

# New Testament Background

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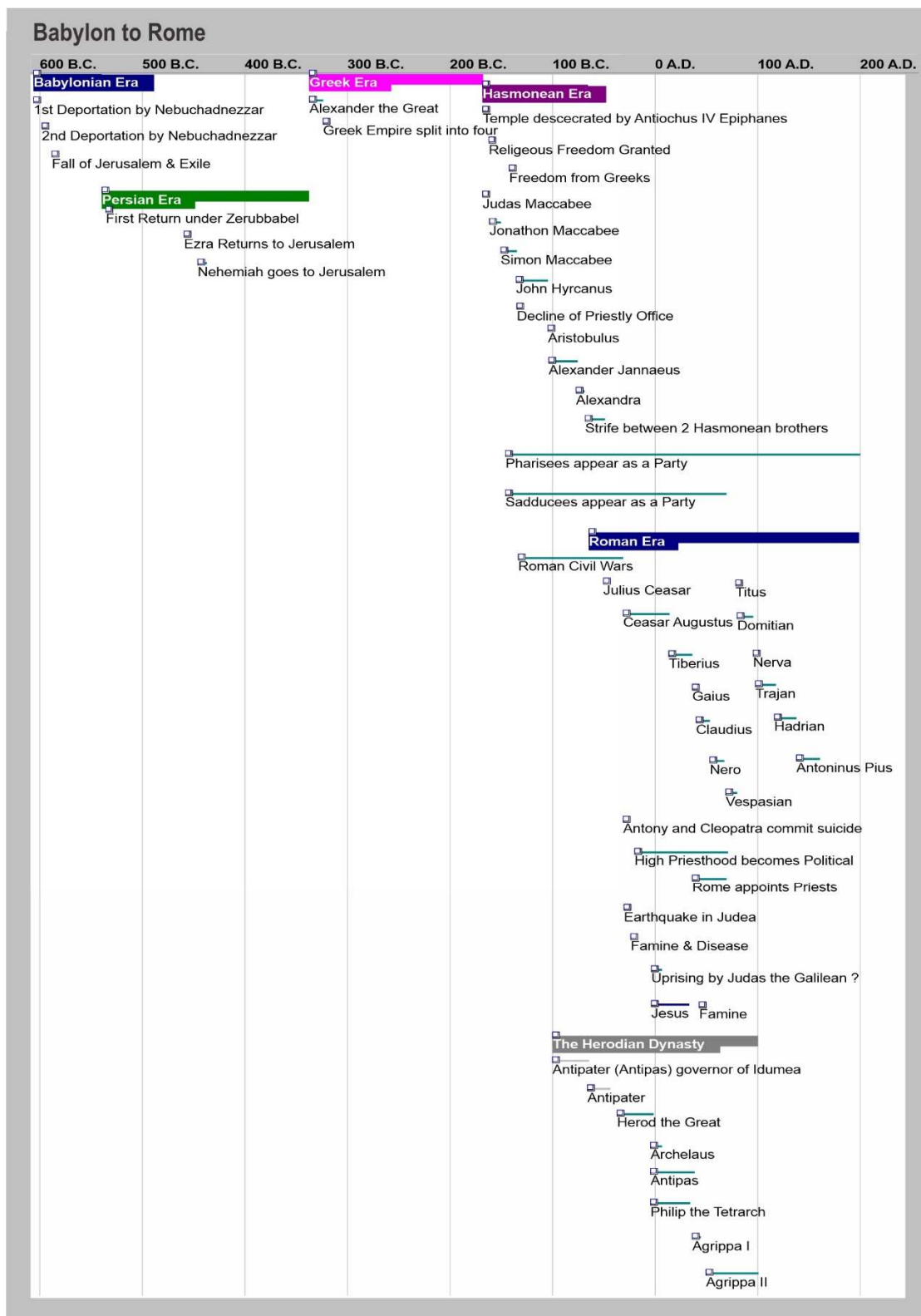
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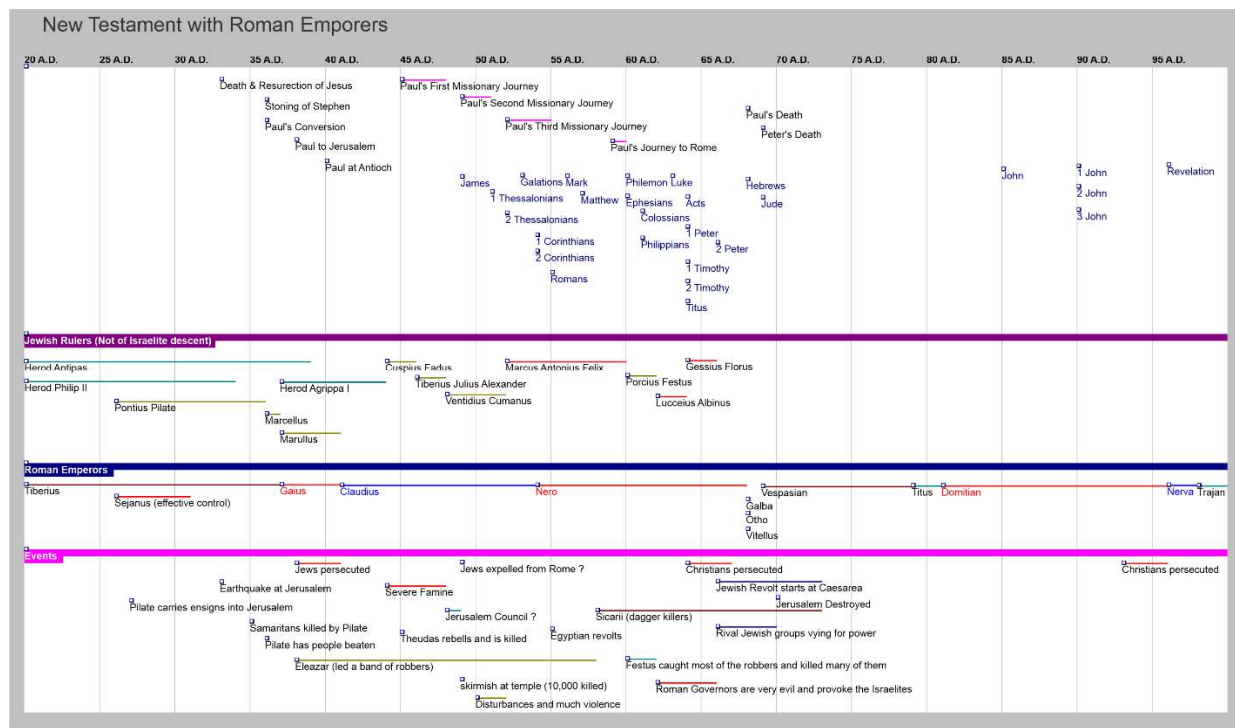
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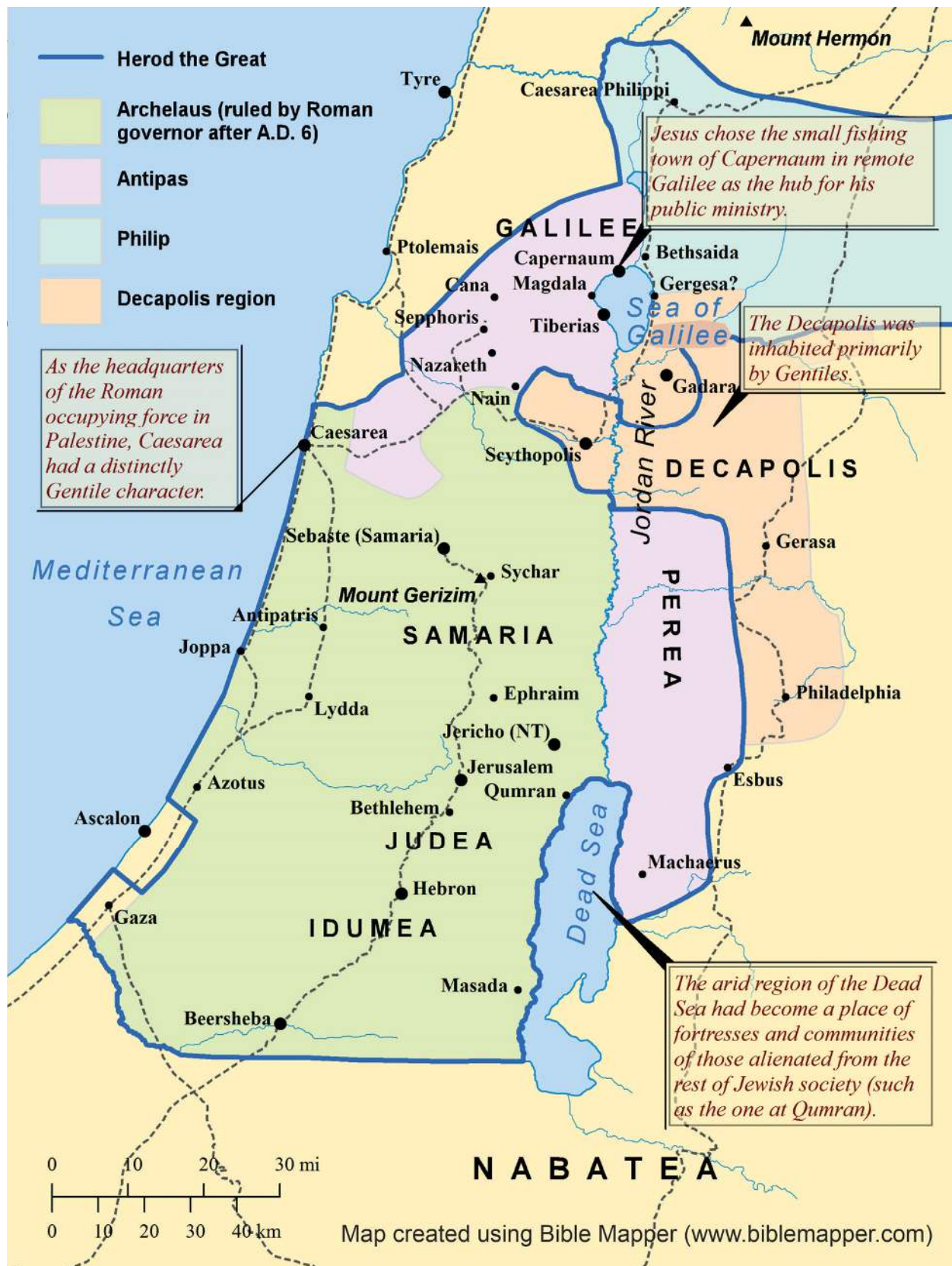
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## Charts and Maps





