

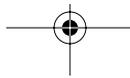
Introduction

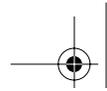
Importance

The Second Temple, standing on the same site as Solomon's great edifice, the First Temple, endured from 516 B.C. to A.D. 70. According to Jewish tradition, this was the same site as Mount Moriah, where Abraham nearly sacrificed his son Isaac (2 Chron 3:1; cf. *b. Sanh.* 89b). Of course, the structure dedicated in the time of Zerubbabel was but a pale shadow of Solomon's (cf. Ezra 3:12; Hag 2:3). In time, however, it grew to eclipse even that building in grandeur and splendor. Herod the Great began a tremendous renovation project (c. 20-19 B.C.) that resulted in the Second Temple taking its place among the great wonders of the ancient world. During Jesus' ministry, the courtyards surrounding the temple were still under construction (cf. Jn 2:20) and were finished only a few short years before its destruction by the Romans in A.D. 70.

Our interest, however, lies not primarily in the Second Temple per se but in the time span designated as the Second Temple period (586 B.C.-A.D. 135). This era was one of immense importance for Jews and Christians. The roots of both Christianity and rabbinic Judaism reach back into the soil of the various expressions of Second Temple Judaism. It was a time of crisis, transition and creativity.¹ For the most part, Christians are unacquainted with this era, which is unfortunate, because the New Testament (hereafter NT) Scriptures did not spring into existence out of a vacuum. Rather, Jewish Christians, who were heirs of this rich culture and tradition spanning more than five hundred years, wrote most of what the church now calls the NT. When one studies the NT against the backdrop of the Second Temple period, a new understanding

¹I am indebted for this phraseology to George W. E. Nickelsburg, *Jewish Literature Between the Bible and the Mishnah: A Historical and Literary Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), p. 1.





emerges. Christianity now appears as a sister faith, alongside rabbinic Judaism, both of whom are greatly indebted to their mother, namely, Second Temple Judaism, itself a development of the ancestral faith rooted in the Hebrew Bible. Despite common roots, Christianity and rabbinic Judaism struck out in decidedly different directions. But the kinship is unmistakable. The heart of this study lies in demonstrating the indebtedness of Christianity to the Judaism of the Second Temple period. We think the reader will find the process of rediscovering the Jewish roots of Christianity an enriching experience.

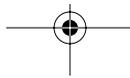
Protestant Christians have been accustomed to label the approximately four hundred years between Malachi (the last OT prophet) and the NT the “silent years.” From a Protestant perspective, divine inspiration temporarily ceased after Malachi; the voice of prophecy fell silent and did not resume until John the Baptist began preaching in the Jordan Valley about A.D. 26/27 (Lk 3:1-3). But Jews were not silent, nor did they cease to reflect upon God and his ways with human beings—far from it! As our study will amply demonstrate, a sizable body of literature was composed during the period between 586 B.C. and A.D. 200. This literature, while not part of the Protestant Bible, illuminates the thought of the NT, and many portions edify one’s soul. In short, there is profit in its study.²

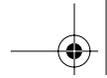
Crises That Shaped the Jewish People During the Second Temple Period

The Destruction of the First Commonwealth and the First Temple (586 B.C.)

Like devastating earthquakes or volcanic eruptions, five great events reshaped the landscape in which Jews lived during this era. The first of these was the invasion of Judah by the Babylonian forces of Nebuchadnezzar and the ensuing destruction of Jerusalem with its centerpiece, Solomon’s temple (587/586 B.C.). Thousands perished in the fighting; other thousands were deported hundreds of miles away to resettlement camps along the Euphrates River; thousands more fled to nearby countries as refugees. Some few thousand, the poorest of the land, remained among the ruins barely managing to eke out a living. This catastrophe was the Lord’s long-threatened covenant sanction of expulsion from the land for failing to obey the stipulations of the Sinai Covenant (Ex 24; Lev 26:14-39; Deut 28:15-68; cf. Amos 4:2-3; 6:7; 7:11, 17; 9:9). The northern tribes had already been swept away by Assyrian invasions in 734-721. The long exile had begun. It left a deep scar upon the collec-

²See Martin Luther’s preface to the Apocrypha in his German translation of the Bible: “books which are not held equal to the Holy Scriptures, and yet are profitable and good to read” (cited in Bruce M. Metzger, *An Introduction to the Apocrypha* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1957], p. 183).





tive memory of the Jewish people and prompted many soul-searching questions: Had God abandoned Israel forever? Would he return and be gracious, and if so, under what conditions? The literature of the Second Temple period ponders these questions and offers various responses.

