
The Greatest Life Ever Lived

A Study in the Incarnate Life of Jesus Christ and An Exposition of the Four Gospels

LESSON II : INTRODUCTION -- THE INTER-BIBLICAL ERA

THE INTER-BIBLICAL ERA (THE 400 “SILENT” YEARS)

Gal 4:4 “when the fullness of time was come, God sent forth His Son”

- 722 BC the northern kingdom of Israel falls to the Assyrians, with Assyria colonizing their territory with heathen people from its own realm. The **Samaritans** of the NT is a result of the interbreeding between the Jews and the heathen settlers. For example, see John 4:9. Compare the racial situation in America, which brings more meaning to the Good Samaritan story, among others.
- 597 BC Babylon captures Jerusalem, deporting the skilled craftsmen and the ruling classes (Daniel, Ezekiel). Zedekiah remains ruler under Nebuchadnezzar’s authority. Upon Egypt’s rebellion to Babylon in 590 BC, Zedekiah cast his lot with Egypt.
- 586 BC Jerusalem fell to Babylonians, the Jews being dispersed or taken captive to Babylon. Although the temple sacrifices ceased, “orthodox Judaism” had its beginning, along with the **synagogue worship**. (Luke 4:16) Groups of faithful Jews banded themselves together in congregations, the earliest of which possibly beginning in the homes of believers (cp Ez 8:1; 20:1-3) and eventually becoming more formal assemblies for instruction, public worship and prayer. Teachers were appointed, taking the place of the temple priesthood. B.H. Carroll states: “The synagogue is not a temple, but it is a place of public worship. Every Sabbath day, throughout the world, [the Jews] come up to these synagogues and read a part of the law, and a part of the prophets, and a part of the other writings, and then expound them just as a preacher now reads a portion of the Scriptures and expounds it.... The synagogue more nearly embodies the idea of a New Testament church than the temple does, and in the Greek Old Testament, it is sometimes called *ecclesia*.”
- 538 BC Babylon falls to Cyrus, king of the Medo-Persian empire. Within a few years more than 50,000 Jews return to the land, rebuilding the temple under the leadership of Zerubbabel. Spiritual leadership at that time was the high priest Joshua. Haggai and Zechariah were contemporary prophets.
- 478 BC Esther becomes the wife of Zerxes the Great (biblical name: Ahasuerus)
- 458 BC Ezra leads another caravan of Jewish exiles to Jerusalem, bringing with him a copy of the Pentateuch and restoring pure religion. *Note that even to this present time, no Jew from the time of Ezra worships idols. The Lord had purged that from their manner of worship.* Ezra begins a body of people called **the scribes**, with Ezra himself being one of them. (Matt 5:20; 23:15) We could credit the publication of the OT to this group, as they were responsible for the gathering and the duplicating of the manuscripts. Since they were intimately conversant with the Mosaic law, they became known also as **lawyers**. (Luke 7:30; 11:45,46) Vine’s Expository Dictionary says: “The scribes were originally simply men of letters, students of Scripture, and the name first given to them contains in itself no reference to the law; in course of time, however, they devoted themselves mainly, though by no means exclusively, to the study of the law. They became jurists rather than theologians, and received names which of themselves called attention to that fact.”

Ezra also commenced the Jewish Council of Elders, which some called The Great Synagogue (possibly dating back to King Jehoshaphat of Judah, at least in principle -- 2 Chron 19:8-11). Around 250 BC this was modified to a 70-member group presided over by the high priests, becoming as **the Sanhedrin** (the word “Sanhedrin” is an Aramaized form of the Greek word synedrion, meaning “a sitting together”). This body possessed powers of jurisdiction and developed into the supreme native court of the Jews by Jesus’ day, functioning in both civil and religious realms till the fall of Jerusalem (70 AD). The term “Sanhedrin” is not used in the NT (KJV) although there are references to them; see Mark 14:53. In Mark 14:55, the word “council” in the KJV is translated “Sanhedrin” in the NIV.

