

# THE INTERTESTAMENTAL PERIOD

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## Introduction

From the ending of Old Testament history and prophecy to the opening words of Matthew's Gospel account in the New Testament spans about four centuries. Historians have described this period by various terms besides those in the title of this chapter. It is depicted as "the four hundred silent years," "the period of silence," "the interval between the Old and New Testaments," "interbiblical history," "from Malachi to Christ," and likely others.

The period is referred to as a period of silence, not because no one was speaking or nothing significant was occurring in world history. Quite the contrary, earth-changing events occurred in this interval—events that greatly affected Israel, God's covenant people. Circumstances and developments of this era served as providential preparation for the insertion of the Incarnate Word into the stream of human history. Some of the institutions that appear in the four Gospel records arose during this period. This span simply represents an information gap as far as inspiration is concerned.

With the books of Nehemiah and Malachi, completed (cir. 432 B.C.), the inspired pen of the historians, the voice of the prophets, and miraculous activity were inoperative. They did not resume until Gabriel's announcement to Zacharias of the coming of John, the Lord's forerunner (Luke 1:13–19). Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, was born only a few months after His cousin, John, becoming the central figure of all history. Hence, thereafter, time is reckoned as beginning with A.D. 1, from which dating system we derive the four centuries between the Testaments.<sup>1</sup>

The Bible does not satisfy the human curiosity that naturally seeks a cause for this silence of inspiration and miraculous activity. Perhaps the simplest explanation is that the silence occurred because God, at that time, had said all He needed to say and all that men needed to hear until "the fullness of the time came" for Him to send forth His Son (Gal. 4:4). Perhaps God needed to say no more because of the numerous details he revealed to Daniel in advance and that the prophet preserved for us in the book that bears his name.

In the sixth-century before Christ, God, through Daniel, the statesman-prophet of the Exile, revealed the geo-political outline that would (and did) characterize the period between the Testaments more than a century before the time of Nehemiah and Malachi. Daniel's inspired interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's first dream (chap. 2) applied the respective parts of the dream's colossal image to four great world empires stretching from the sixth to the end of the

first century B.C. The interpretation foretold that Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon would be subdued by the Persian Empire.<sup>2</sup> In turn, Alexander's Grecian Empire would conquer Persia, and finally, he foresaw the rise of Rome (vv. 7–43). During this last empire, God would establish His kingdom, which would subdue all others and have no end (v. 44; cf. 2 Sam. 7:12–14; Luke 1:31–33).<sup>3</sup>

God commissioned Nebuchadnezzar (Jer. 25:8–11; cf. Deu. 28:48–50; Isa. 39:7) to conquer Judah and take her to Babylon. Likewise, two centuries in advance, He called Cyrus the Persian by name and raised him up to subdue Babylon, to allow the Jews to return to Judea, and to rebuild the temple and the city of Jerusalem (2 Chr. 36:22–23; Isa. 44:28–45:1–5; Jer. 25:12; 29:10; cf. Ezra 6:3–5).

Two centuries before it would occur, Daniel specified repeatedly that the Greek empire of Alexander the Great (specifying Greece by name, no less) would conquer Persia and much more (Dan. 2:39; 7:6; 8:3–8, 20–21; 10:20). Per Daniel's interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's dream, as noted above, the empire seated on the Tiber in Italy would eventually conquer and/or absorb the geographical remnants of Alexander's vast domain. There is no Biblical evidence that God directly exalted Alexander to make his sweeping conquests or the Roman emperors to rise to power, as in the cases of Nebuchadnezzar and Cyrus. However, as we shall subsequently observe, it is difficult to discount God's providence at work in both cases.

Besides Daniel's broad vista of the successive empires in chapter 2 of his prophecy, he provides much greater detail relating to the empire and influence of Alexander and his successors in chapter 8. In a vision, he saw the figure of a ram with two horns, one of which was higher than the other, and the ram pushed in every direction (vv. 3–4). Then he saw a "he-goat" with a "notable horn" that came from the west, attacking the ram furiously, smiting him, and breaking his two horns (vv. 5–7). However, at the apex of his strength, the horn of the mighty he-goat was broken, and in its place arose four "notable horns" (vv. 8). Moreover, out of one of the four came a "little horn" that came to have great power and that opposed God's people in "the glorious land" (vv. 9–12). After a long period (2,300 days), the sanctuary this ruler had trodden under foot would be cleansed, signaling the end of the oppression (vv. 13–14).

