

Lesson IV.

Religion, Politics, Cultural, and Customs

I. Introduction / Review of Lesson III

II. New Testament Sects / Religious Groups / Political System

A. Roman Rule

1. Herod the Great
2. Sects Development
3. Pharisees
4. Sadducees
5. Essenes
6. Zealots

B. Hebrew Culture and Customs

C. New Testament Culture and Customs

Introduction

There's a roughly 400-year gap between the final events recorded in the Old Testament and the coming of Jesus in the New. During that span, sometimes called the *intertestamental period* or the *years of silence*, there were no prophetic writings, which means **no direct revelation from God.**

Discussion Points

References to the 400 “Silent Years” simply means that God ceased to speak through prophets in the manner he had done during the establishment, development, and exile of the Nations of Israel and Judah.

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.

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.**

Persian and Hellenistic Periods (538-142 BC)

First Return:

Following a decree by the Persian King Cyrus, conqueror of the Babylonian empire (538 BC), some 50,000 Jews set out on the first return to the Land of Israel, led by **Zerubbabel**, a descendant of the House of **David**.

The Jews were allowed to return and build the temple. Work was completed in 515 BC. There is no known detailed plan of the Second Temple. It was surrounded by two courtyards with chambers, gates, and a public square. It did not include the ritual objects of the First Temple; of special significance was the loss of the Ark itself. Ritual, however, was elaborate and was conducted by well-organized families of priests and Levites.

Why is it significant to note that Zerubbabel was a descendant of the House of David?

Zerubbabel was the grandson of King Jehoiachin of Judah (1 Chronicles 3:17) and thus a descendant of David. Born in Babylon during the exile (between 587 and 539 BC), Zerubbabel traveled to Judah after King Cyrus II allowed the Judean captives to return to their homeland to rebuild the temple (Ezra 1:1-4; 6:3-5, 8-10). The prophet Haggai identifies Zerubbabel as the governor of Judah after the exile (Haggai 1:1; 2:2, 21).

Zerubbabel is listed in the Bible as an ancestor of Jesus Christ (Matthew 1:12-13; Luke 3:27).

First Return:

The first wave of Jews returned under **Zerubbabel** and **Joshua the priest**. They rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem, which turned out to be a small and pale replacement of Solomon's grand temple that had been destroyed by the Babylonians.

The repatriation of the Jews under Ezra's inspired leadership, **construction of the Second Temple** on the site of the First Temple, refortification of the walls of Jerusalem, and establishment of the *Knesset Hagedolah* (Great Assembly) as the supreme religious and judicial body of the Jewish people marked the beginning of the Second Temple period.

Within the confines of the Persian Empire, Judah was a nation whose leadership was entrusted to the high priest and council of elders in Jerusalem.

Prophets?

The prophets Haggai and Zechariah encouraged the work with promises of a future glory to be revealed by God.

What can we learn about prophets from the above statement?

God used prophets at different times for different reasons.

A prophet in the Old Testament was someone who was used by God to communicate His message to the world.

Men like Isaiah, Daniel, and Amos and Malachi were writing prophets. But there were also prophets that did not write, they just spoke: Ahijah ([1 Kings 11:29](#)), Micaiah ([2 Chronicles 18:7](#)), and Elisha ([1 Kings 19:16](#)).

There are also some anonymous prophets in the Old Testament, such as the unnamed prophet in [Judges 6:7–10](#).

The prophets came from a variety of backgrounds, spoke to different audiences, possessed unique styles, and used assorted methods. Most of the Old Testament prophets' messages concerned the people of Israel; if other nations were mentioned in the oracles, it was usually in connection to those nations' dealings with Israel. Most prophets of God were men, but the Old Testament also mentions prophetesses such as Miriam ([Exodus 15:20, ESV](#)), Deborah ([Judges 4:4, ESV](#)), and Huldah ([2 Kings 22:14, ESV](#)). All prophets shared some characteristics that made their ministries "prophetic."

A prophet was required to deliver God's message accurately. The prophet Micaiah put it well: "As surely as the Lord lives, I can tell [the king] only what the Lord tells me" ([1 Kings 22:14](#)). Those who, like Jeremiah, tried to keep silent found they could not ([Jeremiah 20:9](#)). Those who, like Jonah, tried to avoid their responsibility were corrected ([Jonah 1:3–4](#)). Others, like the unnamed prophet from Judah who directly disobeyed the divine command, lost their lives ([1 Kings 13:15–24](#)).

