

The Intertestamental History

The intertestamental period is the time period between the recorded historical narrative of the First and Second Testaments. This was roughly a 400-year time period between the ministry of Malachi (420 BC) and ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus Christ (30s AD). This period of time continued Israel's subjugation under the rule of the pagan nations. Understanding this time period is crucial for understanding the Jewish culture in which Jesus ministered compared to the culture of Israel at the end of the First Testament.

The Persian Empire

In 559 BC Cyrus II (559–530 BC) took the throne of the Persian kingdom, which was under the control of the Median Empire. In 550 BC Cyrus II rebelled against and conquered the Median Empire. Over the next ten years, Cyrus II began to conquer Asia Minor, including the Lydian and Babylonian empires. In 539 BC he invaded and captured Babylon, bringing an end to the Babylonian Empire. By this time, he had built the largest empire the world had ever seen. At the end of Cyrus's rule, the Persian Empire stretched from Asia Minor in the west to the Indus River in the east. His successors would continue to enlarge the empire, making it more powerful.



Cyrus II allowed the kingdoms of his empire to govern themselves and also granted freedom of religion and abolished slavery. In 539 BC Cyrus II issued a decree allowing all the people of his empire to return to their homelands from which they had been deported under the Assyrian and Babylonian empires. He also allowed them to take the images of their gods and sacred relics back with them and to freely worship their own gods. He had hoped to earn the favor of these gods and hoped they would bless his sprawling empire.

For almost seventy years the people of the tribe of Judah had lived in exile under the rule of the Babylonian Empire. Under the edict of Cyrus II, the Jewish people returned back to Israel in three different waves of migrations. The first return was under the leadership of Sheshbazzar in 538 BC. Eventually they finished building the temple under the governorship of Zerubbabel in

515 BC. The second return was 81 years later, in 458 BC, under the leadership of Ezra. The third return was under the leadership of Nehemiah in 445 BC.

Pre-exile Israel and Judah were large kingdoms led by kings and prophets. But now the Jews were a small group of cities in the region of Judah under the leadership of governors and a small group of priests. The post-exilic prophets were few and did not have the same political authority they previously had. In addition, the glory of Yahweh had not returned as Ezekiel had prophesied (Ezek. 40–48), showing that though the physical exile had come to an end, their spiritual exile still continued. Though the Jews largely did not worship idols, their lack of devotion to Yahweh and their continued social injustice still existed among the people. Their hearts were still hard and in need of redemption.

The post-exilic prophets taught that the exile would not come to an end until the Jews pursued Yahweh in faithfulness. Yahweh slowly dissolved the office of prophet, making Malachi (432–431 BC) the last prophet. This began what is called the 400 silent years, when Yahweh no longer spoke to His people through the prophets. It would not be until John the Baptist that this silence would be broken. The priests who were concerned with ritual orders sought out a different kind of “wise men” from the prophets. The law was now in the hands and interpretation of educated men known as scribes.

The Greek Empire

In 513 BC the Persian king Darius I (522–486 BC) crossed the Hellespont Strait into Europe and invaded the divided city-states of Thrace, Macedonia, and Greece, subordinating them under its rule. The Greek city-states would rebel against Persia and war among themselves for the next two centuries.

King Philip II (359–336 BC) of Macedon, throughout his reign, united the Greek city-states into one nation. He believed that only as a united Greek nation could they throw off the rule of the Persian Empire. After his death, his son, Alexander III (336–323 BC), took up the fight against the encroaching Persian Empire. In 334 BC Alexander III crossed the Hellespont Strait into Asia Minor and began his conquest that would eventually take him all the way to India before his death. Battle after battle, he swiftly conquered Asia Minor and moved into Syria, causing the Persian king Darius III (336–330 BC) to flee back to Mesopotamia.

After a long siege, Alexander III conquered the great city of Tyre in 332. After this all the cities of the Levant (the land between Mesopotamia and Egypt), including Israel, capitulated. The only resistance was met at Gaza. After Gaza the Egyptians received him as a liberator from the Persian Empire. In Egypt Alexander III was crowned Pharaoh and began the construction of the city of Alexandria.