The Targums have their beginning sometime not long after the return of the exiles from captivity. The Targums are free renderings of the **Hebrew** Scriptures into **Aramaic** after Aramaic becomes the common language of the Jews. These were at first oral, the Hebrew Scriptures being read with the Aramaic rendering given. Later these oral translations were written. Edersheim says: “The language spoken by the Jews was no longer Hebrew, but Aramaean, both in Palestine and in Babylonia... In fact, the common people were ignorant of pure Hebrew, which henceforth became the language of students and of the Synagogue. Even there a **Methurgeman**, or interpreter, had to be employed to translate into the vernacular the portions of Scripture read in the public services, and the addresses delivered by the Rabbis. This was the origin of the so-called **Targumim**, or paraphrases of Scriptures.” *Note that in the NT the common language of the Jews was Aramaic.* (Mark 5:41; 7:34)

- 445 BC Nehemiah made governor of Judea, rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. Malachi is a contemporary prophet. The Jews scattered throughout the empire that did not return to Israel becomes known as **the diaspora** (from two Greek words meaning “throughout” + “to sow seed”; used in Acts 8:1,4; 11:19), which is the target audience for the books of at least Hebrews, James, and 1 / 2 Peter (James 1:1; 1 Pet 1:1). Manasseh, a grandson of the high priest, was expelled during

Nehemiah's time because he married the daughter of Sanballat the governor (Neh 13:23-28). Josephus says he fled to Samaria where he built a temple on Mt Gerizim and established a worship center for the Samaritans (cp John 4:5,19,20). *[note in both Nehemiah and Ezra (chapters 9,10) the mixed marriages are forbidden, yet Jesus breached the separation to deal with the Samaritan woman's sins -- we must keep the balance between remaining pure from the sins of others, remain obedient to God's word, yet have compassion and reach out to the lost]* The Samaritans rejected most of the OT as authoritative, accepting only the Pentateuch and possibly the book of Joshua.

It was under Persian rule that another precedence began: the high priest was made governor of the district, making it easier to collect the tribute for the Persian Empire. This "*union of church and state*" birthed several evils, one of which was that the highest spiritual office had become a matter of barter and sale, with the high priest keeping anything over the required tribute. In the gospels there are two living high priests, Caiaphas and his father-in-law Annas.

334 BC Alexander the Great defeats Persia which gave him control of all Asia Minor; Alexander turns southward to Egypt, founds city of Alexandria. Jewish influence in Alexandria was strong in the founding of the city, and Alexander himself assigned a place to Jewish colonists and admitted them to full citizenship. It is during this time that some of the Jews begin becoming **Hellenists**, that is, they accept the Greek culture even to the point of not being able to speak Hebrew or Aramaic.

324 BC Alexander the Great dies at age of 32, leaving no heir to his kingdom. His kingdom is divided among his four generals (cp Daniel 8:19-22) : Ptolemy ruled Egypt / southern Syria, Antigonus ruled northern Syria / western Babylonia, Lysimachus ruled Thrace / western Asia Minor, and Cassander ruled Macedonia / Greece. Seleucus I soon thereafter conquered the land ruled by Antigonus and absorbed Lysimachus' area as well. The constant hostilities between Ptolemy (Egypt) and Seleucide (Syria) with the area of Israel (Palestine) in between them kept the Palestine area under the dominion of one, then the other.

Because of a great library being built in which a copy of all known books were being collected, the OT was translated into Greek (**the Septuagint**, or **LXX**) during the reign of Ptolemy Philadelphus (285 - 246 BC). One author states that most of the times when the NT quotes the OT, the quote is from the LXX rather than from the Hebrew scriptures. Note also that in many places the translation is very poorly done, and evidences of the translator's own private interpretation is shown throughout.

The Talmud ("teaching") has its beginnings around 300 BC. This is a body of Hebrew civil and canonical laws based on **the Torah** (Law) of Moses. It is a condensation of the thinking of the rabbis from about 300 BC - 500 AD. The Talmud consists of **the Mishnah** (the traditional oral law deduced from the written law of Moses itself) and **the Gemara** (a commentary on these legal traditions, written in Aramaic). Closely connected with the Talmud is **the Midrash**, the earliest synagogue sermons in Hebrew and Aramaic, expounding the Hebrew OT and flourished between 100 BC - 300 AD.