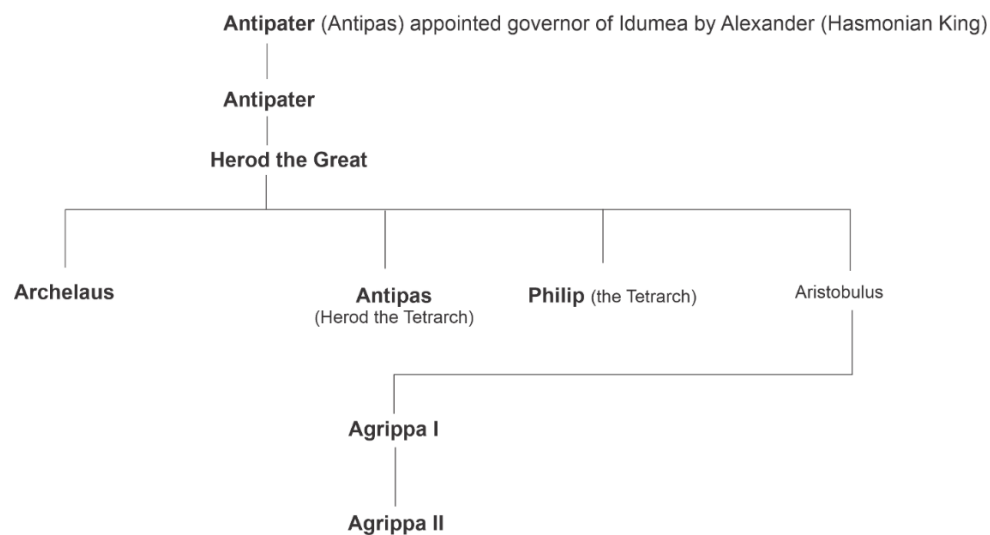






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## Rulers of the Herodian Dynasty



## Introduction

To really understand the New Testament, we need to go back a long way to set the stage. History, culture, religion and world views all play into an understanding of the world of the New Testament. The Bibliography lists a number of resources that provide a more in-depth look at various subjects. The book of Genesis really sets the stage and provides the background information for much of the New Testament. Virtually all of the foundational doctrines stem out of Genesis, either directly or indirectly. Here we have established who God is, who man is, and because of man's rebellion, the need for Jesus to come and redeem mankind. At the tower of Babel dispersion, the emergence of the various people groups and languages started. With this dispersion there emerged the variety of religious beliefs and gods. People were generally polytheistic in their beliefs. This polytheism therefore allowed for all sorts of deities and beliefs, as polytheism is generally non-exclusive. This philosophy haunted the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob throughout history as they struggled with the reality of there only being one God. The exclusivity of monotheism also put them into conflict with their polytheistic neighbors and especially when rulers demanded worship. For example, the Pharaohs of Egypt, Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, the Greek rulers starting with Alexander the Great, and consequently some of the Roman emperors, especially Gaius and Domitian. The Greek culture and Roman rule set the stage for the New Testament.

## The Beginnings of the Jewish People

The genealogical records of Genesis five and eleven record the descendants of Adam down to Abraham. Abraham was called by God to go to the land of Canaan, (Gen 12) promised the land and that he would become a great nation. Genesis chapters 12 to 50 document the lives of Abraham and his descendants to the time of Joseph and his brothers in Egypt where they would live for 430 years. While Abraham had a number of sons, the lineage to the Jewish people was through Isaac and then through his son Jacob. The book of Exodus picks up several hundred years after their move to Egypt with Moses, who was to deliver the Israelites from Egypt and take them back to the promised land of Canaan. Joshua takes over after the death of Moses on the East side of the Jordan and crosses it to conquer the land.

