

HISTORICAL TRANSITION

The Old Testament ends with the Jewish people reestablished in their land. During the time from Malachi to Christ, the people of Israel lived under six different governments: the Persian empire, the Greek empire, the Ptolemies of Egypt, the Seleucids of Syria, self-rule under the Maccabees (Hasmoneans), and finally Roman rule.

NOTE: A significant portion of the information below has been modified/adapted from the ESV “Time Between The Testaments”, online material (<http://www.angelfire.com/nt/theology/15-400sy.html>), Robert G. Gromacki, “New Testament Survey, and Robert H. Gundry, Ph.D., “A Survey Of The New Testament.” and Halley’s Bible Handbook: “The 400 Years Between The Testaments.” (See RESOURCES - below, page 14).

The Persian Period 450-330 B.C.

Cyrus II (559–530 B.C.) inaugurated the Persian empire with his conquest of Media in 549 B.C. and Babylonia in 539 B.C. Cyrus’s policy was to allow peoples exiled by the Babylonians to return to their homelands, rebuild, and reinstitute their forms of worship. From 538 to 430 B.C., many Jewish people returned to Judea, restored Jerusalem, rebuilt the Temple, and reestablished their lives in relative peace. Meanwhile, Jews who remained in Mesopotamia enjoyed prosperity. The last historical narratives of the Old Testament recount this period (Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther; see also Josephus, *Antiquities* 11).

For about 200 years after Nehemiah’s time the Persians controlled Judah, but the Jews were allowed to carry on their religious observances and were not interfered with. During this time Judah was ruled by high priests who were responsible to the Jewish Government.

The Hellenistic Period 330-166 B.C.

Although the Greeks had settled and conducted commerce throughout the Mediterranean world long before Alexander the Great (356–323 B.C.), this Macedonian conqueror is most associated with the spread of Hellenistic (i.e., Greek) culture. Alexander, tutored in Greek philosophy and culture by Aristotle, inherited the reins of Macedonian and Greek leadership from his father, Philip, in 336 B.C. In short order, Alexander marched through Asia Minor, continued south through Syria and Palestine, was welcomed as ruler of Egypt, and conquered the forces of Persia. Alexander was received with awe in many of these lands, which led their inhabitants (esp. members of the various ruling elites) to accelerate their reception of Hellenistic culture - including Greek language, education, and religion.

In 333 B.C. the Persian armies stationed in Macedonia were defeated by Alexander the Great. He was convinced that Greek culture was the one force that could unify the world. Alexander permitted the Jews to observe their laws and even granted them exemption from tribute or tax during their Sabbath years. When he build Alexandria in Egypt, he encouraged Jews to live there and gave them some of the same privileges he gave his Greek subjects. The Greek conquest prepared the way for the translation of the Old Testament into Greek (Septuagint version [LXX] c. 250 B.C. - see below).

In 330 B.C. Alexander received the title of “Great King” of Persia. Yet his short life ended in 323 B.C. without a clear successor. Eventually a few of Alexander’s generals (later termed the *Diadochoi*, meaning “successors”) claimed different portions of his former territory, establishing their own dynastic lines - the Ptolemies of Egypt, the Seleucids of Persia (and portions of Asia Minor), and the Antigonids of Macedon.

The Jews simply shifted allegiance to Alexander and, at first, were generally left alone.

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From 320 to 198 B.C., the Jews were controlled by the Egyptian Ptolemaic Empire. A sizable Jewish community also grew in Egypt, and a large Jewish colony in Alexandria was influential well past the time of Christ (cf. Apollos, Acts 18:24). A Greek translation of the Pentateuch was made in Egypt c. 250 B.C., and of the rest of the Old Testament by about 130 B.C. (together commonly called the Septuagint LXX). Most of Palestine's countryside, outside Jerusalem, adopted Greek culture (Hellenism).

Seleucus had been one of the sub-commanders under Ptolemy. He had captured Babylon in 311 B.C. and had set himself up as a sovereign independent of Ptolemy. The dynasty which he founded has become known as the Seleucids. In about 198 B.C., the Seleucid (Syrian) Empire to the north of Palestine gained control over the Jews.

The Hasmonean Period (The Maccabean Kingdom) 166-63 BC

When this historical period began, the Jews were being greatly oppressed. The Ptolemies had been tolerant of the Jews and their religious practices, but the Seleucid rulers were determined to force Hellenism on them. Some Jews adopted Hellenism. Some sought a wholesale adoption of Greek practices through sending their sons to Greek secondary schools. Pro and anti-Hellenistic factions formed in Judea. However others resisted assimilation.

Halley (page 473)

Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175-164 BC) was frustrated by the Jew's refusal to give up their religion and identity. He turned violently bitter against them and made a furious and determined effort to exterminate them and their religion. He devastated Jerusalem (168 BC) and desecrated the temple by offering a pig (a ceremonially unclean animal according to the law of Moses) on its altar. He then put an altar to Zeus - the main Greek god, called Jupiter by the Romans - in the temple, prohibiting temple worship, forbade circumcision on pain of death, sold thousands of Jewish families into slavery, destroyed all copies of Scripture that could be found, slaughtered everyone discovered in possession of such copies and resorted to every conceivable torture to force Jews to renounce their religion.

