

Between the Testaments

Source: <https://zondervanacademic.com/blog/what-happened-between-testaments/>

4 Things You Need to Know to Read the New Testament Well

Have you ever wondered what happened between the Old and New Testaments?

If you've ever flipped from the last page of the Old Testament to the first page of the new—you've just skipped over 400 years of history with that single page turn.

What exactly happened during these 400 years? Who was in control? What people groups shaped the experience of the earliest Christians?

In those four hundred years, the Pharisees and Sadducees, synagogues, Roman governors, and the family of Herod emerged onto the scene. None were present in the Old Testament. Where did they come from?

And countless events not mentioned in the New Testament had a profound impact on the world of Jesus, such as the Maccabean revolt, the rise of the Essenes, the dominance of the Greek language, and the rise of the Roman Empire.

So what happened between the Old and New Testaments? Here are four things you need to know to get started.

1. Who were the Greeks?

You probably already know about the Assyrians, the Babylonians, and Persians, because they figure prominently in the Old Testament. The Assyrians and Babylonians emptied the land and carried the Israelites into exile. And the Persians allowed a remnant to return.

But the Assyrians, Babylonians, and Persians weren't the only outside groups to shape the history of the Jewish people during the intertestamental period.

The history of the Jewish people was also affected by both the Romans and the Greeks before them.

Here's what happened.

After the Persians were defeated by Alexander, the Greeks invaded Palestine. With them they brought their language and culture—their architecture, names, styles of clothing, and entertainment.

The influence of the Greeks was long-lasting: the entire New Testament was written in Greek. And when Paul wrote his letter to the Romans, who spoke Latin, he still chose to write in Greek.

For the Jewish people—who were to be set apart—the coming of Greek culture represented a moral and spiritual crisis. How were they to deal with the invading culture?

They wrestled with this question up to and during the time the events of the New Testament took place. And it remains an important question we must wrestle with today.

But the story of the Greeks doesn't end with Alexander. Alexander's empire broke into four parts, two of which are important for understanding the context of the New Testament.

The first group—the Ptolemies—were centered in Egypt and ruled over Palestine. They treated the Jews well. But eventually the Seleucids—the second group—took control, and they were brutal. They forced pagan religion on the Jews and set up an altar to Zeus in the temple courts.

Many people objected to the persecution and rebelled, and this rebellion is known as the Maccabean revolt. Through this revolt, Jews gained independence, which lasted until 63BC, when the Romans took control—but the charged atmosphere between Jewish culture and secular Greek culture remained well into the time of the New Testament.

2. Who were the Romans?

You can't read the New Testament without encountering Rome.

Rome's rule was ever-present—every person mentioned in the New Testament felt the pressure of the empire.

Rome got its start centuries before the events of the New Testament took place. Rome was founded in the eighth century BC and became a republic in the fifth century BC. In the first century BC, Pompey conquered the eastern Mediterranean, including Palestine, and Julius Caesar conquered Gaul. Rome dominated Palestine from that point on.

During a struggle for power, Julius Caesar was assassinated, and his adoptive son, Octavian, took control. Octavian was known as Augustus—the same Caesar Augustus we read about in the story of Jesus' birth in Luke 2:1–2:

“In those days, Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.)”

The time of peace and economic stability during Augustus's reign allowed Christianity to grow and flourish—Christian missionaries could travel widely on Rome's transportation networks and spread the gospel throughout the empire.

A later emperor, Tiberius, ruled during the time of Jesus ministry. And Nero ruled during the ministry of both Paul and Peter.

The Roman governors appear regularly throughout the New Testament as well:

Pontius Pilate presided over the trial of Jesus

3. Who were the Pharisees and Sadducees?

The Old Testament closes without a mention of either the Pharisees or Sadducees.

But in the New Testament, and especially in the Gospels, they are the main antagonists.

Who were they, and where did they come from?

If we rewind the clock back to the Maccabean period, we see the Jewish rulers becoming more and more corrupt.

The early supporters of these rulers turned against them, and became known as the Pharisees. Those who remained supportive became the Sadducees. They were high-ranking priests and aristocratic laymen centered in Jerusalem.

The Pharisees and the Sadducees hated each other, but they found a common enemy in Jesus.

4. Who was Herod?

The Romans allowed native peoples to rule the lands they conquered.

In Palestine, they allowed Herod to rule.

Herod was a clever politician and an efficient king—but very cruel and constantly suspicious. He had three of his wives and three of his sons killed.

Jesus was born under Herod the Great's rule, and his family fled to Egypt to escape his massacre.

Herod is best known for his building projects in Palestine, the greatest of which was the temple in Jerusalem—the site of numerous scenes from the New Testament.

Herod died in 4BC, and the Romans divided his kingdom into four parts. In Galilee, Herod Antipas ruled—where Jesus grew up and spend most of his public ministry.