A prophet sometimes had a unique appearance. Elijah was known for wearing "a garment of hair and had a leather belt around his waist" ([2 Kings 1:8](#)). Elijah's mantle that he left for Elisha was also seen as a symbol of the prophetic office ([2 Kings 2:13–14](#)). God told Ezekiel to shave his head and beard ([Ezekiel 5:1](#)). Other prophets were set apart in other ways: Jeremiah, for example, was told he could not marry ([Jeremiah 16:2](#)); Hosea was told to marry a prostitute ([Hosea 1:2](#)). All prophets were recognized as those through whom God spoke (even if their message was not welcome).

The Old Testament also mentions false prophets. These were liars who claimed to speak for God but were intent upon deceiving the people or serving their own interests. Ahab had nearly four hundred such false prophets in his employ ([1 Kings 22:6, 23](#)). Nehemiah's work was opposed by several false prophets and one false prophetess ([Nehemiah 6:14](#)). The test of a prophet was 100 percent accuracy in what he said ([Deuteronomy 18:22](#)). If a prophet's predictions did not come true, then he could not have been speaking for God, since God never lies ([Numbers 23:19](#)).

The role of Old Testament prophet reached its consummation in the person of John the Baptist, who was predicted in [Malachi 4:5](#) (cf. [Luke 7:26–27](#)); and in Jesus Christ, who was the Prophet "like Moses" predicted in [Deuteronomy 18:15](#) (cf. [Acts 3:22](#)).

Second Return:

Less than a century later, the second return was led by **Ezra the Scribe**. Over the next four centuries, the Jews knew varying degrees of self-rule under Persian (538-333 BC) and later Hellenistic (Ptolemaic and Seleucid) overlordship (332-142 BC).

Nehemiah Returns:

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.

After a long period in which the construction of the Temple was stalled, the news reached Babylon that its construction had been completed. This time Ezra would not be left out. The next year, King Artaxerxes gave Ezra permission to lead a

mass immigration to Israel and to enforce the laws of G-d there.¹⁴ With this assurance, Ezra began a campaign to return all the Jews to their homeland. He traveled from town to town, telling his brethren of the impending return to the Land of Israel and the rebuilding of the Temple.

His words went mostly unheeded. The majority of the Jews remained in Babylon.¹⁵ Many even thought that he was lying and sought to kill him.¹⁶ Undeterred, Ezra gathered all who would follow, a relatively small group numbering 1,500, and set out for Israel. He brought along with him much gold and silver for the Temple's construction, along with orders from the king to the treasurer to give them ample amounts of wheat, wine, oil and salt. Their journey lasted four months, and they arrived on the first of Av.

When they arrived, they celebrated by offering sacrifices to God and giving the gold and silver they had brought to the Temple treasury.

Alexander introduced Hellenistic Greek culture, philosophy, religion and language throughout this vast territory.

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.

Their descendants, John Hyrcanus, Aristobulus I and Alexander Jannaeus among them, 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.

Judea's independence ended in 63 BC when it was conquered by the Roman general Pompey, bringing it under the authority of Rome.

Malachi came along at a time when the people were struggling to believe that God loved them (Malachi 1:2). The people focused on their unfortunate circumstances and refused to account for their own sinful deeds. So God pointed the finger back at them, and through Malachi, God told the people where they had fallen short of their covenant with Him. If they hoped to see changes, they needed to take responsibility for their own actions and serve God faithfully according to the promise their fathers had made to God on Mount Sinai all those years before.

Malachi 1:3 And I hated Esau, and laid his mountains and his heritage waste for the dragons of the wilderness.

Amplified Bible (Romans 9:13)

As it is written *and* forever remains written, “JACOB I LOVED (chose, protected, blessed), BUT ESAU I HATED (held in disregard compared to Jacob).”

What is the difference between first temple and second temple Judaism?

Temple of Jerusalem, either of two temples that were the center of worship and national identity in ancient Israel.

In the early years of the Israelite kingdom, the Ark of the Covenant was periodically moved about among several sanctuaries, especially those of Shechem and Shiloh. After King David's capture of Jerusalem, however, the Ark was moved to that city. This action joined Israel's major religious object with the monarchy and the city itself into a central symbol of union of the Israelite tribes. As the site for a future temple, David chose Mount Moriah, or the Temple Mount, where it was believed Abraham had built the altar on which to sacrifice his son Isaac.

The First Temple was constructed during the reign of David's son, Solomon, and completed in 957 BC. Other sanctuaries retained their religious functions, however, until Josiah (reigned c. 640–609 BC) abolished them and established the Temple of Jerusalem as the only place of sacrifice in the Kingdom of Judah.

