

# **In What Ways Does a Knowledge of Intertestamental History and Literature Shed Light on the New Testament Gospels, which a Knowledge of the Old Testament Books Alone Could Not?**

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In order to have a better understanding of the Gospels, one has to have more than a knowledge of the Old Testament record alone. In addition, there needs to be some understanding of the four hundred years that elapsed from the writings of the prophet Malachi to the coming of Jesus Christ, the duration known as the intertestamental period. 1 During this period important historical events occurred, and a considerable amount of extra-biblical literature was written, both of which had a significant effect on the Mediterranean world and consequently influenced the religious thinking, customs, government, and lifestyle of those living in the first century era. 2

## Alexander The Great and Hellenisation

Alexander the Great was born of royal lineage around the year 356 B.C. 3 At the age of 14 he studied under the philosopher Aristotle who had a profound influence upon him; instructing him not only in philosophy but also in politics. After the assassination of his father in 336 B.C. Alexander was made the new Macedonian king. 4 Between the years 334 B.C. and 331 He led his army eastward into victory over the Persian empire conquering them in three major battles. 5 In 327 B.C. Alexander reached India and eventually died in Babylon in 323 B.C. 6 Alexander promoted Greek culture everywhere he conquered. When his armies took Palestine from the Persians in 332 B.C., they required the Jews to adopt Greek language and customs. 7 One of the most notable effects that Hellenism was to have upon the Jews was the translation of the Hebrew Old Testament into the Greek language ( the Septuagint LXX). 8 By the time of Christ it had become the most common translation of the Old Testament. 9 Drane observes that many Greeks and Romans became attracted to Judaism because the Old Testament Scriptures were now in their own language. 10

After Alexander's death his field marshals struggled for dominion of the lands they had conquered. These leaders and their successors (the Ptolemies of Egypt and the Seleucids of Syria) warred among themselves until the Roman conquest began in 197 B.C. 11 After the death of Antiochus of the Seleucid Empire in 187 B.C, he was succeeded by his son Antiochus IV (Epiphanes) in 175 B.C. In pursuing his desire to establish Hellenism, Antiochus prohibited the Jews from practising their worship and laws, and ordered them to conform to the worship of Zeus. The climax of his campaign was to establish a pagan altar in the place of the alter in the Jerusalem temple in 167 B.C. 12 1 Maccabees 1:54, 59 records this event, and Jesus refers to it by using a phrase that comes from the LXX version of Daniel 12:11 "The abomination of desolation" (Mark 13:14), to explain a future desecration of a similar kind. 13 Bruce points out that many Jews inevitably refused to comply with the wishes of Antiochus and as a result suffered martyrdom. 14 Other Jews took up direct resistance, finding leaders in the priest Mattathias of the Hasmonaean family, and his five sons, of whom Judas Maccabaeus was eventually to emerge as leader. Their efforts of resistance were successful and the prohibition of Jewish religion was abandoned. 15 In honour of the rededication of the temple in 164 B.C., the Jews instituted the Festival of Dedication described in 1 Maccabees 4:59. It is this annual festival that Jesus is present at in John 10:22-42. 16 Having gained religious freedom the

Maccabees continued to grow in strength and went on to found a dynasty which controlled Judah until the Roman conquest of 63 B.C.E. 17

### The Roman Presence

Throughout the Gospels the dominating presence of the Roman Empire is clearly seen. Luke connects the birth of Christ with the decree issued by the Emperor Augustus (Luke 2:1). It is under a Roman magistrate that Christ was sentenced to death (Matt. 27:11-26), and by a form of Roman execution that the sentence was carried out (Matt. 27:31). 18 The Romans demanded two primary requirements of its people: that they pay taxes and accept the government of Rome. Any attempt to rebel was met with extreme severity. Evidence of this is seen in the writings of Josephus, as well as in the Gospels (Luke 13:1). 19 Since the Roman domination of Palestine in 63 B.C. the Jews had to pay taxes, but when Judea was added as a Roman province, they were also expected to pay provincial taxes. When collecting their money the Romans wisely selected the lowest persons from among the natives of the country so that the taxpayers' hatred would be turned against these "traitors," and not against Rome itself. 20 Hatred towards tax collectors manifested itself in many ways, one of which was that their testimony was not permitted in a Jewish court of law (c.f. Mishnah, Nedarim 3:4). 21 The Gospels indicate that the problem of taxation was an issue that occupied the minds of all those under Roman rule (Matt. 17:24-27; Mark 12:13-17; Luke 20:21-26). 22

