

Part One

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND FOR STUDYING THE GOSPELS

THE UNDERSTANDING OF any religion depends heavily on the historical circumstances surrounding its birth. This is particularly true of Judaism and Christianity because of the uniquely historical nature of these religions. Centered on Scriptures that tell the sacred stories of God's involvement in space and time with distinctive communities of individuals called to be his people, the Judeo-Christian claims rise or fall with the truthfulness of these stories. For Christianity, the central story is about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the story that forms the topic of the four New Testament Gospels.

Because many courses on the life of Christ or the Gospels are the first in a series of classes surveying the entire New Testament, part 1 of this book includes some historical background relevant to the New Testament more generally (i.e., including Acts, the epistles, and Revelation). Still, its primary focus is to prepare students for an intensive study of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John and the events they narrate. The three major chapter divisions—covering political, religious, and socioeconomic background—obviously overlap, especially when studying a world that knew nothing of the separation of church and state. Still, the divisions are a convenient way of arranging the major topics of historical background to prepare one for a sensitive and informed reading of the Gospels.

1

POLITICAL BACKGROUND

An Overview of the Intertestamental Period

FOR CENTURIES CHRISTIAN scholars have referred to the period from the last quarter of the fifth century BC to the first century AD as the *intertestamental period*.¹ One might just as naturally study this period as the culmination of or sequel to the Old Testament era. However, since surveys of the Old Testament have much more material to cover than studies of the New Testament, textbooks on the New Testament or the Gospels have usually been the place where an overview of these five centuries appears. Furthermore, any informed reading of the New Testament requires some familiarity with the events of this era.

The primary ancient source for the political developments in Israel during the centuries leading up to and including the life of Christ is Josephus's *Jewish Antiquities*, a twenty-volume work on the history of the Jewish people. For the decades immediately after Christ, Josephus's *Jewish War* is most useful. Josephus (AD 37–about 100) described himself as a one-time Pharisee and a military

¹ This is clearly a Christian term based on the belief that the New Testament is a second collection of revelations from God following the Hebrew Scriptures (the Christian Old Testament). In ecumenical circles, “the Second Temple era” is often preferred. This term refers to the period beginning with the rebuilding of the Jewish temple in the late sixth century BC and ending with its destruction in AD 70. The abbreviations BC (before Christ) and AD (*Anno Domini*—“in the year of our Lord”) are often replaced with BCE (before the Common Era) and CE (the Common Era, i.e., when Judaism and Christianity coexisted).

general in the war against Rome (66–70), who subsequently became a loyal supporter of Rome and wrote voluminously under the patronage of the imperial court. Although clearly writing with pro-Roman biases, Josephus may be regarded as a relatively reliable historian; for some periods his works are all we have.²

Other information can be gleaned from the Old Testament *apocrypha* and *pseudepigrapha*. The apocrypha (from the Gk. word for “hidden”) refers to a collection of fifteen short books or parts of books that have traditionally been accepted by Roman Catholics as part of the Old Testament canon or that appeared in ancient Greek translations of the Old Testament.³ These include additions to older canonical works such as Daniel and Esther, books of wisdom literature similar to Proverbs (e.g., The Wisdom of Solomon and Ecclesiasticus [also known as ben Sira]), edifying novels (Tobit, Judith), and historical narratives (1 and 2 Maccabees). The pseudepigrapha (from the Gk. for “false ascriptions” [concerning authorship]) include more than sixty additional works.⁴ Some of these were written in the names of very ancient Jewish heroes (e.g., Enoch, Moses, Levi, Abraham)—hence the name pseudepigrapha. The vast majority of these books were never accepted as inspired or canonical by any official segment of Judaism or Christianity.⁵ The pseudepigrapha include apocalyptic literature, the last “testaments” of dying leaders, expansions of Old Testament narratives, wisdom and philosophical literature, psalms, prayers and odes, and various other miscellaneous works. Few of the apocrypha and pseudepigrapha even claim to be historical narratives, but their themes captured the interests of the Jews during the various time periods in which they were written. The most significant of these documents for reconstructing the history of intertestamental Israel are 1 and 2 Maccabees (from the apocrypha). These books narrate the events leading up to and including the Jewish revolt against Syria in the mid-second century BC, with 2 Maccabees usually viewed as a little less reliable than 1 Maccabees.

Many Jews came to believe that after Malachi, the last of the Old Testament prophets, prophecy ceased to exist in Israel and would arise again only in connec-

² An accessible edition of Josephus’s writings for beginning students is *The Works of Josephus*, trans. W. Whiston (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1987). For a good overview of his life and work, see T. Rajak, *Josephus: The Historian and His Society*, rev. ed. (London: Duckworth, 2002). On his overall relevance for New Testament studies, see S. Mason, *Josephus and the New Testament* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2003).

³ A standard English translation and edition is *The New Oxford Annotated Apocrypha*, ed. B. M. Metzger and R. E. Murphy, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford, 1991). For good introductions, see D. A. deSilva, *Introducing the Apocrypha* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002); and D. J. Harrington, *Invitation to the Apocrypha* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1999).

⁴ A standard collection in English translation, with commentary, is *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. J. H. Charlesworth, 2 vols. (Garden City: Doubleday, 1983–85). For an excellent introduction to the full range of primary, noncanonical Jewish literature relevant for New Testament backgrounds, see L. R. Helyer, *Exploring Jewish Literature of the Second Temple Period: A Guide for New Testament Students* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2002).

⁵ Some branches of Eastern Orthodoxy at times have treated 1 Enoch as canonical.

tion with the events surrounding the arrival of the Messiah and his kingdom.⁶ A reasonable date for the writing of Malachi is 433 BC,⁷ and Josephus claimed that no Scriptures were written after the reign of Artaxerxes, who died in 424 (Ag. Ap. 1.8.40–41). So a survey of the intertestamental period begins where the Old Testament leaves off, with various repatriated Jews having returned from exile to Israel, rebuilding the temple, and seeking once again to serve their God in their land.

Why is this era important to study as background for the Gospels? Politically and socioeconomically, key developments occurred, an understanding of which is essential to a correct interpretation of the situation of the Jews in the time of Jesus. Religiously, Judaism was transformed into a set of beliefs and practices often quite different from Old Testament religion. For those inclined to see the hand of providence in history, numerous events occurred that prepared the way for the first-century world to be more receptive to the message of the gospel than in many other periods of history.

The Beginning of the Time between the Testaments: Jews Continue under Persian Rule (ca. 424–331 BC)

From the perspective of a secular historian, this is no point at which to begin a new era. Nothing earth-shattering happened with the death of Artaxerxes. Life continued much as it had during the time of Nehemiah, Haggai, and Malachi. The Persian rulers, with varying degrees of consistency, continued the policy inaugurated under Cyrus in 539 BC of allowing Jews in exile to return to their homeland, worship their God freely, and obey the laws of Moses. The Jews, of course, did not reestablish a kingship but began to look to future days when they could do so. An increased preoccupation with the Law was based on the convictions that their past exiles were punishment for disobedience and that God would grant them complete freedom when they achieved a substantial measure of obedience to his Word.