At the end of 332 BC, Alexander III moved north to Mesopotamia, conquering Babylon and Susa, the capital of the Persian Empire. Darius III continued to flee eastward until he was assassinated by his satrap Bessus. In 331 BC Alexander III defeated Bessus and so brought an end to the Persian Empire.

Alexander III began to conquer region after region as he made his way to India. In 326 BC he crossed the Indus River, continuing his unstoppable conquest. On the way to the Ganges River the men began to revolt. They were exhausted from years of conquest and feared the increasing size of the Indian armies and their elephants and wanted to return home to see their wives and children. Alexander III agreed and began to return home. In 323 BC, while in Babylon, Alexander III died. It is disputed among scholars whether it was from a fever or poison.



With no clear heir, Alexander III's many generals began to war over who would take control of the empire. After a few battles and assassinations, five major generals, known as the Diadochi ("successors"), divided the empire among themselves. Ptolemy I took Egypt and Syria (including Judah), Seleucus I took Mesopotamia and Asia, Antigonus I took Asia Minor, Lysimachus took Thrace, and Cassander took Macedonia. They then entered into a series of wars with each other known as the Diadochi Wars (322–275 BC). Antigonus I began expanding his empire eastward towards Asia, threatening Seleucus I's territory. The other four generals united together and eventually defeated Antigonus I in the Battle of Ipsus (301 BC), and Cassander took control of Asia Minor, which had belonged to Antigonus I. By 275 BC, the two most powerful empires were the Ptolemies and the Seleucids, known in Daniel 11–12 as the kings of the south and the king of the north. All the kings of the Ptolemies were called Ptolemy, and all the kings of the Seleucids were called Seleucus or Antiochus.

These Greek rulers brought the Hellenization of the eastern world. The philosophy of Hellenism asserts that the Greek worldview and culture are superior to all others, and thus all others should become Greek in their worldview and culture. Man's ability to reason and accomplish anything he puts his mind to is the core of the Greek culture. The Greek philosopher Protagoras stated that "man is the measure of all things." The Greeks emphasized reason, individualism, competition, and art for the sake of entertainment. They developed the theater, organized sports for the sake of competition, education based on the instruction of experts in several subjects rather than a lifelong mentorship under one teacher, and art that emphasized the accomplishments of the man and the human body. Many Jews opposed Hellenism because of its disregard for community, its self-glorification of humans, and the paganism and nudity that were often associated with such institutions.

Under the Persians and the Ptolemies, Judah enjoyed a considerable amount of autonomy—as long as they paid their taxes to the local imperial governor. By this time Judah had become a Temple-state, in which the priesthood was the political governing body of Judah. The high priest was selected from the family of Zadok since the time of Solomon’s temple (960 BC).

After 250 BC the Seleucids gradually lost control of lands east of the Euphrates and began to focus their attention more on the region of Syria and Asia Minor. Antiochus III (222–187 BC) began to expand the Seleucid Empire west into Asia Minor and south into Syria. In 198 BC he seized control over the Levant, which included Judah. It was during this time that Rome was seizing control of Greek city-states and Antiochus III unsuccessfully tried to defeat them. As a result, he incurred a sizable war debt to Rome. Because of this, his successors would put a heavy tax burden on Judah in order to pay this debt.

The Jewish Hasmonaeans

Antiochus III was succeeded by his son Seleucus IV and then his other son Antiochus IV (175–163 BC), the little horn of Dan. 7:8; 8:9-12, 23-25, who also called himself Epiphanes (“god manifest”). Having to pay Rome a heavy tax, Antiochus IV of the Seleucids squeezed his regions in order to provide the money for the Roman tax.



Onias III, a descendant of Zadok, was the current high priest and opposed the Hellenization of Judah and Seleucid rule. In 175 BC, Jason, Onias III’s brother, gave Antiochus IV a large bribe and promised him he would support Hellenization. Antiochus IV agreed and deposed Onias III. Then later in 172 BC, Menelaus, who was not of the high priestly family, bribed Antiochus IV to make him high priest. Onias III discovered that Menelaus had stolen gold items from the temple. Onias III made a public protest about this, and Menelaus killed him in 171 BC.

