were compromised by the allure of their political power.<sup>40</sup> In 63 BC, Roman general Pompey intervened in Jewish civil strife and took control of the land,<sup>41</sup> annexing Judea to Rome.<sup>42</sup> Gary Burge writes, "No doubt the most important event for the average Jew was the conquest of Israel by Rome in 63 BC."<sup>43</sup> Pompey's large armies soon placed Israel under Roman administration. "The reality of this occupation—its tax burden, its Jewish collaborators, its Jewish resisters—shaped the world of Jesus and Paul," says Burge.

When Pompey seized control of Jerusalem he entered the Temple and even its most sacred area, the Most Holy Place. This was sacrilegious and insulting to the Jews, contributing to mutual distrust that lasted more than a century, up to 70 AD, when the Jews rebelled and the Romans destroyed the Jewish state and the Temple.<sup>44</sup> In 40 BC, the Romans appointed Herod the Great as king of Judea, a position also called king of the Jews. Though he didn't actually ascend to the throne until 37 BC, he ruled for more than thirty years, until 4 BC, and was king when Jesus was born (Matt. 2:1, 2). In the meantime, the Roman Senate made Julius Caesar's nephew, Octavian, imperator—supreme military leader—after he defeated Antony and Cleopatra at Actium in 31 BC, giving him the title Augustus ("exalted one") and placing him above the Senate in authority. This event signified the end of the Roman Republic and the beginning of the Roman Empire.<sup>45</sup>

As king of Judea, Herod quashed an insurrection in Galilee,<sup>46</sup> helping to bring order to Israel and advancing Augustus' plans to spread Greco-Roman civilization throughout the Roman Empire.<sup>47</sup> Though Herod refurbished and expanded the Temple, Jews largely viewed him as a usurper of the throne in Jerusalem (because he was partly Idumean, or Edomite)<sup>48</sup> and as an instrument of Roman oppression who had abolished Jewish self-rule.<sup>49</sup> He was a cruel ruler who put to death his own wife Mariamne, their two sons, his son by another wife, and the respected Jewish High Priest Hyrcanus II.<sup>50</sup> He also notoriously ordered

the death of all baby boys in Bethlehem when he was trying to kill the infant Jesus (Matt. 2:16–18).<sup>51</sup>

After Herod’s death, Archelaus became ruler of Judea, Samaria, and Idumea. He severely persecuted the Jews, slaughtering some three thousand in the Temple in 4–3 BC,<sup>52</sup> and was replaced for incompetence in 6 AD by various governors and prefects. The most consequential of these was Pontius Pilate. Serving from 26 to 36 AD, Pilate was prefect during Jesus’ ministry and crucifixion, Pentecost, the early days of the Church, Stephen’s speech and death, and the first Christian missions.<sup>53</sup>

## THE RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND TO NEW TESTAMENT TIMES



At the dawn of the New Testament era, many religions and philosophies were coursing through the Roman Empire, largely due to the Hellenization of the Roman world. The Greek philosophical systems of Pythagoreanism, Stoicism, Cynicism, and Epicureanism, in their respective ways, attempted to explain the universe through human reason.<sup>54</sup> Many Greek philosophies featured a dualistic notion of reality, with the physical world being only a shadow of the spiritual world. The material world was temporal and evil, while the spiritual world was eternal, real, and good.<sup>55</sup> These philosophies influenced the worldview of the empire’s inhabitants at the time of Christ’s birth, though they were not particularly prominent.<sup>56</sup> The New Testament suggests, however, that people at the time were quite fascinated by philosophy and “new” ideas. As the Book of Acts relates, “Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new” (17:21).

Epicureanism, founded by Epicurus in the late fourth century BC, promoted the values of pleasure and friendship, and encouraged withdrawal from civic activities.<sup>57</sup> Pleasure—meaning the absence of pain, as opposed to self-indulgence<sup>58</sup>—was the chief good in life.<sup>59</sup> Epicurus was not an atheist, as he believed in immortal and blessed gods. He did not believe in the afterlife, however, and he thought prayer was pointless because, in his view, the gods didn’t exercise providence over human affairs.<sup>60</sup>

Stoicism was founded by Zeno of Citium (335–263 BC), who taught in the famed Stoa of Athens. Instructing people to achieve happiness through self-control, he stressed virtue as the only good worth pursuing. Zeno's philosophy was pantheistic ("everything is god")<sup>61</sup> and encouraged its adherents to align themselves with nature.<sup>62</sup> Along with Epicureans, Stoics are mentioned in Acts as accusing the Apostle Paul of babbling as he preaches the Gospel and asking him to clarify his "new teaching" (17:16–21).

