

# Malachi and the Middle

A study of the final book of the Old Testament and brief overview of the Intertestamental Period

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## The Middle

### **Timeline of the Intertestamental Period (circa 450 BC – 0 AD)**

#### **1. End of the Old Testament Period (c. 430 BC)**

- The prophet Malachi delivers his message, concluding the Old Testament scriptures.
- Persia continues to dominate the region.

#### **2. Persian Rule (c. 539–331 BC)**

- **515 BC:** Completion of the Second Temple in Jerusalem.
- **c. 400 BC:** Jewish life is centered around the temple and observance of the Torah.
- Jews enjoy relative religious freedom under Persian administration.

#### **3. Alexander the Great and Hellenistic Influence (331–323 BC)**

- **331 BC:** Alexander the Great conquers the Persian Empire, bringing Greek culture and language to the region.
- **323 BC:** Alexander dies; his empire is divided among his generals, leading to the emergence of the Seleucid and Ptolemaic kingdoms.

#### **4. Ptolemaic Rule over Judea (c. 323–198 BC)**

- Judea is under the control of the Ptolemies of Egypt.
- Greek culture spreads, but Jewish religious practices are largely tolerated.

#### **5. Seleucid Rule over Judea (198–167 BC)**

- **198 BC:** Antiochus III (the Great) of the Seleucid Empire gains control of Judea after defeating the Ptolemies.
- **175 BC:** Antiochus IV Epiphanes becomes king and aggressively promotes Hellenization.
- **167 BC:** Antiochus desecrates the Temple by erecting an altar to Zeus and banning Jewish practices, sparking the Maccabean revolt.

#### **6. Maccabean Revolt and Hasmonean Dynasty (167–63 BC)**

- **166–160 BC:** Judas Maccabeus leads a successful rebellion against Seleucid rule.
- **164 BC:** The Temple is rededicated (celebrated as Hanukkah).
- **142 BC:** Simon Maccabeus secures Judean independence, establishing the Hasmonean Dynasty.
- **134–104 BC:** John Hyrcanus expands territory and enforces Jewish practices on conquered peoples.

#### **7. Roman Conquest and Rule (63 BC onward)**

- **63 BC:** Pompey the Great conquers Jerusalem, incorporating Judea into the Roman Republic as a client kingdom.
- **40–37 BC:** Herod the Great, a Roman client king, secures his rule over Judea after defeating the Parthians and rivals.

#### **8. Herodian Period (37 BC–AD 6)**

- **20 BC:** Herod the Great begins rebuilding the Second Temple, significantly enlarging and beautifying it.
- **4 BC:** Herod dies, and his kingdom is divided among his sons.
- **AD 6:** Judea becomes a Roman province governed by prefects, marking the end of local Jewish monarchies.

# Intertestamental Period Overview

## Timeframe

- Roughly 420 BC to John the Baptist, OAD or 3-4 BC.
- An ultra-broad overview of this period includes the transition from Persia to Greece, Seleucid control, and finally to Rome.
- Key developments: Hellenization of the Mediterranean World, emergence of Rabbinic Judaism and Jewish factions, civil war, and the establishment of the Pax Romana.

## Military and Political Developments

### Persia

- Initially dominant during the early part of this period.

### Greece (Macedonian Empire)

- Alexander the Great conquers much of the known world (~330 BC), spreading Hellenistic culture and ideas.
- **Hellenization:** Profound cultural shift impacting language, architecture, and daily life across the Mediterranean.

### The Seleucid Empire

- Following the breakup of Alexander's empire, Seleucid control over Judea emerges (198–168 BC).
- Seleucus I Nicator is the first ruler of this section of the Greek Empire.
- Antiochus IV Epiphanes later desecrates Jewish religious practices, banning the Sabbath and sacrificial worship, and imposing Hellenistic practices, leading to significant unrest.

### A Brief Period of Independence

- **Maccabean Revolt (167–160 BC):** A response to Hellenistic oppression led by Judas Maccabeus and his brothers.
  - Begins as guerrilla warfare but evolves into a formal military campaign.
  - Victory leads to the cleansing and rededication of the temple in 164 BC, commemorated in the festival of Hanukkah.
  - This victory establishes the Hasmonean dynasty.