In 169 BC Antiochus IV decided to march his superior army toward Egypt in order to take it for himself. While Ptolemy VI was at battle, his courtiers declared his younger brother Ptolemy VII to be king. Antiochus IV pretended to make a treaty with Ptolemy VI to put him back on the throne. Ptolemy VII was set up as king in Memphis but in actuality became the puppet of Antiochus IV. But Antiochus IV’s control over Ptolemy VI and Egypt was lost when Cleopatra

II got her brothers Ptolemy VI and Ptolemy VII to reconcile and become co-regents. When Antiochus IV returned to Israel, he killed a lot of Jews and robbed the temple. His motives for doing this are not clear.

Antiochus IV decided to attack Egypt again. But when he arrived with his army, he was met in Alexandria by the Roman consul, Gaius Popillius Laenas. Gaius Popillius Laenas ordered him to leave, but Antiochus IV tried to stall. So Gaius Popillius Laenas drew a circle around Antiochus IV and told him not to step out of the circle until he had made a decision. Humiliated by this and knowing he could not defeat Rome, he returned home.

Jason, the ousted priest, heard that Antiochus IV had been killed in Egypt. This led Jason to attack Jerusalem with a thousand men, and Menelaus took refuge in a citadel. Though Jason killed many supporters of Antiochus IV, he failed to take the city and eventually fled to Ammon. When Antiochus IV heard of the revolt, he sent his army to crush it, not realizing it was already over. His general Apollonius pretended to come in peace but attacked the city on a sabbath, slaughtering thousands of people. The city walls were torn down, and a citadel was built. Many pro-Seleucid Jews fought against their own people and served in the citadel.

Antiochus IV forbade all Jewish practices and festivals on pain of death. He stopped the daily offerings in the temple, banned circumcision, and burned copies of the Torah. Altars to his gods were set up throughout the land, and pigs (an unclean animal) were sacrificed on them. On December 16, 168 BC, he set up an idol to Zeus, also known as the Syrian god Ba'al Shammen ("the lord of heaven"), in the temple and made sacrifices to Zeus on the altar in the temple ("the abomination that causes desolation" of Dan. 11:31). Many Jews compromised their beliefs and joined the pagan practices. But there were also many Jews who resisted this Hellenization and these pagan practices.

In 167 BC representatives of the Seleucid government came to a Judean village of Modein to persuade the priest Mattathias of the Hasmonean family to sacrifice to pagan gods. Not only did he refuse, but he also slaughtered a Jew who stepped forward to comply, and then he slaughtered the governmental officials. With his five sons he fled for the hills and called for a revolt.

After Mattathias' death Judas his eldest son, nicknamed 'Maccabee' (the 'hammer'), took leadership of the revolt. He was known for his guerrilla tactics, which proved successful against Antiochus IV's much larger armies. Having tasted freedom, the Hasmonaeans decided to struggle for total religious and political independence known as the Maccabean Revolt. Having suffered several defeats in 166-165 BC, Antiochus IV withdrew his troops and Judas took back the city and restored the temple on Dec. 14, 164 BC (also known as *Hanukkah*, I Macc. 4:40). Antiochus IV died insane in Persia in 163 BC.

Judas continued to fight the Seleucids and took control of Galilee and Gilead in the north. The small city-state of Judah was being expanded to become the nation of Israel once again. After his death in battle, the youngest brother, Jonathan, succeeded him as leader of the rebel army, and in 157 BC the Seleucids made peace with him. Later in 152 BC he was named high priest in Jerusalem as well as administrator of Judea. Taking the titles of both political governor (akin to a king) and high priest was a violation of the Mosaic Law. But the prophets also looked forward to the day that a messiah ("anointed one" of Yahweh) would come bearing both titles, defeat the enemies of Israel, and establish the New Jerusalem. Having defeated the Seleucids and cleansed the temple, he probably believed he was functioning as the messiah and took both titles to reflect this. He was eventually captured by the Seleucids, imprisoned, and executed in 143 BC.



Simon, the second son of Mattathias and the last of the brothers, succeeded Jonathan and negotiated Judea's total political independence in 142 BC. Overjoyed by this the Jewish people named Simon high priest and prince, and it was decided that the priesthood would stay in his family forever until there should arise a faithful prophet (I Macc. 14:41) even though he was not in the line of Zadok.