Antisthenes (445–365 BC), a contemporary of Socrates, founded Cynicism, which lasted into the early fifth century AD. The Cynics flouted conventional wisdom and distrusted everything associated with it. They taught that ordinary standards of value are based on an illusion. Their extreme positions in combating society's supposed prejudices, such as their defense of incest and cannibalism as natural actions, led to the modern connotation of the word "cynic." They adopted the lifestyle of beggars, appearing unkempt with long beards and coarse cloaks.<sup>63</sup>

The Skeptics were the forerunners of today's moral relativists, teaching that relativizing all claims to knowledge was the way to a peaceful soul.<sup>64</sup>

As Greek influences spread through the Roman Empire, the Roman gods and goddesses became identified with those of the Greek pantheon. For example, the Roman god Mercury was identified with the Greek god Hermes<sup>65</sup> and the Roman god Jupiter with the Greek god Zeus.<sup>66</sup> Overall, as the New Testament era began, faith in the gods had declined because of their perceived immorality, their inability to help their worshippers, and the popularity of secular philosophies.<sup>67</sup> But worship of these gods did not altogether cease, as evidenced by several New Testament references. For example, in Acts 14 local priests call Paul "Hermes" and Barnabas "Zeus" when they heal a crippled man; and in Acts 19 Demetrius, a silversmith who makes shrines to the goddess Artemis, complains to his colleagues that Paul is hurting their business by turning many people away from Artemis.<sup>68</sup>

Deceased Roman emperors were also considered deities by order of the Roman Senate. Some, such as Nero, proclaimed their own deity. One reason the Roman authorities persecuted Christians was that they were considered disloyal because their monotheism precluded worshipping emperors.<sup>69</sup> In fact, the Romans viewed Christians as atheists because

they rejected Roman gods.<sup>70</sup> This was not the only reason they were persecuted, as Jews were the original monotheists and rejected Roman gods, yet unlike Christians they were exempted from worshipping the emperor.<sup>71</sup> Rome's most intense periods of Christian persecution, however, did not occur with the immediate appearance of Christianity, but rather between the close of the New Testament period<sup>72</sup> (circa 100 AD)<sup>73</sup> and Constantine's rule (306–37 AD).<sup>74</sup>

## RELIGION IN ISRAEL IN NEW TESTAMENT TIMES

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Though many religions and philosophies in the Roman Empire impacted the culture into which Jesus was born, the dominant influence came from the various sects and institutions of Judaism.<sup>75</sup> The most important Jewish religious institutions were the priests, the Temple, the synagogues, and the Sanhedrin. The main Jewish sects were the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the Essenes, although many scholars believe there were at least seven, and as many as twelve, Jewish sects at the time.<sup>76</sup> There were also groups better labeled political parties than religious sects, such as the Herodians and the Zealots.<sup>77</sup>

There were many priests—twenty thousand according to Josephus—who were supported by tithes from the community. Most did not live in Jerusalem but regularly went there to perform rituals. They functioned as teachers of the Law and as judges and mediators over legal and other disputes.<sup>78</sup> Among them was a much smaller group, the chief priests—aristocratic elites who answered to Rome for the people's actions.<sup>79</sup> Jesus had little quarrel with the village priests, reserving His admonitions mostly for the chief priests.<sup>80</sup> For example, after He cleanses the leper, Jesus instructs him, “See that you say nothing to anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, for a proof to them” (Mark 1:44). Most of the chief priests, along with other aristocrats, were Sadducees.<sup>81</sup>

The Temple in Jerusalem, site of the Jews' religious sacrifices and feasts, was the crucial center of Jewish worship. King Solomon, as noted, built the original Temple in 964 BC and the Babylonians destroyed it in 586 BC. The Persians authorized its reconstruction, resulting in the

Second Temple, which was completed around 516 BC. It was plundered and defiled by Antiochus Epiphanes in 168 BC but was soon restored by Judas Maccabeus. As Herod the Great ordered the Temple's renovation and expansion (20–19 BC),<sup>82</sup> it was called the Herodian Temple in New Testament times. It was surrounded by a large outer court, which Gentiles were permitted to enter (“the court of the Gentiles”), though they were banned from the two inner courts.<sup>83</sup>

