

Week #:	235	Series:	The Gospels	Title:	The Intertestamental Period
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## The Intertestamental Period:

The **intertestamental period** is the period of time between the events of the Old Testament and the New Testament. There's a roughly 400-year gap between the final events recorded in the Old Testament in the book of Malachi (c. 420 BC) and the coming of Jesus in the New Testament Gospels in the early 1st century AD. It is roughly contiguous with the Second Temple period (516 BC-70 AD) and encompasses the age of Hellenistic Judaism.

It is known by some as the "*400 Silent Years*" because it was a span where no new prophets were raised, no new prophetic writings were given, and there was no direct revelation from God to the Jewish people. An understanding of the events of the intertestamental period provides historical and literary context for the New Testament.

There are a few significant events which took place during this time:

- Beginnings of the Jewish diaspora and Hellenistic Judaism
- Establishment of the first synagogues
- Change in common language from Biblical Hebrew to Aramaic and Hellenistic Greek
- The events of the Maccabean Revolt, as documented in the Books of the Maccabees
- Reign of the Hasmonean and Herodian dynasties, followed by Roman rule
- Production of the Greek Septuagint, the first translation of the Hebrew scriptures into another language
- Writing of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the rediscovery of which became central to modern and contemporary Biblical criticism
- Writing of the Deuterocanonical books (or the Biblical apocrypha) and pseudepigrapha

The period between Malachi and Matthew is full of history that, if properly understood, can bring some important context to the coming of Jesus.

For followers of Jesus, this four-century interval may raise some questions, whether out of idle curiosity or due to deeper questions about their faith. Why did God stop speaking through the prophets? What was happening among the people of Israel and in the surrounding lands? How to bridge the gap between the situation at the end of the Old Testament and the conditions at the start of the New Testament?

Answers to those questions go beyond satisfying historical or theological curiosity. They create a framework for better understanding the political, social, and religious context into which Jesus was born, as well as a deeper appreciation for his Messianic mission.

## The Close of the Old Testament:

The history of the Old Testament closes with the return of the Israelites from Babylonian exile to their own land, thanks to the edict of the Persian king Cyrus, after he had conquered Babylon. Recorded primarily in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, this return took place in a series of waves over a period of about a century, from around 540 BC to 420 BC. The first wave, under Zerubbabel and Joshua the priest, rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem, a small and pale replacement of Solomon's grand temple that had been destroyed by the Babylonians. The prophets Haggai and Zechariah encouraged the work with promises of a future glory to be revealed by God.

Decades later, under Ezra and Nehemiah, the wall of the city was rebuilt, teaching of the Law of Moses re-established, and civil authority reorganized. Malachi wrote the final prophetic words from God during this time, condemning the sins of the priests and people, and looking ahead to the Messiah who would bring judgment and salvation. Throughout this period, Israel was a minor province of the Persian Empire, a far cry from its glory years as a powerful kingdom under David and Solomon.

### **World Events in the Mediterranean and Beyond:**

Israel remained under Persian rule for another century, until about 331 BC, when the Persian Empire was conquered by the Macedonian warrior king Alexander the Great. A brilliant military leader, Alexander built an empire by conquest that stretched from Greece down through Syria and Palestine into Egypt, and across southern and central Asia as far as the frontiers of India. Alexander introduced Hellenistic Greek culture, philosophy, religion and language throughout this vast territory – one of the largest land empires in history – and built the city of Alexandria in Egypt as a center for learning.

After Alexander's untimely death at age 33, his massive empire was divided by his generals into a handful of successor states. The land of Israel, now called Palestine or Judea, became a buffer region ruled by two of these Hellenistic successors, first the Ptolemies of Egypt and then the Seleucids of Syria. Jews of the Diaspora scattered across the ancient world increasingly adopted Greek language and culture, but so did Jews in Palestine. Under the Seleucid rulers, this process of Hellenization reached a tipping point when Antiochus IV Epiphanes desecrated the temple in Jerusalem, dedicated it to the Greek god Zeus and slaughtered a pig on the altar.

Even for the Hellenized Jews this was a step too far. A priest name Mattathias and his sons Judas, Jonathan, and Simon, known collectively as the Maccabees (or hammers), began a revolt against the Seleucids in 168 BC, finally achieving a small but independent Judean state in 142 BC.