Simon's son John Hyrcanus I (134–104 BC) removed all Seleucid influence and expanded his realm to include Idumea (Edom) in the south, Samaria, and parts of Galilee in the north. It is clear at this point that the Hasmoneans were no longer concerned with purification of Israel or the establishment of Yahweh's New Jerusalem but rather with the building of their own kingdom. From this point on, the Hasmoneans' leaders demonstrated deplorable character and imitated the Greek rulers their predecessors had fought so hard to remove from Israel. The Hasmoneans had not returned Judea to orthodoxy but had increased Hellenization.

It was at this time that Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes show up in the historical record. The Pharisees seemed to have started out as an influential group of scribes called the Hasidim ("the pious ones"), who were passionately devoted to the Torah and strongly opposed the Hellenization of Judah. They stood against Hellenization under the Ptolemies and Seleucids with little effect. With the rise of the Maccabean Revolt, they stood firm with the Hasmoneans and fought along their side. But when Jonathan took the titles of prince and high priest, they opposed him for this violation of the Torah. However, they acquiesced with Simon when he gained Israel's independence. When John Hyrcanus I began to act as a power-hungry despot, they broke their ties with the Hasmonean ruling class and opposed their corruption. It is at this point that they are called Pharisees in the historical record; the meaning of the name may communicate the idea of "separatism." They adhered strictly to the law in the Torah and built up a body of interpretation of the Torah known as the Mishna and the Talmud. They believed their salvation was found in the fact that they were Jewish and that Yahweh had given them the Torah. Their obedience to the Law, therefore, would usher in the coming Messiah, who would establish the New Jerusalem. Their teaching of the Torah connected them to the Jewish people, who looked to them as leaders in the faith.

The origin of the Sadducees is more obscure than those of the Pharisees, but they first appear as the party supporting and advising the Hasmoneans from John Hyrcanus I onward. The Sadducees were wealthy, aristocratic Jewish families who supported Hellenization and eventually the Roman Empire in order to maintain their positions of power and upper-class status. Because of this they were hated by the average Jew for their compromise with Rome and the hoarding of their wealth. The Sadducees accepted only the Torah as scriptures and denied the existence of angels and an afterlife.

The Essene movement was a reaction to the Hellenization of Judea, which they believed to be the pollution of their ancestral religion, and they opposed the usurpation of the high priesthood by non-Zadokites. They rallied under the leadership of Moreh Tzedek, the Teacher of Righteousness. They retreated to the desert to live a monastic life of ritual purity, observation of the Mosaic Law, and preservation of the Hebrew Scriptures. It is believed that the Dead Sea Scrolls came from the Essenes' library. Many of the Essenes were celibate, but there were some who married and had children. After a three-year probationary period, new converts would take an oath to the community and to the practice of piety toward God and righteousness toward humanity. Repentance before baptism, and daily ritual washings were core to entrance and life in the community. They looked forward to the day that the king-priest messiah would come and purify the earth and bring the resurrection of the dead. John the Baptist might have come out of this community.

According to the directions of John Hyrcanus I, rulership of Israel after his death was to go to his wife, and his son Aristobulus I was to be high priest only. Aristobulus I (104–103 BC) did not agree with this, so he took the throne and imprisoned his mother (allowing her to starve to death) and three of his brothers. He did not imprison his brother Antigonus, with whom he was close. In 104 BC, Aristobulus I conquered the Ituraeans in the north and forced them to be circumcised if they wanted to remain in the land. He then declared himself the first official king of Israel since the exilic period. However, Aristobulus I was experiencing abdominal pains and began to decline in health. His brother Antigonus returned from battle dressed in armor in order to celebrate the Feast of Weeks, not knowing that it was not acceptable to wear armor during the festival. Aristobulus I's wife Salome Alexandra took advantage of this and told her husband that Antigonus had come to kill him now that he was weak. Aristobulus I had him executed and died childless soon afterward due to sickness.