(note this as a fulfillment of prophecy: Daniel 11:31, cf. 9:27; 12:11; 1 Maccabees 1:54 - Jesus draws on this image of the "abomination of desolation" in reference to future events [Matthew 24:15,16]).

The Maccabean Revolt started in 166 B.C. in the small, village of Modi'in, 17 miles to the northwest of Jerusalem. A Seleucid officer arrived in the village early one morning with a few soldiers. They proceeded to erect an altar in the middle of the town square.

Assembling the villagers, the Seleucid official ordered that Mattathias, an aged Jewish priest, slaughter a pig upon the altar and offer it to Zeus. The villagers would then eat of the pig's flesh, signifying their acceptance of the Greek religion. When Mattathias did not respond, the old man was offered wealth and honor if he would obey. Mattathias refused.

Suddenly one of the villagers stepped out of the crowd and walked up to the altar, announcing that he was willing to make the sacrifice. Mattathias was enraged. Grabbing the sacrificial knife from the villager, he slit the villager's throat and then turn and killed the Seleucid official. Before the astonished soldiers could take in what was happening, the five sons of Mattathias attacked them and slaughtered them.

The villagers banded together under the leadership of Mattathias and his five sons, stripping the soldiers of their weapons and uniforms and hiding the bodies. The handful of rebels moved out into the hills. The revolt had begun.

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The Hasmonean family (named after the Hebrew name of Simon) launched an uprising led by Mattathias and his sons (esp. Judas Maccabeus, Jonathan, and Simon). In the following months, Mattathias and his sons created a small guerrilla force, attacking small Seleucid troops by night in ambush. The resistance movement grew as small villages began to join. The decision was made to fight on the Sabbath day if necessary. A combination of guerilla warfare and larger geopolitics (esp. Seleucid losses in Asia Minor and internal coups) led to the success of this Jewish rebellion.

The Maccabean revolt initially controlled only the territory of Judea in the vicinity of Jerusalem. In 164 B.C. the temple was cleansed, and the daily burnt offering and other religious ceremonies resumed. The event is still commemorated by Jews each December as Hanukkah, the "Feast of Lights." Over the next hundred years, however, the Maccabean rulers slowly added portions of territory to the kingdom until it resembled the borders of the territory allotted to the Israelite tribes by Joshua.

The Hasmoneans established their own royal dynasty. When Mattathias became sick and died, one of his sons, Judas, took his place as leader with Jonathan also proclaiming himself high priest (152 B.C.) although he was not of the proper Zadokite lineage.

In 142 B.C., Syria granted Judea semi-independence, and for most of the following century the Jewish people were self-governing under the Hasmonean dynasty, the descendants of the Maccabees. As time went on, the Hasmoneans embraced Hellenistic perspectives and policies. In violation of Old Testament law, the ruler was also the high priest. Not surprisingly, given this concentration of power, corruption and abuses quickly arose among the Hasmonean rulers.

The party of the Pharisees (and probably also the Essenes) came into view at this time, opposing Hellenization and the singular power of the ruler (see Matthew 3:7). The Sadducees also appeared, supporting Hellenization and the power of the priesthood (see Matthew 16:1-12).

Nine rulers followed Judas Maccabaeus to the throne, including two of his brothers. From the second generation onward, the Maccabean rulers became progressively dictatorial, corrupt, immoral, and even pagan. Internal strife led Jewish leaders to ask the Roman general Pompey to come and restore order. Pompey did so, but he also brought Roman rule, which began in 63 B.C. and lasted into the fourth century A.D.

The Roman Period 63 B.C. - 636 A.D.

Successive wars with Carthage and Macedon left Rome victorious over the western Mediterranean by 146 B.C. Roman expansion continued eastward toward Syria (see map, The Rise of the Roman Empire). In 63 B.C. Pompey marched into Jerusalem and entered the temple. Feuding Judean leaders found that the surest way to secure the Judean crown was to align oneself with Rome. Herod the Great, who was not even fully Jewish, befriended Rome and thus captured for himself the kingship of Judea and surrounding territories (37–4 B.C. see map: Palestine at The Time of The Messiah).

In the year 63 B.C. Pompey, the Roman general, captured Jerusalem, and the provinces of Palestine became subject to Rome. The local government was entrusted part of the time to princes and the rest of the time to procurators who were appointed by the emperors. Herod the Great was ruler of all Palestine at the time of Messiah's birth.

When Pompey took Jerusalem, he entered the temple and even the Most Holy Place. To the Jews, this was the ultimate insult and sacrilege. The Romans could not understand why the Jews resented the various exercises of privilege and control by their conqueror. Hence, deep suspicion and ill will began growing, lasting over a century until the Jews rebelled and the Romans destroyed the Jewish state. The New Testament reader must remain aware of this seething undercurrent that colors much of what takes place, even during the ministry of Jesus.