The First Temple was built as an abode for the Ark and as a place of assembly for the entire people. The building itself, therefore, was not large, but the courtyard was extensive. The Temple building faced eastward. It was oblong and consisted of three rooms of equal width: the porch, or vestibule (*'ulam*); the main room of religious service, or Holy Place (*hekhal*); and the Holy of Holies (*devir*), the sacred room in which the Ark rested. A storehouse (*yazi'a*) surrounded the Temple except on its front (east) side.

The First Temple contained five altars: one at the entrance of the Holy of Holies, two others within the building, a large bronze one before the porch, and a large tiered altar in the courtyard. A huge bronze bowl, or “sea,” in the courtyard was used for the priests' ablutions. Within the Holy of Holies, two cherubim of olive wood stood with the Ark; this innermost sanctuary was considered the dwelling place of the Divine Presence (Shekhina) and could be entered only by the high priest and only on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur).

During the Roman conquest, Pompey entered (63 BC) the Holy of Holies but left the Temple intact. In 54 BC, however, Crassus plundered the Temple treasury. Of major importance was the rebuilding of the Second Temple begun by Herod the Great, king (37 BC–4 CE) of Judaea.

Construction began in 20 BC and lasted for 46 years. The area of the Temple Mount was doubled and surrounded by a retaining wall with gates. The Temple was raised, enlarged, and faced with white stone. The new Temple square served as a gathering place, and its porticoes sheltered merchants and money changers. A stone fence (*soreg*) and a rampart (*hel*) surrounded the consecrated area forbidden to Gentiles. The Temple proper began, on the east, with the Court of Women, each side of which had a gate and each corner of which had a chamber. This court was named for a surrounding balcony on which women observed the annual celebration of Sukkoth. The western gate of the court, approached by a semicircular staircase, led to the Court of the Israelites, that portion of the Court of Priests open to all male Jews. Surrounding the inner sanctuary, the Court of Priests contained the sacrificial altar and a copper laver for priestly ablutions. This court was itself surrounded by a wall broken with gates and chambers. The Temple sanctuary building was wider in front than in the rear; its eastern facade had two pillars on either side of the gate to the entrance hall. Within the hall, a great gate led to the sanctuary, at the western end of which was the Holy of Holies.

The Herodian Temple was again the center of Israelite life. It was not only the focus of religious ritual but also the repository of the Holy Scriptures and other national literature and the meeting place of the Sanhedrin, the highest court of

Jewish law during the Roman period. The rebellion against Rome that began in 66 CE soon focused on the Temple and effectively ended with the Temple's destruction on the 9th/10th of Av, 70 CE.

All that remained of the retaining wall surrounding the Temple Mount was a portion of the Western Wall (also called the Wailing Wall), which continues to be the focus of Jewish aspirations and pilgrimage. Made part of the wall surrounding the Muslim Dome of the Rock and Al-Aqsa Mosque in 691 CE, it returned to Jewish control in 1967.

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.**

Roman Rule (63 BC-313 CE)

In 37 BC Herod, a son-in-law of Hyrcanus II, was appointed King of Judea by the Romans.

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.

Granted almost unlimited autonomy in the country's internal affairs, he became one of the most powerful monarchs in the eastern part of the Roman Empire. A great admirer of Greco-Roman culture, Herod launched a massive construction program, which included renovated the Temple of Jerusalem. It was one of the most magnificent buildings of its time. But despite his many achievements, Herod failed to win the trust and support of his Jewish subjects.

Ten years after Herod's death (4 BC), Judea came under direct Roman administration. Growing anger against increased Roman suppression of Jewish life resulted in sporadic violence which escalated into a full-scale revolt in 66 CE. Superior Roman forces led by Titus were finally victorious, razing Jerusalem to the ground (70 CE) and defeating the last Jewish outpost at Masada (73 CE).

Herod the Great! **Wrong King....**



Part II:

Pharisees

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

Sadducees

The Sadducees, mostly wealthy and powerful social elites, rejected such traditions and obeyed the Law only as far as it didn't interfere with their cultural position and Hellenistic lifestyle.

Essenes

The Essenes were an isolationist sect that rejected both Jewish and Hellenistic society and lived in ascetic desert communities such as the one at Qumran by the Dead Sea.

Synagogues

After the 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.

Sanhedrin

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, 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.

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 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 a Bible 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.

Herodians

The Herodians were Jews in name alone, loyal to the Roman government and the puppet rulers it installed. The Zealots were revolutionaries dedicated to overthrowing the Roman government by any means necessary.

Jesus: Part III