The angel Gabriel was ordered to "make him understand the vision" (v. 16). Gabriel explained to Daniel: the ram with two horns was the Medo-Persian empire (v. 20). The one-horned he-goat was the Greek empire and the "notable horn" was its first king (i.e., Alexander) (v. 21). Alexander died at 33 years (323 B.C.), leaving no declared successor, so the four horns

(v. 22) foretell the four-way division of his empire. Another powerful “horn” (ruler), a “destroyer” of “the holy people,” was to arise from one of the four (vv. 23–25).

Daniel’s inspired prophetic panorama of the 400-year “inspiration gap” will help to organize our study of this era, as follows:

- Two Centuries under the Persians
- Power and Influence of the Greeks and Hellenism
- Jewish Independence—The Maccabean Era
- The Jews Under Rome
- Miscellaneous Notable Developments of the Period

Now let us turn our attention to world events that transpired between the Testaments, particularly in terms of their impact on the people of God.

## **Two Centuries Under the Persians**

### ***A Century Recorded by Inspiration (536–432 B.C.)***

The books of Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi furnish the record of the first one hundred years of the Jews under Persian rule. Under Cyrus, Persia conquered the Babylonian Empire in 536 B.C. He and his successors generally proved to be benevolent dictators, as the Old Testament books referenced above indicate. We see this attitude not only in the decree of Cyrus, but also in the great esteem in which “Darius the Mede,” the city of Babylon’s Persian ruler, held Daniel (Dan. 6:3, 14–15; 18–20), in which Ahasuerus (Xerxes) later held Esther, Mordecai, and all the Jews (Est. 2:15–23; 5:1–8; 6:1–10; 7:1–10:3), and in which Artaxerxes still later held Ezra and Nehemiah (Ezra 7:1–26; Neh. 2:1–8; 13:6–7).

Cyrus immediately issued an unprecedented decree that the Jews were to be allowed to return to their homeland, as B.S. Dean notes: “This return of a captive nation is a unique fact; there is nothing like it in history” (98). Cyrus further ordered that the temple the Babylonians razed fifty years earlier was to be rebuilt with his personal funds (Ezra 1:1–4; 6:3–5).

So after seventy years from the first deportation of the Jewish captives to Babylon (606–536 B.C.), as Jeremiah had promised, those who chose to do so were allowed to make their way back home. Some (e.g., Daniel, Mordecai, Esther, et al.) elected to remain permanently in the land of their captivity where they had prospered. Some (e.g., Ezra and Nehemiah) delayed their return by several years. Three waves of return matched the three waves of deportation under Nebuchadnezzar. The first was under Zerubbabel, who led in beginning the rebuilding of the temple (536 B.C., Ezra 1–6). Ezra led the second contingency (458 B.C., Ezra 7:10).

Nehemiah conducted the third group and distinguished himself by leading the work of completing the rebuilding of the city walls and calling the people to repentance (445 B.C., Neh. 1–13).<sup>4</sup> The Jews were allowed to observe their traditions, practice their religion, and even govern themselves to a degree. While the Persian monarchs did not interfere with the resumption of life in their homeland, Samaritans—remnants of the Ten Tribes who had intermarried with those imported by the Assyrians, following their conquest in 722 B.C.—continually harassed and opposed the rebuilding efforts.

### ***A Century Not Recorded by Inspiration (432–331 B.C.)***

With the close of the inspired record in the books written by Nehemiah and Malachi, students of this final century of Persian rule must turn to uninspired history sources of the time. (The only inspired “history” of these years and those that take us to the appearance of John and Jesus is that of Daniel, written in advance of its occurring, as earlier noted.) These consist chiefly of the works of the pro-Roman Jewish historian, Flavius Josephus, (A.D. 37–c. 100), some of the apocryphal books (particularly I Maccabees), Greek and Roman historians, and various archaeological sources (e.g., inscriptions, monuments, etc.).

The Samaritans continued to be a thorn in the side of the Jews in Judea, until they finally broke with them altogether. In Jesus’ conversation with the Samaritan woman, she said “our fathers worshipped in this mount,” referring to the Samaritan temple on nearby Mt. Gerizim (John 4:20). This temple was built in about 400 B.C. by Manasseh, a Jewish priest who had been cut off from the Jerusalem priesthood because he married the daughter of Sanballat, the Samaritan chieftain who strongly opposed Nehemiah’s effort to rebuild Jerusalem’s walls (Neh. 4:7; 6:2; 13:28). When, upon his expulsion, he fled to Samaria, Sanballat appointed him High Priest in the new temple. “Here a rival cult was established to that in Jerusalem...based on the same law-book as that recognized by the Jews” (Bruce 115). The Jews of Jesus’ day may have despised the Samaritans as much for their having a mongrel temple and religion within twenty miles of Jerusalem as for their mongrel race.