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In the centuries before this, Greece had conquered the ancient world and left its intellectual and cultural mark. The Romans built on this through political achievements. Paul and other travelers made good use of the vast system of Roman roads. Roman government, organization, law, money, taxation, culture, religion, army, and demands were everywhere. "Roman Peace" (*Pax Romana*) was enforced by arms but brought a measure of security and stability to the empire. The levels of its society were clearly understood, and the higher levels often oppressed the lowest. In most strata of society, morals were degenerate. Some captured peoples were restless, yearning to be free from Rome - none more than the Jews. Many, like the prophetess Anna, were patiently "*waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem*" (Luke 2:38).

Roman influence, good and bad, was an ever-present reality in the New Testament world. Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, prayed for a salvation that combined deliverance "*from our enemies*" with increased religious fervor, "*that we might... serve Him [the Lord] without fear, in holiness and righteousness*" (Luke 1:70-75). One Jewish group, the Zealots, sought violent, armed rebellion for religious reasons. The dominion of the Romans over the land where Jesus lived was most evident through the governmental structures they established, the rulers they appointed, and the actions they carried out. The Jewish Sanhedrin, or Council (a combination civil-religious body), predated the coming of the Romans. It retained broad authority, but always under the watchful eye of Rome. The high priest was the head of these 70 (or 72), but rulers under the Romans removed and appointed high priests at will (in spite of the Old Testament provision that the high priesthood was for life). Tax collectors collected taxes for Rome. They were given, and many used, wide freedom in the amount they collected. The Jews hated them for collaborating with the Romans; they suspected that these tax collectors collected enough to satisfy not only their Roman masters but also their own greed.

In 37 B.C. the Roman senate appointed Herod the Great to be "king" of all Palestine. Until his death in 4 B.C., he maintained this position by cooperating with whatever Roman group or emperor happened to be in power. He was king when Jesus was born (c. 5 B.C.). It was Herod who killed the boy babies in Bethlehem (Matthew 2:16-18), an unsurprising atrocity, similar in character to his treatment of friends and family.

Herod carried out great building projects. About 20/19 B.C. he began enlarging and reconstructing the temple in Jerusalem. The main work was completed fairly quickly, but additional improvements continued until 64 A.D. (cf. John 2:20).

Herod's will divided his kingdom between three sons. After changing and ratifying Herod's will, Roman authorities made Archelaus the ethnarch (ruler of half a "kingdom") of Judea, Samaria, and Idumea. Mismanagement led to his banishment in 6 A.D. (see Matthew 2:22). He was succeeded by governors, the best known being Pontius Pilate, who ruled from 26-36 A.D. Pilate was governor during: 1) the ministry of Jesus (c. 27-30 A.D. or 30-33 A.D.); 2) Pentecost; 3) the earliest days of the church; 4) Stephen's speech and death; and 5) the beginnings of Christian missions.

The second of Herod's sons, Philip, ruled as tetrarch (ruler of a fourth of a "kingdom") over Ituraea and Trachonitis, areas northeast of Galilee (Luke 3:1). At his death (34 A.D.) his territory was briefly assigned to the governors who also ruled Judea. Agrippa I (Herod the Great's grandson) was given this territory, with the title "king," in 37 A.D.

The third of Herod the Great's sons, Herod Antipas (often simply called "Herod" or "Herod the tetrarch" in the Gospels and Acts; see chart of Herodian Dynasty) was tetrarch of Galilee and Perea from 4 B.C. until 39 A.D. While visiting his half brother Herod Philip (not the tetrarch), Antipas became infatuated with Philip's wife, Herodias, daughter of another half brother, Aristobulus, and mother of Philip's daughter Salome (cf. Mark 6:22ff.). Contrary to Old Testament law (Leviticus 18:16; 20:21), Antipas married her. The denunciation of this union precipitated Herodias's anger against John the Baptist and eventually his imprisonment and death (Matthew 14:4; Mark 6:17-19; Luke 3:19,20).

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Antipas (at Herodias's request) asked Emperor Gaius to give him the title of "king," the same as that given to Herodias's brother, Agrippa I. Agrippa charged Herod Antipas with plotting insurrection. Antipas, accompanied by Herodias, was exiled to Gaul (modern France) in 39 A.D. Antipas's former territory was then given to Agrippa.

In 41 A.D. the former territory of Archelaus was added to that of Agrippa, thus giving him the same title and virtually the same territory that his grandfather (Herod the Great) had held. During his kingship James, the brother of John, was beheaded (Acts 12:2), and Peter was imprisoned but freed by an angel (Acts 12:3-19). Agrippa was struck by an angel and died in Caesarea in 44 A.D. (Acts 12:23). Roman governors again ruled after this time. In 53 A.D. Herod Agrippa II (son of Agrippa I) became "king" of Ituraea and Trachonitis. Galilee and Perea were added to his domain in 56 or 61 A.D.

Two other Roman governors, Felix (52-60 A.D.) and Festus (60-62 A.D.), appear in the biblical account. Paul was held prisoner and given judicial hearings by both (Acts 24:10-27; 25:8). While King Agrippa II and his sister Bernice were visiting Festus, Paul was again called on to make a defense (Acts 25:13-26:31). Festus transferred Paul to Rome for trial (Acts 26:32-28:16).