As the wars between the Ptolemies and the Seleucidae continued, the land became taxed very heavily and the rulers became despots. While supported by the ruling class, they were never accepted by the general public of which they demanded obeisance. Jesus alluded to them when He said the kings of the Gentiles call themselves "benefactors", for the Gk word euergetes (benefactor) was one of their titles (Luke 22:24-26).

198 BC Egypt was beaten and Palestine comes under the rule of Syria again, with Seleucus IV being ruler.

175 BC Seleucus dies and is succeeded by his brother, Antiochus IV. Although known as Antiochus Epiphanes ("the manifest god", his official title), many called him Epimanes ("the mad-man"). Some of Antiochus' sacrileges included selling a large number of the Jews into slavery, plundering the temple's treasury and converting the temple into a shrine of Olympian Zeus. On Dec 15, 168 BC the image of the god was set upon its alter and a sow was sacrificed to it ten days later. Heathen alters were erected throughout Palestine and the Jews were compelled to worship at heathen feasts. The death penalty was inflicted for possessing or reading the Torah, and Sabbath observance and circumcision was forbidden. The Jews revolted to this under the leadership of an old priest, Mattathias, then under his son Judas (nicknamed Maccabeus, "The Hammer"). Under the Maccabees the Jews remained a free commonwealth until Rome possessed the land in 63 BC.

134 - 104 BC the reign of John Hyrcanus during the Maccabean period, during which time the conflicting parties of the Pharisees, Sadducees and Essenes came into existence. **The Pharisees** were apparently successors to the Hasidim ("the pious") who stood true to the law under Antiochus Epiphanes' rule of the Jews in 168 BC. They were the strictest sect of the Jews. They left fighting for the Maccabean wars when the struggle ceased to be for religious liberty and became political. Some of their beliefs: they held to sovereign foreordination that was consistent with free-will, the immortality of the soul, a literal resurrection, the existence of spirits, and future judgement with rewards for the righteous and punishment for the condemned. In the beginning they were the best people in the nation, men of strong religious character. As time went, it became popular to be a Pharisee and the standards were lowered and externalized. John the Baptist and Jesus called them snakes, and the NT pictures them as self-righteous and hypocritical, observing the minute parts of the law but denying the more important things. It is worthy to note that Paul was a Pharisee prior to his conversion, as was Gamaliel his teacher. One author summarizes: "They were rigid legalistic separatists, with watchwords of prayer, repentance and charitable

giving. From an admirable beginning in the first of Maccabean suffering, they gradually degenerated into empty, unprincipled religionists in Jesus' day." *The Sadducees* were chiefly aristocratic, worldly-minded priests who obeyed the letter of the law but denied the resurrection, angels and spirits, and a future retribution. They were comparatively few in number but were powerful since they were mainly comprised of rich, educated, and influential men. While the Pharisees added much to the law in interpreting it, the Sadducees maintained the "scriptures only", and that men could privately interpret it. They denied foreordination, holding it to be inconsistent with man's free will. Josephus states they believed God was indifferent to our lifestyle, whether it be good or evil. *The Essenes* were a monastic sect rather than a ruling party as the Pharisees and Sadducees. Very little was known of these people until the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in 1947. They numbered about 4000 and were devoted to an ascetic lifestyle. They formed small communities (cp monasteries) to avoid ceremonial defilement, and whoever became a member gave up all possessions to it. Lifestyle: they read the law of Moses daily / nightly, their food and clothing were plain, they passed the day in farming or other useful industry, and had no money since all their needs were met within their group. When they travelled, they would stay with the brethren.

c. 110 BC Khirbet Qumran, headquarters of the Essenes on the NW shores of the Dead Sea founded; flourished until about 37 BC. There is a revival of the Khirbet Qumran during the ministry of John the Baptist and Jesus.

1 BC - 70 AD many of the Dead Sea scrolls date from this period