### The Herods

The Herods emerge as significant people in intertestamental history and an awareness of their origins and activity helps to shed light on references to them in the Gospels. The rule of the Herods began with Antipater, governor of Idumea in 67 B.C. 23 In 48 B.C. he was given Roman citizenship and appointed procurator of Judea by Caesar as a reward for assisting Caesar in civil war against Pompey. 24 Antipater appointed his two sons to govern; Phasael governed Jerusalem and Herod governed over Galilee. By 40 B.C. Herod's power had increased to such a degree that he was appointed king of Judea by Caesar and the Roman senate. 25 Herod's unstable and jealous nature, sparked by rumour of a rival king, is seen in Matthew chapter 2 with the massacre of the infants of Bethlehem. 26 After his death in A.D. 40 his kingdom went to his three sons; Archelaus ruled Judaea and Samaria (Matt. 2:22), Antipas ruled Galilee and Peraea, and Philip ruled over his father's North East regions (Luke 3:1). 27

The Herodians are mentioned throughout the Gospels (eg. Mark 3:6; 12:13; Matt. 22:16) as a group who support the Herodian dynasty. Although there is not much detailed information on this party it can be said that theologically and politically they appear to have been in agreement with the Sadducees. They also appear as a group who are hostile to Jesus. 28

### Pharisees and Sadducees

The Pharisees and the Sadducees are the two prominent Jewish religious groups who appear in the Gospels but are not mentioned in the Old Testament. The actual origin of these two groups is somewhat obscure, although it is generally believed that the Pharisees arose from the pious party or Hasidim, and the Sadducees from the Hellenists during the Maccabean revolt. 'Pharisee' means 'separatist', and it is possible that the name originated by the groups' practice of separating tithes and offerings required for the temple, or because they disassociated themselves from other Jews. The name 'Sadducee' is probably derived from Zadok (the priest who lived in the time of David and Solomon). 29

During the reign of Alexander Jannaeus the Pharisees took a prominent part in public affairs. The first mention of them as a party occurs in Josephus in his account of the reign of John Hyrcanus (135-105 B.C.) where they appear as a very influential party. 30 It is through the Pharisees that the oral law was handed down and expanded, till finally codified in the Mishnah and eventually completed in the Talmud. 31 By the first century the Pharisees began to hold great reverence for this oral tradition. Although it was only originally intended to be supplementary to the Law of Moses, it eventually came to be viewed as equally authoritative and at times, even exceeded it. 32 Mark 7:1-23 is a good example of how highly the Pharisees

held this tradition. The issue is that of purity, as the Pharisees and Scribes object that Jesus' followers do not observe "the tradition of the elders" and eat with "impure hands" (v.5). This particular kind of custom is largely unknown in the Old Testament period and its appearance in the Gospel of Mark (and Matthew 15:1ff) can only be adequately explained by the assumption that some of the Jews had begun practising the custom somewhere in the intertestamental period. 33 It is possible that the practice was influenced by the coming of Hellenism into Palestine. 34 Although there were not many Pharisees in Jerusalem, they were well respected by the masses and depended on this continued support. This helps to explain much of the hostility that Jesus encounters from them when He attracts large crowds in the Gospels, primarily because of his miracles (eg. John 11:47-48) and His teaching (Mark 4:1ff.). 35 But despite the hostility of the Pharisees toward Jesus the common people were drawn to Him. One of the reasons to explain the popularity of Jesus is that much of his teaching actually agreed with what the Pharisees taught. He was a master teacher of the Law (Matt. 7:28-29), and His teaching on diet (Mark 7:1-9), and Sabbath keeping (Matt. 12:24-32) were in agreement with the Pharisees, and was therefore familiar to the people. 36

