



## NEW TESTAMENT SURVEY

### LESSON 1

# Inter-Testamentary Period

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## NEW TESTAMENT SURVEY

### LESSON 1: The Inter-Testamentary Period (Malachi to Matthew)

In your Bible, there is maybe a page or two between Malachi and Matthew. In your head it may all come under an ill-defined concept of 'Bible,' and in daily life it might make no difference at all. But imagine you could travel back in time to when your great, great-grandmother was a little girl. What was the world like then? Did they have motor cars, hot and cold running water, electricity, telephones, aeroplanes, international travel, television and so on? No, it was a different world. Your great, great grandmother would hardly begin to imagine the world of today – and that is only 5 generations.

Between Malachi and Matthew more than 400 years passed, and the world as Jesus and the disciples experienced it was vastly different than the way the people of Malachi's day knew it. The world had undergone enormous changes – in language, religious practice, political context, travel, commerce and more. There are books written on this inter-testamentary period – but this will not be one. The aim here will be to outline in brief paragraphs some of the major changes that occurred in and around Israel during these centuries of enormous change.

WHY? Why is it important to know at least something about this time? Here are three reasons.

1. We need to understand this time in order to understand the context in which Jesus lived, died, and rose again. We need to understand the message of the gospel in context.
2. We need to understand the text and the words of Scripture – without understanding the history and context of the time, we cannot rightly understand the Bible and its message.
3. We need to understand the players, the people, the politics, the desires, hopes and aspirations of the people mentioned in Scripture – the Pharisees, Sadducees, ordinary Jews, Romans, and so on.

Culture is not shaped in simply a few moments. Language, education, institutions, expectations, religion, national hopes etc, take decades to form and to transition. Political changes in the landscape do not happen overnight. We turn all too easily from Malachi to Matthew, yet perhaps we do so without realising the enormous historical changes that had occurred.

Perhaps a theological perspective on history is timely. If, since or because God is sovereign, and because He is sovereignly in control of the destiny of the universe, it is critical to understand some key concepts.

1. God created all things in, through, and for Jesus (John 1:1, 1 John 1:1-3, Eph 1:10, Col 1:16 i.e.).
2. Jesus is the beginning (Genesis 1:1) and the end, or purpose, or goal, of creation (Rev 21:6) and of history.
3. There is always growth, movement, pilgrimage, development; and we always live by, and only by, faith. Not by theology – which is our understanding and explanation of God and how He works. Not by our formulations – such as creeds, confessions, ecclesial statements or historical practices. God is the God of history, and He moves forward to the day of Jesus return.
4. Along the road of history, God has primarily one goal in mind, and that is to make us more and more like Jesus [Rom 8:29c] (and less and less like what we – or our tradition or experience -think Jesus is like).
5. History, by definition, means change, new paradigms, new ways of thinking, new opportunities, revisions, new formulations of what we think or thought we already knew,

new panoramas, new generations of learners who will challenge the past ways of explanation and culture.

6. History also means cognitive provisionality (which means that what we know is seriously limited and contextual) – at two levels: firstly, human beings are subject to history, to change and to growth. So if you still hold exactly to what you held to when you were 15; and if you hold to it in exactly the same way, then you have not grown; and if you have not grown or changed, you are dead. (Frightening thought!) Secondly, you are an historical creature – you do not know everything; in fact, you cannot know anything completely or exhaustively (if you did, you'd be God!!). So the best we can say about our knowledge and experience is: this is our best shot at it to date.
7. All of the above does not mean that we cannot know God truly; it does not mean we cannot say anything definitively; it does not mean our experiences of God are wrong, or faulty. It simply means normal, human limitations to what we know.

In the following paragraphs we will look at what happened to the world as a result of hellenization, something about who ruled where and when, and also something about the development of various religious movements within Israel itself. The aim is that when we start on the gospels, we will have a good working knowledge of the world Jesus was born into.

## **1 HISTORY OF PALESTINE AND SURROUNDING AREAS – 400 BC-0 AD**

### **1.1 Alexander the Great**

There are many stories about Alexander III, the son of Phillip II of Macedon. One of his tutors was Leonidas, a strong disciplinarian who placed great emphasis on physical training and endurance. Alexander was also tutored for 3 years in Beroea by the philosopher Aristotle – who is still studied at universities around the world today. Alexander was a bright young man with a prodigious memory, and he learnt from Aristotle the inherent superiority of the Greek language, culture and politics – it was superior to all other cultures.