## Judges and Kings

After the death of Joshua, the people tended to forsake God and worship gods from the nations around them. They did not live according to the standard that was set before them by God through Moses. Throughout the time of the Judges and Kings, there were cycles of disobedience and then punishment. When the Israelites cried out to God because of the oppression, God would send them a judge to deliver them. Eventually, their rebellion was so bad that God sent them into exile. The Northern kingdom was the first to go in 723 BC and the Southern kingdom was exiled between 605 BC and 586 BC by Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon.

## Events between the Babylonian control and the beginning of the New Testament

In approximately 538 BC, the Persians conquered the Babylonians and allowed the Jews to go back to Judea. Around 336 BC, Alexander the Great conquered the Persians. The significance of the Greek period is what is typically called the “Hellenization” of the people that they conquered. In order to unify the different people groups that the Greeks controlled, they tried to impose their culture, religion, language and identity on them. When Alexander died, his empire was divided among four of his generals. The two that concern us are the Ptolemies in Egypt and the Seleucids in Asia. The area of Palestine was between them and was consequently fought over. The area of Palestine had different people groups in it. Some of the Israelites adopted the Greek customs and language. Others held on to the customs of their fathers. This of course produced strife. The priesthood suffered a decline as the high priesthood was often purchased with bribes. The high priesthood became more of a social status rather than adherence to the priestly office and following the Law of Moses.

One of the Seleucid kings was particularly bad. He was Antiochus IV and wanted to impose the Hellenistic views and practices on the Jews.

*In order to unify and strengthen his hold on the diverse territories of his far-flung empire, the Seleucid ruler Antiochus IV instituted a policy of mandatory hellenization— conformity to Greek ways of living. He forbade many Jewish religious practices and converted the temple in Jerusalem into a pagan temple to the Greek god Zeus. He required all Jews to offer pagan sacrifices in local villages to demonstrate their loyalty to Antiochus and his policies.<sup>i</sup>*

*In his daring madness, the Syrian king, Antiochus IV. (Epiphanes) had forbidden their religion, sought to destroy their sacred books, with unsparing ferocity forced on them conformity to heathen rites, desecrated the Temple by dedicating it to Zeus Olympios, ... and even reared a heathen altar upon that of burnt-offering. Worst of all, his wicked schemes had been aided by two apostate High-Priests, who had outvied each other in buying and then prostituting the sacred office of God’s anointed<sup>ii</sup>*

He desecrated the temple for a period of three years. This led to the revolt led by the Hasmonaeen family who are also called Maccabees. The father, Mattathias and his sons appeared to have been loyal to their religion but the descendants after them were more interested in power and wealth. It was during this time that the different Israelite parties started to show up. The Pharisees and Sadducees seem to appear around 145 BC. In 67 BC, the two sons of Salome Alexandra vied for power after her death in 69 BC. The older was rather unambitious and was given the high priesthood. The younger, the ambitious Aristobulus was given the military command. Their father, Alexander Jannaeus, made Antipater (Antipas), an Idumean, governor of Idumea. This Antipater was the grandfather of Herod the Great. His son, also named Antipater, was quite cunning and feared Aristobulus so he worked to try and have



Hyrkanus II, the older son made king even though the brothers had agreed that Aristobulus would be king. Antipater knew that Aristobulus hated him for a long time.<sup>iii</sup> Antipater was one of the leaders of Idumea who had wealth and authority.<sup>iv</sup> He knew that he had to work with the Romans so that he could gain power and stature. The brothers and Antipater all used bribes with various people to help them. This conflict between the brothers brought about the Roman general Pompey subduing Judea and making it subject to Rome.<sup>v</sup> The descendants of Aristobulus continued to rebel at times causing many casualties. Antipater continued to make himself useful to the Romans. He supplied a Roman army that was going against the Egyptians with money, grain and troops. He helped Julius Caesar when he was besieged in Alexandria and was made procurator of Judaea. Antipater also fought against Alexander, the son of Aristobulus. Antipater was a valiant warrior. Antipater's sons, Herod and Phasaël continued the pattern of co-operation with Rome. Herod was himself a valiant warrior and rid the countryside of robbers. There was conflict between different factions among the Jews and with their neighbours.

*Herod nevertheless showed himself an able, if ruthless, administrator, and throughout his reign the Romans had no reason to rue the day when they appointed him king of the Jews. He consistently upheld the interests of Rome at home and abroad, and indeed he found no contradiction between Rome's interests and those of his kingdom and subjects. Their interests, including the preservation of their religious freedom, would be best served, he believed, by integration into the Roman sphere of influence.<sup>vi</sup>*

Herod was a rich man and used it to obtain favour with Roman leaders. He was a great builder and built many structures in Judea and other places. He greatly expanded the temple in Jerusalem and made it a magnificent structure.

*His fame as a builder extended far beyond Judaea. He erected temples or other public buildings in Athens, Sparta, Rhodes and other great cities of the Greek world; he repaved the main street of Syrian Antioch and equipped it with a colonnade.<sup>vii</sup>*

*Herod was politically savvy, and he was adept at supporting the right people at the right time during this most dangerous period.<sup>viii</sup>*

He had 10 wives and numerous children. One of the wives was a Hasmonaean princess who had two boys. There were many conflicts within the family and suspicions of who might try and take the throne in addition to rivalries between the various sons. He killed a number of them as well as Mariamme, the Hasmonaean princess. Herod became sicker towards the end of his life and about four or five days before his death had another son executed that had been conspiring against him.

It would appear that the taxes on the people were quite heavy. They not only had to pay taxes to Rome, but they also had the temple tax to pay.

*The religious dues were heavy enough; they included obligations (like the “first” and “second” tithes) which were originally alternatives, or one of which was intended to replace another, but which were now combined.<sup>ix</sup>*

*In the absence of data only an approximate estimate of the burden can be attempted, but F. C. Grant is not far wide of the mark when he calculates that “the total taxation of the Jewish people in the time of Jesus, civil and religious combined, must have approached the intolerable proportion of between 30 and 40 per cent; it may have been higher still.<sup>x</sup>*

*Herod was ruthless when it came to protecting his own rule, and this was borne out in his slaughter of Bethlehem’s children recorded in Matthew 2:16–18.<sup>xi</sup>*

*In view of such executions, the emperor Augustus reportedly quipped, “It is better to be Herod’s pig than son” (Macrobius, Saturnalia, 2:4:11)*

Prior to his death, he commanded all the principal men of the entire Jewish nation to be brought to him. Because he was afraid that nobody would mourn for him at his death, but rather rejoice, he ordered that they all be shut up in the hippodrome. He then commanded his sister and her husband to have them executed as soon as he died so that there would be great lamentations among the people. After he died, his sister did not carry out the order.<sup>xii, xiii</sup>

After his death, his kingdom was divided among 3 of his sons. Archelaus received Judea, Antipas received Galilee and Philip received an area on the east side of the Sea of Galilee, North of the Decapolis.