Three important new developments did take place, however, during the Persian period, which sowed the seeds for the transformation of Judaism by the first century. The first two of these were the rise of the *synagogue* and the beginning of the *oral Law*. In fact, no one knows for sure the origins of either institution; some would date one or both much earlier or later. It is reasonable to assume that the events of exile and return had a formative influence on both. Without access to a temple in which to gather or a divinely authorized place to offer sacrifices, Jews began to congregate in local places of worship. They drew on biblical texts such as 1 Sam 15:22 (“To obey is better than sacrifice”) and substituted prayers of repentance and good works as the means of atonement for sin.⁸ Because they sought

⁶ This claim has been challenged, but see B. D. Sommer, “Did Prophecy Cease? Evaluating a Reevaluation,” *JBL* 115 (1996): 31–47.

⁷ P. A. Verhoef, *The Books of Haggai and Malachi* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 160; for discussion of other options, see 156–59. Many critics, of course, date other OT books even later.

⁸ Distinct buildings may not have been utilized for several more centuries, but “the origin of the ‘synagogue’ as a public assembly including torah-reading rituals is bound to the administrative structure of the land of Israel and goes back to the Persian period, more specifically to the reign of

to apply the *Torah* (Law) to every area of life, a body of oral tradition—interpretation and application—began to develop around the written Law of Moses to explain how to implement its commandments in new times and places.⁹ Both the synagogue and the oral Law featured prominently in Jesus’ interaction with Judaism centuries later.

The third development was the establishment of *Aramaic* as the main language for business and international relations throughout many parts of the Persian Empire, including Israel. A cognate language to biblical Hebrew, Aramaic became and remained the native tongue for everyday use among Jews in Palestine well into the first century. Indeed, by the time of Christ, many Jews were probably not fluent in Hebrew, as it had become a language largely limited to the reading of Scripture.¹⁰

Alexander the Great and the Hellenistic Period (331–167 BC)

The first major new era of Middle Eastern history after the end of the Old Testament period began with the defeat of the Persians by the Greeks. Winds of change were heralded by the defeat of Athens by Philip II of Macedon in 338 BC. This small kingdom in the north of what today is Greece had expansionist designs. The Greek historian-philosopher Isocrates challenged Philip with his famous declaration: “Once you have made the Persian subject to your rule, there is nothing left for you but to become a god.”¹¹ Philip was assassinated two years later, however, and it fell to his son Alexander to strive for those goals.

Born in 356 BC, taught by Aristotle, and inspired by Achilles (the warrior in the *Iliad*), Alexander has been considered by many the greatest military ruler ever. In only thirteen years (336–323) he conquered and controlled virtually all of the former Persian Empire, plus some territories not previously under its control. His rule extended from Greece to India and from southern Russia to northern Africa.¹²

Artaxerxes I.” So A. Runesson, *The Origins of the Synagogue: A Socio-Historical Study* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 2001), 479. For an overall history, see esp. B. Olsson and M. Zetterholm, eds., *The Ancient Synagogue from Its Origins until 200 C.E.* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 2003).

⁹ For the diversity of ancient opinions concerning the development of the oral Torah, see B. D. Sommer, “Unity and Plurality in Jewish Canons: The Case of the Oral and Written Torahs,” in *One Scripture or Many? Canon from Biblical, Theological, and Philosophical Perspectives*, ed. C. Helmer and C. Landmesser (Oxford and New York: OUP, 2004), 108–50.

¹⁰ See further J. M. Watt, “The Current Landscape of Diglossia Studies: The Diglossic Continuum in First-Century Palestine,” in *Diglossia and Other Topics in New Testament Linguistics*, ed. S. E. Porter (Sheffield: SAP, 2000), 18–36. For the view that Hebrew played a larger role in first-century Jewish life, at least within Israel, see S. Safrai, “Spoken and Literary Languages in the Time of Jesus,” in *Jesus’ Last Week: Jerusalem Studies in the Synoptic Gospels*, vol. 1, ed. R. S. Notley, M. Turnage, and B. Becker (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2006), 225–44.

¹¹ Helmut Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament*, vol. 1, rev. ed. (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 1995), 8.

¹² For an excellent biography, see R. L. Fox, *Alexander the Great*, rev. ed. (Boston: Little, 2000). Cf. also N. G. L. Hammond, *The Genius of Alexander the Great* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

Greek Rule under Alexander (331–323 BC)

Israel came under Greek rule in 331 BC as Alexander's armies swept eastward. Like most of the peoples conquered, the Jews were given the same relative freedoms of worship and government as under the Persians, so long as they remained loyal subjects of Greece. Alexander apparently hoped to unite the eastern and western parts of his empire and create a new hybrid of cultures, religions, and peoples, with all, however, permeated by *Hellenistic*¹³ culture and influence. His turn-of-the-first-century biographer Plutarch, for example, claims that he founded as many as seventy new cities (*Alex.* 1), but most historians think this number is seriously exaggerated.

The voluntary dispersion of many of the Jews continued, as under Persia, since greater economic gain was to be had in many parts of the empire outside Israel. In fact, the largest Jewish community not in Palestine developed in one of Alexander's newly founded cities in Egypt, which he named for himself—Alexandria. This city became an important Christian center by the second century AD. Jews, under the influence particularly of the mid-first-century writer *Philo*,¹⁴ as well as Christians, especially following the late-second-century theologian Origen, developed in Alexandria an allegorical form of exegesis that sought to harmonize the best of Greek philosophy with Jewish or Christian religion.

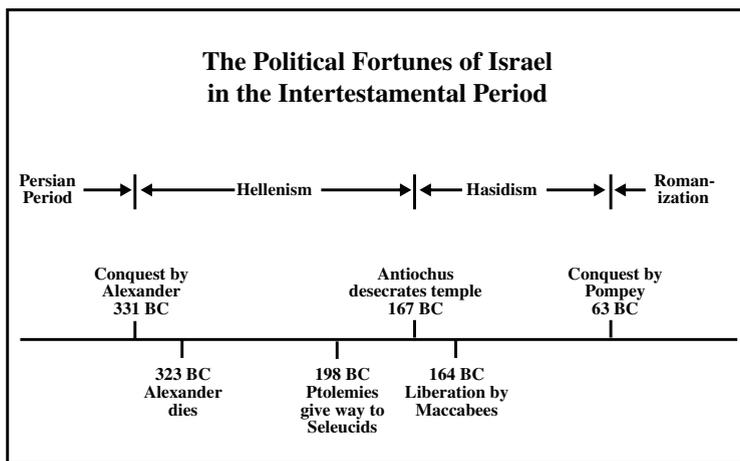
In Greece, Alexander and his armies had come from Greek cities with a history of democratic ideals. As he marched eastward, he encountered peoples used to acclaiming or even worshiping their rulers as gods and saviors, most notably the Egyptians with their Pharaohs. At first, Alexander was shocked by the inclination of his new subjects to grant him similar acclaim, but eventually, he accepted it and even came to demand it, to the horror and disgust of many of his own countrymen. Alexander's morals also decayed toward the end of his life, which ended prematurely just before his thirty-third birthday when, after a heavy bout of drinking, he caught a fever, possibly malaria, and died.