Scattered throughout the Roman Empire, synagogues were the hubs of Jewish life at the time of Christ (Mark 1:21; 6:2; Luke 4:16, 31; 6:6; 13:10; Acts 13:14, 27, 42, 44; 15:21; 16:13; 17:2; 18:4). The religious services held in the synagogues generally included the reading of a doctrinal creed, readings from the Law and the prophets, a sermon, and benedictions. Most religious instruction occurred at the synagogues.<sup>84</sup>

In Jerusalem, the community's lay leaders and the Temple priests formed a “high council” known as the Sanhedrin (Matt. 5:22; 26:59; Mark 15:1), which functioned as the Jews' main judicial and administrative body,<sup>85</sup> and also ran the city's affairs. One such lay leader was Joseph of Arimathea, who received Pilate's permission to bury Jesus in his tomb (Mark 15:43; John 19:38–42).<sup>86</sup> The Sanhedrin frequently clashed with Jesus, trying to have Him arrested (John 7:32) and even wanting to kill Him (Luke 22:2). It had seventy members (seventy-one, counting the high priest who led the body),<sup>87</sup> patterned on the seventy elders Moses had appointed (Num. 11:16). Significantly, Jesus sent about that many disciples—seventy-two—to prepare for his ministry in Galilee (Luke 10:1).<sup>88</sup>

The Pharisees were devout Jewish believers. The word Pharisee comes from the Hebrew and Aramaic words for “one who separates.” They separated themselves from the impurities they observed in the priests, the common people, the Hellenists, and certain political groups.<sup>89</sup> Strict observers of the Law, they were vociferous critics of those who yielded to Hellenistic influences. Some believe their origin can be traced to efforts to purge the land of Hellenism during the time of the Maccabean revolt.<sup>90</sup> They are considered to be direct descendants of the Hasidim—a group of pious Jews who joined the Maccabean rebellion.<sup>91</sup> They anticipated a Messiah who would usher in a time of righteousness.

Concerned foremost with purity and kosher requirements,<sup>92</sup> Pharisees emphasized tithing, observance of the Sabbath, and food purity laws.<sup>93</sup> They mainly operated in the synagogues, and they were intent on protecting the Torah.<sup>94</sup> Jewish historian Josephus was a self-described Pharisee who identified the group as “a certain sect of the Jews that appear more religious than others, and seem to interpret the laws more accurately.”<sup>95</sup> The New Testament reveals that they believed in angels, spirits, and the resurrection of human beings (Acts 23:8). They were quite influential in Israel, though they were a relatively small group of some six thousand members.<sup>96</sup> The Pharisees are featured prominently in the Gospels, often as recipients of Jesus’ sharp criticism. They strongly opposed Him, especially when He appeared to break their legalistic rules, as when He healed on the Sabbath (Luke 6:6–11). Pharisaism is considered the forerunner of modern Orthodox Judaism.<sup>97</sup> The Apostle Paul had been an ardent Pharisee before his conversion (Phil. 3:5).

The Sadducees, probably named for Zadok, who was appointed high priest by Solomon (1 Kings 2:35), were a smaller group than the Pharisees. They were educated and wealthy elites, often in positions of political authority, such as many of the priests (Acts 5:17). Prizing their social positions, they were closely connected with the Roman authorities and accepted many aspects of Hellenism.<sup>98</sup> Unlike the Pharisees, they did not believe in angels or demons, resurrection, or the afterlife (Acts 23:8), but taught “that souls die with the bodies.”<sup>99</sup> They did not anticipate a coming Messiah,<sup>100</sup> and they had their conflicts with Jesus, though not to the extent the Pharisees did. The Sadducees tried to trip up Jesus on theological questions such as the resurrection (Matt. 22:23–33), which Jesus parried by citing a passage from the Pentateuch instead of a more obvious text from Isaiah or Daniel, knowing the Sadducees didn’t consider non-Pentateuch biblical books as sources of doctrine.<sup>101</sup> The Sadducees ceased to exist as a sect after the Romans sacked Jerusalem in 70 AD.<sup>102</sup>

The Essenes, who are not directly mentioned in the New Testament,<sup>103</sup> left the cities and lived in isolated communities such as Qumran near the Dead Sea. The group, which included some four thousand members,<sup>104</sup> originated in the second century BC<sup>105</sup> and is widely

associated with the Dead Sea Scrolls, which were discovered in eleven caves near Qumran. They are believed to be the writers of the non-biblical portion of the scrolls, which have provided much of our information on the culture and history of Judaic Israel a few centuries before and at the time of Christ.<sup>106</sup> Of the scrolls' nearly 900 manuscripts, about 210 are copies of biblical books.<sup>107</sup>

The Essenes lived frugally and held their property in common, though their theology was similar to that of the Pharisees.<sup>108</sup> They rejected the significance of the Temple, which they thought had been compromised, and were quietly waiting and praying for the arrival of the Messiah,<sup>109</sup> believing they were the true Israel to whom he would come.<sup>110</sup> Like the Sadducees, the Essenes virtually disappeared from history after the Romans suppressed the Jewish revolt in Jerusalem.