For the most part the Jews living in the post-Biblical period of the Persian Empire were allowed to live their lives without interference by imperial policy, both in their homeland and in the various areas of the empire where they chose to live. “Naturally they were not free, but so long as they recognized the supremacy of Persia and observed the laws governing them they were not molested or abused” (Hester 316). Judea was part of the province of Syria in the Persian Empire, and “Under the Persians, the Jews were usually governed by their own High Priest, subject to the Syrian Satrap, or Governor” (Dean 103).

## **The Power and Influence of the Greeks and Hellenism**

In the middle part of the fourth century B.C., while the power of the Persian Empire was waning because of challenges from within and without and from lack of forceful leadership, a new power was rising in the West. King Philip of Macedon had mastered the city-states of Greece and Thrace, and intended to move against Persia (which been attacking this area for half a century). When he was assassinated in 336 B.C., his son, Alexander succeeded him at the age of 20 years, bent on carrying out his father's plan.

### ***Alexander's Military and Cultural Conquests (333–323 B.C.)***

Only two years after ascending the Greco-Macedonian throne, Alexander crossed the Hellespont into Asia Minor (modern Turkey), beginning his astonishingly successful and rapid triumph over the once invincible Empire of Persia. He showed himself to be every bit the “notable horn” of the mighty “he-goat” from the west that Daniel saw in his prophetic vision two centuries before (8:5–7, 21). With his defeat of Darius III at Issus in 333, Syria, which included the homeland of the Jews, was his. He then turned southward to Egypt, which brought him through Palestine. Josephus tells that Jaddua, the High Priest, led a procession to meet him, which mightily impressed the young warrior-king (244). *The New Analytical Bible* reports: “His favorable treatment of the Jews has been accounted for on the supposition that his attention was called to the predictions of Daniel that two hundred years before set forth his brilliant conquests” (1079).

In 331, while in Egypt (which accepted Alexander as a deliverer from the hated Persians), he founded his famous namesake city, Alexandria. He then retraced his steps through Syria, marching on eastward, where he met and routed the Persian army east of the Tigris River at Gaugamela. This battle in October of 331 was the final nail in the coffin of the once mighty Persian Empire. Alexander expanded his empire greatly with thrusts further eastward, but died in 323 in the palace of Nebuchadnezzar II in Babylon. He may be the only general in history who never lost a military battle, but who nonetheless lost the battle of life through reputed uncontrolled vice and self-indulgence.

Alexander's ambitions extended beyond military conquest and rule:

As Alexander swept across the areas of his conquest an impact greater than the sword alone can produce was eventually to obtain. This potent force was “...a body of ideas” that was in fact a culture unparalleled in history. This refined Grecian culture, best known as Hellenism, came to be the chief contribution of Alexander's meteoric career. Its impress upon the world through language, literature, philosophy, science, and art has practically determined the course of subsequent history, especially in the West, but to a degree even in the East. The Jews were not immune (McClish 2).

One writer calls Alexander “the apostle of Hellenism” (Pfeiffer 67). On the heels of his victories, Alexander founded cities and settled them with Greeks. He also colonized existing cities with them. Thus he extended the Greek culture and language throughout his domain. One scholar assigns the first Palestinian colonization as early as 332 in Samaria (Bickerman 41). As the Hellenistic influence diffused, it was with growing difficulty that the small province of Judea could totally resist it. The principal vehicle upon which Hellenism rode was the Greek language. How could the Jews engage the Gentiles in commerce without learning the language? As we shall see, the Greek influence would play a major role in Jewish political events in the second century B.C.

### ***The Jews Under the Post-Alexander Empire (323–167 B.C.)***

Alexander died with no provision for a successor. The power struggle initially involved various generals, satraps, and family members (the “diadochi”). After numerous wars (and some assassinations), most of his empire was divided between four of his generals, represented by the four horns of Daniel 8:22, but the struggles for their respective territories were not completed until 301 B.C. While little is known of the Jews’ history in this uncertain time, Hester says that during the “twenty-five years after Alexander’s death Jerusalem changed hands seven times” (321). Only two of these successors directly affected the Jews: Ptolemy I (Lagi) gained control of Egypt and southern Syria, and Seleucus initially ended up with Babylon and northern Syria. Palestine was the sandwich filling between these two monarchs and their dynasties for the next century. The Ptolemy and the Seleucid dynasties warred frequently for the coveted land of the Jews, rarely with a definitive victor, although the Ptolemies maintained control over it. The Jews paid tribute to Egypt, and they were allowed to govern themselves through their High Priests.