Numerous results of Alexander's conquests lasted well into the Roman period and the time of the rise of Christianity. First, Greek rule brought improved standards of living and administrative efficiency in an empire that came to be urban rather than rural-centered. This shift facilitated mass communication; and news, including the gospel, could be spread rapidly by focusing on the major cities in each territory.

Second, Hellenization spread as the result of imperialism. Greek culture and influence could be found everywhere. For Jews, this provided significant enticements to disobey their Law. All the subjugated peoples were exposed to the breadth of Greek religion and philosophy. Major libraries (especially in Alexandria) and universities (especially in Tarsus) were founded. Jews divided among themselves as to whether or not it was acceptable to study, learn from, and incorporate into their lifestyles Hellenistic elements. Second Maccabees 4:10–17 describes some

¹³ I.e., Greek—from *Hellas*, the Greek word for Greece.

¹⁴ See *The Works of Philo*, trans. C. D. Yonge (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1993).



of the temptations of Hellenism in the late 170s BC: Greek forms of dress, with idolatrous associations attached to them; male athletic competition in the Greek gymnasia, often in the nude, contrary to Jewish scruples; and an interest in sports, with worship and sacrifice neglected! Other pressures on Jews to compromise their ways that began early under Hellenistic influence included attendance at or participation in the religiously explicit Greek theater and the availability and attractiveness of eating nonkosher food. The tensions of this era may perhaps be compared to the mutual pressure Western secularism and Islamic fundamentalism exert on people in various Arab countries today.

Thirdly, no doubt the most pervasive result of Alexander's conquests was the spread of the Greek language itself. Almost everyone who had to do business with the Greek soldiers and merchants who came to be located in every urban center had to learn to speak a little Greek. A simplified form of Attic (Athenian) Greek developed, now known simply as Hellenistic Greek. It was less flowery and semantically precise than its classical predecessors. The Greek of New Testament times became known as *koinē* (Gk. for "common") and reflected what Romans called the *lingua franca* (Lat. for "common language"). Thus even through the first century, many Jews in Palestine may well have been at least marginally trilingual, with some knowledge of *Hebrew* (probably limited in use to religious literature), *Aramaic* as their common vernacular, and *Greek* as the language of business, commerce, and relations with the military and political authorities.¹⁵

The extent of the spread of the Greek language is perhaps best illustrated by the need of diaspora Jews (i.e., outside Israel) to translate the Hebrew Bible

¹⁵ It is regularly and rightly assumed that most of Jesus' words in the Gospels reflect the evangelists' translation and paraphrase of his original Aramaic into Greek. Still, we must not underestimate the possibility that on occasion the Gospels have preserved original Greek dialogues. See esp. S. E. Porter, *The Criteria for Authenticity in Historical-Jesus Research: Previous Discussion and New Proposals* (Sheffield: SAP, 2000), 126–80. More generally, cf. M. O. Wise, "Languages of Palestine," in *DJG*, 434–44.

into Greek as early as the mid-third century BC because of the disuse into which Hebrew was falling, even among the generally closed and tightly-knit Jewish communities. This translation of what we call the Old Testament became known in Roman times as the *Septuagint*, from the Latin word for “seventy.” Traditions developed that seventy (or seventy-two) scholars were commissioned to produce this translation, and one late legend claimed that all worked independently to produce word-for-word identical copies! The latter claim is demonstrably false—the surviving manuscripts demonstrate the same complex history of formation and development of textual variants and traditions as do the Hebrew Bible and the Greek New Testament.

The importance of the Septuagint for New Testament studies, though, can scarcely be overestimated.¹⁶ In a substantial majority of cases, the LXX (as it is customarily abbreviated) is often the version quoted in the New Testament, even when the Greek rendering varies from the Hebrew in some significant way. The Septuagint was clearly “the Bible” for most first-century diaspora Jews. An important area of scholarship that is only beginning to receive the attention it deserves involves the relationship among the different versions of the Septuagint and the ancient copies of the Hebrew Old Testament.¹⁷ Until the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the oldest known Hebrew versions were copies of the *Masoretic* text (MT) from the ninth and tenth centuries after Christ, while portions of the Septuagint were half a millennium older. Now, however, we have copies and fragments from pre-Christian times of most Old Testament books in Hebrew. Occasionally, these older readings differ from the MT but support the LXX. So not every instance of a New Testament author seeming to differ significantly from the Old Testament involves his taking inappropriate liberties with the text; in some cases the LXX may well translate the underlying Hebrew more accurately than we first thought. But there are many other reasons for the distinctive uses of the Old Testament by New Testament writers, and much profitable study is yet to be undertaken in this field.¹⁸

Egyptian Rule under the Ptolemies (323–198 BC)¹⁹

When Alexander died he left no living heir to his kingdom, so a struggle for succession ensued among his generals. From 323–301 BC, the outcome of this

¹⁶ The best introduction is K. H. Jobes and M. Silva, *Invitation to the Septuagint* (Grand Rapids: Baker; Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000). Cf. J. M. Dines and M. A. Knibb, *The Septuagint* (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2004).

¹⁷ See esp. M. Hengel, *The Septuagint as Christian Scripture: Its Prehistory and the Problem of Its Canon* (London: T&T Clark, 2002; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004).

¹⁸ For an excellent introduction to OT textual criticism, see P. D. Wegner, *A Student’s Guide to Textual Criticism of the Bible: Its History, Methods and Results* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2006), 163–203. For a more comprehensive treatment, see E. Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress; Assen: Van Gorcum, 2001). An outstanding resource for the use of the Hebrew Bible in the NT is now G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, eds., *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007).

¹⁹ For a selection of primary sources treating this and immediately subsequent periods, see M. Austin, *The Hellenistic World from Alexander to the Roman Conquest*, rev. ed. (Cambridge: CUP, 2006).

power struggle was uncertain; this time frame is known as the period of the *Diaadochoi* (Gk. for “successors”). Initially, the empire was divided into four parts; then, into three. Finally, two dynasties controlling most of the land that Alexander had previously held were established by Seleucus and Ptolemy. The northern half, based in Syria, came under *Seleucid* control, and its rulers generally took the names either of Seleucus or Antiochus. The southern half, based in Egypt, was *Ptolemaic*, and its leaders consistently adopted the title of Ptolemy. Because Israel was precariously perched in the only stretch of fertile ground exactly between these two powers, it was consistently vulnerable to expansionist designs on the part of either.

From 311 BC on, Israel was securely in the hands of the Ptolemies. The Ptolemaic period seems to have been one of relative peace and freedom for the Jews, with a fairly good standard of living, but sources of information about this time are scarce. One source that has survived is the collection of Zenon papyri that describe the development in the first half of the third century BC of the institution of tax-farmers—local people, including Jews, co-opted into collecting taxes as go-betweens for the Hellenistic authorities. This practice continued into Roman and New Testament times, fueling the Jewish hatred for tax collectors that we see on the pages of the Gospels. During the second half of the third century, a rivalry also grew up between the households of two men named Onias and Tobias. The Oniads were high priestly families who objected to the growing Hellenism of Jewish life; the Tobiads were wealthy supporters of the Ptolemies and were more favorably disposed to Greek culture. This tension, too, continued for several centuries.²⁰

The most famous and powerful ruler during this century was Ptolemy III (246–222 BC),²¹ who promoted scientific investigation. Some of his astronomers even proposed that the earth was spherical, rather than flat, and computed its circumference with relative accuracy. But this information was not widely believed until the discoveries of Galileo in the early 1600s.

