THE EQUIP INSTITUTE
Theme: Christian Story
Topic: OT Survey – The Intertestamental Period and Second Temple Judaism
Fall 2026

Introduction

The Equip Institute exists to equip members of Taylors First Baptist Church to think rightly about God and his Word for the sake of living rightly before God in his world. Our theme for this fall is Christian Story. This session focuses on two overlapping topics: the Intertestamental Period and Second Temple Judaism.

The Intertestamental Period

Christians sometimes refer to the "400 years of silence," when there were no prophets whose words were recorded as Scripture. This period dates from the writing of Malachi (early 400s BC) and the beginning of John the Baptist's public ministry (late-20s AD). The 400 years of silence roughly overlaps with what is called the Intertestamental Period. Politically, the Intertestamental Period was an era when numerous empires reigned over the Jews at various times. One of the results was the rise of Hellenistic Judaism, when the Jews were dispersed throughout the Greek-speaking world and Greek functioned as the universal language of the public square.

We call the period from 597 to 538 BC the "Babylonian Exile." During this time, the Babylonian Empire conquered Judah, and most Jews were deported to other parts of the empire. In 539, the Medo-Persians conquered the Babylonians. A year later, Cyrus the Great (ruled 560–530) allowed Jewish exiles to return to Judah. We only know a little about these early Jewish repatriates, though we know reconstruction of the Temple was begun in 536 and stalled out because of local Gentile opposition. Zerubbabel, a descendant of David, was appointed governor of Judah. The prophets Haggai and Zechariah were active during these years. The Temple was completed in 516, during the reign of Darius (ruled 522–486)

During the reign of Darius's successor, Xerxes (ruled 486–464), whom the Jews called Ahasuerus, the events of Esther took place. During the reign of Xerxes's son, Artaxerxes (ruled 464–423), Ezra and Nehemiah returned

to Jerusalem. Malachi and Joel were active as prophets during these later Jewish repatriations. The Intertestamental Period officially began around 420, when the book of Malachi was likely written.

The Persians continued to rule over most of the Middle East, including Israel, until 332. The Jews enjoyed relatively autonomy, led by governors and high priests, though under the ultimate rulership of the Persians. By the fourth century, however, the Medo-Persian Empire was in cultural disarray and politically weakened, plagued by court intrigue and royal assassinations.

In 332, Alexander the Great conquered the Persians. This marked the beginning of Hellenistic Judaism. Following Alexander's death in 323, his empire was divided among four generals, including Ptolemy, who was based in Egypt. The Ptolemies ruled Israel for about 125 years. They kept a firm control over Israel and limited the freedom of the Jews to practice their faith, promoting instead the worship of the Greek gods. Many Jews relocated to Egypt, leading to Alexandria becoming the largest Jewish center outside of Israel. The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the OT, was compiled in Alexandria around 130.

The Ptolemies warred for decades with the Seleucids, who descended from Seleucus, another of Alexander's generals who was based in Syria. The Seleucids gained control of Israel in 198 and ruled the region for almost 40 years. At first, the Jews welcomed Seleucid rule because Israel enjoyed greater autonomy than they had under the Ptolemies. But within a few years the Seleucids began persecuting the Jews and requiring their total conformity to Hellenistic religion. Persecution reached its climax under Antiochus Epiphanes (ruled 175–164), who forbade circumcision and Jewish feasts, required Jews to worship the Greek gods, plundered the Temple, and even sacrificed swine on the Temple's altar. Many Jews interpreted the latter event as the "abomination of desolation" that Daniel had prophesied about in Daniel chapters 9–11.

From 167–160, the Jews revolted against Seleucid rule. The leader was a priest named Mattathias and his five sons. Under the leadership of Mattathias's oldest son, Judas Maccabeus (190–160), Israel gained its independence. Judas restored all Jewish rituals and rid the Temple of all evidence of Hellenistic religion. Hannukah commemorates the Maccabean Revolt and the

cleansing of the Temple. The Maccabean family, who became known as the Hasmoneans, ruled Israel for about a century. At first, Israel prospered, but following the death of Judas in 160, the Hasmonean rulers became increasingly corrupt and some even promoted idolatry. Things were so bad that in 63 BC, several Jewish leaders asked the Roman general Pompey to occupy Israel and restore order.

Pompey offended his Jewish allies by entering the Holy of Holies, which began the cycle of mistrust between Jews and Romans that we find throughout the New Testament. On the one hand, Rome allowed the Jews to practice their faith freely and not submit to Roman religion. On the other hand, Rome imposed strict taxes on the Jews and established garrisons throughout Israel. In 37 BC, Rome installed Herod the Great as the king of Israel, but he was a puppet who was allied with Rome and who collaborated with the Roman governors. With funds collected from Roman taxation, Herod undertook numerous building projects throughout Israel, most famously expanding the Temple until it was double its original size.

Second Temple Judaism

While Bible scholars are interested in the historical events of the Intertestamental Period, they tend to focus even more on what is called Second Temple Judaism. Second Temple Judaism refers to the beliefs and practices of the Jews during the period between when the Temple was rebuilt (516 BC) and destroyed (70 AD). Second Temple Judaism provides the cultural and religious background for the ministry of Jesus, as well as the subsequent rise of Christianity as a separate faith from Judaism.