336 years before Christ, Phillip was assassinated, and Alexander came to the throne at age 20. Within fifteen months he stamped out rebellions, marched into various Greek cities demanding submission, sent his armies as far north as the Danube River, and destroyed the city of Thebes. In 334, with 37,000 men he marched into Asia, conquering lands for his empire. He conquered Egypt and was crowned pharaoh in 332. By 327, Alexander's armies had moved as far east as India. Alexander had a vision not simply to conquer the world, but to Hellenize it, to make it conform to Greek culture and language.

### **1.2 Hellenization**

How did Alexander undertake the process of hellenization? One of the things he did was to set up cities where ever he went. Garrisons were left in these cities. These colonists would become the ruling class. They would impose laws or rules to promote hellenization. Of the sixty to seventy thousand mercenaries he summoned from Greece, nearly forty thousand remained to inhabit these cities.

Also in these cities gymnasia were set up. The gymnasium was the centre for learning and they were located or built in most Greek cities. This ensured that Hellenic art, drama, philosophy, architecture, religious ideas, literature and language was diffused throughout the Near East. He married Roxane, a Persian captive, and arranged for more than 10,000 of his soldiers to also marry Persian women. Alexander was trying to fuse the cultures of East and West, of Asia Minor and Greece. This fusion is what historians mean by the expression of hellenization.

Alexander's first royal act after being crowned pharaoh in Egypt was to plan the building of a great port city – the city of Alexandria – to be a university city that would radiate Greek culture out through the middle eastern regions.

Alexander conquered the entire region surrounding Israel, and many Jews during the centuries following 332 BCE came to believe the claim that Greek culture and language were superior, and they sought to emulate it by adopting Greek educational practices (including learning rhetoric), by embracing Greek values about physical education and training, and by accepting Greek ideals about independence and democracy. Note that the process of hellenization did not happen simply over a brief period – it took centuries. When Alexander died in 323 BCE, he had conquered the world in a brief 12 years, but the process of hellenization had just started.

### 1.3 After Alexander

In the century after Alexander's death, things gradually changed. The Ptolemaic and Seleucid kings that came after him continued the cultural and linguistic consolidation of the Greek invasion. They appointed local officers, who had Greek secretaries. Such favoured natives gave their children a Greek education, and early in the Greek period, educated Orientals spoke Greek. Greek became the *lingua franca* in key educational centres, in travel and commerce, and in the armies of the time.

### 1.4 The Ptolemies

Ptolemy was a high ranking Macedonian general and long time confidant of Alexander. He became Alexander's successor, and he chose what he thought was the most strategic location from which to rule – Egypt. In 305 he assumed the title of king of Egypt. Each of the succeeding kings of the Ptolemaic dynasty assumed the name Ptolemy, and the queens were all to call themselves Cleopatra.

From the outset Ptolemy I planned to make Egypt into a showcase of learning and culture for the Mediterranean world. He offered inducements for scholars to move to Alexandria, and one of the great draw-cards was the development of an unparalleled library with a huge collection of scrolls. Through commerce and education, Egypt under the Ptolemies had considerable influence over what transpired in Israel. Jews and many others migrated to Egypt, where they also learned Greek. As the language of officers, notaries, orators and citizens, *koine* Greek temporarily replaced Aramaic in the Middle East; everywhere it became the common language of politics and government, commerce and education.

From the time of Alexander's death, the Ptolemies exercised a relatively stable reign for almost one and a half centuries. Their major military challenges were campaigns against Syria, where the Seleucid dynasty reigned. Warfare between these two dynasties raged for over a century, and these wars impacted the Jews significantly.

Ptolemy I – 323 -283  
 Ptolemy II – 283 -246  
 Ptolemy III – 246 -221  
 Ptolemy IV -221 -204  
 Ptolemy V -204 – 181  
 Ptolemy VI -180 – 145  
 Ptolemy VII -145 –  
 Ptolemy VIII -145 – 116



Ptolemy I

Cleopatra VII came towards the end off the Ptolemaic dynasty, when Rome was rising as the world power. She wanted to become queen of the whole Mediterranean world, which led to her first courting Julius Caesar, and then Marc Antony. When both of these had died, and Octavian (ie., Augustus) could not be enticed, Cleopatra

sealed the fate of the Ptolemaic dynasty by taking her own life, thus handing Egypt over to Rome. Augustus was Caesar when Christ was born (Luke 2:1).