Syrian Rule under the Seleucids (198–167 BC)

In 198 BC, the Seleucid ruler Antiochus III conquered and occupied Israel, shifting the balance of power from south to north. For the next several decades, Jews were subject to Syria rather than Egypt. Antiochus III (who ruled from 222–187) and Seleucus IV (187–175) continued the Ptolemaic policy of limited freedom and self-government for Israel, but they also wished to keep on friendly terms with the growing power to their west—Rome. A peace treaty by Antiochus

²⁰ Cf. further B. Noghri, “The Motivations of the Maccabees and Judean Rhetoric of Ancestral Tradition,” in *Ancient Judaism in its Hellenistic Context*, ed. C. Bakhos (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2005), 85–111.

²¹ Or 221 BC. The dates given for many events in the ancient world often vary by a year or so in one direction or the other in different modern textbooks because of uncertainties in the calendars and other ancient forms of dating used. For the most part, this book will not note instances of these discrepancies but merely adopt widely held dates.

in 188 BC promised Rome substantial annual tribute, forcing the Seleucids to impose increasingly heavier taxation on their subjects.

Antiochus IV came to power in 175. He began significantly to alter the previously cordial relationship between the Seleucids and the Jews in Israel. At first his motives seemed strictly economic. He severely increased taxation to try to keep up with the payments to Rome. But he also began more actively to promote Hellenization, eventually to the extent of proclaiming himself a god—Antiochus *Epiphanes* (from the Gk. for “manifest”). The later historian Polybius commented that his detractors referred to him instead as *Epimanes*—a “madman” (*Histories* 26.1a)!

Relationships progressively deteriorated between Antiochus and the faithful Jews who objected to the growing Hellenism. These Jews were increasingly called the *Hasidim* (Hb. for “pious ones”). Conflict seemed inevitable when a man named Jason, the brother of the rightful heir to the high priesthood (Onias III), paid a large bribe to Antiochus to receive appointment to that office. The problem worsened when Menelaus, a Benjamite and thus not lawfully a priest at all, in turn outbid Jason and was installed as high priest shortly afterwards. After a military campaign by Antiochus in Egypt, a false rumor spread throughout Jerusalem that Antiochus had been killed, leading to public rejoicing and celebration. This prompted Antiochus, on his way home to Syria, to enter the temple sanctuary and carry off the equivalent of billions of dollars of sacred objects and treasury monies. He also allegedly massacred forty thousand Jews in one day.

After Antiochus’s next Egyptian expedition, he again looted Jerusalem, set fire to parts of the city, and slaughtered many—all on a Sabbath, a time when the Jews would not resist. In addition he made virtually all of Judaism’s distinctiveness illegal and transgressed its holiest laws by renaming the Jerusalem temple for Zeus Olympius, setting up a pagan altar there on which swine were sacrificed (the most unclean of animals in Jewish eyes), prohibiting circumcision and Sabbath observance, banning and burning copies of the Torah, and ordering sacrifices to pagan gods at various altars around the country.²² Because Dan 11:1–30 predicted in detail the political events from the time of the Persian empire to Antiochus IV (though without mentioning him by name), many Jews understandably took verses 31–35—Daniel’s famous “abomination of desolation”—to refer to Antiochus’s desecration of the temple. First Maccabees 1:54 specifically relates this to the events on 15 Chislew (roughly December) in 167 BC when “they erected a desolating sacrilege upon the altar of burnt offering,” although its specific nature is not described. Jesus later reapplied this imagery to the destruction of the temple

²² For the entire period of Seleucid rule and the Maccabean uprising, see Dov Gera, *Judaea and Mediterranean Politics, 219 to 161 B.C.E.* (Leiden: Brill, 1998). *Contra* Gera’s surprisingly positive assessment of Antiochus Epiphanes, see D. R. Schwartz, “Antiochus IV Epiphanes in Jerusalem,” in *Historical Perspectives: From the Hasmoneans to bar Kokhba in Light of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, ed. D. Goodblatt, A. Pinnick and D. R. Schwartz (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2001), 45–56. For an attempt to separate history from Maccabean redaction, see S. Weitzman, “Plotting Antiochus’s Persecution.” *JBL* 123 (2004): 219–34.

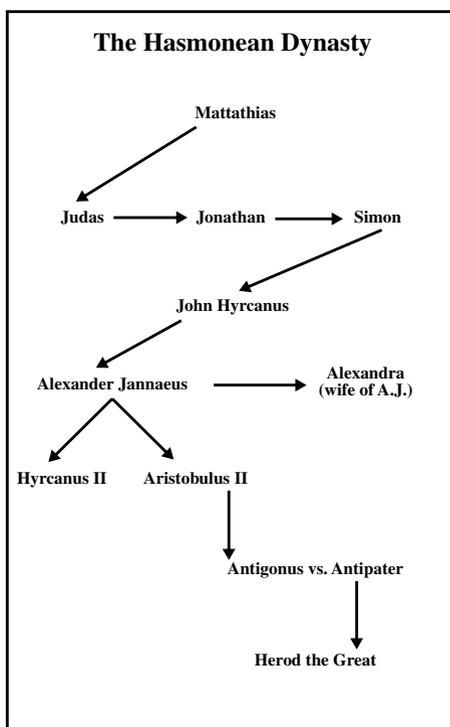
by Rome in AD 70 (Mark 13:14 pars.), and some interpreters take the imagery of Rev 11:2 to refer to a similar desolation at the end of human history just prior to Christ's return.

The Maccabean Revolt and the Hasmonean Dynasty (167–63 BC)

Needless to say, little further provocation was necessary to start a Jewish revolt. An aged priest, Mattathias, was ordered to sacrifice on one of the unlawful altars Antiochus had erected in a small town in northwest Judea called Modein. He refused, and when a fellow Jew came forward to obey the king's orders, Mattathias slew both his countryman and the soldier overseeing the sacrifice. Soon the priest and his five sons fled to the Judean hill country and organized a band of rebel Jews. They repeatedly surprised and defeated outposts of the much larger Syrian armies through the otherwise little-used tactics of guerrilla warfare, including nighttime attacks from their mountain hideouts and a willingness to defend themselves and fight on the Sabbath.

Mattathias died in 166 BC, but his son Judas, nicknamed *Maccabeus* (from the Gk. for "hammer[er]"), continued leading the attacks. The Syrian commander Lysias was unable to devote his whole attention to the Jewish insurgents because of internal divisions among the Seleucids and attacks from the Parthians to the northeast, so the Maccabees continued to win victories despite being outnumbered by as many as six to one (cf. 1 Macc 4:28–29). By 25 Chislew in 164 BC, Judas succeeded in regaining control of the temple precincts and "purifying" the sanctuary. This crucial stage in the liberation of Israel from foreign rule is still celebrated today by Jews each December as *Hanukkah* (the Feast of "Dedication").²³ John 10:22 introduces one account of Jesus' teaching in the temple at precisely this festival.