In 103 BC Salome Alexandra took the throne and released Aristobulus I's brothers from prison, making the oldest brother, Alexander Jannaeus, her husband and king. Alexander Jannaeus (103–76 BC) appointed himself king and high priest. The Pharisees strongly opposed him for this, and he hated them as a result and so gave more power to the Sadducees, who supported him. In 93 BC, during the Feast of Tabernacles, Alexander Jannaeus, functioning as high priest, intentionally insulted the Pharisees by pouring out the libation offering onto his feet instead of the altar. They responded by calling him the descendant of a captive woman and pelted him with etrogim citrus fruit. Enraged, he killed six thousand Jews in the temple courtyard and built barriers around the temple, allowing only the Sadducees to enter. As a result, the pro-Pharisee rebel movement grew even larger. They made an alliance with the Seleucid king Demetrius III and marched against Alexander Jannaeus, defeating him at Shechem and killing all his mercenaries. Alexander Jannaeus escaped and fled to the mountains. In sympathy, six thousand rebels returned to him. Fearing this, Demetrius III withdrew to Syria. Eventually Alexander Jannaeus turned on the rebels and continued to fight them. Over time, he defeated them all and

captured eight hundred of the rebels and brought them back to Jerusalem. He then executed their wives and children in front of them and then crucified them all. Throughout his reign, Alexander Jannaeus continued to expand the borders of Israel. He died of illness, and his wife Salome Alexandra took the throne.

Salome Alexandra (76–67 BC) came from a Pharisee heritage and had hidden many of the Pharisees during the Judean civil war. She installed the Pharisees as the dominant ruling party over the Sadducees. She then established the Great Sanhedrin. The origin of the Sanhedrin is unknown. The Sanhedrin were religious political tribunal courts throughout the land. It may have been Salome Alexandra who established the Great Sanhedrin and made the Pharisees its governing body. According to Josephus, the Great Sanhedrin was a political and judicial council headed by the high priest, much like the Supreme Court. According to the Talmud, it was a religious legislative body headed by sages, with certain political and judicial functions. Salome Alexandra made her son John Hyrcanus II the high priest with the intention of him also being king after she died. She ruled in peace and brought prosperity to Israel.

Upon Salome Alexandra's death, her son John Hyrcanus II (67–66 BC) took the throne. Three months later his brother Aristobulus II, supported by the Sadducees, rebelled against him. Most of the Jewish army sided with Aristobulus II, and John Hyrcanus II was defeated at the battle of Jericho. John Hyrcanus II was forced to renounce the throne and the high priesthood but would still receive money from the temple tithe. Aristobulus II (66–63 BC) declared himself king and high priest of Israel.

Antipater the Idumean (Edomite) offered to help the weak-minded John Hyrcanus II regain political control in order to manipulate him for his own control over Israel. Antipater promised the Nabataeans that the land that had been taken away from them by the Hasmonaeans would be returned to them if they fought for them against Aristobulus II. But they were defeated by Aristobulus II's army.

Losing the war, John Hyrcanus II and Antipater sought the aid of the Roman general Pompey. In 63 BC Pompey captured Jerusalem and then exiled and imprisoned Aristobulus II and his sons. Upon entering Jerusalem, Pompey entered the Temple and went into the Holy of Holies; for that, the Jews would never forgive him. Pompey reinstated Hyrcanus II as high priest. However, Pompey gave the political power to Antipater as procurator (an official representing the interest of Rome), whom he believed better served the interest of Rome.

In 47 BC, upon the death of Pompey, John Hyrcanus II and Antipater sought the help of the Roman general, Julius Caesar, who continued Rome's support of the two. However, Julius Caesar released Aristobulus II and his sons in order to turn the Jews against Pompey. Pompey's men poisoned Aristobulus II and beheaded his son Alexander; his other son Antigonus got away.

The Roman Empire

Rome began as a city-state whose political genius exceeded its sense of culture. For the Jews, Yahweh was the measure of all things. For Persia and ancient Near East, the king was the measure of all things. For the Greeks, man and his intellect was the measure of all things. For Rome, the government ruled by law was the measure of all things. The Roman ideal was great statesmanship, not the search for good, truth, and beauty, as in Greece. Thus, Rome's constitutional system was a balance of the monarchic (consul), oligarchic (senate), and democratic (assemblies) elements. And the fear of the gods held it all together. Rome was highly

Hellenized taking and absorbing foreign cultures, ideas and religions. Rome was the melting pot of the ancient world with the Greek culture being the dominant influence.