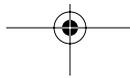
The Collapse of the Persian Empire in the Wake of Alexander the Great's Invasion

The ruthless foreign policy of wholesale destruction and deportation practiced by the Assyrians and Babylonians gave way under the Persian Empire to a more lenient policy. The various ethnic groups who wished to rebuild their religious shrines in their ancestral homelands—demolished by the Neo-Babylonian depredations—were permitted to do so. Some ethnic groups were even allowed to emigrate back home—provided, of course, that they submitted to the political hegemony of the Persian Empire (cf. Ezra 1:1-4). Most Jews opted *not* to emigrate. Instead, they settled down and became participants in a vast political and commercial network. A few Jews even rose to high ranks in government (cf. Neh 1:1; 2:1; 5:14; Esther 2:5, 19-23; 3:2; Dan 1–6). For the most part, however, they were small farmers, herders, traders, merchants and artisans. On the whole they flourished, all the while continuing to hold fast to the ancestral faith. This relatively tranquil state of affairs lasted for some two centuries.

The calm was shattered by a conqueror. Racing across the Middle East (cf. Dan 8:5-8) and settling an old feud with the Persians, Alexander the Great rapidly became the master of the Near East by 331 B.C. His conquest was not, however, merely military and political; it was nothing short of a cultural revolution. Hellenistic ideals became the measure of all things. Hellenism would last for a millennium and was Alexander's greatest legacy to Western civilization. Jews now had to contend with a cultural imperialism unlike anything they had ever faced before. Our literature reflects the varied responses of Jews to this cultural phenomenon that seemed to brook no rival. The question now became, How can Jews be a part of this larger world and still remain true to the Mosaic traditions?

Persecution by Antiochus IV Epiphanes (Beginning in 175 B.C.)

One of the Seleucids, a successor dynasty carved out of the empire of Alexander after his death in 323 B.C., etched his name deeply within Jewish memory. It is not of blessed memory! Antiochus IV sought to unify his diverse kingdom by a thoroughgoing hellenization program. Unfortunately, Jews and Judaism did not fit into his grand scheme. Antiochus IV mandated that all Jews become good Greeks. This crisis prompted one of the greatest resistance movements of all time, led by the sons of Mattathias and known by the nickname the Maccabees.





Several literary works bear the unmistakable imprint of those hard times when Jews literally had to decide if their faith was worth dying for. After a protracted struggle, the Maccabee family, also known as the Hasmoneans, established an independent Jewish state that lasted from 141 to 63 B.C. We shall later read two versions of the heroic struggle that forged this political reality.

Domination by Rome (Beginning in 63 B.C.)

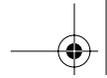
A new and powerful player assumed center stage in Middle East politics in 63 B.C. Rome ended the relatively short period of Jewish autonomy during the Second Commonwealth. Now Judea became an occupied province of the mighty Roman Empire. The Romans ruled Judea by either native, client kings or directly appointed Roman governors. Resentment seethed and hopes for independence waxed and waned according to living conditions under the occupation. Once again there were varied responses by the Jewish people. Some harked back to the glory days of the Maccabees and called for violent resistance. Others insisted that the people must wait for the Messiah, the promised scion of the house of David, to lead the liberation movement. Still others counseled accommodation with imperial Rome. The question now became, What are the legitimate means by which to realize the messianic prophecies of Israel's future glory? Those with vested interests tried to keep the lid on a simmering pot.

Roman Destruction of the Jewish State and Temple (A.D. 66-74)

The pot finally boiled over. After a succession of incredibly inept governors, the boiling point was reached and the country erupted into open rebellion. The Roman response was brutal and devastating. The rebels were systematically annihilated as Jewish centers of resistance one by one came under siege. Jerusalem and its splendid temple went up in smoke in A.D. 70. It was one of the darkest days in Jewish history, ironically occurring on the same calendar day (the ninth of Ab) as the destruction of the First Temple. Human losses were so great that one marvels how the Jewish people survived as a distinct entity. Not only did they survive, but they also continue to this very day. We will conclude our study of the Second Temple period by briefly noting how they reorganized and redefined themselves in the wake of this disaster and in the ensuing controversy with the new claimants to the title of "Israel," namely, the Palestinian Jesus movement.³

³This descriptive term for the early followers of Jesus is borrowed from James H. Charlesworth, "The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Jewishness of Jesus" (public lecture delivered at the Twentieth Forum on Jewish/Christian Relations: Judaisms, Jesus, John and the Dead Sea Scrolls, Christian Theological Seminary, Indianapolis, Ind., April 2, 2001).