*While the brothers were pressing their claims in Rome, there were many attempts at revolt in Palestine. The most serious was in Galilee, where an insurgent named Judas, whose father Hezekiah had been captured and put to death by Herod forty years before, raided the palace at Sepphoris and seized the armory.<sup>38</sup> This rising was not put down until Varus, imperial legate of Syria, marched south with two legions to crush it and to pacify the troubled land.<sup>xiv</sup>*

Archelaus was a bad and oppressive ruler and was exiled in 6 AD by Caesar Augustus.

*now Archelaus took possession of his ethnarchy, and used not the Jews only, but the Samaritans also, barbarously; and this out of his resentment of their old quarrels with him.<sup>xv</sup>*

There were many factions during this time which caused much strife and divisions.

*The rapacity of many provincial governors is only too well attested in Roman records.<sup>xvi</sup>*

*Popular resentment was felt not only against the Romans but against the wealthy landed proprietors who prospered at the expense of their poorer fellow countrymen.<sup>xvii</sup>*

The land had a diverse population due to the various wars and even Herod bringing in mercenaries to help him.

*As Herod, well knowing his unpopularity, surrounded himself by foreign mercenaries, and reared fortresses around his palace and the Temple which he built, so he erected these fortified posts, which he populated with strangers, as so many outworks, to surround and command Jerusalem and the Jews on all sides. .... At the same time, the Herodian cities enjoyed not the same amount of liberty as the 'Hellenic,' which, with the exception of certain imposts, were entirely self-governed, while in the former there were representatives of the Herodian rulers.<sup>xviii</sup>*

With the various wars and captivities, the Jews were scattered throughout many countries. Once they were allowed to return to Judea, most did not return but stayed where they were. Some were even settled in other places by those that ruled them.

Jewish slaves that were taken in war could at times get their freedom and were thus called "freedmen". Some stayed where they were and others returned to Judea. Some of the slaves and freedmen had very good positions and others were quite poor and had a hard time making ends meet.<sup>xix</sup>

It is of interest that the Israelites did not seem to have the issue of idolatry after the Babylonian exile. Prior to the exile, they had frequent issues with idolatry. Holding on to their belief that they worshipped the only true God brought them into conflict with the Greeks and Romans. It may have also contributed to their hostility towards Jesus as He claimed to be God. They did not understand the nature of God being a triune God.

Really good resources that goes over the time from Abraham to the early second century are the "Crossway ESV Bible Atlas" and the "Holman Bible Atlas". A detailed background is provided by F.F. Bruce in "New Testament History". (The only caveat is that they use a secular timeline rather than a Biblical one from creation to a time after the flood.)

## Languages of Israel and its Neighbours

Initially, Israel used the Hebrew language. When they went into captivity, they started to speak the language of their captors. In Babylon, they spoke Aramaic. The conquest of the Greeks brought their language into the region. The Greek language became the universal language, similar to English in our time. The Romans spoke Latin and the neighbours of Israel spoke their own languages such as Arabic.

*Instead of the characters anciently employed, the exiles brought with them, on their return, those now common, the so-called square Hebrew letters, which gradually came into general use. (Sanh. 21b) The language spoken by the Jews was no longer Hebrew, but Aramaean, both in Palestine and in Babylonia; in the former the Western, in the latter the Eastern dialect. 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 address delivered by the Rabbis. This was the origin of the so-called Targumim, or paraphrases of Scripture.<sup>xx</sup>*

We see the diversity of languages they spoke at Pentecost in the beginning of the book of Acts.

*Now there were Jews living in Jerusalem, devout men from every nation under heaven. And when this sound occurred, the multitude came together, and were bewildered because each one of them was hearing them speak in his own language. ... “And how is it that we each hear them in our own language in which we were born? “Parthians and Medes and Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the district of Libya around Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—we hear them in our own tongues speaking of the mighty deeds of God.” (Acts 2:5–11 LSB)*

## Biblical and Religious Writings

### The Scriptures Proper

The Old Testament was written primarily in Hebrew. Some of Ezra and Daniel have Aramaic portions.

There was a Greek translation of the Old Testament started about 270 BC (LXX). This translation was performed in Alexandria. The translation of the first five books is quite good. The other books vary in the quality of the translation.

Alfred Edersheim has a chapter on the origins of traditionalism, its character and literature.

*it seems necessary similarly to trace the growth of the ‘traditions of the Elders,’ so as to understand what, alas! so effectually, opposed the new doctrine of the Kingdom. The first place must here be assigned to those legal determinations, which traditionalism declared absolutely binding on all, not only of equal, but even greater obligation than Scripture itself.<sup>xxi</sup>*

*Accordingly, so important was tradition, that the greatest merit a Rabbi could claim was the strictest adherence to the traditions, which he had received from his teacher. Nor might one Sanhedrin annul, or set aside, the decrees of its predecessors. To such length did they go in this worship of the letter, that the great Hillel was actually wont to mispronounce a word, because his teacher before him had done so.<sup>xxii</sup>*

### Targums

*Primarily the Targum, then, was intended as a translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into the vernacular Aramaean. Of course, such translations might be either literal, or else more or less paraphrastic. Every Targum would also naturally represent the special views of the translator, and be interesting as affording an insight into the ideas prevalent at*

*the time, and the manner in which Scripture was understood. But some Targumim are much more paraphrastic than others, and indeed become a kind of commentary, showing us the popular theology of the time.*<sup>xxiii</sup>

*The origin of this practice is debatable. Some scholars trace it back to Ezra's reading of the Torah to the postexilic community in Jerusalem, which the Levites simultaneously translated into Aramaic (Neh. 8:1–8). There is, however, no evidence in the Second Temple literature that Aramaic translations accompanied the reading of the Torah and the Prophets during synagogue worship*<sup>xxiv</sup>

## Mishnah

*But Palestine owed, if possible, a still greater debt to Babylonia. The new circumstances in which the Jews were placed on their return seemed to render necessary an adaptation of the Mosaic Law, if not new legislation. Besides, piety and zeal now attached themselves to the outward observance and study of the letter of the Law. This is the origin of the Mishnah, or Second Law, which was intended to explain and supplement the first. This constituted the only Jewish dogmatics, in the real sense, in the study of which the sage, Rabbi, scholar, scribe, and Darshan, were engaged.*<sup>xxv</sup>

*According to one tradition, the Mishnah goes back to Mount SINAI, where God supposedly gave to MOSES oral instruction in addition to the tablets of the law, and that instruction was passed on by word of mouth through the generations*<sup>xxvi</sup>

## Midrashim

*From the Hebrew root drš, “to investigate, seek, search out, examine” (cf. Lev. 10:16; Isa. 34:16; 1 Chron. 28:8), midrash refers to a form and method of scriptural interpretation, and to compilations of rabbinic exegesis. In its broadest sense, the term is often used to refer to an interpretation of any text, sacred or secular, ancient or contemporary.*<sup>xxvii</sup>