Ptolemy I imported thousands of Jews to Egypt where some were placed in military service, while the most of them were settled in Alexandria, which the Ptolemies made their seat of government. They built the city into one of such prominence that it was larger than Rome and was second in prominence only to Rome at its zenith of power, size, and wealth.<sup>5</sup> It became the home of the largest concentration of Jews in the world, many of them great scholars, during the Ptolemaic era. The Jews there gradually gave up their Hebrew tongue in favor of the predominant Greek. This circumstance led to the famous and valuable translation of the Old Testament into the Greek language—the Septuagint (LXX, the Roman numeral 70, for the traditional number of translators)—during the reign of Ptolemy II, who ruled from 285–246 B.C. Hester summed up the significance of this translation:

This was a most significant event, since with this translation available every person who spoke Greek could read the scriptures. It made the Old Testament with all its predictions of a Messiah available to hundreds of thousands of people who otherwise might never have had the opportunity of reading the Jewish scriptures (320).

The issue between the Ptolemies and the Seleucids was finally settled in 198 B.C. when the Seleucid king, Antiochus III (“The Great”) soundly defeated Ptolemy V, taking undisputed control of Palestine. The Jews would have to deal with the Seleucids for the next 135 years. Antiochus divided the land into the five provinces familiar to New Testament students: Judea, Samaria, Galilee, Trachonitis, and Perea.

Antiochus IV (“Epiphanes”) ascended the Seleucid throne in place of his assassinated brother, Seleucus IV, in 175. He was a passionate evangelist for Hellenism, which was having its affect by association upon many of the Jews, particularly those dispersed throughout Syria. He set about to **enforce** this way of life on all of his subjects—including those in Palestine. His cultural zeal and insane cruelty would lead to one of the darkest periods of Jewish history short of Hitler’s Holocaust of the twentieth century. It would also lead to the last period of Jewish independence.

As Hellenism progressed in Judea, an element of the Jews became alarmed. In defense of strict adherence to the Law and to halt the Hellenistic inroads, the “Hasidim” (i.e., “the pious ones”) party appeared. It opposed the liberal element that welcomed all things Greek, which element had become strong by the time the Seleucids gained control of the Jewish homeland. In 170, Jason, an extreme Hellenistic Jew, led 1,000 men against Jerusalem to take the office of High Priest by force. Antiochus supposed this trouble represented a full revolt by the Jews against him, consequently:

He turned his troops loose on a city already bathed in blood by Jason’s treachery, and ordered a massacre, irrespective of age or sex. The Temple was plundered with the assistance of Menelaus (the reigning High Priest, an unauthorized Benjamite), and its remaining treasures were carried away to Antioch (McClish 10).

The book of I Maccabees states that he slaughtered 40,000 in this stunning and outrageous attack. The Jewish depopulation was replaced by the importation of Hellenistic colonists.

However, this brief assault was only a prelude to the one Antiochus launched only two years later. In 168, he returned from an unsuccessful attempt to topple the Ptolemy regime in Egypt where he was rebuffed when Rome came to Egypt’s aid. He vented his anger this time by launching an extended war of extermination, not against the Jews themselves, but against their religion, seeing in it the source of a growing anti-Syrianism.

He began his pogrom by sending an army of 22,000 against Jerusalem, waiting to fall upon the city until the Sabbath, knowing the Jews would not defend themselves on their holy day. They burned Jerusalem, forbade observing the feast days and offering the sacrifices, erected an altar to Zeus on the great altar, and, on December 25, 168, sacrificed a sow upon it, thus fulfilling Daniel's prophecy of four centuries earlier: "And forces shall stand on his part, and they shall profane the sanctuary, even the fortress, and shall take away the continual burnt-offering, and they shall set up the abomination that maketh desolate" (Dan. 11:31). (The Lord later quoted Daniel to describe the blasphemies the Romans would visit upon the temple in A.D. 70 [Mat. 24:15].) Thus began the crusade that made it a capital offense to circumcise their baby boys, to possess a copy of the law, to observe the Sabbath, and to refuse to eat pork or animal flesh offered to pagan deities. His proscription of Judaism led to the merciless slaughter of additional thousands, with many women and children sold into slavery.