## 1.5 The Seleucids

The second major dynasty that arose from the splitting of Alexander's empire was the Seleucid dynasty. Their kingdom extended from Asia Minor to the limits of the Persian territory. They had two capitals (one at Antioch in Syria [which is why the Ptolemies continued to have military campaigns against Syria] and the other at Seleucia on the Tigris in Mesopotamia). The Seleucids also remained Greek in language and culture, but in their rule they followed Persia's more autocratic style – they began to be worshipped as gods as early as Antiochus II. One of the kings called himself "Epiphanes" (god revealed) and created great consternation among the Jewish people.

Seleucus I -312 – 281

Antiochus I -280 – 261

Antiochus II -261 – 246

Seleucus II -245 – 225

Seleucus III -225 -223

Antiochus III -222 – 187

Seleucus IV -187 -175

Antiochus IV -175 – 164

Antiochus V -164 – 162



Seleucus I

The wars between the Ptolemies and the Seleucids continued, and in 200 (some scholars think 198) BCE the Seleucids won a decisive victory over the Ptolemies at Caesarea Philippi. Israel was governed by these rulers from Antioch for the next 50 years. These Syrian wars were a frequent source of suffering for the inhabitants of Israel, though there is conjecture that some Jews may have benefited by enlisting as soldiers, or commercially by selling supplies.

## 1.6 The Septuagint

According to the Jewish-Hellenistic letter of Aristeas, Ptolemy II ordered the writing of the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Bible (Old Testament) ascribed to seventy scholars, from which it derives its name and abbreviation of LXX. The letter of Aristeas (whose authenticity is doubted by some scholars), tells of the royal librarian in Alexandria convincing the king (Ptolemy II) that it was important to have a translation of the Jewish law in his library. Ptolemy, so the story goes, requests that 72 elders proficient in the law, 6 from each tribe, undertake the task. The elders arrive in Alexandria where they are honourably received by Ptolemy. After a banquet, Ptolemy tests their proficiency by asking hard questions. Being satisfied, the 72 are escorted to the island of Pharos where they complete their task, as if by miracle, in 72 days; their work being a result of collaboration and comparison.

Did it occur precisely like that? Scholars think not. It is more likely that only the actual Pentateuch was translated at that time, and other books in later years. However, what is clear is that the LXX was in wide usage at the time of the apostles and Jesus. We know it was used by the apostle Paul, is quoted in the New Testament, and was used by the Apostolic Fathers. Of the fuller quotations in the New Testament of the Old, nearly one hundred agree with the modern form of the Septuagint, and six agree with the Massoretic text. We also know it was held in great respect in ancient times; the historians Philo and Josephus ascribe divine inspiration to its authors.

There are 3 more things we need to say about the LXX. Firstly, while Alexander greatly admired all things Greek, he was a Macedonian, as was Ptolemy I. Scholars

came from all over, and the language as it developed (language, like history is not static) was the Alexandrian dialect. Secondly, the LXX as we have it today does not follow the Massoretic (Hebrew) texts exactly, though it does so mostly. Scholars are aware of other texts of the Old Testament being available in Samaria, and there is evidence of variations in translation. Further, there is appended to the book of Esther an explanatory gloss, written, as it were, by Mordecai, and adding the name of God to the letter. There are small amendments in Daniel as well.

But, in the third place, not everyone liked what was happening with hellenization – there was a reaction. While modern scholars regard the LXX as a reliable text, not everyone thought so. One of the earliest of those writers who mention the Greek translation of the Scriptures speaks of the version as not fully adequate. He wrote: *“For the same things expressed in Hebrew have not an equal force when translated into another language. Not only so, but even the Law and the prophecies and the rest of the books differ not a little as to the things said in them.”* This was written around 130 BCE. It was a view shared by a group called the separatists, and they were to take some seriously radical action. We know them as the party of the Pharisees. So where did they come from? What was their agenda?