*Collections of rabbinic midrash interpret large portions of the Old Testament (especially the Pentateuch), often in the form of commentaries or literary sermons. These commentaries interpret laws, answer difficult questions arising from the biblical text, address apparent contradictions, and “fill in the blanks” where more information seems necessary.*<sup>xxviii</sup>

*Rabbinic midrash must be seen as an essential element in the rabbinic worldview. For the rabbis, the Torah was their link between this world and God. A rabbi was a rabbi because he alone knew the totality of revelation, and the written and oral versions of the Torah, and it was his task, as a rabbi, to study and to actualize the Torah's content. For the rabbis, midrash was, above all, a religious, God-centered, activity.*<sup>xxix</sup>

*Its primary purpose is not to determine the plain meaning of the text, called peshat (“simple”), but to seek knowledge that can be gained through logical inferences, analogies, combinations of different passages, and the like. According to Ithamar*



*Gruenwald, the goal of midrash “is not the mere act of understanding texts, but the creation of the meaning that is attached to them.”<sup>xxx</sup>*

*From the outset, Jewish theology divided into two branches: the Halakhah and the Haggadah. The former (from halakh, to go) was, so to speak, the Rule of the Spiritual Road, and, when fixed, had even greater authority than the Scriptures of the Old Testament, since it explained and applied them. On the other hand, the Haggadah<sup>34</sup> (from nagad, to tell) was only the personal saying of the teacher, more or less valuable according to his learning and popularity, or the authorities which he could quote in his support. Unlike the Halakhah, the Haggadah had no absolute authority, either as to doctrine, practice, or exegesis. But all the greater would be its popular influence,<sup>35</sup> and all the more dangerous the doctrinal license which it allowed. In fact, strange as it may sound, almost all the doctrinal teaching of the Synagogue is to be derived from the Haggadah—and this also is characteristic of Jewish traditionalism.”<sup>xxxi</sup>*

These writings are what Jesus was referring to.

*“Leaving the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men.”  
And He was also saying to them, “You are good at setting aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition. (Mark 7:8–9 LSB)... thus invalidating the word of God by your tradition which you have handed down; and you do many things such as that.”  
(Mark 7:13 LSB)*

## Sects and Groups

### Hebrew Jews

Hebrew, or Aramaic speaking Jews generally considered themselves superior to Hellenistic Jews. The Pharisees would generally have been a part of this group.

### Hellenistic Jews

Hellenistic Jews had adopted the language and possibly some of the culture of the Greeks. In Acts 6:1, the Hellenistic Jews complained that their widows were being overlooked in the distribution of food. These may have been captives or slaves in other regions, gained their freedom and returned to Palestine. They may also have gone to other places voluntarily.

### Pharisees

The Pharisees appear as a party during the time of the Maccabees.

*The Pharisees constituted the largest and most important group, Josephus stating that they numbered about 6,000.”<sup>xxxii</sup>*

*they were a lay (not priestly) association who were thought to be expert in the laws; they were, in a sociological sense, “retainers” who brokered power between the aristocracy and the masses; they promoted a special living tradition in addition to the laws; they*

*were very interested in issues of ritual purity and tithing; and they believed in afterlife, judgment, and a densely populated, organized spirit world.* <sup>xxxiii</sup>

### Sadducees

The Sadducees also appear around the time of the Maccabees.

*The Sadducees were aristocrats. They were the party of the wealthy and of the high priestly families. They were in charge of the temple, its services, and concessions. They claimed to be descendants of Zadok, high priest of Solomon. True derivation of the term is unknown. In all our literature they stand in opposition to the Pharisees. They were social conservatives, seeking to preserve the practices of the past. They opposed the oral law, accepting the Pentateuch as the ultimate authority. The Sadducees were materialistic in their outlook. They did not believe in life after death or rewards or punishment beyond this life. They denied the existence of angels and demons. They did not believe that God was concerned with what people did. Rather, people were totally free. They were politically oriented, supporters of ruling powers, whether Seleucids or Romans. They tolerated no threats to their position and wealth, so they strongly opposed Jesus.* <sup>xxxiv</sup>

### Essenes

*A movement within Judaism, known primarily in the late Second Temple period, especially from ca. 146 B.C.E. to ca. 70 C.E. They were a communal association, entered by initiation, and considered themselves the predestined remnant of those who truly observed God's will. They pursued their own interpretation of Torah and prophecy.* <sup>xxxv</sup>

*They are not mentioned in the NT. They were ascetics who practiced community of goods, generally shunned marriage, refrained from attending worship in the temple, and attached great importance to the study of the Scriptures. Many scholars associate the Dead Sea Scrolls discovered in 1947 with an Essene community.* <sup>xxxvi</sup>

### Herodians

Josephus mentions the party of the king (Life 402, Wars 2:52 etc.) In the New Testament we also read of the Herodians. (Mk 12:13) It would appear that they were politically and militarily aligned with Herod the Great and his sons.

### Scribes

The scribes were those who studied and copied the law. They were the ultimate authority of spiritual and practical matters. They were the lawyers. They commanded respect and were very respected. This likely goes back to at least the time of Ezra after the exile. <sup>xxxvii</sup>

### Samaritans

The people living in Samaria were a mixture of Israelites and settlers that the Assyrians brought into the Northern Kingdom of Israel after they had conquered and exiled the Israelites. An

Israelite priest was brought in to teach these newcomers the requirements of God after they were being killed by lions. (2 Ki 17) These people were hostile towards the returning exiles.

*Then the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard that the people of the exile were building a temple to Yahweh, the God of Israel, so they approached Zerubbabel and the heads of fathers' households and said to them, "Let us build with you, for we, like you, seek your God; and we have been sacrificing to Him since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assyria, who brought us up here." (Ezra 4:1–2 LSB)*

*It is impossible to write an accurate history of the Samaritans because their records are so scanty; the references to them are also highly contradictory. Their history began after the Assyrian capture of the city of Samaria in 721 B.C., and the deportation of 27,290 of Israel's population (these figures are taken from Sargon's record of the conquest).<sup>xxxviii</sup>*

There must have been a number of Israelites left since Hezekiah, whose reign began in about 715 BC, sent messengers throughout the Northern Kingdom to invite them to the Passover celebration. (2 Ch 30:1) The Samaritans have their own version of the Pentateuch and do not accept the other Old Testament writings.

From the time of the return of the Southern Kingdom from their exile, there is fairly constant friction between the Samaritans and the Israelites.

*John Hyrcanus, a Jewish governor and high priest, destroyed Shechem and leveled the Samaritan temple in 128 B.C., establishing the basis for a new bitterness in Jewish-Samaritan relations. Within ten years Shechem was decimated and most of the Samaritans returned to Samaria, leaving behind only a residual community at the foot of Mt. Gerizim in the towns of Sychar and Neapolis.<sup>xxxix</sup>*

With the various wars, there would have been other groups within this area as well. In the New Testament times, John makes note that Jews have no dealings with Samaritans. (Jn 4:9)

### Sicarii

These came on the scene in the late 50s, after Felix had got rid of a band of robbers that had operated for about twenty years. They continued on in the revolt against Rome and were the group that made the last stand at Masada.