### **Jewish Independence—The Maccabean Revolt**

Antiochus underestimated the depth and breadth of loyalty the Jews had to their Law. The repeated bloody atrocities, the plundering and desecration of the temple, followed by the force of new laws intended to destroy all that gave the Jews their identity inflamed many. The Hasidim, formed a century earlier to stem Hellenistic apostasy, found many now joining cause with them either in fact or at least in will. All the resistance needed was leadership.

#### ***The Origin of the Revolt***

The spark that ignited the Jews to revolt occurred in Modein, a little town twenty miles northwest of Jerusalem. In 167 B.C., Apelles, a Syrian officer, came to the town to compel heathen sacrifice. When an apostate Jew stepped forward to comply, one Mattathias sprang from the bystanders and slew both the Jew and Apelles, and pulled down the heathen altar. Consequently, running through the town, he cried, "Everyone that hath a zeal for the law, and maintaineth the testament, let him follow me." Upon this he fled to the mountains with his five sons, leaving all possessions behind (McClish 13).

Thus began what is known as the Maccabean Revolt, which produced the Hasmonean Dynasty.<sup>6</sup>

Though a devout priest, Mattathias made a crucial, two-fold decision relating to the resistance effort he would lead. First, he determined his forces would fight any and every day of the week, including the Sabbath. Second, he decided on a strategy that included offensive as well as defensive action against the Syrians. The Hasidim quickly joined his efforts.

Within a year of his revolt at Modein, Mattathias died, but had named his son, Judas, to lead the movement. He proved to be a bold, elusive, and clever strategist for the guerrilla

campaign and later as a field general. He first led rapid sorties out of the wilderness areas, destroying pagan altars, performing circumcisions, and generally enforcing Moses' law, striking fear in the hearts of the apostates and modernizers. These efforts replaced despair with hope in the hearts of masses and attracted ever-growing numbers to their insurgency. In a two-year span he molded his forces into a regular army that, while always numerically inferior to the Syrian forces, proved superior to them repeatedly on the battlefield. The successes of the Maccabees won them a peace treaty with the Syrians just two years after the uprising that began with one elderly priest in a small town.

Judas was able to march into Jerusalem and restore the worship of Jehovah without Syrian interference. The old defiled altar was torn down and a new one erected, the garments and furniture replaced, and the temple was rededicated with sacrifices on Kislev (December) 25, 165 B.C., exactly three years after its defilement by the swine-offering (McClish 18).

Judas decreed an eight-day feast in perpetuity to commemorate this occasion, to which John refers (John 10:22), and which Jews yet observe as Hanukkah. Ironically, the demented Antiochus Epiphanes died in early 164, only a few weeks after the dedication of the temple he had defiled. Daniel's "little horn" that came forth from one of the four "notable horns" and that took away the continual burnt offering and shut up the sanctuary at last "was cast down" (8:9–11, 23–25).

With the freedom regained to openly follow the Law, the Hasidim had accomplished their aims; they never had political ambitions. Not so with the Maccabees, however, who sought political as well as religious liberty. Menelaus, the Benjamite High Priest, was replaced with Alcimus, a descendant of Aaron, but nonetheless a zealous Hellenist. When he gained office (with Hasidim support), he promptly had sixty of the Hasidim leaders executed. The Maccabees fled once more to the hills to carry on the fight. They won one more major battle with the Syrians, after which, in 161, Judas sought and obtained a mutual defense pact with Rome—the rising power in the West that had earlier scotched the Syrian threat to Egypt. Shortly afterward, the Syrian army finally crushed the Maccabean rebels before Rome could come to their aid, and the heroic Judas fell. Thus seven years after Mattathias took his stand, the first chapter of the resistance to the Syrian attempt to destroy Judaism came to a close. It appeared for the moment that all was now lost and that the Jewish Hellenizers would be able to move forward unrestrained. History shows that such rejoicing in Antioch and Jerusalem was premature, however.

### ***Jewish Independence Achieved***

Judas' mantle fell upon his brother, Jonathan, who proved his military ability in further successful guerrilla strikes, but who accomplished far more by other means:

He was the crafty politician rather than the warrior. During the eighteen years of his leadership (161–143) Israel was to make great seeming advances, not due so much to her own strength, but through the clever way that Jonathan and his successors turned the weakness of Syria with its ever-present rival claimants for the throne to the advantage of Palestine (Enslin 20).