Although Judas did not remove the Syrian forces from the Acra fortress in Jerusalem, a temporary peace was negotiated. Fortunately for the Jews, Antiochus



²³ Cf. further D. J. Harrington, *The Maccabean Revolt: Anatomy of a Biblical Revolution* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1988).

IV died in 164, and his successor, Antiochus V, was prepared to treat the Jews more favorably. Rome, too, sent a letter promising friendship (2 Macc 11:34–38). Still, as opportunity arose, Judas and his brothers continued to fight Syrian troops until the Seleucid presence was entirely removed from Israel in 142. This ushered in roughly eighty years of independence, still heralded as a golden age of Jewish nationalism. After Rome ended this period in 63 BC, Jews would never again live in Israel as a free, entirely self-governing people until the reestablishment of the nation after World War II.

The Maccabean revolt, like the events that led up to it, intensified Jew-Gentile hatred to a degree not typically found in Old Testament times. This enmity, with its accompanying Jewish nationalism, is an important phenomenon for understanding New Testament events. Consider, for example, Paul's speech to the Jerusalem crowd in Acts 22:3–21. Paul had almost been beaten to death because of the false rumor that he had brought Greeks into the temple, and had been rescued from the Jewish mob by the Roman soldiers who arrested him (21:27–29). When he spoke to the crowd in Aramaic, they quieted down and heard his defense (21:40–22:2). They could patiently listen to his claims about Jesus of Nazareth and to the story of his dramatic conversion. What they could not tolerate was his account of the Lord's commission: "Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles" (22:21). With this "they raised their voices and shouted, 'Rid the earth of him! He's not fit to live!'" (v. 22).

The era of Jewish independence also reinstated long dormant hopes of a restored kingship. Increasingly, certain strands of Judaism couched these in messianic language. When the Romans later overran Israel, the author of the pseudepigraphal Psalms of Solomon expressed this hope by echoing words from the canonical Psalms:

Behold, O Lord, and raise up for them their king, the son of David,
At the appointed time which, O God, you did choose,
That he may reign over Israel, your servant.
And gird him with strength, that he may shatter unrighteous rulers,
And may cleanse Jerusalem from the Gentiles that trample her down in
destruction.
Wisely and righteously let him expel sinners from the inheritance,
And destroy the sinner's pride as a potter's vessel,
With a rod of iron may he break in pieces all their resources.
Let him destroy the lawless Gentiles by the word of his mouth.

(Ps. Sol. 17:21–24)²⁴

²⁴ The translation is taken from R. P. Martin, *New Testament Foundations*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 110–11, who also provides a brief commentary on the larger passage in which these verses are embedded (109–14). For more on the ethos producing this kind of literature, see W. Horbury, *Jewish Messianism and the Cult of Christianity* (London: SCM, 1998). For a chronologically broader overview, cf. G. S. Oegema, *The Anointed and His People: Messianic Expectations from Maccabees to Bar Kochba* (Sheffield: SAP, 1998).

By the first century AD, these hopes reached a fever pitch in certain circles and spawned a variety of revolutionary movements.

Judas Maccabeus died around 160 BC and was succeeded by his brothers Jonathan (160–143) and Simon (143–34). While the Syrians still controlled part of Israel, they appointed Jonathan high priest, even though everyone recognized that he was not the legitimate successor to the office. The move was generally accepted as a stopgap measure in light of the extraordinary circumstances. When Jonathan died and Simon succeeded him as military and political leader, ridding the nation of the final vestiges of Syrian presence, “the Jews and their priests decided that Simon should be their leader and high priest forever, until a trustworthy prophet should arise” (1 Macc 14:41). What eventuated instead was a new hereditary succession of “priest-kings” that became known as the *Hasmonean* dynasty (after the name of Mattathias’s great-grandfather).

After Simon died, Jewish rule finally passed to the next generation, to Simon’s son John Hyrcanus (134–104 BC). Little by little the ideals of the original Maccabees were lost sight of as Hyrcanus devoted his reign primarily to territorial expansion and forced conversions, most notably of the Idumeans, living south of Judea, from whom Herod the Great would later emerge.²⁵ Hyrcanus also set the stage for the increased antagonism between Jews and Samaritans that carried over into New Testament times (John 4:9) as he destroyed a temple the Samaritans had built in their territory on Mount Gerizim. This alternate site for worship reflects the same theological debate mentioned by the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4:20. The Samaritans were the descendants of the foreigners who settled in Israel after the Assyrian invasion in 722 BC and with whom the Jews had often unlawfully intermarried. In New Testament times, they considered themselves believers in the God of Israel but limited their Scriptures to the Pentateuch, which existed in a slightly different version in their own dialect. They looked for a Messiah, called a *Taheb* (a “restorer”), who was arguably somewhat more of a teacher and a little less of a warrior-king than in the expectations of the Psalms of Solomon.²⁶

The Hasidim, who had supported the Maccabean revolt on religious grounds, now reemerged to protest the corruption of the original ideals and the growing Hellenization, which even the Hasmoneans had begun to promote.²⁷ Probably it was this group from which the Pharisees emerged, calling the Jews back to faithful obedience to their Law. After an aborted one-year rule of Hyrcanus’s son Aristobulus (103 BC), a second son, Alexander Jannaeus, began a lengthy reign (103–76 BC), in which he virtually obliterated the Maccabean ideals. On one occasion he

²⁵ Hyrcanus eventually controlled more territory even than Solomon had. See J. Sievers, *The Hasmoneans and Their Supporters from Mattathias to the Death of John Hyrcanus* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1990), 141–46.

²⁶ For more on the Samaritans, see I. Hjelm, *The Samaritans and Early Judaism: A Literary Analysis* (Sheffield: SAP, 2000); and R. T. Anderson and T. Giles, *The Keepers: An Introduction to the History and Culture of the Samaritans* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2002).

²⁷ See further J. Geiger (“The Hasmoneans and Hellenistic Succession,” *JJS* 53 [2002]: 1–17), who stresses how natural this would have seemed to the key power brokers and applies it specifically to their dynastic rule.

had more than eight hundred of the Pharisees who protested his policies crucified. Pro- and anti-Hellenization positions were thus solidified, creating a polarization that remained unresolved in New Testament times.

Jannaeus was determined that his wife Alexandra should succeed him. She ruled from 76–67 BC, was much more supportive of Jewish law, and was well liked. After her death a power struggle ensued between her sons Hyrcanus II and Aristobulus II. The former was the older son who had been supported by his mother, but the latter was the stronger and more ambitious. Both appealed for assistance from Rome, by now the strongest political power in the area. Rome, indeed, intervened; its general Pompey invaded Jerusalem in 63 BC, profaned the temple by entering the Holy of Holies, and put an end to the century of Jewish independence.

The Roman Period (63 BC through the Entire New Testament Era)

From at least 280 BC onwards, Rome had slowly been growing by deliberate expansionist policies. By 148 BC, for example, Macedon had fallen to the Romans. A subsequent near-century of civil war kept Rome from conquering far more territory more quickly, yet by the time of Pompey's invasion, Rome was already knocking on Israel's door. Egypt fell in 30 BC, and the Roman empire continued to grow well into the second century AD, by which time it embraced the largest geographical expanse ever unified by one political administration in antiquity, including major sections of what today are Britain, France, Spain, and Germany, as well as the former Persian and Hellenistic empires.