Rome (the Greek word for “strength”) fought three major wars with the Carthagenean Empire in Africa, known as the Punic Wars (262-241, 218-201, 149-146 BC). With the defeat of Carthage, Rome came to control all of the western Mediterranean. At the same time, Rome fought four Macedonian Wars (214-205, 200-196, 171-167, 150-148 BC) in the east. At the end of these wars, Rome controlled Macedonia, broke Greece down into their component city-states and destroyed Corinth. By 188 BC Rome had taken most of the territories of the Ptolemies and the Seleucids, and by 168 BC they were both under Roman control paying Rome a tax.



In 133 BC the Roman Republic was thrown into social upheaval, and in 90 BC the Civil Wars began. During the Civil Wars Pompey established himself as a military leader and statesman by sweeping the Mediterranean of pirates and bringing the remaining Seleucid territories under Roman control. It was during this time that Pompey marched into Syria, and in 67 BC he sided with Hyrcanus II. By 55 BC the Roman Empire was controlling most of the world.

The constitution of the Roman Republic was a complex set of checks and balances designed to prevent one person from increasing in power to the point of creating a monarchy. In order to circumvent these checks, three Roman generals—Julius Caesar, Pompey, and Crassus—forged a secret alliance, called the First Triumvirate, in which they agreed to help each other maintain a great deal of power and control in the Republic.

Upon Crassus’ death the balance was upset, and the senate demanded that Julius Caesar release his control of the army having secured control of Gaul. In 49 BC Julius Caesar refused and crossed the Rubicon River, the legal boundary of Roman Italy beyond which no commander might bring his army, and civil war ensued between him and Pompey for control of the Roman Empire. With the defeat of Pompey in 48 BC, the war came to an end but only for a short time.

In 44 BC Julius Caesar proclaimed himself perpetual dictator. In response, a group of senators led by Gaius Cassius and Marcus Brutus assassinated Julius Caesar, fearing he would bring back the monarchy. Upon his death Julius Caesar had named his great nephew Octavian as his heir.

Julius Caesar's chief lieutenant Marc Antony and Octavian, forming the Second Triumvirate, gained control of Rome and defeated the conspirators at the battle of Philippi in 42 BC.

Soon conflict broke out between Octavian and Marc Antony, who was involved with Cleopatra VII, queen of the Ptolemaic Empire. Octavian's defeat of Marc Antony and Cleopatra VII at Actium in 31 BC, led to them both committing suicide in 30 BC.

The Roman wars were finally at an end, as was the Republic. Octavian gave power back to the senate and relinquished control of the armies and the Roman providences. But in reality, he maintained complete legislative power. In 27 BC the senate gave him the titles Augustus ("the illustrious one") and Princeps ("first in order"). Augustus (27 BC – 14 AD) did not see himself as an emperor, but his actions and policies would pave the way for the emperors who would follow him. The contributions of Augustus to the Roman Empire included peace, economic prosperity, improved communications, stable government and a sense of renewal. Augustus policies ushered in a 200-year period of peace in called the *pax romana*, which maintained peace as the highest priority within the empire.

Upon his death he was succeeded by his son Tiberius (14–37 AD) who was one of the greatest Roman generals and expanded the empire to far greater extents. He came to be remembered as a gloomy and reclusive ruler who never really desired to be emperor. In 26 AD he removed himself from Rome and left its administration largely in the hands of his unscrupulous Praetorian prefects Sejanus and Naevius Sutorius Macro.

The Herodians



With the arrival of Roman forces in Syria and the Promised Land, Antipater realized that any hope for a truly independent Judea was lost. And so Antipater turned to Julius Caesar to maintain his power over Israel. The most significant act of Antipater as procurator of Israel was his appointment of his two sons as tetrarchs (governors), Herod I in Galilee and Phasael in Jerusalem. Herod I was energetic, impulsive and ruthless, and many times during this period, he reacted with violence, which upset the Sanhedrin for "they saw how powerful and reckless Herod I was and how much he desired to be dictator" (*Ant.* 14.158-165; *J. W.* 1.204-207).

Antigonus, the last son of Aristobulus II, made an alliance with the Parthians east of Mesopotamia and in 40 BC led a coup against Antipater. Antigonus poisoned Antipater and captured John Hyrcanus II. Antigonus then cut John Hyrcanus II's ears off, disqualifying him from being high priest (*Lev.* 21:17-23) and then exiled him to Babylon. He was then

proclaimed king and high priest over Israel. At this point, the power in the Sanhedrin shifted to the Sadducees and stayed with them until the Jews were driven out of the land in 135 BC.