*When the country was purged of these, there sprang up another sort of robbers in Jerusalem, which were called Sicarii, who slew men in the daytime, and in the midst of the city; this they did chiefly at the festivals, when they mingled themselves among the multitude, and concealed daggers under their garments, with which they stabbed those that were their enemies; and when any fell down dead, the murderers became a part of those that had indignation against them; by which means they appeared persons of such reputation, that they could by no means be discovered. (War 2:254–255 JOSEPH)*

*many were slain every day, while the fear men were in of being so served, was more afflicting than the calamity itself; (2.13.3) and while everybody expected death every hour, as men do in war, so men were obliged to look before them, and to take notice of their enemies at a great distance; nor, if their friends were coming to them, durst they trust them any longer; but, in the midst of their suspicions and guarding of themselves, they were slain. Such was the celebrity of the plotters against them, and so cunning was their contrivance. (War 2:256–257 JOSEPH)*

## Zealots

*While the Zealots are not mentioned by name before A.D. 66, the rise of their party is commonly traced in the events of A.D. 6. After the deposition of Archelaus, when Judaea received the status of a Roman province, a census was held in the province by P. Sulpicius Quirinius, legate of Syria, in order to determine the amount of tribute which it should contribute to the imperial exchequer.<sup>xli</sup>*

*The Zealots were the extreme wing of the Pharisees.<sup>xlii</sup>*

Josephus describes their activities during the revolt of the Jews from 66 AD to the fall of Jerusalem.

## Epicureans

Epicureans believed that there were gods, but that they were removed and unconcerned about people. Pleasure was the absence of pain. They generally had good morals. They did not believe that the world was created by divine power, but rather that everything can be explained by atoms moving through empty space. They did not believe in life after death.<sup>xliii</sup> They believed in a free will.

*The Epicurean quest for personal pleasure led to a retreat from public activities and participation in government, which was contrary to the Greek expectation that one should be active in public life. This philosophy was a system of thought focused on the individual and mostly unconcerned with society.<sup>xliii</sup>*

## Stoicism

This was another group that Paul debated with in Athens.

*Stoicism was one of the major philosophical traditions in NT times (cf. Acts 17:18) and arguably the most influential. Its aim was to teach people to attain happiness by being in control of their lives, emphasizing virtue as the only good to strive for, all other things being indifferent.<sup>xliv</sup>*

*The general thrust of Stoicism was that one could best obtain happiness by discovering and then living according to the laws of nature. Stoics believed in an impersonal deity, inherent in all matter, which guides the universe with a kindly providence. All that befalls human beings is intended for their education.<sup>xlv</sup>*

*Stoic theology may be described as a monistic and materialistic pantheism, in which God permeates all of nature, from the cosmos as a whole down to the most lowly physical object<sup>xlvi</sup>*

*Nothing exists outside the world and its material principles; there is no spiritual world or world of ideas, such as in Platonism—hence the materialism of Stoicism<sup>xlvii</sup>*

*Everything is providentially arranged for the good of the world system as a whole. Such a deterministic view of the world does not allow for the existence of evil—even apparently bad events such as illness, pests or natural disasters contribute to the overall well-being of the universe<sup>xlviii</sup>*

This was basically a pantheistic view.

*For the Stoic, happiness consists in attaining one's goal (telos) as a human being, which is "to live in agreement with nature"<sup>xlix</sup>*

One comment may be made regarding people's perception of gods. They primarily seem to be super humans. The true God is all powerful, all knowing, eternal and cannot be defeated. These gods could be defeated, killed or coerced. An impersonal god that guides the universe is really an oxymoron. If something is impersonal, it cannot guide anything. In order to be concerned about people, a god has to be personal and cannot just be some "force".

## General Conditions during the First Century AD

Upon Herod's death, there were a number of revolts and disturbances.

- While the brothers were in Rome vying for the kingship, the Roman governor wanted to raid the temple. The fight that ensued claimed many on both sides. When Varus, the president of Syria came to his rescue, he killed many along the way and crucified about 2000 of those that appeared to have been leaders in the turmoil.
- Some of Herod's veteran soldiers fought against those of the king's party.
- Judas of Sepphoris led a large rebellion.
- Simon from Perea burnt the royal palace in Jericho. He and his followers were killed. A number of other great buildings were also destroyed.
- A shepherd named Athrongeus acted like a king and overran the countryside for a time. He killed Jews, Romans and those of the king's party.

In about 6 AD, Archelaus the son of Herod that received charge over Judea was banished. At this time, Judea became a Roman province. The other two brothers retained their respective territory. At this time, Judas revolted over the issue of taxation. Josephus describes this:

*so men received what they said with pleasure, and this bold attempt proceeded to a great height. All sorts of misfortunes also sprang from these men, and the nation was infected with this doctrine to an incredible degree; one violent war came upon us after*



*another, and we lost our friends, who used to alleviate our pains; there were also very great robberies and murders of our principal men. This was done in pretense indeed for the public welfare, but in reality for the hopes of gain to themselves; whence arose seditions, and from them murders of men, which sometimes fell on those of their own people (by the madness of these men towards one another, while their desire was that none of the adverse party might be left), and sometimes on their enemies; a famine also coming upon us, reduced us to the last degree of despair, as did also the taking and demolishing of cities; nay, the sedition at last increased so high, that the very temple of God was burnt down by their enemy's fire. Such were the consequences of this, that the customs of our fathers were altered and such a change was made, as added a mighty weight toward bringing all to destruction, which these men occasioned by thus conspiring together; for Judas and Sadduc, who excited a fourth philosophic sect among us, and had a great many followers therein, filled our civil government with tumults at present, and laid the foundation of our future miseries, by this system of philosophy, which we were before unacquainted withal; concerning which I shall discourse a little, and this the rather, because the infection which spread thence among the younger sort, who were zealous for it, brought the public to destruction. (Antiq. 18:6–10 JOSEPH)*

During the tenure of Coponius, (6AD - 10 AD) the Roman governor, some Samaritans came into Jerusalem and threw corpses into the cloisters in the temple area. At this, they were excluded from the temple.

Pilate, who was governor from 26 AD to 36 AD, wanted to abolish Jewish laws and brought ensigns with images into Jerusalem. The Jews protested to him in Caesarea. Josephus records the following:

*and when the Jews petitioned him again, he gave a signal to the soldiers to encompass them round, and threatened that their punishment should be no less than immediate death, unless they would leave off disturbing him, and go their ways home. But they threw themselves upon the ground, and laid their necks bare, and said they would take their death very willingly, rather than the wisdom of their laws should be transgressed; upon which Pilate was deeply affected with their firm resolution to keep their laws inviolable, and presently commanded the images to be carried back from Jerusalem to Cesarea. (Antiq. 18:58–59 JOSEPH)*

Another time, Pilate constructed an aqueduct and exacted money from the temple treasury to pay for it. When the Jews complained about him using the sacred money, his soldiers beat and killed many of them.