Jewish Population

It has been estimated that more than 4,000,000 Jews lived in the Roman Empire during New Testament times, perhaps 7 percent of the total population of the Roman world. But scarcely 700,000 of these Jews lived in Palestine. There were more Jews in Alexandria, Egypt, than in Jerusalem; more in Syria than in Palestine! Even in parts of Palestine (Galilee, where Jesus grew up, and Decapolis) Gentiles outnumbered Jews.

Language

Latin was the legal language of the Roman Empire, but was mainly used in the west. In the east the lingua franca was Greek. Besides Greek, Palestinians spoke Aramaic and Hebrew, so that Jesus and the first disciples were probably trilingual.

Transportation, Commerce, and Communication

In transportation, commerce, and communication Palestine was rather poorly developed. The country probably had no paved highways, but there were several main roads. Although in Palestine the road system was comparatively poor, throughout much of the Roman Empire the roads were justly famous. They were as straight as possible and durably constructed. Early Christian missionaries used them to full advantage. The imperial post carried government dispatches over these highways. One could even buy tourist maps in manuscript form, and even guidebooks for tourists. Water provided the primary means of commercial transportation.

SPIRITUAL TRANSITION

Writings

In the 400 years between the last of the Old Testament books and the beginning of New Testament history, Jewish thinking underwent radical changes under the extended influences of Persian rule, Greek language and philosophy, and renewed nationalism. Though none of the writings of this period were accepted as Scripture, they are valuable for understanding Jewish history and culture.

Apocrypha

The works of the Apocrypha (meaning “hidden, secret” - and therefore “profound”) (*Epistle of Jeremiah, Tobit, Baruch, Ecclesiasticus [Sirach], Judith, 1–2 Esdras, 1–2 Maccabees, Wisdom of Solomon*, and additions to Esther and Daniel) were included with most manuscripts of the Greek Old Testament. Most of the 15 (or 14) books of the Apocrypha are included in the canon of the Orthodox and Roman Catholic traditions, and excerpts from them are still read regularly in some Anglican churches.

15 Apocryphal Books written about 300 BC to 100 AD

1. Wisdom of Solomon
2. Ecclesiasticus
3. Tobit
4. Judith
5. 1 Esdras*
6. 2 Esdras*
7. 1 Maccabees
8. 2 Maccabees
9. Baruch
10. Letter of Jeremiah
11. Additions to Esther
12. Prayer of Azariah or Song of Three Young Men
13. Susanna
14. Bel and the Dragon
15. Prayer of Manasseh*

*Not given canonical status

Pseudepigrapha

Also in circulation during the New Testament era were pseudepigraphal books (e.g., *1–2 Enoch, Jubilees, Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, Letter of Aristeas, Psalms of Solomon*). The word “pseudepigrapha” means “false inscription” or “false title” (referring to the name of the supposed “author” attached to each one). “False” is more a judgment of the names with which the writings are traditionally associated than of their content. Most of these writings represent the beliefs of distinctive groups or schools (or in some cases just individuals) connecting themselves with the name of a notable person of antiquity, such as Enoch, Noah, Moses, or Ezra. Modern collections of the pseudepigrapha contain more than 60 titles.

Most of the religious literature of the period, including the books of the Apocrypha and pseudepigrapha, were written in Greek, but some Jewish separatists living at Qumran continued writing in Hebrew. Their writings, discovered in 1948, are commonly referred to as the Dead Sea Scrolls and include Old Testament, commentaries on them, and liturgical and philosophical texts.

Targums

Halley (page 490):

The Targums are translations of the Hebrew Old Testament books into Aramaic. They were originally oral translations, paraphrases, and interpretations that had their origin in the Babylonian captivity, when Hebrew lost its standing as the primary language of the Jewish exiles and was replaced by Aramaic. These oral paraphrases were later written down and became increasingly necessary as the use of Aramaic became prevalent in Palestine. In the synagogue, a passage would often be read in Hebrew, followed by the Targum of the same passage.

The Septuagint

For sake of completeness the LXX needs to be mentioned here. It has been mentioned earlier (see the introduction to the Bible/Old Testament). The Septuagint is a translation of the Hebrew Old Testament into Greek, made in Alexandria. According to tradition, 70 Jews, skillful linguists, were sent from Jerusalem to Egypt at the request of Ptolemy Philadelphus (285-247 B.C.) and completed the translation in 70 days. In reality the translation was done over a period of time. The Torah was translated first, and later the rest of the Old Testament books were added. The LXX was in common use in the days of Messiah. Many of the quotations from the Old Testament in the New Testament (which was written in Greek) are from the LXX.

Development of Religions / Spiritual Factions

Though the Jewish people retained both the ceremonial pillar of their response to God and the moral-ethical pillar as well, the primary emphasis shifted away from the ceremonial to the moral-ethical. But to obey the law, one needed to know its content, which required study. As a result, the center of worship was no longer exclusively the temple with its liturgy but also the place of learning, the assembly, the local synagogue. The major religious leader was no longer only the priest but also the teacher-rabbi. Such adjustments required careful, detailed study. This resulted in new and different forms of interpretation and the birth of traditions, often additional laws, which supposedly expanded and clarified the written Torah. During the New Testament period these additional laws were taught and passed on both orally and in written form (note the frequent mention of “scribes” in the New Testament). Many people regarded these rabbinic traditions as having a divine origin, equal to the laws in the written Scriptures, but Jesus pronounced them “the tradition of men” (Mark 7:1-23, esp. v. 8).