The Zealots were activists, believing they should do what they could, including waging war, to hasten the establishment of God's messianic kingdom. They had a zeal for the Law, which fueled their opposition to the Romans, and they led the ill-fated revolt against Rome. The Apostle "Simon the Zealot" likely broke from the Zealots to follow Christ (Acts 1:13).<sup>111</sup>

The Herodians were more a political coalition than a religious one, which supported King Herod and his family. Various Roman leaders who ruled Palestine at different times were among this group, which conspired with the Pharisees to entrap Jesus (Mark 3:6; 12:13).<sup>112</sup>

The scribes weren't a party or sect, but a class of well-educated Israelites who taught and interpreted the Law and prosecuted its violators. Most scribes were Pharisees and were probably the most elite members of that sect.<sup>113</sup>

N. T. Wright says that the great majority of Jews didn't belong to a particular sect or party, but were devoted to the basic tenets of Judaism.<sup>114</sup> Though a widely diverse people, they cared about their God, scriptures, and heritage, and therefore sought to observe biblical law. They prayed, fasted, attended synagogue, and traveled to Jerusalem for the celebrated feasts. They kept the Sabbath, eschewed pork, and obeyed their religious duty to circumcise their male children.<sup>115</sup> Most expected deliverance through the coming Messiah and the resultant kingdom of God.<sup>116</sup>

## JEWISH RELIGIOUS STRUGGLES DURING THE INTERTESTAMENTAL PERIOD AND JEWISH MESSIANIC EXPECTATIONS



When the Persians permitted the Jews to return to their land and rebuild the Temple, most chose to remain in exile. Those who returned appreciated the new Temple, though at the time it was far less resplendent than its predecessor had been (Haggai 2:3). Those who stayed abroad, called the Diaspora (Greek for “the scattered”), were determined to retain their covenant identity with God, allegiance to the Torah, and religious observances. Diaspora Jews had varying success in these endeavors, but they retained their sense of national identity as God’s chosen people and vested their hope in Him. The Jewish people in both Palestine and the Diaspora built synagogues for prayer, Scripture study, and Sabbath worship. These became the central institution of Jewish communities, though they were not a complete substitute for the Temple,<sup>117</sup> and many Jews made pilgrimages to Jerusalem for important festivals.<sup>118</sup>

Though the Jews had been freed, the impact of the Babylonian destruction of the Temple and the ensuing exile remained. They regarded Jerusalem and the Temple as the center of their homeland and their religion, and their removal from both challenged their faith in their covenantal God.<sup>119</sup> Where was the God Who had specially chosen them? They faced the jolting reality that His prophetic predictions of judgment were now historical facts.<sup>120</sup> They were still the chosen people, but that privilege came with responsibilities, which they hadn’t honored.

As the intertestamental period began and exiled Jews flowed back to their homeland, they did not reestablish their kingship but longed for the day when this would occur. They became increasingly focused on studying and following the Law because they were convinced that their disobedience had led to their exile and that only through obedience could they regain their freedom.<sup>121</sup> They sought to please God by observing the sacrifices and ceremonies, and by remembering His roles as lawgiver and judge.<sup>122</sup> But obedience was difficult at a time when they were dominated by foreign powers and were pressured to adopt pagan Hellenistic ideas and practices.<sup>123</sup>

Still, their return from captivity was a powerful testimony to God's patience, faithfulness, forgiveness, and mercy—in short, He had not forsaken them. Thus, much of the intertestamental writings reflect the Jews' continued faith in God's loving-kindness and His sovereign care of the Jewish nation.<sup>124</sup>

## MESSIANIC HOPES



Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen contend that five fundamental beliefs, developed over Israel's two-thousand-year communion with God since Abraham's time, molded the lives of the Jews—both in the homeland and outside it—during the intertestamental period:

1. Monotheism—Belief in one God, the Creator and sovereign Ruler.
2. Election—God had chosen Israel as His people, who would bless all nations through Abraham.
3. Torah—God would bless them for obedience to His Law.
4. The holiness of the land and the Temple—The land wasn't just holy because it was a choice piece of real estate, but because God promised it to Abraham as an everlasting possession (Gen. 17:8), and He dwelt with Israel there (Zech. 2:12). There was no other land on earth where the people could enjoy that level of communion with Him.
5. Redemption—Though God had punished them for their disobedience, He would remain faithful and redeem them as promised.<sup>125</sup> But their beliefs were constantly being tested as they suffered under the domination of foreign powers. When would God step in and save them?<sup>126</sup>

What did the Jews have in mind as they looked to God for redemption? The answer can largely be gleaned from intertestamental literature, which provides insight into the Jews' messianic expectations at the time of Christ's incarnation.<sup>127</sup>

Some Jews believed that someday the Gentile nations would acknowledge Israel's God and joyfully live under His rule. But more believed that Israel would come to rule over all the nations that had oppressed the Jews. "Israel's long years of humiliation," write Bartholomew and Goheen, "had bred such hatred for the pagan oppressors that the dominant note sounded in Israel was not that the nations would flock to Zion to learn the way of God (Isaiah 2:3). Instead, Israelites looked for the nations to be dashed into pieces like a Potter's vessel (Psalm 2:9)... In vengeance God would destroy the oppressors who had so long sought to keep Israel from serving him according to his covenant. And so God would deliver his people."<sup>128</sup> This act of deliverance would be led by the Messiah—an anointed king who would usher in God's renewed kingdom. "Israel looked to a day when there would be 'no king but God,'" Bartholomew and Goheen maintain.<sup>129</sup>

Thus, Israel expected a different kind of Messiah than Jesus—not one who would suffer, die, and be resurrected for them, but one who would deliver them from their political and military oppressors. The Jews' perspective was strongly influenced by the tyranny of foreign governments and by their own failures in self-governance. They longed for the coming Messiah to deliver justice.<sup>130</sup> Until then, they would hope, pray, study the scriptures, observe the feasts, remain obedient to the Law, and be prepared for military action.<sup>131</sup> When Jesus claimed to be the Messiah but didn't follow the pattern they anticipated, they were offended and appalled.

F. F. Bruce writes, "No single form of messianic expectation was cherished by Jesus' contemporaries, but the hope of a military Messiah predominated. The promises of a prince of the house of David who would break the oppressor's yoke from his people's neck seemed to many to be designed for such a time as theirs, whether the yoke was imposed by a Herodian ruler or by a Roman governor."<sup>132</sup>

Some modern Christians criticize the Old Testament Israelites' misunderstanding of the type of Messiah the scriptures promised and the first-century Jews' initial blindness to Jesus. But today we read the Old Testament with the benefit of the New Testament's clarifying revelations, and we cannot assume we would have had greater perception than they did before these revelations existed.

Biblical scholar Mike Heiser explains that many Old Testament passages that modern Christian readers see as clear references to the Messiah would not have been seen as such by Old Testament and first-century Jews. Heiser notes that even the disciples initially missed Jesus as the Messiah when He appeared to them in His resurrected body. “Do you realize,” he asks, “that there isn’t a single passage in the Old Testament that actually has the Messiah dying and rising again.... The disciples were not ignoramuses.”

Even in Isaiah 53, the well-known passage we now see as containing numerous messianic prophecies involving a suffering servant, the Hebrew word for Messiah never appears. Heiser contends that God deliberately did not spell out the messianic plan all in one place in the Old Testament. “What you do see,” he says, “is what I call a messianic profile. The full profile of who the Messiah was going to be and, more importantly, what He was supposed to do, is splintered and scattered in hundreds of places in the Old Testament so that you can only... see the mosaic after the fact.” In fairness, it’s not surprising that Jesus had to open His disciples’ eyes to the passages in the Old Testament pointing to Him. But with the illumination He provided them, which the New Testament writers passed on to us, we can now read the Old Testament with much greater clarity.<sup>133</sup>

George Eldon Ladd takes essentially the same position as Dr. Heiser. “The Gospels,” writes Ladd, “represent the disciples as hopeless after Jesus’ death. When he appeared to them, they did not believe it was he. ‘They were startled and frightened, and supposed that they had seen a spirit’ (Luke 24:37)... Modern Christians... read Isaiah 53 with its vivid depiction of a suffering, dying servant and see Jesus’ sufferings and death clearly foretold in the Old Testament.”<sup>134</sup>