## 2 JEWISH RELIGIOUS GROUPS

### 2.1 The Pharisees

Are the Pharisees the ‘bad guys’ of the New Testament? While there is still a great discussion surrounding the origins of Pharisaism, their broad concerns are clear. A dire threat to the very survival of Judaism emerged already with the exile to Babylon (c586 BCE). The Jewish nation was meant to be one under God, living in the land he allocated, following the law He had given, worshipping at the temple in Jerusalem built for Him, attending the national feasts, and having access to, and service from, priests trained in the law. The Babylonian captivity created a dilemma with which Judaism was not designed to cope. The concern was there already at the time of Ezra the priest and the scribes who were with him (cf Ezra 4:23). Their aim was to return to the law. The name Pharisee is derived from the Hebrew *“perusim”* which means the ‘separated ones.’ The concern was there when the high priest Simon the Just at the beginning of the 3rd century BCE said: *“On three things the permanency of the world depends: on the Torah (faithfulness to the Law and its pursuit), on worship (the non-participation in Grecianism), and on works of righteousness.”*

Some scholars tie the roots of Pharisaism as a party back to the Chasidim (the righteous), a movement that emerged apparently under the persecutions of Antiochus IV Epiphanes that occurred in 167/6 BCE. At the time of the Seleucids many complaints were made in Hasidic circles about the desecration of the Temple by unclean priests. The high priests ‘bought’ the office, and the purchase was hotly contested with bribes. The Hasidim and the emergent Pharisees were less than impressed by this corruption. Whatever their precise origins, their name and actions well describe them. They were the separated ones. Israel is separated from the nations by the Law. It is separated from the world around. When Jesus prayed His high priestly prayer, and asked the Father:

*“I do not ask Thee to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth. Thy word is truth. As Thou didst send me into the world, I also have sent them into the world.”* (John 17:15-18)



The Pharisees would have said the Amen. In the world, but not of it. Pharisaism was not concerned firstly about outer separation, but inner separation. Their focus was on the work of the priests, who were to remain free of (separated from) defilement. The law which they practiced in the temple should be actualized in everyday life with the aim of being a sanctified people. Pharisaism was a holiness movement with a focus on dietary laws, ritual purity for meals, and Sabbath observance.

The apostle Paul used his being a Pharisee to good end in Acts 23:6, and called upon the Pharisaic belief in the resurrection to his own benefit over against the Sadducees. Author F.F. Bruce states in his Acts commentary: *"A Sadducee could not become a Christian without abandoning a distinctive theological tenet of his party; a Pharisee could become a Christian and remain a Pharisee – in the apostolic age at least."*

So – what were the Pharisees against? In today's terms, they were stridently against any and every form of liberalism and moral laxity. They resented the Greek translation of the Scriptures. They resented allegiances and alliances between the high priests of the temple and the foreign invaders. They rejected foreign culture. They fought against Greek education. They returned to being the people of the book – no syncretism for them.

To achieve their aims, they set up schools and developed a national system of education where local boys were schooled by trained scribes in the Torah. They established and ran the local synagogues. They hedged themselves apart not only from (Greek) heathenism but equally from the rest of (lax) Judaism. They were organised in small brotherhoods and steadily gained authority among the majority of Jewish people. One source identifies 400 synagogues in Jerusalem alone, and the Pharisees had a strong voice in the Sanhedrin.

There's one more thing that we haven't said about the origin and history of Pharisees. One of the reasons for their pursuit of purity was the political dealings that the high priests had with the various political oppressors. Politics always seems to mean deals and compromise – the very opposite of the law of God. But being the high priest also meant access to temple taxes, gold, trade, prestige and power – and all of that was a doorway into the governance of the Jews by both the Ptolemies and the Seleucids. The Pharisees hated every form of compromise with foreign invaders. That especially meant tax-collectors, prostitutes, and other sinners who liaised with, dealt with or did business with those foreigners who undermined the law. By the time of Jesus, the Pharisees were a well-respected middle-class party.