Alcimus, the Hellenistic High Priest, died in 159, and the office remained vacant the next few years. Jonathan threw his support behind the rival to Syria's throne who eventually triumphed, for which he was duly rewarded. The most dramatic Maccabean gains of political power to this point were realized when, in 153, the new Syrian ruler named Jonathan High Priest. "In the span of only fifteen years (167–153), the Seleucid powers had run the gamut from attempted annihilation of the Maccabeans, to outbidding each other for their favor!" (McClish 25). It got better: In 150 the same Syrian monarch declared Jonathan "governor and partaker of his dominion." This empowered him to drive the entire remaining pro-Greek element out of Jewish government for good.

In 143, Jonathan fell into the hands of a Syrian insurgent who executed him. The Maccabean leadership now fell upon Simon, yet another of the sons of Mattathias. He was so successful militarily as a general that he could demand complete independence from Syria, which he received. For the first time in almost five centuries the Judean Jews could claim independent national status. The people appointed Simon High Priest along with his military and civil power as governor, which roles he filled with great success and honor. The legitimizing of Simon as religious, military, and civil ruler (i.e., *Ethnarch*) marked the beginning of the Hasmonean Dynasty, that, in one form or another, would continue until the beginning of the Roman rule (63 B.C.).

Simon fell prey, however, to political intrigue within his own family. In a bid for power, his son-in-law murdered him and two of his three sons in 135 B.C. The third son, John Hyrcanus, escaped the plot and succeeded in laying claim to all of his father's titles. George Gibson described his interest as follows: "Fired with great worldly ambitions, he gave himself to mere conquest. The marvelous religious zeal that had characterized the Maccabeans disappeared, and in its place there came worldliness and greed for power" (19). He destroyed the Samaritan temple on Mt. Gerizim and compelled the city of Samaria to capitulate, however, not out of religious zeal, but because the Samaritans had long been a disturbing element to the Jews politically.

Hyrcanus died in 104, by which time the Jewish state was at its greatest power since the time of Solomon. His son, Aristobulus I, disdaining *ethnarch*, denoted himself *King of the Jews*. His Jewish name was Judah, which he used only in dealing with his own people. He preferred Aristobulus, his Hellenistic name, thereby showing his sympathies for Hellenism, the very influence that provoked the father of his dynasty to revolution six decades earlier. When he came to power he imprisoned his stepmother (whom he starved to death) and all of his stepbrothers, lest they challenge his power. The world was better off when he died after only one year.

One of Aristobulus' imprisoned stepbrothers, Alexander Jannaeus, succeeded him and ruled the Judean kingdom the better part of thirty years. He extended his kingdom's borders to rival those of Solomon's, even as Hyrcanus had brought the Kingdom to a place of influence not seen by the Jews since the days of "Solomon in all his glory." He was even more cruel to his subjects than Aristobulus had been to his family. He was also a Hellenist, and the descendants of the Hasidim hated him and publicly reviled him. Lamar McGinty described his revenge: "in retaliation for this hatred he killed, in all, probably 50,000 of his people, some 800 being crucified at a banquet after their wives and children had been slain before their eyes. This tragic occasion introduces us to the cross in Jewish history" (143-44).

He left the kingdom to his wife Alexandra when he died in 76 B.C., and she occupied the throne nine years, appointing her son, Hyrcanus II, High Priest. When Alexandra died (67), Hyrcanus became king, a role for which he had neither interest nor aptitude. His younger brother, Aristobulus II, unseated him in less than a year, causing him to flee for asylum to Aretas, a Nabatean Arab chief whose stronghold was the "rose city" of Petra, about seventy miles south of the Dead Sea. Another non-Jew, Antipater, an Idumean<sup>7</sup> chieftain, sought to gain power in Jerusalem by restoring Hyrcanus II as his "puppet king." He bargained with Aretas to rally his Arab hordes to besiege Aristobulus II in Jerusalem.

The Roman general, Pompey, then in the East, sent his army to Jerusalem and "mediated" the conflict by taking Jerusalem. The Romans would hereafter have dominance in Palestine. The Hasmonean rule was at an end, and with it, Jewish independence. The year was 63 B.C. (McClish 27).

### **The Jews Under Rome**

Pompey removed Aristobulus and took him and his family, along with other Jews, to Rome to include in his homecoming victory parade of the conquered. When he restored Hyrcanus II as High Priest and Ethnarch of the province of Judea, he rewarded Antipater by

making him adviser to Hyrcanus. Julius Caesar treated the Jews with benevolence regarding their religious observances and general freedoms, but he required their annual tribute money, as would be expected of a subjugated people.