### Hasmonean Dynasty

- Begun by Simon Thassi after his brother Judas' military successes.
- The dynasty lasts about 100 years but ends in civil war between Pharisees and Sadducees.
  - Internal strife includes the reign of Alexander Jannaeus and his controversial decision to serve as both king and high priest, sparking rebellion.
  - Civil war intensifies after his death, as rival factions seek power.

### Roman Era (63 BC Onward)

- Roman general Pompey captures Jerusalem, marking the beginning of Roman control.
- Rome maintains dominance through overwhelming military strength and strategic alliances, such as their use of Herod the Great.
  - **Herod the Great:** An Idumean appointed by Rome, consolidates power through public works (e.g., the rebuilding of the temple) but earns widespread hatred due to his cruelty.

## Cultural and Religious Developments

### Hellenization

- The spread of Greek culture profoundly affects Jewish society.
- Public institutions like gymnasiums and libraries flourish, but these also lead to significant assimilation challenges for the Jewish people:
  - Adoption of Greek names, dress, and customs.
  - Some Jews even undergo "reverse circumcision" to fit in socially and economically.
- Antiochus IV's extreme measures (e.g., sacrificing pigs in the temple) provoke fierce resistance.

### Development of Jewish Factions

- The resistance to Hellenistic influence and Roman rule fosters the rise of distinct Jewish parties:
  - **Pharisees:** Focused on strict adherence to the Torah and oral traditions.
  - **Sadducees:** Associated with the Temple and political alliances with Rome.
  - **Essenes:** Separatist group emphasizing purity and communal living.
  - **Zealots:** Advocates for violent resistance against Roman rule.
- Not all Jews identified with these factions; many were unaffiliated.

### Synagogue Worship

- Emerges as a central feature of Jewish religious life, emphasizing communal prayer and Torah study.

### Key Writings

#### Pseudepigrapha and Apocrypha

- **Pseudepigrapha:** Works falsely attributed to notable figures (e.g., Gospel of Thomas).
- **Apocrypha:** Books debated within Jewish and Christian traditions, such as Tobit, Judith, and the Maccabees.
  - Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions often include these books as deuterocanonical.
  - Examples of other writings: Enoch, Jubilees, and Psalms of Solomon.

### Talmud

- Completed around 350 BC, marking the rise of Rabbinic Judaism as the dominant form of Jewish religious expression. The Talmud is the book of collected traditions and teachings, including the hedge law, of the rabbis over the years.

### Cultural Shifts

- **Alexander the Great's Legacy:** Beyond his conquests, Alexander's greatest achievement is the spread of Greek culture and language, enabling rapid communication and cultural exchange.
- **Roman Influence:** By the time of Jesus, many Jews adopted Roman names and customs, reflecting the enduring influence of both Greek and Roman cultures. (Matthew/Levi)
- **Hanukkah:** Rooted in the Maccabean Revolt, this celebration evolves into a significant cultural and civic holiday.
- **Language:** Israel brought Aramiac with them from Babylon after exile which eventually became the dominant language in Palestine along with Greek and Latin (to a lesser extent).

## Summary

By the time of Jesus, the social, political, and religious landscape is defined by the enduring effects of Hellenization, Roman rule, and the internal struggles of Jewish society. This complex backdrop sets the stage for the emergence of Jesus' ministry and the early Christian church.

## **Content Questions**

1. What were the major political and cultural transitions during the Intertestamental Period, and how did they shape the social setting of Jesus' time?
2. How did the process of Hellenization influence Jewish religious practices and identity, particularly under Antiochus IV Epiphanes?
3. What role did the Maccabean Revolt play in the development of Jewish independence and the establishment of the Hasmonean dynasty?
4. How did Roman control, starting in 63 BC, change the political and religious landscape of Judea?
5. What are the key distinctions between Pseudepigrapha, Apocrypha, and Deuterocanonical writings, and how do they differ in their reception across various Christian traditions?

## **Discussion Questions**

1. How might the cultural and religious tensions between Hellenistic influences and Jewish traditions during the Intertestamental Period help us understand the rise of different Jewish sects (Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and Zealots)?
2. What lessons can be drawn from the Maccabean Revolt about faith, cultural assimilation, and resistance to oppression?
3. In what ways does the Pax Romana help explain the rapid spread of Christianity after Jesus' resurrection?
4. How does studying the writings of the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha (writings not verbally inspired) help us discern the uniqueness and authority of Scripture (inspired)?
5. What parallels can we draw between the cultural assimilation challenges of the Intertestamental Period and the pressures faced by Christians in modern society?