## 2.2 The Zealots

Already from the Old Testament we see the idea of a 'holy war' where Yahweh fights and defeats his enemy. It is prominent in Psalm 110. Yahweh's warriors are volunteers, and Yahweh himself marches in the lead. The religious distress experienced under Antiochus Epiphanes gave a new lease of life to the idea of a 'holy war.' [A 'jihad' is a holy war. The battle of Blood River, where the South African general Praetorius with a few hundred men fought and defeated thousands of Zulus was perceived to be a holy war.] A 'holy war' always has powerful eschatological imagery and in various inter-testamentary writings including Qumran (see for e.g. Rev 12:7-10, 17), God as the hero marches before his people to rout his enemies.

In the Essene community the real war Messiah was to come from Judah and the line of David, and he would break the resistance of his opponents. They also had a war scroll with precise military regulations probably derived from a Hellenistic manual on the art of war. The leadership in the battle is in the hands of the messianic high

priest. No wonder the Pharisees were more than disillusioned with the corruption of the high priests who colluded with the occupying forces. The picture that is emerging here is that while many Jews tolerated various rulers with their predominantly Greek culture, that by the time of Jesus is defined as Greco-Roman culture because Rome was the dominant world power – tolerance does not mean acceptance. Many hated foreign dominance and their accompanying irreligion. The Pharisees despised it. The Zealots hated their foreign overlords, and had many plans, discussions and religious ideas about their overthrow by force. They were the Jewish freedom movement.

The transition that has occurred from the Babylonian captivity, through the hellenization started by Alexander and continued by both the Ptolemies and the Seleucids, has generated a range of movements and groups intent on being, and remaining – or returning to – the law of God. There is anger and division in the land. Significantly, two of Jesus' disciples were zealots. While the Zealots were close to Pharisaism, they were an independent party – and radical enough to pursue a holy war if the right leader should come along. Some hoped that might be Jesus.

There were other insurrectionists at the time of Jesus – and afterwards. Barabbas is a well known rebel who may well have been a Zealot. We read in Acts 5: 36 37 of an insurgent called Theudas, and another called Judas of Galilee who led a revolt in 6AD. Judas argued that God alone was Israel's true King, therefore it was high treason against God to pay tribute to Caesar. Another such group was called the Sicarioi from the Latin *sicarius*, meaning murderer or assassin. Assassins is what they were called in Acts 21:38 – and they were led apparently by an Egyptian. Paul's ability to speak Greek ensures he is not the rebel.

*“Do you know Greek? Then you are not the Egyptian who some time ago stirred up a revolt and led four thousand men of the Assassins out into the wilderness?”*  
Acts 21:38.

The line between Greek-hating law-abiding Pharisees and Zealots is a fine line; the line between Zealots and the Sicarioi is a fine line, and the line between the Sicarioi and robbers and bandits is equally difficult to discern. Israel in the time of Jesus of Nazareth may well have been like Northern Ireland 15 years ago – the Catholics hating the Protestants, the favour returned equally, extremist groups on both sides, criminality invading nationalist idealism, and everyone hating the English. There are two other groups in and around Jerusalem at the time of Jesus – the high priests – and the Sadducees.

### 2.3 The High Priests

The high priests wielded impressive political and religious power. The centuries of war between the Ptolemies and the Seleucids had seen the emergence of high priests who variously accommodated or hated the process of hellenization. We need to highlight a particular Jason and his partnership with Antiochus IV. This Antiochus was big on hellenization. He liaised with Jason (brother of Onias III, a Zadokite high priest in Jerusalem). Jason was an ardent Hellenist, and in 174 Antiochus installed him as high priest. Jason built a gymnasium below the citadel of the Temple in Jerusalem, a centre for academia, sports, music and military exercises. Jason also arranged a magnificent torchlight procession in honour of Antiochus Epiphanes. In 171 BCE his brother Menelaus replaced Jason. In 167 BCE Antiochus arranged for a military parade on the Sabbath along the north wall of Jerusalem. His troops occupied Temple hill. An Athenian senator directed a religious festival that replaced the Jewish cult with Hellenistic sacrificial worship. An altar to Zeus was placed upon



the altar in Jerusalem, and a sacrifice was offered to Epiphanes. Literature called this altar of Zeus "*the abomination that makes desolate*" (Daniel 11:31, 12:11, Matt 24:15). This abomination lasted for three and a half years (a time, and times, and half a time – see Dan 7:25). Other sacrifices were made to Dionysius, and these would have included the sacrifices of pigs. God-fearing, law-abiding Jews were appalled.