Caesar further rewarded Antipater by appointing him procurator of Judea in 48 B.C., making him a very powerful political force in Palestine. He was poisoned after only one year in office, and his two sons, Phasael and Herod later were appointed procurators of Judea and Galilee, respectively. Furthering Herod's rise was Antony's favor after Caesar died in 44 B.C. Moreover, he married Mariamne, granddaughter of Hyrcanus, thus marrying into the Hasmonean family. Antony named him King of the Jews in 37, which title he held until his death in 4 B.C., his reign briefly overlapping with the birth of our Lord.

Herod was so jealous of his power and paranoid concerning plots to seize it (whether real or imagined) that he had several of his family members murdered, including his Hasmonean wife, Mariamne, her mother, and some of his several sons. His paranoia and depths of merciless cruelty are on full parade in his slaughter of the innocents in and around Bethlehem in his efforts to slay the baby Jesus (Mat. 2:16). He left many monuments to his thirst for building, including the famous fortresses of Masada and Herodium. However, the zenith of his construction projects was the rebuilding of the Temple, begun in 20 B.C. The Temple proper was finished in a year and a half, although work on surrounding buildings and courts continued almost to the time of its destruction in A.D. 70.

Herod's death brings us to the end of the intertestamental period, as miraculous and prophetic activity resumed near the end of his life. Such activity would continue throughout the first century after the Lord's birth, until the Gospel was revealed and confirmed in its fullness (1 Cor. 13:8–12; Eph. 4:11–15).

### **Miscellaneous Notable Developments of the Period**

Although there are no great prophets or inspired historians in the period between the Testaments, the era gave rise to various institutions and even some literature. Notice has already been given to the production in the early third century B.C. of the monumental and vastly influential translation of the Old Testament into Greek—the Septuagint. Brief notice of some of the other significant products of this time is appropriate.

#### ***The Old Testament Apocryphal Books***

Earlier I made reference to the apocryphal book of 1 Maccabees as a primary source of the history of the Maccabean Revolt and the events that precipitated it. It is one of fourteen

books, collectively called “The Apocrypha,” so called because of the meaning of the term: Secret, hidden, or of doubtful origin. The Roman Catholic Bibles sandwich them between the Old and New Testaments, but they are universally—and rightly—omitted from all other Bibles.

All of these books originated in the intertestamental period and were perhaps intended to be somewhat of an uninspired appendix to the Old Testament to fill the inspiration gap between the Testaments. Their dates of writing and authorship are, for the most part, shrouded in uncertainty and mystery. They abound in historical and geographical errors as well as anachronisms and fall well short of the level of the canonical books. The Lord settled the Old Testament canon as He summed up all of its contents as the things “written in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms” (Luke 24:44).

### ***Jewish Parties***

The Jewish sects of which we read in the New Testament originated in the period between Malachi and Matthew. The two prominent parties discussed in the Gospel accounts, the Pharisees and Sadducees, are believed to have had their origin in the events surrounding the Maccabean Revolt. As mentioned earlier, in response to the Hellenistic pressures that were eroding faithful observance of the Law, the “Hasidim” (“pious ones”) had begun resistance efforts. When, in 168 B.C., Antiochus Epiphanes visited the terrors upon the Jews intended to destroy their religion, the Hasidim began taking to the mountains. When Mattathias and his five sons sparked a full-scale revolt and fled to the mountains a year later, the Hasidim joined their effort. In their zeal for the Law, they played a major part in the success of the Maccabean push for independence.

The **Pharisees** were perhaps the largest of the sects so much in discussed in the Gospel accounts. Although their origin is not known with any certainty, it is possible that they existed as early as the time of Johnathan (161–143 B.C.). *Pharisee* is generally understood to mean “separated ones.” Historians almost as one believe that the Pharisees are the successors to the Hasidim. When the concession was won to rededicate the Temple and restore Jewish worship, the Hasidim separated from the Maccabean cause. Some speculate that this separation marks the source of the party and gave it its name.

The **Sadducees** were the offsetting party to the Pharisees and are also prominent in the first four New Testament books. Just as the Hasidim opposed Hellenism, there was also a party that was zealous for it under the Seleucids. It is not uncommon to find the Sadducees identified with this liberal element of two centuries earlier. *Sadducee* is usually traced to *Zadok*, the name of the High Priest in Solomon’s court. It was the Hellenizing element that sold its faith to the

Seleucid rulers for a mess of political power, and it was the Sadducees who enjoyed such political power in Jesus' time.