Divisions grew within the Judaism of the Second Temple era. Some Jews lived in their ancestral land, others did not; some adopted Hellenistic culture, while others clung to the Hebraic one. (Such culturally oriented conflicts are behind the complaint of Acts 6:1.). The new interpretative methods and the additional traditions increasingly became the subject of disagreement. Groups competed for religious prestige and authority, political power, recognition as being wise, wealth, the satisfaction that they were really in the “right,” etc. Thus arose numerous parties, denominations, or sects. The best known are the Sadducees, Pharisees, Zealots, and Essenes. (see below). Most of their differences resulted from their distinctive traditions. One example of such differences is seen in the tensions between the Sadducees and Pharisees in Acts 23:6–9 and elsewhere.

Most people in the land of Israel belonged to none of these groups, being too busy earning a living and caring for their families. According to Josephus (*Jewish Antiquities* 18:11-17), the Pharisees were the most influential on the general public; the Sadducees came from aristocratic priestly families and were not generally popular. Most ordinary Jews were devoted to their nation and religion, and some (it is hard to know how many) were genuinely devoted to God (such as Zechariah and Elizabeth, Joseph and Mary, Simeon, and Anna; see Luke 1-2). From such as these came most of Jesus' early followers. With contempt, the Jewish leaders regarded them as “*this crowd that does not know the law*” (John 7:49).

The Jews revolted against the Romans in 66 A.D. Before the overthrow of the city and temple in 70 A.D., Jerusalem Christians fled to the Decapolis city of Pella (probably in response to Jesus' warning and instruction, Matthew 24:15,16; Mark 13:14; Luke 21:20-24; cf. 19:43). Afterward, Jewish Christian activity during the first century in Jerusalem was limited, but seems to have continued in Galilee.

Roman victory over this Jewish revolt brought “The Time between the Testaments” to its end. The third era of Hebrew history, Rabbinic Judaism, began about 90 A.D., under Roman rule, and continues to this day. From the second century on, Jerusalem was a Gentile city, and Christianity became largely a Gentile movement.

When Jesus began to proclaim the gospel, the Sadducees, Essenes, and Pharisees were also laying claim to Israel's heritage. Josephus (*Jewish Antiquities* 13.171) mentions the groups for the first time during the high priesthood of Jonathan (152-142 B.C.) after the demise of the Zadokite priesthood, which had dominated the religious life of Judea for centuries. The Essenes eventually dropped out of public life and became a network of close-knit communities. It is probably for this reason that the New Testament does not mention them. The Sadducees and Pharisees continued to compete for control of the temple and Sanhedrin. By the first century, the Sadducees were dominant (cf. Acts 5:17). However, the Pharisees remained an influential minority in Jerusalem, and had mounted a successful campaign to win the hearts of the people.

The Sadducees

The aristocratic Sadducees were the heirs to the intertestamental Hasmoneans. Although fewer in number than the Pharisees, they wielded more political influence because they controlled the priesthood.

The Sadducees, including the high priest Caiaphas (18-36 A.D.), were primarily of wealthy, priestly families in Jerusalem. Josephus claims they were unfriendly - even to one another - and were unpopular (*Jewish War* 2.166; *Jewish Antiquities* 13.298). They could be cruel judges (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 20.199; Mishnah, *Sanhedrin* 7:2; *Makkot* 1:6). When Jesus disrupted their financial interests in the temple, he was arrested and condemned (Mark 11:15-19; 14:53-65). James, the brother of the Lord, was later killed by a Sadducean high priest (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 20.200).

The Sadducees rejected the extrabiblical traditions of the Pharisees, perhaps embracing only the Pentateuch as canonical (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 13.297; 18.16). This narrow canon may explain why they did not believe in the general resurrection of the dead (Mark 12:18; Acts 4:1,2; 23:6-8), since it is not explicitly mentioned in the Pentateuch. Perhaps for the same reason, they embraced human responsibility, which is emphasized in the Law of Moses (e.g., Genesis 4:7; Deuteronomy 30:19,20), in contrast to the determinism of the Essenes (Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.164; *Jewish Antiquities* 13.173). Jesus, when arguing for the resurrection (Mark 12:18-27), meets the Sadducees on their own ground by showing the implications of Exodus 3:6 instead of appealing to a more straightforward passage (e.g., Daniel 12:2).

The Essenes

The Essenes were a smaller sect of about 4,000 people. The Essenes, like the Pharisees, probably evolved from the Hasidim (Those who became disgruntled with the expanding political aims of the Hasmoneans). The Essenes lived communally in villages and cities throughout Palestine and Syria (Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.124; 11.1; Philo, *Hypothetica* 11.1). According to Pliny the Elder, an Essene community resided near the Dead Sea (*Natural History* 5.15.73). Some of the Dead Sea Scrolls, which were discovered in caves at Qumran, probably reflect the ideology of this community.