When the Maccabees overthrew the Seleucids and took back control of the Temple in Jerusalem, they set about sanctifying the Temple again. They found only enough of the special oil to keep the flames of the menorah lit for only one day, however it would take a week more to make the oil in the fashion in which it was required in the scriptures. The miracle of the one day of oil lasting eight days is now celebrated in what we call *Hanukkah*, and in the scripture is referred to as the *Festival of Lights* or the *Festival of Dedication* (which Jesus was said to have been celebrating in John 10:22).

The Maccabee's descendants formed the Hasmonean Dynasty (named after a Maccabean ancestor) and ruled as de facto kings and priests for about 80 years. The last significant Hasmonean ruler was a queen, Salome Alexandra, under whom Judea reached its largest extent, incorporating Samaria, Galilee, and regions east of the Jordan River and the Dead Sea.

For a brief historical moment, it may have seemed that the Jews were on the verge of a promised Messianic Kingdom and a return to former glory. However, the Hasmoneans were no messiahs, and their kingdom was small and unstable, driven by political and religious divisions. Judea's independence ended in 63 BC when it was conquered by the Roman general Pompey, bringing it under the authority of Rome. In 37 BC the Romans installed Herod the Great as a client king of Judea. Herod was Idumean (or Edomite) and a nominal convert to Judaism who sought favor with the Jews by renovating and expanding their temple, but his primary loyalty was to his Roman masters. To consolidate his position among the Jews, he married a Hasmonean princess, Mariamne I. Once he was established, he had her and two of his sons killed, prompting the emperor Augustus to quip that it was better to be Herod's pig than his son. It was a

characterization in keeping with the Gospel of Matthew's portrayal of Herod in its nativity account of Jesus.

### **Second Temple Judaism:**

All these historical developments became factors that shaped Judaism after the exile and during the intertestamental period. Known as Second Temple Judaism, this era of Jewish history extended from Cyrus' edict to rebuild the temple in 539 BC to the destruction of the temple by the Romans in AD 70.

During this period, Greek and Aramaic replaced Hebrew as the common spoken languages of the Jews, the former thanks to Alexander the Great and the latter due in part to the Israelites' long stay in Babylon. In addition, Greek culture, ideas and beliefs were adopted to varying degrees by different circles within Jewish society.

Their time in foreign captivity had cured the Jewish people of idol worship, one of the sins for which God had sent them into exile. They rededicated themselves to obeying the Law and being set apart to God, but interpreted these commitments in a variety of ways, all of them mingling faith with politics. While avoiding idolatry, they acclaimed their leaders as kings or priests or both, even though none of these leaders were descended from the royal line of David or the priestly line of Aaron.

After the Babylonian exile, most Jews remained scattered across the lands of the Mediterranean and the Near East. Even for the returning remnant, political instability often made temple worship difficult. This led to the creation of the *synagogue* as the chief institution for community religious life, both in Palestine and across the Diaspora. True to its Hellenistic origin, the name "synagogue" comes from the Greek *synagein*, "to bring together" and means "a place of assembly." Unlike the centralized temple worship once or twice a year, synagogues provided local weekly gatherings for non-sacrificial worship, prayer, and the reading and teaching of Scripture. They also made it possible for God-fearing Gentiles to pursue their interest in Judaism and became the precursors of Christian church worship.

As with the synagogue, the Sanhedrin took its name from the Hellenistic Greek *synedrion*, "sitting together" and thus "assembly" or "council." It was instituted during the reigns of Alexander Jannaeus and Salome Alexandra as a Hasmonean court made up of priests and elders to administrate political, legislative and judicial matters. By Roman times, according to the Jewish historian Josephus, the Sanhedrin's role was to oversee Jewish cultural and religious affairs, as the Romans didn't care about such things unless sedition was involved.

The scribes, elders and rabbis arose as the leading scholars of the day who would study, interpret, and apply the principles of the Jewish Scriptures. Largely due to their work during the intertestamental period, various scriptural doctrines were developed and brought into sharper focus. These included the nature of angels and demons, the pre-cosmic fall of Satan, resurrection, and the afterlife beyond the brief hints in the Prophets and the Psalms, and growing expectation of a coming Davidic Messiah.