But we must put ourselves in the disciples’ shoes to understand their expectations, which means reading the Old Testament messianic prophecies not through our Christian eyes but in the context and setting of first-century Jews. Then we discover that they expected the Messiah to be, in Ladd’s words, “a Davidic king who would arise from among men but would be supernaturally endowed to destroy the national and political enemies of Israel to gather God’s people—Israel—into the earthly kingdom of God with Jerusalem as its capital.” But how “could a

celestial glorious being become the helpless victim of lawless men and die the death of a criminal?”<sup>135</sup> Yes, the Old Testament predicts a suffering servant, but not in connection with the Messiah. Ladd quotes an expert in Jewish literature who argues, “In the whole Jewish Messianic literature of the Tannaitic period [before AD 200] there is no trace of the ‘suffering Messiah.’”<sup>136</sup>

It’s true, Ladd concedes, that the Old Testament didn’t point to a resurrected Messiah absent the benefit of New Testament hindsight, and so it’s understandable that His disciples didn’t get it based on the Old Testament alone. But why didn’t they understand it even after Jesus predicted His suffering, death, and resurrection to them? Could it be that Jesus’ predictions of His death were fabrications of the early Church and not historically trustworthy? How else do you explain the disciples’ blindness to what they were witnessing?<sup>137</sup>

Ladd denies that the scriptural passages were an invention of the early Church. He says the “explanation for the disciples’ utter inability to grasp Jesus’ predictions about suffering, death, and resurrection” is that they were “a flat contradiction of everything they believed about the Messiah and the Son of Man. He was to conquer and reign, not suffer and die. The two ideas seemed mutually exclusive. He was to destroy the wicked, not be destroyed by the wicked. He was to establish the Kingdom of God, not fall victim to the kingdoms of men.”<sup>138</sup>

Yes, Jesus affirmed that He was the Son of Man who would descend from heaven and establish God’s kingdom, as the prophet Daniel wrote (Daniel 7:13–14, 26–27), but that would happen eschatologically—in the future, at the end of the age. But before that day could come—when ever that might be—He had to suffer and die. It was this aspect that seemed so contradictory and unscriptural to His disciples. When Jesus began to instruct them that His mission was to suffer and die (Matt. 8:31), “the disciples were sure something was wrong.”<sup>139</sup>

So it’s not that Jesus failed to warn His disciples about His suffering, death, and resurrection, and it was not a myth propagated by the early Church. It’s that this part of the message seemed so inconsistent with their firmly established scriptural beliefs that it didn’t fully register with them.

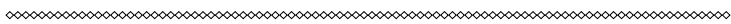
Ladd therefore concludes that the Gospel story describing the disciples’ initial blindness to Jesus’ necessary suffering and death is

completely credible—both psychologically and historically. Jesus was fulfilling none of the roles expected for the Messiah. In fact, when the people tried to force His hand, He withdrew, such as when they tried to make Him their king after He miraculously fed the five thousand (John 6:15).<sup>140</sup> Of course, He could have made Himself king, but it was not His time. In fact, when Jesus refused to accept their timetable and immediately assume the role they anticipated for the Messiah, “many of his disciples drew back and no longer went about with him” (John 6:66).

The Old Testament prophets didn’t predict that the Messiah would suffer and die. Yes, Isaiah 53 and other passages foretold a suffering servant. However, writes Ladd, “it was completely hidden from the disciples that the Son of Man must fill the role of the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53 before he comes in the power and glory of God’s Kingdom.”<sup>141</sup> In other words, the Old Testament predicted a Messiah and a suffering servant, but not that the Messiah *would be* the Suffering Servant.

This historical backdrop underscores the reliability of the Gospels. The disciples weren’t unquestioning cult members salivating at the prospect of creating a new religion founded on a lie. Something dramatic had to occur before the scales were lifted from their eyes. That something was the resurrection of Jesus Christ after His crucifixion—and even then, they didn’t fully grasp the full import of what had occurred until He opened their eyes on the Emmaus road and elsewhere. Only then did they begin to see the many passages of the Old Testament as a cohesive mosaic—one that distinctly shows the image of Jesus Christ.