Each of these crises produced great trauma and required Jews to adapt to new circumstances. It is a testament to their indomitable spirit and to God's faithfulness that they did persevere. They are survivors.

The Corpus

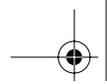
The Jewish literature of the Second Temple period is a sizable corpus—considerably larger than the Bible. It is also a bit daunting because no anthology brings all these diverse strands together. First, one must acquire a copy of the Apocrypha (unless one has an edition of the Bible that includes it, such as the NRSV). Second, one needs a copy of the even larger Pseudepigrapha (the editions of R. H. Charles and James H. Charlesworth extend to nearly two thousand pages each). Finally, one needs to secure an edition of the Dead Sea Scrolls (approximately four hundred pages), an edition of Philo (running to about nine hundred pages) and an edition of Josephus (another nine hundred pages). This is no small investment!

This book will delve into portions of the five distinct blocks enumerated in the above paragraph. For now we will briefly define each of these blocks. As we proceed, more detailed introductions will be provided for the individual writings under discussion.

The first block of writings is designated the Apocrypha. This derives from the Greek word ἀπόκρυφος (*apokryphos*), which means “hidden.” In the neuter plural, it means “hidden things” or, in our particular context, “hidden books.” This term is not the best, but since it has been in use since the time of Jerome in the fourth century A.D., we must make do with it. Simply stated, the Apocrypha refers to those books or parts of books not found in the Hebrew Bible but included in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible called the Septuagint (abbreviated LXX). Matters are not, however, quite so simple. We will later discuss the formation of the LXX and its important role for both Jews and Christians. Scholars variously date the individual works from as early as the fourth century B.C. down to about A.D. 90.

The second block of material goes under the title of Pseudepigrapha. The Greek neuter plural ψευδεπίγραφα (*pseudepigrapha*) literally means “falsely ascribed.” It designates Jewish literature written between 200 B.C. and A.D. 200 and spuriously ascribed to various prophets, kings and ancient worthies mentioned in the Hebrew Scriptures. Once again, this is not the best term to describe the diverse contents of this material, but the designation is long-standing and traditional. It actually encompasses a variety of genres, such as apocalypse, testament, hymn, narrative fiction and so forth. None of this material is found in the Hebrew Scriptures or, for that matter, in the LXX. Thus, it does not appear in English Bibles and, for the most part, is even more unexplored territory than the Apocrypha. I think the reader will have a





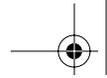
mixed reaction reading this literature. The apocalyptic writings are at times quite fascinating, especially since they stand in some relationship to the apocalyptic visions of the end times found in both the OT and NT. Other sections are frankly quite tedious: lengthy descriptions of the supposed inner workings of the movement of heavenly bodies and atmospheric conditions generate little enthusiasm! But one cannot fail to be impressed by expressions of sincere piety and unquenchable faith encountered in this literature.

The Dead Sea Scrolls have received much more publicity than the previous two blocks of material, in part because they precipitated fierce scholarly debates over their interpretation, provenance and significance for Judaism and Christianity. But even more sensational have been the fantastic conspiracy theories alleging that their contents were deliberately withheld from the public because they undermined key doctrines of Christianity. As we shall see, there is no basis for such charges. These writings (mostly fragments of works, not complete manuscripts) from the caves of Qumran are perhaps the single most important archaeological discovery of the twentieth century. We may generally date the Qumran library to the period circa 140 B.C.-A.D. 68. Like the Pseudepigrapha, the Dead Sea Scrolls encompass a wide range of literary genres. Probably the most significant for understanding the ethos of this group are the community rules—expositions dealing with standards of behavior and penalties for violations, ritual purity laws, and affirmations of belief. The Dead Sea Scrolls reveal a movement with a degree of commitment rarely matched in Christendom. Some of the hymns produced by this community are deeply moving and spiritually uplifting. The parallels between this community and the early Christian movement will, of course, be of utmost interest.