Herod I, now that his father and brother dead, fled to Rome in order to stake his claim to be ruler of Israel and gain military support. The Roman senate, not wanting to deal directly with the rebellious Jews and knowing his ruthlessness would keep order and maintain the tax, they proclaimed Herod I as king of Israel in 39 BC. Herod I was known as a client king, which means that his rule was relatively independent, but Rome still ultimately ruled and could step in for any reason they desired. Upon Herod I's arrival in Judea, war ensued for two years until Antigonus was captured and executed in 37 BC. The Romans as well as Herod I were furious that there was so much Jewish resistance to taking the city. So the Jews in support of Herod I slaughtered all those who had resisted Herod I – old, young, women and children were piled in heaps (*Ant.* 14.480). Opposition was so extensive both within and outside of Judea that Marc Antony had to leave a Roman legion encircling the city of Jerusalem to protect the king's position (*Ant.* 15.72).

Herod I (37–4 BC) married Mariamne I, the granddaughter of John Hyrcanus II and niece of Antigonus in order to secure his claim to the throne. As a result, he banished the wife and son he already had. He also converted to Judaism to win the favor of the Jews, but many Jews questioned his conversion.

Herod I brought from Babylonia the priest Ananelus (also known as Hanameel) and installed him as high priest. Herod I's wife Mariammes was infuriated that her brother, Aristobulus III, was passed over. So Marc Antony persuaded Herod I to install Aristobulus II instead, which overjoyed the Jewish people. However, Herod I had him drowned at a swimming party in Jericho and reinstated Ananelus. Herod I also sacked each high priest after only one year in service. He did this to keep the Sanhedrin under control, for they knew that anything they did to upset Herod I would result in his disrupting their structure.

After Octavian's defeat of Marc Antony in 31 BC, Herod I appeared before Octavian and confessed that he had been Marc Antony's friend but that he would be an even more loyal friend to him. Octavian was impressed with Herod I and reconfirmed his position as king of Israel. Herod I supplied Octavian on many of his military campaigns and Octavian responded by granting him more land and designating Herod I his "ally and friend." This title gave Herod unlimited power and control over his domain; only foreign alliances and waging war needed the approval of Rome.

In an attempt to suppress the contempt the Jewish people had for him, Herod I held to the Jewish ceremonial laws and observances. He built the temple mount around the temple, the harbor at Caesarea Philippi, the fortresses Masada and Herodium, and many aqueducts that went through the land. However, he also built many pagan cities in order to appeal to the country's pagan population. He put a heavy tax burden on the people in order to pay for all of his building projects and support his lavish lifestyle. He also put a Roman eagle on the front of the Jewish temple, which was a violation of the Mosaic Law.

Likewise, he dealt with the people harshly. For example, a group of youths were incited by their teachers to pull down the Roman eagle Herod I had placed above the Temple, after which they and their teachers were all burned. Herod I grew more and more paranoid throughout his reign, eventually killing his wife and three of his sons—because of their threat to the throne—as well as many other family members. When Caesar Augustus heard about Herod I killing his son, he said,

“It is better to be Herod’s pig than his son,” referring to the fact that, under the Mosaic Law, Jews were not allowed to eat pigs.



Herod I died in 4 BC and divided his kingdom among his three younger sons. Philip (4 BC–34 AD) was given Iturea and Trachonitis, northeast of the Sea of Galilee. He ruled in peace until he died in 34 AD. Herod Archelaus (4 BC–6 AD) received Judea, Samaria, and Idumea; however, in 6 AD he was dismissed by Rome because of his ruthlessness. Herod Antipas (4 BC–39 AD) was given Galilee and Perea.

Upon Herod Archelaus’ dismissal, Herod Antipas took partial control of his domain. He also married his brother’s wife who was also his niece, which John the Baptizer condemned. Herod Antipas reigned during the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Eventually Herod Antipas was exiled by the Roman emperor Caligula (37-41 AD) at the request of his nephew Herod Agrippa I (41-44 AD).