## PROVIDENTIAL CONFLUENCE OF EVENTS



The providential hand of God prepared the New Testament world and Palestine in particular for Christ’s entrance into human history. The Middle East was situated in the center of an empire rich with Hellenistic influences. From the time of Alexander the Great’s conquest of the region—about three hundred years before the birth of Christ—Greek was a common second language and culture, allowing for the spread of new ideas and information between the Roman Empire’s various nations.<sup>142</sup>

Relative peace prevailed throughout the empire (*Pax Romana*) from the reign of Augustus (27 BC–14 AD) to the reign of Marcus Aurelius (161–180 AD), which was conducive to the spread of the Gospel.<sup>143</sup>

The Romans had established a sophisticated and comprehensive system of roads, facilitating travel, trade, and communications. The Apostle Paul and other early Christians utilized the Roman roads and waterways to spread the good news throughout the Mediterranean world.<sup>144</sup> The Romans' uniform system of justice helped to provide stability to the region. Furthermore, as Rome relied on Palestine and its neighbor Egypt for much of its corn supply, it was in Rome's economic and strategic interests to protect the Jewish homeland.<sup>145</sup> Palestine also served as a buffer against Rome's rival, the Parthian Empire, which lay beyond the Euphrates, the eastern border of the Roman Empire.<sup>146</sup>

The birth of Christianity occurred at an ideal time in the history of philosophical thought. Classical Greek philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, and their successors raised profound questions but provided few soul-satisfying answers, which contributed to the development of the various philosophical schools we've discussed. "Into this intellectual situation," writes Mark Noll, "the Gospel came as a cleansing breeze. It was not that Christianity solved all philosophical problems easily; rather, it provided an intellectual confidence and a personal certainty resting not in the powers of human intelligence, but in the God revealed through Jesus Christ."<sup>147</sup>

Moreover, the state of Judaism in the time of Jesus readied the Mediterranean world for the spread of the Gospel. God-fearing Jews, steeped in the Law of Moses and the writings of the prophets, lived in small communities throughout the Mediterranean basin. They were among the first people the apostles approached and converted, preaching that Jesus Christ fulfilled the promises of their God, Yahweh.<sup>148</sup>

Many scholars believe Paul was referring to this combination of God-ordained events when he wrote, "But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons" (Gal. 4:4). Paul was particularly suited to preach when he strategically visited local synagogues, which the Jews had

established inside and outside Palestine. Using his intimate knowledge of the Old Testament, he stressed Christ's fulfillment of Israel's messianic hopes.<sup>149</sup> Jesus taught in the synagogues as well, as He acknowledged in His trial before the high priest: "I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all Jews come together" (John 18:20).

Undeniably, an extraordinary confluence of circumstances enabled the spread of the Gospel. There was the Jewish influence—the existence of unquenched messianic expectations; the Roman influence—the Pax Romana; and the Greek influence—the common language and culture.<sup>150</sup> This notion of God's hand at work is almost as old as Christianity itself. As the early Church father Origen writes,

For righteousness has arisen in His days, and there is abundance of peace, which took its commencement at His birth, God preparing the nations for His teaching, that they might be under one prince, the king of the Romans, and that it might not, owing to the want of union among the nations, caused by the existence of many kingdoms, be more difficult for the apostles of Jesus to accomplish the task enjoined upon them by their Master, when He said, "Go and teach all nations." Moreover, it is certain that Jesus was born in the reign of Augustus, who, so to speak fused together into one monarchy the many populations of the earth. Now the existence of many kingdoms would have been a hindrance to the spread of the doctrine of Jesus throughout the entire world; not only for the reasons mentioned, but also on account of the necessity of men everywhere engaging in war, and fighting on behalf of their native country, which was the case before the times of Augustus, and in periods still more remote, when necessity arose as when the Peloponnesians and the Athenians warred against each other, and other nations in like manner. How, then, was it possible for the Gospel doctrine of peace...to prevail throughout the world, unless at the advent of Jesus a milder spirit had been everywhere introduced into the conduct of things?<sup>151</sup>

## NEW TESTAMENT CULTURE AND BACKGROUND

Everett Ferguson, an expert in early Christian studies, likens the historical setting of the New Testament to a series of concentric circles. Beginning from the outside and moving inward toward the center of the circle, the Romans' governmental, legal, and economic systems represent the outer circle. Next are the Greek cultural, educational, and philosophical influences, followed by the Jewish world, which provided the immediate religious context for early Christianity. Further inward is the already Hellenized land of Palestine, which was the home of Jesus and His disciples and the setting of Jesus' ministry. At the center are the diaspora synagogues, which provided the most important entry points for early Christianity into the wider Greco-Roman world.<sup>152</sup>

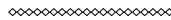
The Roman military, which was the tip of the spear in expanding the empire, kept the peace, which facilitated social, cultural, and economic progress.<sup>153</sup>