The Jewish writer Philo, from Alexandria, Egypt (c. 20 B.C.-A.D. 50), has bequeathed to Western civilization a voluminous collection of commentaries on the Bible, along with a number of philosophical treatises. His importance lies in offering us a glimpse into the world of highly educated Jews quite at home in the Hellenistic culture at the end of the first century B.C. and in the first half of the first century A.D. In other words, we have a near contemporary of both Jesus and Paul, but one who continues, in his own mind at least, to adhere faithfully to the traditions handed down from Moses. Philo affords a prime example of how an acculturated Jew harmonized and integrated his faith with the intellectual tradition of the Hellenistic world. It is a fascinating result. Philo's exegetical and hermeneutical techniques influenced Jews, and especially Christians, for centuries. In a sense, his legacy still lives on.

The importance of Flavius Josephus (c. A.D. 37-100) for understanding the history of early Judaism and early Christianity can scarcely be overemphasized. He fills a huge gap in our knowledge of the Second Temple period. Josephus was a Jewish historian who wrote for a cultured Roman audience.





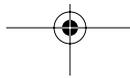
Two of his works are of special importance: *Jewish War* and *Antiquities of the Jews*. In both we find a survey of our period. The latter work is much broader in scope, being a sort of paraphrase or running commentary on biblical history as found in the Hebrew Bible (and supplemented by traditional Jewish interpretation—with perhaps a dash of Josephus's own creativity thrown in!). *Antiquities* leaves off on the eve of the outbreak of the first revolt against Rome. *Jewish War* starts with the conquests of Alexander the Great and traces Jewish history up to the end of the war against Rome. Readers will enjoy the works of Josephus, since he knows how to tell a good story, and the story itself is quite amazing. If Josephus stretches the truth a bit here and there—well, so be it! We sample another of his works, *Against Apion*, because it is an apologetic work defending Judaism against anti-Judaic slanders and phobias. Listening in on this spirited reply will throw light on a larger and ubiquitous problem that continues to this very hour: the plague of anti-Semitism.

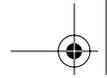
To round out our excursion into the Jewish literature of the Second Temple, we will read some private letters and documents recovered by archaeologists from the period of Bar Kokhba, the second revolt against Rome in A.D. 132-135. Reading these pieces clothes with humanity the people mentioned in the correspondence. In spite of war and death, life went on and people made decisions about all sorts of matters, such as marriage and divorce, buying and selling, and the nitty-gritty details of life. We will also briefly introduce the immense world of Mishnah. This demonstrates how Jews transformed themselves and maintained their identity in the centuries following the collapse of the Second Commonwealth. Rabbinic Judaism ushered in, for more than fifteen hundred years, an era of uniformity within Judaism. Only the intellectual earthquake called the Haskalah (the Jewish Enlightenment of the eighteenth century A.D.) eventually unravels the unified, symbolic worldview that rabbinic Judaism fashioned at the end of the Second Temple period.

Finally, it should not be forgotten that the NT itself is a product of Second Temple Judaism.⁴ As Christians, we all too often forget the larger context in which it emerged. Thus we will at numerous points refer to NT documents as they supplement, amplify or challenge various views and positions staked out by the various groups or individuals within the larger arena of Second Temple Judaism.

We conclude this section by drawing attention to Jacob Neusner's helpful

⁴As J. Julius Scott Jr. reminds us in *Customs and Controversies: Intertestamental Jewish Backgrounds of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1995), p. 32. Bruce Chilton and Jacob Neusner argue that we really should speak about "the Judaism of the New Testament" (*Judaism in the New Testament: Practices and Beliefs* [New York: Routledge, 1995], p. 8 [italics theirs]). See pp. xii-18 for their full arguments.





analysis of Judaism and its developments.⁵ Neusner posits four Judaic systems that have appeared in history:

1. The age of diversity (586 B.C.-A.D. 70)
2. The formative age of Judaism (A.D. 70-640)
3. The classical period of Judaism (A.D. 640-1787)
4. The modern age—the second age of diversity (A.D. 1787-present)

From this outline it is evident that the Second Temple period was the first great age of diversity. Why did this diversity occur? What factors led to such schism within the Jewish people? These and other questions will be better answered at the conclusion of our study. Working through this era will prompt similar questions for Christians. Why are we so diverse today? What factors have led to such schism? In some respects Jews and Christians are mirror images of each other. I hope that this excursion into a Judaism now long past will provide some light on our own spiritual pilgrimage.



⁵Neusner has set this out in numerous works. For a lucid discussion, see his *Self-Fulfilling Prophecy: Exile and Return in the History of Judaism* (Boston: Beacon, 1987), pp. 5-17.

