The Period between the Testaments
from A Newcomer’s Guide to the Bible by Michael C. Armour

The centuries between the last Old Testament prophets and the opening of the New Testament brought vast change to the Middle East. When Malachi died, the Persian empire still held sway over the eastern Mediterranean and the lands of the Tigris-Euphrates Valley. But two upstart powers to the west were beginning to exert themselves.

The first to gain prominence was Greece, which swept through Canaan under its legendary leader, Alexander the Great. He subdued the entire region, including Egypt, before turning against cities east of the Euphrates. After pressing all the way to India, Alexander died suddenly and unexpectedly, throwing his kingdom into disarray. There was no plan for someone to succeed him, and his generals ended up dividing the empire among themselves.

The Jews under Greek Rule

In this division a family known as the Seleucids took over the area along the northern reaches of the Euphrates River, as well as adjoining regions such as Syria and Canaan (whose name gradually changed to Palestine). Another Greek family, the Ptolemys, established control of Egypt. Relationships between the Seleucids and the Ptolemys were often strained, which put Jerusalem and the Jews in a precarious position. Judea (as the old territory of Judah became known) was situated halfway between the center of Seleucid power and the capital from which the Ptolemys ruled. Even though they were initially under Seleucid control, the Jews were also the first to be attacked if the Ptolemys marched northward. As a consequence, the leaders in Jerusalem had to maintain a delicate balancing act in their diplomacy.

Greek rule also posed another problem for Jewish leadership. Greek dynasties always pushed Greek culture and customs on people they ruled. Many Jews, impressed with the achievements of Greek philosophy and science, found Greek ways appealing. Others saw their own Jewish heritage at risk if they adopted Greek outlooks and manners. After all, God had destroyed the independence of Israel and Judah in the past because they indiscriminately compromised with paganism. Had the nation not learned its lesson? Was it still willing to flirt with God’s displeasure by turning to pagan ways once more?

Influential families found themselves on both sides of this debate. Eventually this resulted in a divided camp in Jerusalem, with two different parties striving to control Jewish religion and politics. Those who were open to non-Jewish customs and practices were known as the Sadducees. Their opponents, the people who insisted on a strict observance of the Law of Moses and who tried to distance themselves from Greek influence, were called Pharisees.
The Jews under Roman Rule

In time the Jews were able to gain their independence by overthrowing their Greek political masters. One of the Seleucid rulers, Antiochus Epiphanes, outraged the Jews by personally sacrificing a sow on the altar at the temple in Jerusalem. Under the Law of Moses pork was forbidden as a food for the Jews. To slay a pig on the altar was therefore an act of absolute sacrilege. Under a family called the Maccabees, the Jews rose up in revolt. Spurred on by their fury at Antiochus, they equipped themselves well as warriors and won a hard-fought freedom.

Still, their independence remained threatened so long as they stood between the warring Seleucids and Ptolemys. Looking for allies, they turned to a new emerging power in the Mediterranean, the Romans. Battle by battle the Romans were unseating the Greeks and taking over their dominions. Rome’s protection had a price, however, and the Jews eventually lost their freedom in the bargain.

Now a new balancing act confronted Jewish leaders. As with the Greeks, power struggles were constantly underway among the Romans. The Jews had to be adroit in deciding which Roman leaders to align with, which ones to resist. Fortunately, they chose the winning side when they allied themselves with Julius Caesar as he moved to solidify his position. Once he prevailed, Caesar rewarded the Jews by granting them special privileges, including the right to exempt themselves from pagan festivals and activities that might violate their conscience. But the Romans exercised an ironclad political control of Jerusalem, and Jewish freedom was a thing of the past.

While the Jews retained control of the temple and their religion, the Romans parceled out Jewish lands to various kings and governors. Many of these rulers were cruel, if not insane. One of the most notorious was a king named Herod the Great, who ruled toward the end of the first century B.C. Knowing that the people hated him, he set out to win them over by enlarging the temple in Jerusalem. Poverty and lack of leadership had prevented the Jews from restoring the temple to the splendor it had known under Solomon. But Herod announced plans to expand and enhance the temple so that it would overshadow even Solomon’s splendid structure.

Temple and Synagogue

It took 46 years to accomplish this ambitious undertaking, but in its final form the temple was one of the most impressive buildings in the ancient world. It contained so much glistening marble that travelers, approaching Jerusalem from a distance, sometimes mistook it for snow covering the top of the hills. Sadly, the completed temple stood only a few years before the Romans leveled it, along with the rest of Jerusalem. The temple was in its moments of greatest glory during the years that Jesus walked its courts. And the earliest Christians gathered in the porticoes of this temple for worship and prayer.