The Sadducees represented the party of the wealthy priests and their friends in the aristocracy. They combined traditional religious outlooks with politics. Their political position and sense of survival led them into an openness to Hellenistic cultural influences. After the coming of Rome, they encouraged collaboration with the ruling power and were concerned in maintaining the status-quo, which secured their position. 37 The principal agency of the Sadducees power was in the Sanhedrin, the supreme court of justice. This administrative and legal body consisted of 71 people, the majority of whom, including the high priest, were Sadducees. 38 Also influential in this organisation were the chief priests (Mark 14:53; Luke 22:66). 39 Guignebert observes that because of the restrictions that the Jews had experienced under the Greeks and the Romans the need for an authoritative internal organisation was felt to be necessary and eventually resulted in the establishment of the Sanhedrin. 40 Although the Rabbis of the Talmud believed that its origins could be traced from the time of Moses to their own times in an unbroken line, the earliest reliable evidence for its existence is under Antiochus the Great (223-187 B.C.). 41 Under the Hellenistic kings the influence of the Sanhedrin increased, and continued to do so at the beginning of the Maccabean revolt. Despite a slight decrease in power with Simon being established as high priest in 140 B.C., it increased in power again under the Romans between A.D. 6 - 41. By this time the influence of the Sanhedrin was widely respected and is referred to in the Gospels as an authoritative assembly (Mark 15:1). 42

### Synagogues

An understanding of intertestamental history is important when considering the establishment of the Jewish synagogue. 43 The origins of the synagogue can be discerned in the desire that the Jews of the Diaspora had in wanting a more permanent place of worship. 44 Although continuing to gather together and to pray and be instructed in teaching (c.f. Ezek. 8:1; 14:1) the need of a more permanent meeting place arose, eventually finding its full expression in the organised synagogues as portrayed in the New Testament Gospels. 45 Although no rigid architectural design was required, there are some features that all synagogues shared. For example, Josephus describes that synagogues were most commonly orientated toward Jerusalem. 46 The synagogue's of the Diaspora were often built near a source of water or had a supply of water kept in cisterns. 47 Most synagogue's were fitted with a platform with a reading stand for teaching, and also benches around the walls, and a 'chief seat' (described as Moses' seat in Matthew 23:2) for the one presiding. 48 It was from such a platform that Jesus speaks in Luke 4:16-27. 49 The synagogue served as a place for community affairs, a place of worship, and a centre for religious teaching. 50 Philo (20-B.C.-A.D. 45) labels synagogues as 'schools', in agreement with what the Gospels say about the teaching that was given in them (Luke 6:6; John 6:59). 51

### Messianic Expectations

Christian scholars have often declared that during the intertestamental period, and especially just prior to the birth of Jesus, the Jewish world was dominated by discussion and speculation about the Messiah. 52 But in recent times other scholars have felt that such a concept has been somewhat exaggerated. Ferguson observes how Christian scholars, looking back from their own perspective, are responsible for much of the

discussion of the messianic hope of the Jews, and have imposed upon the sources available more than what was originally implied. 53 Collins also disagrees that messianism was widespread and feels that the majority of references that scholars cite from this period contain only implicit reference to the Messiah rather than anything explicit. 54 But this is not to say that there was no anticipation of a coming Messiah or deliverer amongst the Jews prior to Christ. Collins does agree that a clearer and more explicit and developed form of messianic interest can be discerned with the rise of the community at Qumran, 55 and again in the first century B.C. E. with the Psalms of Solomon. 56 Freed observes the unequivocal messianic language of the Psalms of Solomon and points out how the word Messiah is used in an eschatological context. writer speaks of "the Messiah" (18:5) or "the Lord Messiah" (17:32; 18:7). 57 Concerning this latter phrase, Bruce observes that the same words are used of Christ in the angelic proclamation in Luke 2:11. 58 The Qumran community, like the writer of the Psalms of Solomon, also lived under a strong eschatological expectation. They looked forward to the arrival of a prophet and the Messiah's (anointed one's), and of Aaron (the eschatological priest) according to 1QS ix.9-11 and 4QTest. 59 Wise and Tabor point out that among the most interesting of the recently released Dead Sea Scrolls is the fragment 4Q521 written between 200 B.C.E and 70 C.E. This text speaks of a single Messiah, very much like the Christian Messiah, who will rule heaven and earth.60