Patronage—a reciprocal relationship between patron and client—was prevalent in the Roman world and aided the early spread of Christianity. Patrons and clients were of different social statuses, having entered into their relationship voluntarily. The clients assisted their patrons in their private, public, and political lives, and the patrons provided them with gifts or money, invited them to their homes for visits and meals, and extended them legal protection. The Book of Romans mentions that Phoebe, a Church servant, was a patron of many people (16:2).<sup>154</sup> Patrons of a religious group were usually affluent or prominent people who allowed its members to meet in their home.<sup>155</sup>

At the dawn of the New Testament era, only 10 percent of the Roman Empire's population lived in cities, yet that is where most Christian evangelism and worship occurred. Rome and Alexandria were the most populous cities, followed by Carthage and Antioch, then Corinth, Ephesus, and Pergamum.<sup>156</sup> Private houses played a crucial role in the spread of Christianity, as shown by Paul's references to people hosting meetings in their homes (Romans 16:3–5, 23; Phil. 2; Col. 4:15; 1 Cor. 16:19).<sup>157</sup> These meetings helped early Christians develop a sense of community, friendship, and mutual support.

This close-knit relationship is illustrated in Paul's frequent references to fellow believers, males and females, as "brothers." Paul naturally uses this term because Ananias called him "brother" shortly after Paul's conversion, when he laid his hands on Paul and returned Paul's sight lost after his encounter with the resurrected Jesus (Acts 9:17; 22:13). Throughout his letters we see that Paul considers his fellow believers as a family and "of the household of faith" (Gal. 6:10). His instructions on how Christians should treat each other reflect this: "Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father, younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, in all purity" (1 Tim. 5:1–2). Paul was protective of those he brought to the faith and mentored, referring to them as "my beloved children" (1 Cor. 4:14), whose "father in Christ Jesus" he had become through the Gospel (1 Cor. 4:15).<sup>158</sup> He considers them his personal responsibility spiritually, calling them "my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you!" (Gal. 4:19).

## CITY LIFE



The cities generally had theaters, amphitheaters, baths, temples, basilicas, ornamental fountains, and porticoes, but they were beset by narrow streets, sanitation problems, and overcrowding. People spent most of their time outside in public, whether at work or leisure, because the average house was small and unclean. The artisans, however, generally worked in their homes.<sup>159</sup>

Both natives and foreign immigrants often lived among neighbors of the same ethnicity, and within these ethnic areas, people of similar occupations lived on the same streets. People of the same trade weren't as competitive with each other as they are today.<sup>160</sup> This could explain why Barnabas has little problem finding Paul, who he knows would be among the tentmakers, when he goes to Tarsus to bring Paul back to Antioch to evangelize and minister there (Acts 11:25–26). Likewise, Paul easily locates Aquila and Priscilla, who have the same occupation, in Corinth (Acts 18:1–3).<sup>161</sup>

Roman houses were generally made of brick or concrete, but those in Palestine were made of stucco, sun-dried brick, or stone—either white limestone, which was abundant and cheap, or black basalt.<sup>162</sup> The roofs were commonly made with wooden beams covered with brush and topped off with mud or clay. Homeowners had to roll their roofs after every heavy rain, using an outside staircase or wooden ladder to access the rooftops, which were enclosed with parapets to keep people from falling. People did various activities on the roofs such as washing clothes and drying fruits and vegetables. The Book of Acts records Peter praying and having a vision on a housetop in Joppa (Acts 10:9–10). A more momentous event involving a housetop occurs when four men bring a paralytic to Jesus for healing and enter the home by climbing to the roof, making a hole, and lowering the man, on his bed, down to Jesus (Mark 2:1–12).<sup>163</sup>

Palestinians usually ate two meals a day, mostly of vegetables, fruit, and bread, with meat representing a less common luxury. In some areas they ate fish as a source of protein. Wealthy Romans, on the other hand, enjoyed richer foods and ate four times a day.<sup>164</sup>

Men and woman wore loose-fitting tunics throughout the year, donning cloaks over their garments in the cold. This explains Jesus' instructions to His disciples to give their cloaks to someone who had successfully sued them and taken their tunics (Matt. 5:40), after telling them to turn the other cheek to one who slaps them. All but the destitute, who went barefoot, wore open leather sandals.<sup>165</sup>

Having reviewed the historical and cultural backdrop to the New Testament, we will now examine the development of the New Testament canon and the historical reliability of the New Testament documents and writers.