A cultural struggle ensued. A law-abiding faithful family was found, known both as the Maccabees (after Judas Maccabeus [Greek *makkabaios* -Hebrew *maqbebet* – possibly meaning 'hammer']), and as the Hasmoneans. The Hasmoneans rejected the Hellenistic Syrian hegemony. In 164 BCE, Judas Maccabeus headed up a guerrilla force, defeated Syrian units, and purified the temple at Jerusalem on 25 Chislev (December). This date has been celebrated as Hannukah or the Rededication of the Temple (John 10:22). Judas the "hammer" was a hero. So go figure how Jesus was received when he was alleged to have said he would tear down the temple and rebuild it in three days.

Judas' brother Jonathan succeeded him from 160 to 143 BCE, and he was a leader of guerrilla bands in the desert, and after Jonathan, Simon, the oldest of the Maccabees led the Jewish resistance from 143 to 134 BCE with military successes. Judas gained freedom of religion in 162; Jonathan became high priest in 152, and Simon achieved tax exemption in 142 BCE. The Jews once more constituted an independent state, and 79 years of freedom ensued under Hasmonean rule. They too helped set the stage for the one known as Jesus of Nazareth.

## 2.4 The Sadducees

The Sadducees are widely assumed to have been named after Zadok, a priest in the time of David and Solomon (Ezra 7:2, Ezek 40:45f, 43:19), although a less accepted theory suggests that they took their name from a later Zadok who lived in the 2nd century BCE. Alternatively, some scholars think that the name "Sadducee" comes from the Hebrew *tsadiq* which means "righteous." Others think that by the time of Jesus they were the priestly aristocracy of the Hasmonean period.

What do we know about them? We know they did not believe in the resurrection, but why not? They wanted to guarantee the exact fulfilment of the temple and cult legislation which was written in the law. It was their duty to interpret the law, and only the literal application on the law was proper. The Prophets and the Writings were not rejected, but neither were they regarded as authoritative. The Sadducees also rejected the oral tradition and refused to accept any theological ideas which could not be explicitly documented in the written law. Hence it is no accident that they appear in the New Testament as the opponents of the Pharisaic teaching of the future resurrection (Mark 12:18f, Luke 20:27f). In Acts 23:8 we see Luke explaining how the apostle Paul uses the differences between the Sadducees and the Pharisees to his own advantage: "*For the Sadducees say there is no resurrection, nor an angel, nor a spirit; but the Pharisees acknowledge them all.*" Rewards and punishments, said the Sadducees, were to be understood only with regard to life on earth.

This priestly circle of the Sadducees rejected any novel Hellenistic reforms, while on the other hand they had assimilated aspects of Hellenism in their own lifestyle. As guardians of the Law of Moses, they maintained the integrity of the temple, and this enabled them to maintain their leading position in the religious policies of Israel right into the Roman period. However, they were scarcely aware that the religious direction of Judaism had passed them by. They too had no theology of history.

### 3 ENTER ROME



The rise of the Roman Empire also took place over centuries, and it needn't detain us here. We'll enter in at 66 – 64 BC, when Pompey conquered the Middle East and established the Roman province of Syria. Whenever Rome conquered, they established rule through a Roman governor, who was in charge of the higher courts, administration of taxes and duties, and the military. Local administration and lower courts remained in the hands of the indigenous population. This explains why the Jews themselves did not have authority to crucify Jesus.

It's probably worth having a chat about Pompey. At 23 years of age, he gathered himself a mercenary army on behalf of a few Roman millionaire business people with whom he had aligned himself. War is after all about money and making more of it. He marched off to war; he subdued the pirates of the Mediterranean, and arrived at Damascus in 64 BCE to take over what was the Seleucid Empire. There he met three groups of Jews: some aristocrats, some from Hyrcanus (he was the high priest in Jerusalem from the Hasmonean tribe), and a representation of the ordinary people.

Pompey marched against Jerusalem, and on the Day of Atonement in 63 BCE he entered into the temple and the Holy of holies. Hyrcanus, who had opened the gates to let him in, was rewarded by being allowed to remain high priest. Judea was once again under foreign domination. Pompey and his successors considered Hellenistic cities, culture and commerce to be the best political and commercial instrument for controlling the East. Hellenism is back in Israel.