## Five politico-religious factions emerged within Jewish culture during this time:

- **The Sadducees**
- **The Pharisees**
- **The Essenes**
- **The Herodians**
- **The Zealots**

**The Sadducees**, mostly wealthy and powerful social elites, rejected the oral traditions of the Pharisees and obeyed only the written law and only as far as it didn't interfere with their cultural position and Hellenistic lifestyle. They obeyed the law and saw no reason for change. If it was not in the five first books of the Torah written by Moses, then it wasn't for them to follow. They wanted to maintain the status quo and believed completely in *free will*. They did not want to make waves with the Romans. From their inception, they were predominantly found in the area of Galilee.

The Sadducee would say: *"God created us, gave us the law, and left. There is no afterlife."*

It is this particular believe that has led us to distinguish them against the Pharisees with the joke: "The *Sadducees* didn't believe in an afterlife and thus eternity in Heaven with God, and so they were *sad, you see.*"

**The Pharisees** believed in the written and oral law. The Pharisees were radically devoted to obeying the Law of Moses, to the point of adding their own legalistic traditions to it, which they came to view as equal in authority with the Scriptures. They developed rules to help keep the law. They put value in the rules. They probably started out to protect their beliefs, then they twisted it in their human nature to make God happy, when in reality the rules kept them from God's perfect will.

They believed in the afterlife and in one true God. At the time of their inception, they were predominantly in Jerusalem. They consisted of the more middle class people than the Sadducees upper class society.

The Pharisee would say: *"Nothing is preordained, but everything is pre-known."*

**The Essenes** were an isolationist sect that rejected both Jewish and Hellenistic society. They lived in strict isolationism in desert communities on the NE band of the Dead Sea, such as the one at Qumran where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found. Archaeologists have found a large amount of pottery that indicates that they ate communally. They held to strict Kosher dietary requirements. They also believed that all sacrifice must be made in the Temple, and since it had been destroyed, they did not offer sacrifices. Also, in their excavating, archaeologists have found tables where they would read the scrolls of the Scriptures. It is believed that the scrolls found in the caves were possibly made there. Their city was destroyed twice – once by earthquake, and the second time it was burned by the enemy. Within a time span of only two years they disappeared from existence.

It may be that some Essenes—the same group that deposited the Dead Sea Scrolls in the caves around Qumran—joined the Jewish rebels atop Masada, a Jewish fortress where 967 Jewish men, women, and children reportedly chose to take their own lives rather than suffer enslavement or death at the hands of the Roman army.

The Essene would say: *"Everything is preordained."*

**The Herodians** were a sect of Hellenistic Jews, meaning they were Jews in name alone, loyal to the Roman government and the puppet rulers it installed. They were mentioned in the New Testament on two occasions: first in Galilee, and later in Jerusalem. Both mentions assign that they were hostile toward Jesus.

Like the Pharisees, the Herodians wanted political independence for the Jewish people. Unlike the Pharisees, who sought to restore the kingdom of David, the Herodians wished to restore a member of the Herodian dynasty to the throne in Judea.

Some believe the Herodians were actually Essenes who were treated by Herod with great care, and thus had begun to be called *"Herod's pets,"* which led to the name *"Herodians."* This is not well established though, and is difficult to say for certain if they were actually Essenes or if they were a completely different group altogether. The major difference we can easily see is that the Essenes were an isolationist sect and very devout to their beliefs, whereas the Herodians were Hellenistic in their views. It is unclear from historical writings whether they were the Essenes or not.

**The Zealots** were a political movement in 1st-century Second Temple Judaism which sought to incite the people of Judea Province to rebel against the Roman Empire and expel it from the Holy Land by force of arms. They were revolutionaries dedicated to overthrowing the Roman government by any means necessary. Most notably, they arose during the First Jewish–Roman War (66-70 A.D). *Zealotry* was the term used by Josephus for a *"fourth sect"* or *"fourth Jewish philosophy"* during this period. Josephus states that there were three main Jewish sects at this time, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the Essenes. The Zealots were a "fourth sect", founded by Judas of Galilee (also called Judas of Gamala) in the year 6 A.D. against the Census of Quirinius, shortly after the Roman Empire declared what had most recently been the tetrarchy of Herod Archelaus to be a Roman province. According to Josephus, they "agree in all other things with the Pharisaic notions; but they have an inviolable attachment to liberty, and say that God is to be their only Ruler and Lord."