### The Qumran Community

In addition to showing the level of the expectancy of a Messiah during the intertestamental period, the discovery of the scrolls at Qumran has shed new light on some of Jesus' words in the Gospels in a way that the Old Testament cannot. For example, where Jesus refers to the teaching "Love your neighbour and hate your enemy" (Matt. 5:43), no exact statement can be found in the Old Testament alone. But now a similar statement is known from Qumran (1Q i.9-11; ix.21-22). 61 Also, the use of "poor" as a religious term for the voluntary poor and humble (Matt. 5:3) may be illuminated by the similar use at Qumran (1QpHab xii.3, 6 10 and 1QH ii.32). 62 Flusser observes how the discovery of the scrolls also indicates that Jesus actually refers to the Qumran community in Luke 16:8. Flusser arrives at this conclusion by observing how the Dead Sea Scrolls show that the favourite self designation of the community was "the sons of light", the same term that Jesus uses in Luke 16:8. Flusser believes that Jesus was teaching His disciples not to engage in the extreme asceticism that the Qumran community practised. 63 Despite Jesus' apparent reference to them, other Gospel evidence suggests that He did not commend their separatism and exclusiveness. Unlike those at Qumran, He did not engage in their ascetic practices, nor did He condemn the temple and religious life of the people. 64 Concerning the former point, Flusser believes that Jesus makes an ironic reference in condemnation of the practices of the Qumran community in the parable of the unjust steward in Luke 16:1-9 and its application in verses 10-12. 65

With the victories of Alexander the Great, Hellenism swept through the ancient world both influencing, and at times, forcing itself as a lifestyle. Even with the victories of the Maccabees, and the later Roman domination, Hellenism continued to sustain an influence and is seen in the Gospels, most noticeably with the Sadducees and the establishment of the Sanhedrin. The Pharisees, however, tended to reject Hellenistic influence and arose from the pious party or Hasidim. The authority of the Roman Empire is seen throughout the Gospels demanding payment of taxes and obedience. In connection with the activity of Rome the Herods also emerge. There is no reference to the synagogue in the Old Testament and an understanding of intertestamental history is important when considering its establishment as an institution. It has been seen that although messianic expectation certainly existed in the intertestamental period, being discerned implicitly in most literature and explicitly in the Psalms of Solomon and the Qumran writings, some scholars have tended to over exaggerate how widespread it actually was. In addition to messianic exception, the Qumran writings have also helped to illuminate some of Jesus' words in the Gospels.

### ENDNOTES

1 J.I. Packer, M.C. Tenney, W. White, The World of the New Testament (Alton: Window Books, 1982), 3.

2 For the purpose of this essay historical background and literature that does not relate directly to the Gospels will be kept to a minimum.

3 Packer, Tenney and White, 47.

4 Ibid., 47-49.

5 J.P. McKay, B.D. Hill, J. Buckler, *A History of World Societies* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1988), 142. The three battles against the Persians that map the course of Alexander's march eastward are as follows: Granicus (334 B.C.), Issus (333 B.C.), and Gaugamela (331 B.C).

6 Ibid.

7 Packer, Tenney, and White, 91. Apparently many of the Jews accepted the rulership of their Hellenistic overlords reasonably well, as Jewish tradition portrays Alexander in a favourable light. Both Josephus and the Talmud mention that many of the Jews fought in his army.

8 C. F. Pfeiffer, *Between the Testaments* (London: Pickering & Inglis Ltd., 1965), 85.

9 Packer, Tenney and White, 55.

10 J. Drane, *Introducing the New Testament* (England: Lion Publishing, 1986), 24. It was partly because of the Septuagint that Jewish teachers were quick to take advantage of making proselytes, and often travelled great distances to do so. The Gospels record Jesus' observations of their activity (Matt. 23:15).

11 Packer, Tenney and White, 53-54.

12 F.F. Bruce, *New Testament History* (London: Oliphants, 1971), 4.

13 M.D. Hooker, *The Gospel According to Saint Mark* (London: A&C Black, 1991), 314.

14 Bruce, 4.

15 Ibid.

16 J. M. Freeman, *Manners and Customs of the Bible* (New Jersey: Logos International, 1972), 429. Freeman observes how in later times this festival was called "the Feast of Lights" on account of the custom of illuminating houses while celebrating it. This custom originates from the story of when the Jews drove the heathens out of the temple during which they found a solitary bottle of sacred oil, untouched by Gentile hands. This oil was consequently used for lighting the sacred lamps and it was claimed that by a miracle, the oil kept burning for eight days and therefore became the duration of this festival.