So where does Rome obtain a governor who is favourably inclined to Rome while aware of local customs and language? An Idumean named Antipater, and later his son Herod, were to rule Jerusalem through some extremely turbulent times. They were hated by the Jews. How did the governor manage to sustain the commercial interests of Rome? Tax collectors collected business tax and temple tax and every other sort of tax. Tax collectors worked for the enemy of Israel.

The system was treacherous and corrupt. Whenever a governor intended to feather his nest through exploitation and extortion, he would not have to fear the protests of a colleague nor any restraints from local authorities. Yet if he tried to prevent exploitation by Roman businessmen or leaseholders, he had to figure this would create powerful enemies in Rome who would terminate his administration and rule. Rome's wars of conquest had been designed for profit, not for peace. Administration was a problem, and dissatisfaction with Roman administration and outbreaks of violence were an everyday occurrence. Rome solved these problems very simply – with death to insurgents, often by crucifixion.

### 4 WHAT'S IN A NAME?

The names of people generally do have both a reason and a meaning. We need to spend a moment looking at what the various rulers called themselves, and how the Jewish people would have understood and received this. We're going to jump between the Ptolemies and the Seleucids till we get to the Caesars – the names say it all. Ptolemy I was Soter (in Greek this means saviour); Antiochus I was Soter, Antiochus II was Theos (Theos means god), Ptolemy V was Epiphanes (god revealed, or manifest), Seleucus III was Soter, Antiochus IV was Epiphanes (he was the one who sacrificed pigs in the temple in Jerusalem).

After Pompey came Julius Caesar – he had a liaison (and a child) with Cleopatra, then came Marc Antony as a general from 41 – 31 BCE, under the reign of Octavian, who was also called Augustus Caesar. Octavian called himself Imperator Caesar *divi filius* (imperator = commander in chief, master, general or emperor; *divi* = divine; *filius* = son) the emperor Caesar, son of the divine.

When all the four gospels were written, the word 'Saviour' was a well known political term. There's a famous inscription which speaks of Caesar Augustus (Luke 2:1):

*"It seemed good to the Greeks of Asia and in the opinion of the High priest to say the following – Since Providence which has ordered all things and is deeply interested in our life, has set in most perfect order by giving us Augustus, whom she filled with virtue that he might benefit mankind – sending him a saviour, both for us and for our descendants, that he might end war and arrange all things."*

"It seemed good to the Greeks in Asia and in the opinion of the High Priest" sounds exactly like, and is exactly like what we read in another Roman document: "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us..." (Acts 15:28).

This Caesar Augustus was a saviour. Why? Because Providence (and note that for both Greeks and Romans Providence was a she), Providence ordered all things, and one of the ways she ordered things was to give Caesar Augustus as a saviour.



And like Solomon, she filled him with virtue, and what he did as a saviour was to end war and arrange all things. He ended conflict and restored order. That's what saviours did. They restored life to the way it should have been lived. They arranged society and work and government – they arranged all things. It was political and social stuff that saviours dealt with. Saviour has to do with education and health and the economy and bringing up families and ending wars.

In Bethlehem, during the reign of this Caesar, an apparently illegitimate son was born to a young girl who was allegedly a virgin, and the child she bore was eventually called both *Soter* and *Kyrios* (Lord) and the Son of God. He was a Jewish child.

## 5 THE DA VINCI CODE – REALLY?

One page between Malachi and Matthew – didn't anybody write anything? Did God not reveal anything to anybody? The fact is that there was an enormous output of literature within those 400 plus years. There are two main types: the first is called Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, the *pseudo* part indicating they are false, the *epigrapha* indicating they are writings. Why are they called false writings? Listen to a few of the titles: 1 Enoch (The Apocalypse of Enoch [mentioned in Jude 8]), 2 Enoch (Slavonic Book of the Secrets of Enoch), 2 Baruch (The Book of the Apocalypse of Baruch The Son of Neriah), 3 Baruch (The Greek Apocalypse of Baruch), The Life of Adam and Eve, The Apocalypse of Moses, The Martyrdom of Isaiah, The Revelation of Esdras, The Testament of Abraham.