Towards the end of his tenure, one of the Samaritans persuaded others that they should go to Mount Gerizim where he would show them the sacred vessels that Moses had placed there. They armed themselves to go there but Pilate came against them and killed some and dispersed others. He took many alive and killed the most prominent ones.

Caius, the Roman emperor, ordered a statue of himself to be erected in Jerusalem. When the Jews found out about this, they petitioned Petronius, the president of Syria. Petronius threatened them with death and war, but the Jews bared their necks as being ready to die. They also did not till the ground during this time. Petronius relented and sent a letter to Caius explaining the situation. There had been a great drought for a year, but as soon as Petronius relented, God sent rain. The emperor was quite upset with Petronius and ordered him to commit suicide. The letter was delayed though and Petronius received word that Caius was killed prior to receiving the letter from the emperor. Petronius recognized that the God of the Jews had worked in these situations.

Around 40 AD, Fadus, the new Roman governor caught Tholomy, an arch robber and killed him. During his tenure, Judea was cleared of robberies.

In the middle to late 40 AD period, there was great famine in Palestine. Many people died during this time. Helena, queen of Adiabene, (a kingdom East of the Tigris River) had embraced the Jewish Religion and provided food for the people in Judea. Her son, Izates, also converted to Judaism and trusted God for his deliverance even when a great army came against him. God diverted that army back to where it came from without harming Izates.

During this time, a magician named Theudas deceived many people and told them to follow him with their belongings. He told them he was a prophet and would divide the Jordan so that they could cross it. Fadus, the governor sent horsemen against them and killed many and took many others alive. Theudas had his head cut off.

During the tenure of Cumanus, during Passover, one of the Roman soldiers let down his breaches and exposed himself to the multitude. After the Jews protested, Cumanus sent his troops against them. As the people fled, at least 20,000 were killed. Some of those that had raised the tumult at the temple robbed a servant of Caesar. At the news of this, Cumanus ordered his soldiers to plunder the neighboring villages. As the soldiers did this, one of them destroyed a copy of the Law of Moses. When the Jews complained to Cumanus, out of fear of more violence, he executed the soldier.

Following this, some Jews from Galilee were traveling through Samaria. As they were going through, some Samaritans fought with them and killed a number of them. When the Jews complained to Cumanus, he accepted a bribe from the Samaritans. At this, some of the Jews along with a robber named Eleazer were going to fight the Samaritans. Cumanus, along with soldiers and Samaritans slew many and took many alive. After this, Josephus records that Judea was overrun by robbers. Cumanus was governor from 48 AD to 52 AD.

Felix succeeded him and was governor from 52 AD to 60 AD. The Roman historian writes:

*Antonius Felix, practised every kind of cruelty and lust, wielding the power of king with all the instincts of a slave;*<sup>1</sup>

Josephus writes regarding this time period:

*Now, as for the affairs of the Jews, they grew worse and worse continually; for the country was again filled with robbers and impostors, who deluded the multitude. Yet did Felix catch and put to death many of those impostors every day, together with the robbers. He also caught Eleazar, the son of Dineus, who had gotten together a company of robbers; and this he did by treachery; for he gave him assurance that he should suffer no harm, and thereby persuaded him to come to him; but when he came, he bound him and sent him to Rome. Felix also bore an ill will to Jonathon, the high priest, because he frequently gave him admonitions about governing the Jewish affairs better than he did, lest he should himself have complaints made of him by the multitude, since he it was who had desired Caesar to send him as procurator of Judea. (Antiq. 20:160–162 JOSEPH)*

Felix then hired some robbers (Sicarii) to kill Jonathon the high priest. This group then went on to kill their enemies. They were also hired to kill others, even in the temple.

Josephus makes an interesting observation:

*And this seems to me to have been the reason why God, out of his hatred to these men's wickedness, rejected our city; and as for the temple, he no longer esteemed it sufficiently pure for him to inhabit therein, but brought the Romans upon us, and threw a fire upon the city to purge it; and brought upon us, our wives, and children, slavery,—as desirous to make us wiser by our calamities. These works, that were done by the robbers, filled the city with all sorts of impiety. And now these impostors and deceivers persuaded the multitude to follow them into the wilderness, and pretended that they would exhibit manifest wonders and signs, that should be performed by the providence of God. And many that were prevailed on by them suffered the punishments of their folly; for Felix brought them back, and then punished them. (Antiq. 20:166–168 JOSEPH)*

*And again the robbers stirred up the people to make war with the Romans, and said they ought not to obey them at all; and when any persons would not comply with them, they set fire to their villages, and plundered them. (Antiq. 20:172 JOSEPH)*

*Upon Festus's coming into Judea, it happened that Judea was afflicted by the robbers, while all the villages were set on fire, and plundered by them. (Antiq. 20:185 JOSEPH)*

It basically just got worse and worse in the final years, prior to the destruction of Jerusalem.

## Cities and Areas

As the Jews had been dispersed throughout the nations, they set up synagogues in various places. When the apostle Paul went on his missionary journeys, he had a habit of going to the synagogues in the various places to proclaim the Gospel there. One of the earliest letters of the New Testament was written by James to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion. This most likely refers to those believers that had been scattered after the stoning of Stephen. They were likely residing in areas outside of Judea in places like Antioch, Cyprus, Phoenicia and the like. Peter writes to those who are scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia.

### Alexandria

Alexandria was founded by Alexander the Great. A large number of Jews settled there and were given special privileges. It was here that the Greek translation of the Old Testament occurred.

### Antioch

Antioch was in Syria at the Northeast edge of the Mediterranean Sea. Acts 11:20 records that Antioch was the place where those that were scattered because of the persecution associated with Stephen first proclaimed the Gospel to the Gentiles. This is where Barnabas and Saul (Paul) spent time teaching. This was also the “home base” for Paul’s missionary journeys.

### Athens

Athens had a long history and during the New Testament times was full of idols. Much time was spent discussing new ideas. It would appear that in this environment, not many people accepted the Gospel.

### Caesarea

Herod the Great built a magnificent city and harbour where an earlier town was. It became the official home of the Roman Governors after Archelaus was removed and exiled. It was located Northwest of Samaria.

### Colossae

Colossae was a city in Asia Minor. This is one church that Paul did not start. It was founded by Epaphras.

### Corinth

Corinth was a city in Greece. The church there was established by Paul. It had a reputation for being morally corrupt.

### Ephesus

Ephesus is on the West coast of Asia Minor. The church there was established by Priscilla and Aquila. Paul spent about three years there.

### Galatia

Galatia is a region in Asia minor. Paul travelled through this region during his missionary journeys.

### Philippi

Philippi is between Asia Minor and Greece. It became a Roman colony with many Roman veterans settling there. The church was founded by Paul on his second missionary trip.

### Samaria

Omri, the king of Israel, purchased the hill and built the city of Samaria on it. During New Testament times, the name Samaria also applied to a larger region.

## Thessalonica

Thessalonica also lay between Asia Minor and Greece and was established by Paul.