Yet, for all its importance, the temple was no longer the most common center of Jewish worship. On a weekly basis, or even more frequently, Jewish families met in a building called a synagogue, which closely resembled a small modern church. Synagogues first appeared in the lands to which the Assyrians and Babylonians relocated the Jews. With the temple no longer available to them, these exiled Jews sought an alternate place at which they could worship and preserve their Hebrew heritage.
Meanwhile other Jewish families left Judea at their own initiative, and they, too, built synagogues. They typically moved to Asia Minor, Egypt, and elsewhere, sometimes to escape an invading army, on other occasions to pursue trade and business. By the time of Jesus millions of Jews lived outside of Palestine. The Jews in a given locale gathered at a synagogue every Sabbath day to hear instruction from Scripture. The leaders of the synagogue, usually known as elders, also served as overseers who watched out for the well-being and needs of the local Jewish community.

So successful were these synagogues that Jews in Palestine began to build synagogues of their own. There were dozens of them in any city of significance, some identified with the Sadducees, others with the Pharisees. The teacher in a synagogue was known as a rabbi, and he went through extensive schooling to master the Law of Moses.

**Scribes and Pharisees**

Working closely with the rabbis were specially trained men called scribes. Their job was originally to make transcriptions of the Bible by hand. Each synagogue needed a copy of the works of Moses, a project that might take months or even years for a scribe to complete. Because they spent so much time copying the Bible, scribes also became experts in what it said.

This led people to view the scribes as legal specialists. Whenever a judicial decision turned on a fine point of Jewish law, the elders of the synagogues and the courts in Jerusalem asked respected scribes for their opinion. Gradually the scribes came to be as highly regarded for their knowledge of the law as for their dedication to copying Scripture. In time the scribes moved beyond merely explaining the law and began issuing decrees about how to apply it.

For example, Moses had said that no one was to work or to carry a burden on the Sabbath. The scribes interpreted this to mean that no one with a wooden leg could wear it on the Sabbath. Nor could a doctor call on sick patients during the Sabbath hours. Of course, neither of those provisions are found in the Law of Moses. But the scribes made such regulations just as binding as the words of Moses himself.

The Pharisees, with their deep concern about keeping the Law carefully, were especially inclined to accept such binding regulations. They associated themselves closely with the scribes, and in the New Testament we see them working together. Jesus Himself was often the target of attack by the scribes and Pharisees, for he disagreed with many of their regulations.

**Political Climate**

Thus, as we move to the New Testament the social, political, and religious landscape of Israel is quite different from what it had been near the end of the Old Testament. Jerusalem is under Roman rule. The broader region of Judea (the name now given to the area once controlled by Judah) is the domain of Herod the Great. Jerusalem is prosperous and filled with splendid structures, the temple sitting among them like a crown jewel. There is a high priest, an appointee of the Romans, who is as much a political leader as a spiritual one. And synagogues are everywhere, with rabbis and scribes among the most highly respected people in the community.

At the same time there is a deep spirit of unrest beneath this splendor and prosperity. Roman rule is not popular, and Herod and his kind are detested. Interest in the Messianic promises is running high. People are longing for the Messiah to appear, set up his kingdom, and throw the Romans out. Both Herod and the Romans know about this Messianic fervor, and at times it makes them nervous. They watch every political movement with a wary eye. They cannot take a chance that someone might appear, claiming to be the Messiah, and seize a large enough following to mount a serious military revolt.
Geographically there are new names to contend with as we open the New Testament. As we have seen, Canaan has become Palestine. The old lands of Israel and Judah are now divided into three distinct sectors. To the north is Galilee. It lies along the western shore of a large inland sea. Fed by the upper Jordan River, this lake is known in the New Testament as the Sea of Galilee. It is here, in Galilee, that Jesus lived most of His life and did most of His work.

Just south of Galilee is a region known as Samaria, held for centuries by a foreign people called the Samaritans. They were transplanted there by the Assyrians. Even though the Samaritans accepted the Law of Moses, the Jews detested them. The Jews went out of their way to walk around Samaria rather than pass through its towns. And the Samaritans were denied the right to worship in Jerusalem. As a result, the Samaritans built a temple of their own near Samaria and worshiped there.

Further south is Judea, the stronghold of first century Judaism. Herod the Great had his palace there. Judea was also the residence of the Roman governor. Day-to-day life in Israel was controlled by a national council called the Sanhedrin, which doubled as a governing body and the supreme court of the land. The Sanhedrin traditionally had about 70 members, who had the same respect and esteem that the Romans accorded members of their Senate.

As we move into the New Testament, all these places and institutions weave their way into the story. The social and political landscape of the New Testament is quite different from the one we have seen in the Old Testament. In terms of literary style, the New Testament is also a sharp departure from the way in which the Old Testament was written. From its opening pages, however, the New Testament stresses that its themes and events build and enlarge on God’s promises to Abraham and Israel. The New Testament presents itself, not as a break with the Old Testament, but as an extension of it.