The Roman Prefects

When Augustus disposed of Herod Archelaus in 6 AD, Judea was reduced to the status of a Roman province, governed by and responsible to a prefect appointed directly by the emperor. Prefects were Roman military men who served as high-ranking officials over Roman provinces. Their duties were first military and then judicial, and they were responsible for collecting the taxes. The prefects of Judea lived in Caesarea Philippi in the Galilee region, going to Jerusalem mainly for major feasts in order to maintain order over the large crowds.

What led to the installment of the prefects in Judea was that in 6 AD a census was taken after Herod Archelaus was disposed, which angered the Jews, and Judas the Galilean started a revolt against Rome. This gave birth to the movement of the Zealots, a group who believed that it was necessary to remove the rule of Rome at all cost. They implemented violence and terrorist activities against Roman citizens and sympathizers. The revolt was put down, and Coponius (6–9 AD) was installed as the first prefect of Judea. However, the zealots continued to be an ever-present nuisance to the Romans. Usually when the Zealots caused problems for the Romans, the Romans punished the Jewish people along with any Zealots they could find. As a result, the

Jewish people began to hate the Zealots, who constantly “kicked the hornets’ nest,” provoking the Romans to retaliate against everyone. Simon the Zealot was one of Jesus’ disciples.

In 14 AD Tiberius became emperor of the Roman Empire and because of his tendency to be an isolationist, he allowed the senate member Sejanus to exercise effective power, including the appointment of Judean prefects. In 26 AD Sejanus appointed Pontius Pilate (26–36 AD) as fifth prefect over Judea.

Pontius Pilate was known for his conflicts with the Jewish people. One time under the cover of night he introduced Roman standards into Jerusalem with images of the emperor on them. A large number of Jews prostrated themselves in protest around his house for five days. He threatened to kill them if they did not leave, so they bared their necks ready for the deathblow. He was so impressed with this action that he removed the standards. Another time he took funds from the temple treasury to fund his building of an aqueduct. When the Jews protested, he disguised his soldiers and dispersed them through the crowds, who beat many of the Jews to death with cudgels. He then put shields with Tiberius’ name on them in Jerusalem but removed them when the Jews protested to Tiberius himself. Later, when a group of Samaritans attacked him at Mount Gerizim, he had them killed, for which he was removed from office in 36 AD. This background gives the reader, when reading about his role in the crucifixion of Jesus, an idea of the relationship Pontius Pilate had with the Jews.

The prefects, especially Pontius Pilate, worked closely with the Sadducees, who controlled the Sanhedrin at this time. One of the responsibilities that the prefect had in Judea was the appointment of the high priests. Augustus had changed prefects frequently, whereas Tiberius believed in letting them continue in office for longer periods. Annas (6–15 AD) was installed as the first high priest, under the authority of the Judean prefects.

When Annas was appointed, he became the head of one of the most influential high priestly families; five of his sons, a son-in-law and a grandson were high priest at various times. Although he had been disposed of by the prefect Valerius Gratus (15–26 AD), he continued to remain the true power behind the successive high priests who were members of his family and worked closely with the Sadducees.

In the next three years, two high priests were installed and sacked, until Valerius Gratus installed Annas, the son-in-law of Joseph Caiaphas (18–37 AD), as high priest, who maintained a good relationship with Valerius Gratus and then Pontius Pilate.

This was the Roman-Jewish world into which Jesus was born and ministered. Jesus was born in about 6 BC under the rule of the Roman emperor Augustus, King Herod I, and Herod Archelaus. We know that Jesus was born before 4 BC because that is when Herod I died. Most scholars believe that Jesus was two years old when the Magi came and told Herod I about the birth of Jesus and then went on to Bethlehem (Matt. 2). Herod I died soon after that, in 4 BC. Since Jesus was born at least two years before Herod I’s death, that puts his birth about 7 or 6 BC.

Bibliography

- Atkinson, Kenneth. *A History of the Hasmonean State: Josephus and Beyond*. New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016.
- Bock, Darrell L. *Studying the Historical Jesus: A Guide to Sources and Methods*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002.
- Bruce, F. F. *New Testament History*. New York: Doubleday, 1969.
- Elwell, Walter A. and Robert W. Yarbrough, Eds. *Encountering the New Testament: A Historical and Theological Survey*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998.
- Ferguson, Everett. *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993.
- Witherington, Ben III. *New Testament History: A Narrative Account*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001.