The **Zealots**, though not as prominent as the aforementioned parties, are worthy of mention, if for no other reason than that the Lord chose as one of His apostles "Simon who was called the Zealot" (Luke 6:15). The Zealot Party agreed with the Pharisees religiously, but they considered it treason to pay tribute to Rome when Jehovah alone was their true and only king. Their origin dates to the time of the Roman sacking of Jerusalem under Pompey (63 B.C.). They engaged in guerrilla-type excursions against Roman garrisons. Like the Maccabees, they seemed to be bent on fighting to the finish against foreign domination. In zeal, purpose, and strategy they revived the spirit of the Maccabees.

The **Sanhedrin Court** conducted travesty trials of the Lord that condemned Him to death and later forbade the apostles to preach any more in Jesus' name in Jerusalem. *Sanhedrin* is a Greek word spelled in English letters that means "sitting together," thus a council or assembly. It dates back at least to the time of Alexander Jannaeus, the Hasmonean King of Judea (76 B.C.) when it is mentioned in connection with his administration.

## **Conclusion**

Herod the Great was the transitional character regarding Jewish history. His permitted "reign" over Judea by the Romans was the bridge between two eras. His last days would be the first earthly days of the prophesied true King of the Jews (but not as a successor to Herod). This King would become "King of kings and Lord of lords" of Jew and Gentile alike. Deity would once more speak and act through more than providence.

Alexander the Great and his successors had supplied Koine Greek, an all but universal language, to the civilized world. The translation of the Old Testament into this language of the people (the Septuagint) made it possible for the first time for many thousands of Gentiles to read the Jewish Scriptures, thereby learning of the one true and living Creator-God and the Messiah of the prophets. The Romans were not only great warriors; they were also great engineers and builders, which resulted in a network of roads. The Pax Romana ("Roman Peace") that began with the accession of Caesar Augustus in 27 B.C. provided a period of political stability that would endure for two centuries in the vast empire ruled by the Caesars. All of these developments occurred during the "silent years" between "Babylon and Bethlehem," providentially setting a propitious stage for the fruition of Daniel's Prophecy: "And in the days of those kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed, nor shall the sovereignty thereof be left to another people; but it shall break in pieces and consume all

these kingdoms, and it shall stand for ever” (Dan. 2:44). “The fullness of the time” had arrived, and “God sent forth his Son” (Gal. 4:4). Thus ended the four centuries of Scriptural silence.

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### Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> For those unaware, *B.C.* abbreviates *Before Christ*, which period ends at His birth. Thereafter, the historical era is marked by *A.D.*, the abbreviation for the Latin words, *Anno Domini*, meaning, “in the year of the Lord,” referring to the birth of Christ. Correct form places *A.D.* before the date noted (viz., A.D. 250) and *B.C.* after the date noted (viz., 400 B.C.). It is only fitting that the incarnation of Deity, the birth of the Only Begotten Son of God, should be the dividing line of history.
- <sup>2</sup> Historians also refer to the Persian Empire as the “Medo-Persian” Empire, its being composed of both Medes and Persians, though the Persian element was dominant. The prophetic references to the Medes should be understood as meaning the Medo-Persian or Persian Empire (e.g., Isa. 13:17, 19; Jer. 25:25; 51:11).
- <sup>3</sup> These world empires are depicted again by means of four beasts in Daniel’s vision recorded in 7:2–8.
- <sup>4</sup> At some point following the rebuilding of Jerusalem’s walls (Neh. 4:6), Nehemiah returned to Babylon, only to make a second trip to Jerusalem 12 years after his first (2:1; 13:6–7). None else is mentioned as accompanying him on this second trek. Suggested date for the latter visit is 432 B.C.
- <sup>5</sup> Seleucus Nicator, who received Babylon and upper Syria after Alexander’s demise, founded Antioch in Syria for his capital in about 300 B.C., naming it after his father, Antiochus. It prospered greatly, becoming as significant to the northeastern Mediterranean as Alexandria was to the southeastern. This is the Antioch of Acts 11 and became Paul’s “home congregation.”
- <sup>6</sup> *Hasmonean* springs from a priest, Asamoneus, the great grandfather of Mattathias. The Jewish political rulers who descended from him became the Hasmonean dynasty. *Maccabean* derives from the son of

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Mattathias, Judas Maccabeus (or “the Maccabee,” i.e., “the hammer”), the son of Mattathias, chosen by his father to succeed him in the insurgency. Thus the revolt or resistance effort is named “Maccabean.”

<sup>7</sup> *Idumean* is another name for an Edomite. Edom was another name given to Esau, Jacob’s twin brother (Gen. 25:30). Thus the Idumeans were very distant “cousins” of the Jews.

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