They are false writings in that these were not written by the people who are purported to have written them. But arguably the reasons that they adopted the titles they did was because they wanted to draw on the great heroes of Old Testament faith to help them face the horrendous times in which they lived.

The second type of literature is still included in some Scriptures, though they are not deemed to be canonical. They are called the Old Testament Apocrypha, and include titles such as: 1 Esdras, 1,2,3 & 4 Maccabees, Baruch, Bel and the Dragon (an addition to Daniel), Daniel and Susanna (an addition to Daniel), Judith, Prayer of Azariah.

From 1 Maccabees we read of Mattathias, the father of five sons who played such a prominent part in Israel's history. They were heroes.

For a Jewish explanation of Maccabean story, which is celebrated by Hanukkah, watch: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mk7tnBQhGDU>



*“And all who became fugitives to escape their troubles joined them and reinforced them (44). They organised an army, and struck down sinners in their anger and lawless men in their wrath; the survivors fled to the Gentiles for safety. And Mattathias and his friends went about and tore down the altars; they forcibly circumcised all the uncircumcised boys that they found within the borders of Israel. They hunted down the arrogant men, and the work prospered in their hands. They rescued the law out of the hands of the gentiles and kings, and they never let the sinner gain the upper hand. Now the days drew near for Mattathias to die, and he said to his sons: “Arrogance and reproach have now become strong; it is a time of ruin and furious anger. Now my children, show zeal for the law, and give yourselves for the covenant of our fathers. Remember the deeds of the fathers, which they did in their generations; and receive great honour and an everlasting name.”*

The picture is similar to David in Adullam's cave, but whereas David was in hiding and waiting on the Lord, Mattathias is acting for the Lord, murdering, circumcising, resisting the Gentiles (Greeks), imposing the law, and calling his sons to continue a life of faith – that could lead to martyrdom.

From 4 Maccabees we read an historical description, and some of the detail about Antiochus Epiphanes.

*“When King Seleucus died, his son Antiochus Epiphanes succeeded to the throne, an arrogant and terrible man, who removed Onias from the priesthood and appointed Onias' brother Jason as high priest. Jason agreed that if the office were conferred upon him he would pay the king three thousand six hundred and sixty talents annually. So the king appointed him high priest and ruler of the nation. Jason changed the nation's way of life and altered its form of government in complete violation of the law, so that not only was a gymnasium constructed at the very citadel of our native land, but also the temple service was abolished.” 4.1.15 – 20*

*“The tyrant Antiochus, sitting in state with his counselors on a certain high place, and with his armed soldiers standing about him, ordered the guards to seize each and every Hebrew and to compel them to eat pork and food sacrificed to idols. If any were not willing to eat defiling food, they were to be broken on the wheel and killed.” 4.5.1-3*

What follows is a story of an old man, a certain Eleazar, who refuse to eat the pork. Antiochus taunts him before torturing him, but the old man's faith holds firm to the end. The speeches are similar to the speech of Daniel's three friends before Nebuchadnezzar. The law is upheld. What is clear from these inter-testamentary writings is that the Greeks (and Romans) were hated, that politics was corrupt, that the little people were being stepped on, that there was a great hope that the Messiah would come, that God would act, and bring to justice all despisers off his law, that a new creation would begin for the downtrodden nation of Israel, that a new unity would emerge, that temple worship would be restored, and God and the peace of God would reign from Zion over the whole earth. God alone was Saviour, and there was no other. The single word used to describe the above is 'apocalyptic,' and some scholars argue that apocalyptic is the major backdrop to the New Testament, against which Jesus preached the kingdom of God, the rule of God.

Somehow, God reigning by hanging on a cross didn't seem to fit the longing and anticipation of Israel. Their God was one who would tread down their enemies and restore the Davidic kingdom – a dusty Galilean carpenter didn't fit that profile. What's more, the appalling arrogance of one calling himself the son of God was beyond belief. It just didn't seem to fit. So what would they do with a “doctrine of prosperity” preaching Jesus?

For a challenging and thoroughly Christ-centred view of history, see Berkhof, Hendrikus. Christ and History



Give a short description of each of the following Jewish religious groups that were around during the time of Christ.

Pharisees

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Zealots

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High Priests

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Sadducees

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