When Pompey entered Jerusalem, Aristobulus II decided to resist but was defeated.²⁸ Pompey recognized that Hyrcanus II would likely prove more loyal to Rome and so installed him as the high priest. An Idumean by the name of Antipater, the son of a man with the same name whom Jannaeus had made governor over Judea, was given the local political leadership. In general, Rome established "client-kings" at the provincial or regional levels. Antipater ruled from 63–43 BC. The Roman emperor during these years was Julius Caesar. Because of Antipater's crucial help for imperial troops in 47 BC in Alexandria, Julius reduced Israel's taxes, gave her permission to rebuild Jerusalem's walls and fortify other cities, and supplied Judaism with unique freedoms of religion. This was the origin of Judaism as a *religio licita* (Lat. for "legal religion"), which later exempted it from the requirement of sacrificing to those emperors who came to believe themselves to be gods.

From 42–40 BC, another power struggle ensued, this time between Herod, Antipater's son, and Antigonus, son of Aristobulus II and rightful heir to the Hasmonean throne. From 40–37 Antigonus gained the upper hand, but by 37 BC Herod had finally triumphed. He ruled as client-king over Israel for the next thirty-three

²⁸ See further E. Regev, "How Did the Temple Mount Fall to Pompey?" *JJS* 48 (1997): 276–89. Regev particularly examines the contradictory approaches to fighting on the Sabbath taken by different Jewish leaders, which was just one part of their overall disarray at the time.

years. The high priesthood remained a separate institution; its occupants were Roman appointees. This explains, for example, why the Gospels depict hearings of Christ before both Annas and his son-in-law Caiaphas (John 18:13). Although in Jewish law the high priesthood was for life, political fortunes under Rome were less secure. Annas had been appointed in AD 6 and deposed in 15. Caiaphas followed a short time later after three brief appointees and held his office until 37.

Herod is the second personality surveyed in this chapter to whom historians have given the title “Great.” He ruled in Israel from 37–4 BC.²⁹ His reign was marked by massive building projects funded by heavy taxation in addition to his ample private means. The most astonishing of all was the temple in Jerusalem, rebuilt from ground up after the old remains were entirely razed. Although Herod’s temple was completely destroyed by Roman armies in AD 70, the western retaining wall around the temple precincts was allowed to stand. It became known as the “wailing wall,” where faithful Jews to this day go to pray. Other projects, the ruins of which are still visible, include fortresses at Herodion just south of Jerusalem and at Masada atop a huge natural outcrop of rock overlooking the Dead Sea, an amphitheater (now restored), and an aqueduct at Caesarea Maritima. Herod also rebuilt the capital city of Samaria and renamed it Sebaste (from the Gk. equivalent of “Augustus”).

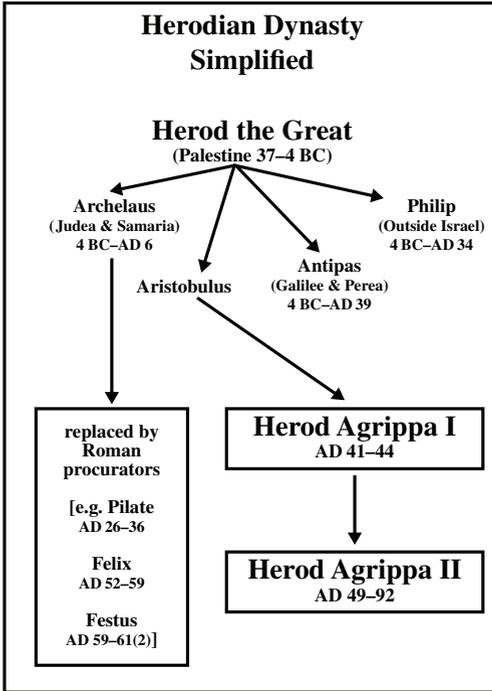
Before the start of Herod’s reign, Julius Caesar had been assassinated (44 BC). Originally allies, Octavian, Caesar’s nephew, and Mark Antony eventually vied for power. Octavian’s defeat of Antony at Actium in 31 BC led to the suicide of both Antony and his wife Cleopatra. Taking the title of Augustus, Octavian reigned as the new emperor until AD 14.³⁰ Herod had originally been a staunch supporter of Antony, but he quickly convinced Augustus that he could prove equally loyal to him. Most historians credit Herod’s success to his good relations with Rome. Indeed, he pursued an active policy of Hellenization and Romanization in Israel, but more subtly than some of his predecessors, all the while insisting that he was a genuine and obedient convert to Judaism. Though never well liked by the masses of Jews, he did gain a significant number of close followers who continued to support the dynasty of his descendants. They appear on two occasions in the Gospels and were known simply as Herodians (Mark 3:6; 12:13 par.).

Toward the end of his life, however, Herod became increasingly paranoid about potential coups and had several of his sons and his most beloved wife, Mariamne, executed to forestall what he feared were attempts to overthrow him. At one point, Augustus ironically remarked that he would rather be Herod’s pig (which a Jew would not kill) than his son (whom Herod would kill). Although recorded in Latin, the remark probably preserves a play on words in Greek because of the similarity between *hus* (pig) and *huios* (son).³¹ Thus, although there is no independent confirmation of the story in Matt 2:16 of Herod ordering the massacre of the

²⁹ For the explanation of the anomaly that Herod, ruler in Judea when Christ was born, died four years “before Christ,” see below pp. 222–23

³⁰ For a recent biography, see P. Southern, *Augustus* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

³¹ See Macrobius, *Saturnalia* 2.4.11.



young children of Bethlehem, the account is entirely in keeping with his character and actions at the end of his time in office.³²

After changing his will several times in his dying days, Herod finally bequeathed his kingdom to three of his surviving sons: Archelaus, Antipas, and Philip. When Herod died, Archelaus instigated several oppressive measures against the Judeans that led the Jews to send an embassy to Rome to appeal the disposition of the will. Antipas and Philip eventually appeared as well, with Augustus deciding to give Judea (including Idumea) and Samaria to Archelaus. Antipas received Galilee and Perea; and Philip, the remaining provinces to the north and east of the Sea of Galilee (cf. Luke 3:1).

Jesus' parable of a nobleman who went to a distant land to receive a kingdom and was opposed by an embassy of citizens (Luke 19:11–27) may reflect these events. Archelaus's cruel treatment of the Jews continued, however, and subsequent appeals to Rome led to his banishment in AD 6. Little wonder that Matt 2:22–23 describes Jesus' family avoiding Judea and returning to Galilee after Archelaus replaced his father as ethnarch in the south.

Antipas's rule in Galilee was far more benign and included the rebuilding of Sepphoris and the construction of a new capital city on the shores of the Sea of Galilee named Tiberias in honor of the emperor who succeeded Augustus.³³ Since Sepphoris experienced a construction boom in the early twenties, just five miles or so from Nazareth, scholars wonder whether Joseph and Jesus may have plied some of their trade there, but the Gospels never mention either city. Perhaps Jesus, at least during his ministry, deliberately avoided these bastions of Hellenization and Romanization.³⁴ Antipas retained his "tetrarchy" until AD 39, when he too finally

³² For details, see R. T. France, "Herod and the Children of Bethlehem," *NovT* 21 (1979): 98–120. On Herod more generally, see esp. P. Richardson, *Herod: King of the Jews and Friend of the Romans* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996).