## Events prior to the Destruction of Jerusalem

*Under the last governors, Felix, Festus, Albinus, and Florus, moral corruption and the dissolution of all social ties, but at the same time the oppressiveness of the Roman yoke, increased every year. After the accession of Felix, assassins, called "Sicarians" (from sica, a dagger), armed with daggers and purchasable for any crime, endangering safety in city and country, roamed over Palestine. Besides this, the party spirit among the Jews themselves, and their hatred of their heathen oppressors, rose to the most insolent political and religious fanaticism, and was continually inflamed by false prophets and Messiahs, one of whom, for example, according to Josephus, drew after him thirty thousand men. Thus came to pass what our Lord had predicted: "There shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall lead many astray."<sup>li</sup>*

The Christians received a revelation telling them to leave:

*But the people of the church in Jerusalem had been commanded by a revelation, vouchsafed to approved men there before the war, to leave the city and to dwell in a certain town of Perea called Pella. And when those that believed in Christ had come thither from Jerusalem, then, as if the royal city of the Jews and the whole land of Judea were entirely destitute of holy men, the judgment of God at length overtook those who had committed such outrages against Christ and his apostles, and totally destroyed that generation of impious men.<sup>lii</sup>*

*Epiphanius also records this flight. A comparison of his account with that of Eusebius shows a common source, which is undoubtedly Hegesippus. The words in italics appear to come from him.*

*Pella was beyond Jordan, and was then in the dominions of Herod Agrippa II. The Christians in Jerusalem could not be expected to show any sympathy to, or receive any from Jewish nationalists.<sup>liii</sup>*

Josephus records a few interesting events just prior to the destruction of Jerusalem.

*Thus were the miserable people persuaded by these deceivers, and such as belied God himself; while they did not attend, nor give credit, to the signs that were so evident and did so plainly foretell their future desolation; but, like men infatuated, without either eyes to see, or minds to consider, did not regard the denunciations that God made to them. (War 6:288 JOSEPH)*

*Thus there was a star resembling a sword, which stood over the city, and a comet, that continued a whole year. (War 6:289 JOSEPH)*



*At the feast of unleavened bread, on the eighth day of the month Xanthicus [Nisan], and at the ninth hour of the night, so great a light shone round the altar and the holy house, that it appeared to be bright day time; which light lasted for half an hour. (War 6:290 JOSEPH)*

*At the same festival also, a heifer, as she was led by the high priest to be sacrificed, brought forth a lamb in the midst of the temple. (War 6:292 JOSEPH)*

*Moreover, the eastern gate of the inner [court of the] temple, which was of brass, and vastly heavy, and had been with difficulty shut by twenty men, and rested upon a basis armed with iron, and had bolts fastened very deep into the firm floor, which was there made of one entire stone, was seen to be opened of its own accord about the sixth hour of the night. Now, those that kept watch in the temple came hereupon running to the captain of the temple, and told him of it: who then came up thither, and not without great difficulty, was able to shut the gate again. (War 6:293–294 JOSEPH)*

*So these publicly declared, that this signal foreshowed the desolation that was coming upon them. Besides these, a few days after that feast, on the twenty-first day of the month Artemisius [Jyar], a certain prodigious and incredible phenomenon appeared; I suppose the account of it would seem to be a fable, were it not related by those that saw it, and were not the events that followed it of so considerable a nature as to deserve such signals; for, before sunsetting, chariots and troops of soldiers in their armor were seen running about among the clouds, and surrounding of cities. Moreover at that feast which we call Pentecost, as the priests were going by night into the inner [court of the] temple, as their custom was, to perform their sacred ministrations, they said that, in the first place, they felt a quaking, and heard a great noise, and after that they heard a sound as of a great multitude, saying, “Let us remove hence.” (War 6:296–300 JOSEPH)*

There was also a prophet that started to prophecy regarding the coming destruction of Jerusalem. He started four years prior to the start of the war. The leading people of the city punished him with many severe stripes, but he still continued warning the people. After this the Jewish rulers brought him to the Roman governor who had him whipped until his bones were laid bare. He just continued to say “Woe, woe to Jerusalem”. He never reproached those who beat him and scorned him. He continued this for seven years and five months. He was killed by a Roman projectile during the siege of Jerusalem.

Josephus records the events of the last years of Jerusalem in “Antiquities” Book 20 and “The Wars of the Jews” Book 2:250- Book 7. There was continual fighting, deceit, strife and corruption during this time. The last Roman governor, Gessius Florus, became a partner with the robbers He was a greedy and violent man. There is much more that happened during this time than can be recorded here in this short background study.

Tacitus, a Roman historian makes some interesting comments regarding the war.

*The Romans now turned to preparations for an assault; for the soldiers thought it beneath their dignity to wait for the enemy to be starved out, and so they began to clamour for danger, part being prompted by bravery, but many were moved by their savage natures and their desire for booty. Titus himself had before his eyes a vision of Rome, its wealth and its pleasures, and he felt that if Jerusalem did not fall at once, his enjoyment of them was delayed.<sup>liv</sup>*

*The population at this time had been increased by streams of rabble that flowed in from the other captured cities, for the most desperate rebels had taken refuge here, and consequently sedition was the more rife. There were three generals, three armies: the outermost and largest circuit of the walls was held by Simon, the middle of the city by John, and the temple was guarded by Eleazar. John and Simon were strong in numbers and equipment, Eleazar had the advantage of position: between these three there was constant fighting, treachery, and arson, and a great store of grain was consumed. Then John got possession of the temple by sending a party, under pretence of offering sacrifice, to slay Eleazar and his troops. So the citizens were divided into two factions until, at the approach of the Romans, foreign war produced concord.<sup>lv</sup>*

Josephus was a pharisee and a general in the Jewish resistance. He was captured by the Romans and then helped them by trying to get the Jews in Jerusalem to surrender. As part of a longer speech to the besieged people in Jerusalem, he said the following:

*Indeed, what can it be that hath stirred up an army of the Romans against our nation? Is it not the impiety of the inhabitants? Whence did our servitude commence? Was it not derived from the seditions that were among our forefathers, when the madness of Aristobulus and Hyrcanus, and our mutual quarrels, brought Pompey upon this city, and when God reduced those under subjection to the Romans, who were unworthy of the liberty they enjoyed? (War 5:395–396 JOSEPH)*

*As for you, what have you done of those things that are recommended by our legislator! And what have you not done of those things that he hath condemned! How much more impious are you than those who were so quickly taken! You have not avoided so much as those sins which are usually done in secret; I mean thefts, and treacherous plots against men, and adulteries. You are quarreling about rapines and murders, and invent strange ways of wickedness. Nay, the temple itself has become the receptacle of all, and this divine place is polluted by the hands of those of our own country; which place hath yet been revered by the Romans when it was at a distance from them, when they have suffered many of their own customs to give place to our law. And, after all this, do you expect Him whom you have so impiously abused to be your supporter? (War 5:401–403 JOSEPH)*

Josephus recognized two things. God brought the Romans against the Jews because of their evil deeds. The other was the division among the Jews brought about their downfall. Much can be learned by our present generation from this.

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