The Essene communities shared all things in common, including food and clothing (Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.122, 127; Philo, *Good Person* 86). Wages were given to a steward, who would purchase and distribute goods to those in need (Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.123; Philo, *Hypothetica* 11.10). They cared for their elderly and sick (Philo, *Good Person* 87). The Jerusalem church adopted a similar way of life (Acts 2:44,45; 4:34,35; James 1:27), except that giving was voluntary (Acts 5:4).

Many of the Essenes did not marry (Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.120; Philo, *Hypothetica* 11.14; Pliny, *Natural History* 5.15.73; but see *Jewish War* 2.160). The group survived by attracting converts. Pliny claims they drew large crowds (*Natural History* 5.15.73). A convert would follow their way of life for a year (Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.137). He could then be baptized, but was not allowed to live with

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them for another two years (*Jewish War* 2.138). Followers of Jesus were similarly baptized into the church, but without a probationary period (cf. Acts 2:37-47; 8:37,38).

The Essenes believed God was the cause of all things (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 13.172; 18.18; Philo, *Good Person* 84). Consequently, they viewed all government as divinely ordained (Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.140). However, the Dead Sea Scrolls assume belief in two spirits - one divine, the other satanic - that will be in conflict until the end of the age (e.g., 1QS Colossians 3:17-19; 4.16,17). Paul similarly ties spiritual warfare with God's ultimate sovereignty over all things, including government (Romans 13:1-7; Ephesians 2:1-3).

The Essenes were especially scrupulous about maintaining purity. They dressed only in white linen (Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.123). They no longer participated in the sacrifices of the temple, because, in their view, the priests were defiling the sanctuary (Dead Sea Scrolls, *Damascus Document* 5.6,7, 14,15). Josephus claims they offered their own sacrifices (*Jewish Antiquities* 18.19), while Philo assumes they abstained from animal sacrifice altogether (*Good Person* 75). The Dead Sea Scrolls claim prayer is an acceptable sacrifice (Dead Sea Scrolls, *Damascus Document* 11.21; 1QS Col. 9.3-5). They also strictly observed the Sabbath. Whereas Jesus assumes most Jews would pull an ox out of a well on the Sabbath (Luke 14:5), the Dead Sea Scrolls forbid it (*Damascus Document* 11.13).

The Pharisees

The Pharisees ("separated ones" - probably in a ritualistic sense) originated shortly after the Maccabean revolt as an outgrowth of the Hasidim (objectors to the Hellenization of Jewish culture). They resided primarily in Jerusalem (but see Luke 5:17) and were divided into at least three schools: the disciples of Shammai, Hillel, and Gamaliel. These schools were especially concerned about the proper administration of the temple.

The disciples of Shammai, who represented the more conservative wing of the group, were dominant before the destruction of the temple in 70 A.D. (Mishnah, *Shabbat* 1:4). But Hillel, representing a more liberal interpretation of the Jewish Scriptures, had moved from Babylon to Jerusalem about a generation before Jesus, and gained wide influence as well.

Gamaliel, the son (or grandson) of Hillel, was a renowned teacher of the law in Jerusalem. The apostle Paul had been a disciple of Gamaliel (Acts 22:3). Gamaliel is remembered for his wisdom (Acts 5:34) and careful management of the Jewish calendar. Most Jews followed a lunisolar calendar, which consisted of 12 lunar months, totaling 354 days. Every three years or so a thirteenth month had to be added, in order to bring the average total days of the year up to the 365.25 days of the solar year. Otherwise, the seasons would not have matched the festivals and sacrifices in the temple. Gamaliel determined when to add the thirteenth month (Mishnah, *Rosh Hashshanah* 2:8; *Sanhedrin* 2:6). Ironically, if the Galatian Christians had adopted the calendar of Jewish religious holidays advocated by Paul's opponents (Galatians 4:10), they would have found themselves under the authority of his old teacher!

These three schools attempted to shape the religious life of the ordinary Jew through the dissemination of their traditions (Matthew 23:15; Mark 7:1-13; Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 13.297). Galilee was also a part of their mission. The Jerusalem Talmud (*Shabbat* 15d) claims that Johanan ben Zakkai, a disciple of Hillel, spent 18 years - probably from 20 to about 40 A.D. - teaching in the Galilean town of Araba (or Gabara). So Johanan and Jesus were teaching in Galilee at the same time.

The Pharisees also had considerable influence over local scribes, who would preach in the synagogue according to their interpretations (Matthew 7:29; 23:1,2; Mark 2:16). When the Pharisees in Jerusalem were alerted by some scribes that Jesus was preaching a new teaching with authority, they

sent a delegation, which, after observing some alarming behaviors, attributed his miraculous power to Beelzebul (Mark 3:22; 7:1). Since the Pharisees were highly respected by the people, the accusation may have had devastating consequences for Jesus' mission (cf. Matthew 11:20-24).