³³ An important major work that ranges widely over the entire Herodian family is H. W. Hoehner, *Herod Antipas* (Cambridge: CUP, 1972). Focusing more predominantly on Antipas, cf. M. H. Jensen, *Herod Antipas in Galilee* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006).

³⁴ Cf. further R. A. Batey, *Jesus and the Forgotten City: New Light on Sepphoris and the Urban World of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991).

fell into Roman disfavor and was banished. Antipas is the Herod who appears at several points in Jesus' adult life on the pages of the Gospels (esp. Mark 6:14–29 pars.; Luke 13:31–33; 23:6–12).

After Archelaus's banishment from Judea, Rome began to appoint a series of procurators or prefects in the southern half of Israel—Roman governors sent to ensure a more direct link with and control by the empire. The most famous of these today, because of his appearance in Scripture, was Pontius Pilate (AD 26–36). Pilate succeeded in alienating the Jews more than all his predecessors. Josephus records three key incidents surrounding his governorship (*Ant.* 18.3.1–2; 18.4.1–2): installing military standards and shields in Jerusalem with imperial images that violated the second of the Ten Commandments; taking funds from the temple treasury to build an aqueduct; and putting down an uprising of Samaritans. The first incident ended peacefully after a nonviolent Jewish protest; the latter two, in mass bloodshed. While Luke 13:1–2 does not exactly match any of these incidents, it is in keeping with the spirit of Pilate that Josephus describes.

The picture of Pilate in the Gospels as in some ways more weak than cruel does not conflict with Josephus's portrait. If Christ's crucifixion is dated to AD 33, it would have occurred shortly after the demise in AD 31 of Sejanus, the praetorian prefect in Rome, whose previous actions unofficially branded him as anti-Semitic. Without imperial support, Pilate could not afford to be as repressive against the Jews as he once was. But even if the crucifixion took place in AD 30 (on the debate, see below, pp. 225–26). Pilate still would not have been in a position of great strength. Alienating the Jews too much could have led to deposition, as in the case of Archelaus. But Pilate does demonstrate strength in publicly acknowledging Jesus' innocence. At the same time, a Judean procurator had to take quite seriously any charge that he was “no friend of Caesar” (John 19:12). Being sent to govern the out-of-the-way and rebellious Judea was no great Roman honor, and one senses that such governors were regularly caught “between a rock and a hard place.”³⁵

After Antipas was banished from Galilee, all of Israel was temporarily reunited under Antipas's nephew, Herod Agrippa I (41–44). Agrippa, sympathetic to Judaism, was a friend and political appointee of the emperor Caligula (37–41) who had succeeded Tiberius (14–37). Herod Agrippa I is the Herod who appears throughout Acts 12, first martyring James the apostle, then imprisoning Peter, and finally being struck dead himself for his blasphemy. When Agrippa died, the emperor Claudius (41–54) returned Judea and Samaria to the hands of procurators. Acts mentions two of them in conjunction with the imprisonments of Paul: Felix (52–59) and Festus (59–61 or 62). Agrippa II, however, eventually succeeded his father as client-king in Galilee and ruled for nearly half a century (49–92), gradually regaining territory until he controlled about as much territory as Herod the Great originally held.³⁶

³⁵ Cf. H. Bond, *Pontius Pilate in History and Interpretation* (Cambridge: CUP, 1998).

³⁶ On all the Herods, see N. Kokkinos, *The Herodian Dynasty: Origins, Role in Society, and Eclipse* (Sheffield: SAP, 1998).

Until the Roman emperor Nero (54–68) instigated a short-lived but intense persecution of Christians in Italy in 64–68, the period of Roman rule over Israel and, indeed, over the rest of the empire was primarily a positive one for the spread of Christianity. Seven major factors may be listed: First, Greek continued as the *lingua franca* of the empire. A politically unified realm preserved a linguistically unified people. No attempt was made to impose Latin on the masses outside Italy although some would have been used in military and trade relations. When one compares the dozen or more major languages spoken today in the same territory that Rome once occupied, one understands the boon to communication of having a common language. Second, the *pax Romana* (Roman peace) gave the heart of the empire freedom from warfare over an expanse of time and space previously unparalleled in Middle Eastern history. True, Rome continued to fight skirmishes with Parthia to its northeast and with Germany to the north, but these battles did not directly affect the daily life of most people in the lands depicted in the New Testament.

Third, a direct outgrowth of the first two points was the development of the most advanced transportation and communication systems of the ancient world, perhaps never again matched until the time of Reformation Europe in the 1500–1600s. “It has been estimated that the Roman government’s mail service covered 75 km per day; messengers on horseback using relay stations, could cover as much as 100 km per day. Soldiers were expected to march 30 km daily.”³⁷

Fourth, a cosmopolitan spirit grew, particularly in the cities, which transcended national barriers. Old tribal distinctions and identities were breaking down, leaving people ripe for new religions or ideologies to fill the gaps. The gospel would meet many felt needs in this climate. Fifth but closely related was the elimination of many cross-cultural barriers to dialogue and the dissemination of new world-views because of the cultural and political unification that was increasing.

Sixth, as long as Christianity was viewed as just another Jewish sect, it too received protection as a *religio licita*. Throughout the events of Acts, all of which were completed by about 62 (before Nero’s persecution), Roman rulers consistently came to the rescue of Christians, particularly Paul. Only by the decade of the 60s was it clear to all that Christianity was significantly transcending its Jewish roots and becoming a major world religion, at which point it was no longer granted the legal status it previously enjoyed.

Finally, Rome implemented perhaps the most enlightened and advanced judicial processes of antiquity. It had its tyrants and despots to be sure, along with various breaches of conduct, but due process of law brought justice, at least for citizens, more consistently than in other ancient empires. Jesus, of course, was not a Roman citizen, but Paul was. One repeatedly reads of him receiving the legal benefits of his citizenship (esp. Acts 16:35–39; 22:23–29; 25:10–11).³⁸ Little

³⁷ Koester, *Introduction*, 314.

³⁸ Cf. further the important studies of H. W. Tajra, *The Trial of St. Paul* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1989); and B. Rapske, *The Book of Acts and Paul in Roman Custody* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Carlisle: Paternoster, 1995).

wonder that many Christian historians have seen not only a theological but a historical application of Gal 4:4: “When the fullness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son” (KJV).

Already this overview of the intertestamental period has gone beyond the time of the life of Christ and even the events of the Book of Acts. It is worthwhile to continue briefly sketching major developments of Israel under Roman rule—first, because the logical terminus of this period does not come until at least the early second century and, second, because the *writing* of the Gospels and of the rest of the New Testament was probably not complete until at least the end of the first century.

Following the time of Felix and Festus in Judea, two particularly repressive and ruthless procurators were appointed who brought Israel to the brink of revolt: Albinus (62–64) and Gessius Florus (64–66). Taxation had steadily increased although Galilee to the north remained relatively prosperous. But many farmers had lost their fields to absentee landlords who held vast tracts of property and, in turn, hired their employees for irregular work at minimal wage, much like migrant workers today. Increasing indebtedness created foreclosures and, in extreme cases, jail sentences in debtors’ prisons.