17 C.J. Roetzel, *The World That Shaped the New Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1985), 14.

18 Bruce, 1.

19 Packer, Tenney, and White, 82.

20 Ibid., 79-81. 21 Bruce, 174.

22 Packer, Tenney, and White 82.

23 J.D. Douglas, *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, part 2 (Leicester: IVP, 1980), 542.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid., 542-544.

26 Ibid., 544.

27 Ibid.

28 J.B. Green, S. McKnight, I.H. Marshall, Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels (Leicester: IVP, 1992), 325.

29 G.H. Box, Judaism in the Greek Period (London: Oxford University Press, 1945), 29.

30 Josephus, Ant. 13:288-300. Cited by G.H. Box, 49.

31 J. Bright, A History of Israel (London: SCM Press, 1967), 450.

32 Freeman, 364.

33 Green, McKnight, Marshall, 129. 34 Ibid. 35 Packer, Tenney, and White, 95.

36 Ibid.

37 E. Ferguson, Backgrounds of Early Christianity, 2nd. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), 486.

38 V.G. Beers, The Victor Handbook of Bible knowledge (Illinois: Victor Books, 1981), 539.

39 Green, McKnight, Marshall, 635-636. Although both Josephus and the Gospels speak of the chief priests as an identifiable party within Judaism there is insufficient information available to accurately discern their origins.

40 C. Guignebert, The Jewish World in the Time of Jesus (New York: University Books, 1965), 50.

41 Ibid., 51.

42 J.B. Green, S. McKnight, I.H. Marshall, 730.

43 "The word 'synagogue' is of Greek origin, meaning a gathering of people, or a congregation. The Hebrew word for such a gathering is keneseth." Pfeifer, 59.

44 Pfeifer, 59-60.

45 Bright, 23.

46 Josephus, Against Apion 2.10. Cited by Ferguson, 474.

47 Josephus, Ant. 14.10.23. Cited by Ferguson, 474.

48 Ferguson, 474.

49 Ibid.

50 R.H. Mounce, *Matthew* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers Inc., 1991), 35.

51 E.D. Freed, *The New Testament, A Critical Introduction*, 2nd. ed. (London: SCM Press, 1994), 28.

52 Guingnebert, 152.

53 Ferguson, 517.

54 J. J. Collins, *Judaism and Their Messiahs at the Turn of the Christian Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 98-101, 103-104, 106. Collins does recognise that the Old Testament concept of Davidic messianism was retained during this period but argues that this in itself did not necessarily bring any extraordinary expectation to the minds of those living in the first century.

55 It is probable that the community at Qumran should be identified with the Essenes. Concerning this Bruce observes: "The Identification of the men of Qumran with the Essenes - not with the whole Essene order, but with one group of Essenes - satisfies more of the evidence than does any rival identification". Bruce, 112.

56 Collins, 105-106. Bruce observes that although the Psalms of Solomon have been considered to reflect Pharisaic arrangement they probably reflected the view of other community's who were cherishing the hope of Israel. Bruce, 119.

57 Freed, 19.

58 Bruce, 120. Bruce further observes that this identification becomes more of a mere coincidence when one considers that Luke's nativity narrative is similar to the Psalms of Solomon in that those who are depicted, Zechariah and Elizabeth, Joseph and Mary, Simeon and Anna, who are looking for the 'consolation of Israel', are in many ways similar to the community who produced the Psalms of Solomon.

59 Ferguson, 191.

60 M.O. Wise and J.D. Tabor, "The Messiah at Qumran" *Biblical Archaeology review* 1992, vol. 18, no. 6, 60-65.

61 Ferguson, 192.

62 Ibid.

63 D. Flusser, "Jesus and the Essenes", *Jerusalem Perspective* May/June 1990, vol. 3, no. 3, 3.

64 Ferguson, 492.

65 Flusser, 3.

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