The Second Temple period was a time of religious transition in Israel. In the region that had previously been the Northern Kingdom of Israel, the Samaritans emerged as a separate people group distinct from the Jews as early as the 300s. The Samaritans affirmed the Pentateuch, but they rejected the prophetic writings and the wisdom literature. They worshiped Yahweh alongside various pagan deities and rejected Jerusalem as the royal city.

Among the Jews, the books of the Hebrew Scriptures were all completed and in circulation throughout this period. Like the Samaritans, all Jews affirmed the Pentateuch as Scripture, but other sections of the Hebrew Scriptures were rejected by some groups. In addition to

Scripture, numerous apocryphal books were in circulation, some of which were widely read and appreciated. The most famous are 1 and 2 Maccabees, which recount the Maccabean Revolt and its aftermath, and Ecclesiasticus, a wisdom book that is modeled after Proverbs. These works were later included in the Apocrypha, which came together in the second and third centuries AD and was declared part of the OT canon by the Roman Catholic Church at the Council of Trent in 1545–1563.

Two related institutions developed during the period of Second Temple Judaism that continued to be important during the time of Jesus and beyond. Scribes were a scholarly class that was tasked with interpreting and teaching Torah. Because of the changing status of the Temple and the related sacrifices, scribal teaching became increasingly important and authoritative in forming Jewish identity. Jews consider Ezra to be the father of the Scribes. The earliest known synagogues date to the third century BC. It is likely that synagogues were originally homes where Jews met to pray together and study Torah during periods when the Temple was inaccessible. Over time, scribes became responsible for the teaching in synagogues.

Within Judaism, there were at least five groups, each of which was characterized by different emphases. The first group were the Essenes, who lived in tight-knit communities throughout the region. The Essenes believed they were the true remnant of Israel and were waiting for the Messiah to establish an eternal kingdom where they would rule alongside him. The Essenes emphasized ritual purity and likely invented the rite of baptism, though there is no evidence that John the Baptist was an Essene. They held a fatalistic view of God's sovereignty, leaving little room for either God's grace or human freedom. The most famous Essene community was Qumran, where the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in 1947. There is no direct evidence of the Essenes in the NT.

The Sadducees were a small but influential group of wealthy families from a priestly background. The Sadducees comprised most of the Sanhedrin, controlled the High Priesthood, and collaborated closely with the Roman authorities (including in Jesus's crucifixion). They were unpopular with other Jews and were sometimes rivals with the Pharisees. The Sadducees believed that only the Pentateuch was Scripture, and in general were more concerned with political power and commerce than

other groups of Jews. They rejected the resurrection of the dead and were not awaiting a messiah. They emphasized human freedom and had little to say about God's sovereignty or His grace. There is no evidence in the NT of any Sadducees becoming followers of Jesus.

The Pharisees were close allies of the scribes who wanted to see Israel renewed spiritually through faithful interpretation of Scripture and a commitment to ritual purity. If the Sadducees were identified with the Temple, the Pharisees were identified with the synagogue. They accepted the inspiration of the entire Hebrew Scriptures. In addition to the Torah, they also emphasized hundreds of additional teachings that sought to further apply the biblical commands. The Pharisees emphasized God's grace more than their contemporaries, but they also tended toward legalism because of their extra-biblical teachings. The Pharisees were awaiting a messiah whom they believed would conquer God's enemies and reinstitute an eternal Davidic kingdom on earth. They were strongly opposed to Roman occupation and believed the Sadducees had chosen the path of political influence over religious faithfulness. While most Pharisees rejected Jesus and His message, some of the earliest Jewish followers of Jesus were Pharisees who recognized Him as the Messiah.

The Zealots were a militant faction of Jews founded by Judas of Galilee in 6 AD. Zealots believed that God alone was Israel's true ruler, and they rejected the rule of any foreign power as enslavement. They believed that paying taxes to Rome and submitting to Caesar was a form of idolatry. Between 6 AD and their final stand at a fortress near the Dead Sea called Masada in 73 AD, the Zealots were responsible for numerous instances of armed resistance and guerrilla warfare against Rome. The Zealots helped provoke the anti-Roman sentiments among the Jews that led to the First Jewish Revolt (66–70AD), when Jerusalem was sacked and the Temple was destroyed. One of Jesus's twelve disciples was Simon the Zealot.

The final group was definitely the largest: everyday Jews. This is also the group we know the least about because they did not leave written records. What we do know is that many Jews worshiped Yahweh, resented Roman occupation, participated in the various festivals and feasts, and attended synagogue. Some were clearly awaiting a messiah, though they were also confused about some of the details. There is also evidence many Jews resented

the Sadducees and rejected the strict expectations of the Pharisees. Most of Jesus's earliest Jewish followers were everyday Jews who were not tied to a particular movement.

Recommended Resources

The New Complete Works of Josephus (Kregel, 1999). Includes *The Jewish Antiquities*, which was Josephus's history of Israel prior to the Jewish War in 66–70 AD.

Walter C. Kaiser Jr. and Paul D. Wegner, *A History of Israel: From the Bronze Age Through the Jewish Wars*, rev. ed. (B&H Academic, 2016). This is an excellent college-level textbook about the history of Israel. The last section focuses on the topics we discussed in this lesson.

N. T. Wright and Michael F. Bird, *The New Testament in its World: An Introduction to the History, Literature, and Theology of the First Christians* (Zondervan, 2019). This is an outstanding seminary-level textbook. Part Two covers the topics we discussed in this lesson.

Daniel M. Gurtner, "Between the Testaments," *The Gospel Coalition Bible Commentary*, https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/between-the-testaments/.