The term *zealot*, the common translation of the Hebrew *kanai*, means one who is zealous on behalf of God. The term derives from the Greek *zelotes*, which means *"emulator, zealous admirer or follower."*

*Simon the Zealot* was listed among the apostles selected by Jesus in the Gospel of Luke and in the Acts of the Apostles. To distinguish him from Simon Peter, he is given a surname in all three of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) where he is mentioned. Simon is called *"Zelotes"* in Luke and Acts (Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13). For this reason, it is generally assumed that Simon was a former member of the political party the Zealots.

### **Developments in the Canon of Scripture:**

This rise in scholarly activity together with centuries of prophetic silence led to the realization that the canon of Jewish Scripture had been closed. A consensus emerged during the intertestamental period about which books bore the marks of divine inspiration, sorted by Jewish scholars into three groups: The Law, the Prophets, and the Writings (or the Psalms, the most prominent book in the third group). Although organized differently, these are the same books that make up the Christian Old Testament.

There was a problem, however: Greek and Aramaic had become the shared languages of the Jews, and most of them could no longer read or understand Hebrew. Beginning around 275 BC Hellenistic Jewish

scholars based primarily in Alexandria translated the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek. Known as the **Septuagint**, referring to the tradition of 70 scholars having translated it, this became the standard version used by Hellenistic Jews and quoted by New Testament authors when they quoted Old Testament Scripture. Along with Aramaic translations known as *targums*, the Septuagint was the version read in synagogues, especially among Jewish communities in the Diaspora.

The era also produced a large body of religious, nationalistic and historical writings, grouped either in the Apocrypha or the Pseudepigrapha (meaning titles with false authorship). Some of these writings, notably 1 and 2 Maccabees, are valuable primary sources on the history of the intertestamental period. Others, however, contain strange and unorthodox interpretations of Judaism and none of them were accepted as belonging among the inspired body of the Jewish canon.

Perhaps the most fascinating of this intertestamental literature are the Dead Sea Scrolls, discovered between 1947 and 1956 in the caves of Qumran. Produced by the Essene community between about 400 BC and AD 100, the Scrolls include biblical commentaries, liturgical works, apocalyptic literature and rules for community life. They also contain Hebrew manuscripts of every book in the Old Testament except for Esther. Some are mere fragments, others nearly complete like the Great Scroll of Isaiah, all of them a thousand years older than any previously known manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible. Their ongoing value to the historical and textual study of the Old Testament cannot be overstated.

### **The Opening of the New Testament:**

After four centuries of prophetic silence, God sent his angel Gabriel to announce the births of John the Baptist and of Jesus. These annunciations bridged the 400-year gap from the prophecies of Malachi, which had predicted the coming Messiah and his forerunner who would prepare the way before him.

God hasn't revealed why he stopped speaking to the nation of Israel after returning them to their own land, but it's evident He was still at work through the historical, cultural and philosophical developments of the intertestamental period, preparing the way for the advent of his Son Jesus. The political and religious climate had raised messianic expectation to a fever pitch, and the centuries of silence made the sense of anticipation almost palpable.

When Jesus arrived, the institutions of Second Temple Judaism and Hellenistic Jewish culture provided the backdrop and springboard for his ministry. Some of these institutions he challenged and some of them he embraced and built upon. The intermingling of Jewish and Gentile culture pointed to the universal nature of the salvation Jesus would bring. Among his chosen twelve was a tax collector who served the Roman government, a Zealot who sought to overthrow it, and some rural fishermen who got embarrassed when he publicly challenged the Pharisees.

Thanks to Alexander the Great's Hellenizing enterprise, Jews and Greeks had scripture they could all read and understand, and a common language in which they could share and receive the Gospel message. Thanks to the Roman genius for construction and administration, the Early Church had the roads, transportation, and infrastructure it needed to travel anywhere in the Empire and make disciples among all nations.

The intertestamental period demonstrates that the distinction between so-called sacred and secular history is false. All of it is God's history, under his sovereign control, through which he glorifies his name and his Son and builds his ultimate Kingdom.