Despite Judaism’s protection as a *religio licita*, not all had proceeded smoothly between Jews and Romans. In 41, Caligula tried to erect a statue of himself in the temple in Jerusalem. The fierceness of the protests³⁹ would almost certainly have led to a horrible massacre had word not reached Israel that Caligula had suddenly died. Under Claudius, in the late 40s, the empire experienced a famine that seems to have been most severe in Judea (cf. Acts 11:27–30; 2 Cor 8:1–9:15). In 49, Claudius expelled all Jews from Rome (many returned after his death in 54) because of frequent “disturbances,” which the Roman historian Suetonius described as coming at the instigation of a man named Chrestus (*Claud.* 25.4). Most scholars believe that this is a garbled reference to *Christus* (Lat. for “Christ”) and that conflicts between Christian and non-Christian Jews had provoked the riot. Then in 64, after the great fire of Rome, the emperor Nero looked for a scapegoat on whom to blame the destruction, particularly in view of rumors that he had started it. What resulted was the first state-sponsored persecution of Christians (Jewish or Gentile), now viewed as distinct from the historic Jewish community per se. But, for the most part, it was limited to Rome and its environs on the Italian peninsula.⁴⁰

Meanwhile, tensions were building between Jews and Romans in Judea. In 61, the Greek residents of Caesarea erected a building partially walling in the local Jewish synagogue, and Nero replied to Jewish protests by revoking their status as legal equals to the Gentile inhabitants of the city. By 66 there was fighting in the streets. Gessius Florus ordered that the temple treasury be raided for political purposes. A combination of military, religious, and socioeconomic factors thus sparked the Jewish War with Rome, which lasted until AD 70. Nero’s general

³⁹ On which, see N. H. Taylor, “Popular Opposition to Caligula in Jewish Palestine,” *JSJ* 32 (2001): 54–70.

⁴⁰ For an assessment of Nero more generally, see E. Chamblin, *Nero* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

Vespasian probably would have squelched the rebellion even faster were it not for Nero's suicide in 68 and the uncertainty of imperial succession. Eventually in 69, Vespasian himself became emperor—after the very short-lived tenures of Galba, Vitellius, and Otho—and left Titus, his commander, to complete the invasion of Israel and the recapture of Jerusalem. Titus destroyed the temple, burned various parts of the city, and took numerous prisoners of war back to Rome. The year 70 marked a decisive turning point in Jewish and Christian history. Never again were the Jews a credible political or economic force in Israel (until today), and if anyone still confused Jews and Christians, Christian refusal to join the Jewish revolt clearly separated the two religions from that point onward. Sporadic fighting continued at Zealot outposts until 73 or 74 when Rome besieged Masada, constructing a huge earthen ramp so as to storm the rocky stronghold, only to discover that virtually all of the 960 Jews defending it—men, women, and children—had committed mass suicide rather than surrender to the Romans. Or at least that is the way Josephus tells the story as part of his *Jewish War*, a detailed account of the exploits of those years.⁴¹

Casualties in Jerusalem were enormous, and the numbers of those deported sizable. D. A. Carson claims that “the savagery, slaughter, disease and famine (mothers eating their own children) were monstrous,” and that “there have been greater numbers of deaths—six million in the Nazi death camps, mostly Jews, and an estimated twenty million under Stalin—but never so high a percentage of a great city's population so thoroughly and painfully exterminated and enslaved as during the Fall of Jerusalem.”⁴² This could partly explain Jesus' extravagant language in Matt 24:21: “For then there will be great distress, unequalled from the beginning of the world until now—and never to be equaled again” (but see also below, p. 404). The temple tax was now to be paid directly to Rome, and Roman troops were headquartered in Jerusalem.

While the war was still raging, one nonparticipating rabbi, Johanan ben Zakkai, requested and received permission to found a rabbinical school at the coastal town of Jamnia (Javneh). Following the war, Judaism as a religion largely survived thanks to the study and leadership provided from this academy. Jamnia is probably best known for its late first-century discussions about the biblical (i.e., Old Testament) canon and for its increasing dissociation from Christians. By the 80s or 90s, synagogue liturgies in various parts of the empire had added a nineteenth benediction, inserted as twelfth in the sequence, to those regularly recited. But this “blessing” was a euphemism for a curse—a curse on all heretics, with *Christian Jews* prominently included.⁴³ The Sanhedrin(s) (see below, p. 48) were

⁴¹ For a thorough analysis of the war, see A. Berlin and J. A. Overman, ed., *The First Jewish Revolt: Archaeology, History, and Ideology* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

⁴² D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” in *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. F. E. Gaebelin, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 501.

⁴³ The Hebrew expression was the *birkath ha-minim* (“a blessing [i.e., curse] on the heretics). Translated it read, “Let the Nazarenes and the heretics perish as in a moment, let them be blotted out of the book of the living and let them not be written with the righteous.” Modern scholarship has often seen this as one decisive rejection by Judaism of Christianity by the end of the first century, but

replaced by the *beth din* (“house of judgment”) as the new court of law for Jewish religious affairs. *Rabbinic* Judaism as a movement had begun, and the seeds were planted for a greater uniformity of belief and practice that did not exist in the days of the highly diverse sects of the pre-70 era or during the birth of Christianity.

A final Jewish revolt in Palestine took place in 132–35 under a man named Simeon, who was given the title *bar Kokhba* (“son of a star”) and proclaimed the Messiah by Rabbi Akiba. This uprising was also decisively squelched.⁴⁴ Historians disagree over whether two edicts were the cause or the result of this rebellion: a ban on circumcision and plans to make Jerusalem a major center of pagan worship named *Aeolia Capitolina*. Economic conditions had also again deteriorated under the emperor Hadrian (117–38). At any rate, Jews were evicted from Jerusalem and forbidden to enter on pain of death, except for one day a year when they could lament their fate at the Wailing Wall. From this point on, Jewish Christianity also largely disappeared from view, although the factors behind its demise are complex and beyond the scope of this survey.

For Further Study

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more recent studies increasingly agree that these developments took place more sporadically. For the latest in the ongoing discussion, see P. L. Mayo, “The Role of the *Birkath Haminim* in Early Jewish-Christian Relations: A Re-examination of the Evidence,” *BBR* 16 (2006): 325–44.

⁴⁴ Cf. further W. Eck, “The Bar Kokhba Revolt: The Roman Point of View,” *JRS* 89 (1999): 76–89.

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Questions for Review

1. What are the historical sources we have for reconstructing the intertestamental period? How reliable are they?
2. Why is this period of time important for understanding the New Testament? Consider both overall trends as well as developments unique to a particular portion of this history.
3. What are the major sections of time into which this period may be broken? What key dates and events occurred to mark the beginning and end of each section?
4. Who are the key historical figures who influenced the course of events for Israel? Consider both foreign rulers and internal, Jewish figures. How was each significant? Try to distinguish the most significant from the more peripheral individuals.
5. Be sure you can define any foreign or technical terms (particularly those in italics) in this chapter (and throughout the book).