The Pharisaic tradition was pragmatic and relevant to the needs of the time. For instance, the Law of Moses requires all loans to be forgiven in the sabbatical (seventh) year (Deuteronomy 15:2). The intention was to provide relief for borrowers, but the reality was that lenders refused to give loans near the seventh year. Hillel addressed the problem by establishing the *prosbol*, a contract that requires a borrower to pay back a lender even in the seventh year (Mishnah, *Shabbat* 7:1). His school was also highly pragmatic (at least for husbands wanting a divorce) when it came to rules for divorce, interpreting the ambiguous phrase in Deuteronomy 24:1, “*some indecency in her,*” as allowing a husband to divorce his wife for almost any reason, including burning his dinner (Mishnah, *Gittin* 9:10). However, the school of Shammai interpreted the law more narrowly, allowing divorce only in the case of adultery.

The Dead Sea Scrolls accuse the Pharisees of being “Seekers of Smooth Things,” that is, passing on easy interpretations to the people (e.g., 4Q169 Fragment 1; cf. Isa. 30:10). While Jesus too was vulnerable to this criticism in some areas of his teaching, especially his indifference to matters of ritual purity and Sabbath observance, he is even more stringent than Moses when it comes to justice. Instead of recommending the *prosbol*, he flatly commands his disciples, “*do not refuse the one who would borrow from you*” (Matthew 5:42). Concerning divorce, he adopts a similar position to the school of Shammai, but also notes that divorce was not God's original plan and is not required (Matthew 5:31,32; 19:9).

The difference in stringency can be further illustrated by the summations of the law provided by Hillel and Jesus. Hillel says, “*What is hateful to you, do not to your neighbor: that is the whole Torah, while the rest is commentary thereof; go and learn it*” (Babylonian Talmud, *Shabbat* 31a). Jesus says, “*So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets*” (Matthew 7:12). We find the negative wording of Hillel's teaching in earlier Jewish writings (*Tobit* 4:15; Philo, *Hypothetica* 7.6–8). Jesus' summation is more challenging, requiring nothing less than a universal love for all people, including one's enemies (Matthew 5:44).

However, despite the curious quality of some of their tradition, the Pharisees were especially scrupulous to maintain a righteous status before God. Many were probably like Paul, who claimed that as a Pharisee he was “blameless” as to the Law of Moses (Philippians 3:6). While many Jews tithed, Pharisees even tithed their garden herbs (Matthew 23:23). While others fasted periodically, they fasted twice a week (Mark 2:18; Luke 18:12). They also maintained purity at their meals to the point of “straining out a gnat” from a cup (Matthew 23:24; cf. Mark 7:4), and they avoided sharing a table with “sinners,” those like tax collectors who habitually broke the law (Mark 2:16; Luke 7:39).

All three expressions of piety come together in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18:9-14). Jesus depicts the Pharisee as distinguishing himself from the tax collector because he fasted and tithed in order to retain a righteous status before God. Elsewhere, Jesus affirms tithing but claims the Pharisees neglect the “*weightier matters of the law*” - justice, mercy, and faithfulness (Matthew 23:23).

The Pharisees took their personal relationship with God seriously, in part because they believed that the resurrection of the dead was a reward for living a righteous life (Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.163; *Jewish Antiquities* 18.14; Acts 23:8; *Aboth of Rabbi Nathan* 5A). But Jesus says, “*For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven*” (Matthew 5:20). On another occasion, he tells the Pharisaic teacher Nicodemus that he needs to be “born again,” or “born from above” (*anōthen*, John 3:3). Despite the blameless way of life many Pharisees pursued, such effort, in Jesus' view, was not enough: like all people, they

needed to repent and believe in the gospel. From this perspective, Paul could anticipate being found by God, at the resurrection, *“not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ”* (Philippians 3:9).

The Scribes

Scribes probably first appeared during the Babylonian captivity (Ezra 7:6). Initially, they were professional copyists of the law. The more they copied the more they came to know about the Scriptures. Soon they developed into the teachers and interpreters of the law. Whenever a case developed with no direct Scripture bearing upon its solution, they passed an oral judgment upon the situation. They later communicated this oral, traditional law to their pupils. In their teaching they always referred to the judgments of the past, learned rabbis (Matthew 7:28,29). Other names for this group included lawyers, jurist, teachers of the law, and rabbis (Matthew 22:35; Luke 5:17; 7:30; 10:25; 11:45,52; 14:3; Acts 5:34). The most learned of them became the “doctors of the law.” Most scribes belonged to or were sympathetic to the Pharisees.

The Priests

Halley (page 485):

According to the Old Testament, all priests had to be descendants of Aaron, Moses’ brother, from the tribe of Levi. The priests were divided into 24 “courses” or groups, each one of which served in the temple one week at a time, twice a year. Most priests lived outside Jerusalem (for example, Zechariah: Luke 1:8,9). The priests who lived in Jerusalem and were connected full-time to the temple were considered far more important than the ordinary priests.

The High Priest

Halley (page 485):

The high priest was to be a direct descendant of Aaron, the first high priest. It was a hereditary office.

During the century of independence under the Hasmoneans, the high priest was both the religious and political leader (see above comments on the Maccabean kingdom). This led in the end to disaster, when the office became for all practical purposes secular (note the effect of the millet system on the priesthood of the Armenian church and spiritual life in the Diaspora - note also the corruption of the Roman Church while in political power). During the Roman period, the high priest was appointed much like other government officials. From the time of Herod the Great until the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., there were no fewer than 28 high priests!

