

About 400 years passed between the closing of the Old Testament (Malachi, 2 Chronicles) and the opening of the New (Matthew). Jewish texts from the first century describe these events, most importantly the books of First and Second Maccabees from a group of writings known as the *Apocrypha*, (most of which were written in the second or first century BC) and the writings of Josephus (written at the end of the first century AD), a Roman-Jewish historian. Throughout the upheaval of this intertestamental period, political and cultural events shaped the lives of the Jewish people as they adapted to retain their religious and cultural identity. They prioritized particular marks like circumcision, keeping Sabbath, and food and purity laws. They created new institutions, like synagogues and rabbinic schools, to facilitate their religious continuity as minorities in foreign lands and under foreign rule. New tensions arose as they navigated their relationship with ruling powers and with one another.

The Old Testament ends with the Jewish people under Persian rule (about 430 BC). They had survived the destruction of their temple and their nation (587/86 BC; 2Kg 24–25; 2Ch 36:1–21; Jeremiah; Dn 1–4) and mass deportations under Babylon. When Persia defeated Babylon (539 BC, Dn 5), its rulers allowed the Jewish people to return (2Ch 36:22–23; Ezr 1; Is 45). They rebuilt the temple (Haggai, Zechariah) and reoriented themselves to living as faithful people of the Torah in their own land (Ezra). Under Persia, the Israelites had a measure of local autonomy over their own cultural and religious affairs but were not an independent nation (Nehemiah). The priests, scribes, and Persian-appointed governors were the political rulers in Israel under the Persian king; there was no Jewish king.

When Alexander the Great conquered the Persian Empire (331 BC), the Jewish people fell under Greek rule, and Alexander imposed a policy of Hellenization—or spread of Greek culture—to unify his empire. This policy included a universal language and monetary system, the assimilation of local religions with Greek religion, and the establishment of Greek cities as the center of cultural life. The goal was to incorporate—but not eliminate—the culture and religion of those he conquered. After Alexander's death in 323 BC, the Greek empire was split into territories, but the program of Hellenization remained. This assimilation under Greek rule was often difficult for the Jewish people, since their strict monotheism and unique religious practices

communicated their identity and theology. Participating even loosely in the worship of Greek gods—a major expectation in the Greek empire—was not an option for a faithful Jew. Despite this tension, the Jewish people experienced varying levels of freedom and peace, and many times they could honor their religious commitments freely.

Under one notorious Greek ruler, Antiochus Epiphanes IV (175–164 BC), increasing mistreatment of the Jewish people led to armed conflict. Antiochus ruled from Syria and his policies significantly oppressed the Jewish people and ended their religious and cultural freedoms. He appointed high priests who would do his bidding (with no regard to their lineage); outlawed circumcision, Sabbath, and food laws; burned Jewish scrolls; and allowed his soldiers to plunder and desecrate the temple in Jerusalem. Those who failed to comply with his policies, including women and children, were brutally executed.

The Maccabees were a family of five brothers who led a revolt against this oppressive rule (166–143 BC). Starting with guerilla warfare, Jewish fighters experienced military victories against the Greek forces and won back control of Jerusalem for the Jewish people. Their rededication of the temple is commemorated in the festival of Hannukah (164 BC, 1 Maccabees 4:52–59). After many years of fighting and political maneuvering, the last surviving Maccabean brother ruled over a Jewish state completely independent of Greek rule. For the first time since the Babylonian exile, the Jewish people were living in their land free of pagan rule.

The time of independence was significant but short-lived. Descendants of the Maccabees ruled for approximately eighty years (143–63 BC). Known as the Hasmonean dynasty, this period saw the expansion of Jewish territory, the reduction of Greek influence, and the enforcement of Judaism on non-Jews living in the land. But it was also a time of internal strife. Certain groups were troubled by Hasmonean rule, especially the combination of the roles of king and high priest in one leader, a leader who was unqualified for either position. A bloody civil war erupted between the Hasmonean-supporting Sadducees and the more critical Pharisees (88–76 BC). Other groups, like the Essenes, withdrew from Jewish society in protest to Hasmonean rule.

Independence ended with a fizzle as Roman rule swept into Judea. A rivalry between two Hasmonean brothers led one side to invite the assistance of Rome against

the other. The Roman general Pompey successfully laid siege to Jerusalem and even entered the Holy of Holies (63 BC). This alliance with Rome was facilitated by Herod Antipater and within a few years, his son, Herod the Great, was appointed king of Judea by the Roman Senate (40 BC). The Hasmonean dynasty was over, and the Jewish people were again under the rule of a pagan empire.

Elements of the reign of Herod the Great were positive. He funded numerous building projects, most famously the refurbishment and rebuilding of the temple precinct in Jerusalem. Herod was not Jewish, but he was local and knew the Jewish laws and customs. He kept direct Roman rule at bay, ruled over a united and expansive Jewish kingdom, and allowed for religious freedom for the Jewish people. Nevertheless, his alliance with Rome and Roman taxation meant he was viewed as an outsider by the people. He was known for brutal political maneuvering and for his penchant for killing his political enemies—be they his own wife, sons, or the high priest. His paranoia led to increasing domestic troubles before his death.

Herod the Great ruled Judea and Galilee at the birth of Jesus (Mt 1:1–2:18; Lk 1:1–2:40), but had died by the time Jesus' ministry began. His son, Herod Antipas, reigned in Galilee (Mt 14:1–12; Mk 6:14–29; Lk 3:19–20; 9:7–9; 23:6–12), and another son, Philip, reigned north of Galilee (Lk 3:1). Jerusalem and Judea were under a Roman prefect which meant there was now direct Roman rule in Jerusalem. The prefect was the ultimate authority, he was supported by Roman soldiers, and he appointed the high priest of his choosing. Pilate was the prefect at the trial of Jesus, and Paul also stood trial before Roman prefects (Ac 24–26).

Tensions were high and conflicts were common. Jewish groups disagreed on how best to live with the Romans occupying their land. In general, the high priestly families and the Sadducees favored collaboration and compromise, whereas groups of Zealots fought openly. The Pharisees, uncomfortable with Roman rule, focused on teaching the people to live in purity and devotion to Jewish teachings. Ultimately, just a few decades after the death and resurrection of Jesus, the Jewish people revolted against Rome—this time without success. In AD 70, the temple and the city of Jerusalem were destroyed by the Roman army.

Jewish women were an integral part of the survival of their people throughout these tumultuous intertestamental years. The Old Testament book of Esther tells of her heroic acts that saved her people during Persian rule (474–473 BC). Second Maccabees describes the faithfulness and courage of a Jewish mother facing the execution of her children by Antiochus' Greek soldiers (2 Maccabees 7, describing events from approximately 170 BC). Other fictional tales in the *Apocrypha* (Susanna, Judith, Tobit) extol the piety and purity of Jewish women in exile and their astute strategies against powerful pagan rulers.

Jewish communities in territories outside the land of Palestine grew during intertestamental times. Alexandria, Egypt had a large Jewish population, and under Greek rule, the city was connected to the translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek (known as the Septuagint). Additionally, there were non-Jewish people living in Israel. The Samaritans were a rival religious group with origins in the exile (2Kg 17:24–35). They were at odds with the Jewish people, and both held deep-seated prejudices against one another (Mt 10:5–6; Lk 9:51–53; 10:25–37; 17:11–19; Jn 4:4–42; Ac 8:4–25). Both worshipped God and claimed to be the “true” Jewish people. The Samaritans practiced circumcision and Sabbath, but worshipped at Gerizim instead of Jerusalem and had their own version of the Pentateuch.