Interestingly, it may be that the Jewish leaders themselves continued to view a former high priest a still having official standing, even though he had been deposed, since according to the law of Moses, the high priest remained in office until his death. When Jesus was arrested, He was first sent to Annas (who had not been high priest for 15 years!) and only then to Caiaphas, who was the high priest at that time. In Acts 4:6, Annas is called the high priest, even though technically he no longer was.

The Chief Priests

Halley (page 485):

It is not entirely certain who the chief priests were. It is likely that they were past and present high priests, or perhaps members of the high priestly families (see Acts 4:6). Of they may have

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included the priests who formed the permanent temple staff. In any event, they constituted a well-defined group.

The Rabbis

Halley (page 486):

“Rabbi” means “my master,” “my lord.” It was used as a general term of respect. John the Baptist’s disciples referred to John as rabbi, and Jesus was called rabbi by His disciples. John explains the term “rabbi” as meaning teacher (John 1:38; 20:16). Jesus warns his disciples that they should not be like the professional scribes in their desire to be called rabbi (Matthew 23:2-12).

“Rabbi” did not become an official title until much later. The professional, ordained, salaried rabbi did not appear until the Middle Ages.

Institutions

The Temple

Halley (page 486):

After King Cyrus allowed the people to return to Jerusalem under Zerubbabel and Ezra, the first thing they did was rebuild the temple. But the second temple was relatively plain and far less imposing than the first temple (Solomon’s), which many of those who returned had never seen, since they had been born in Babylonia.

When Herod the Great became king, one of the things he did to win over the people was to expand and beautify the temple. Since the temple stood on the top of a hill, the only way to enlarge the temple area was to build massive retaining walls and fill the area inside the walls to create a great platform. Herod doubled the size of the original platform of Solomon’s temple. Part of the wall Herod built is still visible and is known as the Wailing Wall; it shows how remarkable and impressive the temple must have been. (see handout: Intertestamental Period Maps - First Century Jerusalem)

Herod died in 4 B.C., almost 70 years before the temple complex was completely finished (64 A.D.), Sadly, the finished temple stood for only six years in all its splendor. In 66 A.D., the Jews revolted against Rome, and four years later, in 70 A.D., Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed.

Synagogues

Halley (page 487):

In the New Testament we encounter synagogues everywhere, both in Palestine and throughout the Roman Empire. The synagogue was “invented” during the Babylonian exile. The temple in Jerusalem - the central place of worship for all Jews - had been destroyed. So wherever there was a group of Jews, they would get together and read and study the Hebrew Scriptures. These meetings then were formalized in the institutions of the synagogue.

Unlike the temple, where the sacrifices were central, in the synagogue the focus was on teaching. Any male present could be asked to read from the Scriptures - first from the Pentateuch and then from the Prophets - and any male present could be asked to preach. This is why Jesus could preach in the synagogue (Luke 4:16-30), and later Paul also (for example Acts 13:15ff).

Christian worship (as well as Muslim worship) is patterned after the model of the synagogue.

POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS

The Herodians

The Herodians (Matthew 22:16; Mark 3:6; 12:13) were an influential political group, composed mainly of the aristocratic, Sadducean priests that supported the Herodian dynasty and Roman rule in Palestine. Greatly opposed to the Pharisees, they nevertheless joined with them in a common effort to crucify Christ.

The Sanhedrin

The Sanhedrin originated during the Greek period of occupation, although many rabbis traced its beginning to the council of seventy elders named by Moses. In New Testament times it was the Jewish supreme court. Biblical writers named it by these terms: "ruler," "chief priests and rulers," "chief priests and elders and scribes," and "council." The high priest presided over a membership of seventy, consisting of high priests, members of families from which the high priests came, tribal and family heads, scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees (Matthew 26:3,57,59; Mark 15:53; 15:1; Luke 22:66; Acts 4:5; 22:30). Council sessions were not held at night, on the Sabbath, or during the various religious feasts. They normally met in the temple area daily, although some claim that they congregated only on Monday and Thursday. In religious cases they had the power to impose and to execute the death sentence upon Gentiles who trespassed unauthorized temple courts and upon Jews who invited Gentiles into Jewish temple areas. In civil cases their verdicts of capital punishment had to be referred to the Roman procurator for execution.

The Zealots

The Zealots were political revolutionaries. Committed to the overthrow of Roman rule, they refused to pay taxes and started frequent revolts (Acts 21:38). Barabbas was probably one (Mark 15:7). One of Jesus' disciples, Simon, was a converted political revolutionary (Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13). Their strength was located in Galilee and in other remote areas. Their power came to an abrupt end in the Jewish War (66-73 A.D.) at the infamous siege of Masada.

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As general resources I've relied on my class notes from various professors at Biola University (especially those of Dr. Curtis Mitchell), Western Conservative Baptist Seminary (WCBS), and Talbot Seminary as well as notes shared with me by Annie Kartoian.

Additional reference material has come from the study Bibles of the English Standard Version, New American Standard Version, and The New Living Translation.

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