

Intertestamental Period

Joshua Tallent

Session 1: From the Exile to the Maccabees

Introduction

- The next three classes will cover a period of about 400 years of history, along with a substantial amount of context and culture. My goal is to prepare you for the study of the New Testament by laying a foundation that will help you understand the world through first century Jewish eyes.
- To do that, we need to go all the way back to the story of the Jewish people's exile into Babylon, and work our way through the histories of many competing nations and empires.
- Along the way, we'll find some well-worn paths, discover some new insights, and hopefully become more fully embedded in the culture and worldviews within which Jesus and the Apostles taught.

Exile

- **[SLIDE] [SLIDE - map of the exile]** The exile of the Jewish people happened in stages.
 - The Assyrians wiped out a significant portion of the northern tribes of Israel in the middle of the 8th century BCE, and took most of the remaining population of the Northern Kingdom into captivity in 722 BCE when they destroyed the city of Samaria.
 - The Assyrians also took some of the residents of the Kingdom of Judah into captivity, **[SLIDE x 2 - Lachish inscriptions]** including when Sennacherib destroyed Lachish and besieged Jerusalem in 701 BCE.
 - **[TIMELINE]** When Nebuchadnezzar the Babylonian king destroyed the Assyrian armies at the Battle of Carchemish in 605 BCE, he then headed to Judah, besieging Jerusalem for the first time and taking exiles (including Daniel and his friends) into Babylon.
 - Nebuchadnezzar besieged Jerusalem again in 597 BCE, taking the new king Jehoiachin, along with the prophet Ezekiel and others, into exile.
 - Finally, he destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple in 586 BCE, taking even more of the population into exile in Babylon.
 - Meanwhile, the scriptures (Jeremiah 43) tell us that a group of people who escaped the exile into Babylon went down to Egypt to try to avoid capture by Nebuchadnezzar.
- Jeremiah, a prophet who lived through the destruction of Jerusalem, prophesied that the exile would last for 70 years:
 - Jeremiah 25:11 — “This entire land will be a place of ruins and an object of horror, and these nations will serve the king of Babylon for seventy years. Then it will be when seventy years are completed I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation,” declares the LORD, “for their wrongdoing, and the land of the Chaldeans; and I will make it an everlasting desolation.”
- Isaiah, a prophet who lived more than 100 years before the destruction of Jerusalem (739-685 BCE) prophesied the name of the Persian king who would set the people of Israel free.
 - Isaiah 44:28 — “It is I who says of Cyrus, ‘He is My shepherd, And he will carry out all My desire.’ And he says of Jerusalem, ‘She will be built,’ And of the temple, ‘Your foundation will be laid.’”

Return

- **[SLIDE] [TIMELINE]** And that's what happened. In 539 BCE Cyrus the Great, King of Persia and the founder of the Achaemenid Dynasty, defeated the Babylonians and decreed that the Jews (and other peoples who were taken captive by the Babylonians) could return to their homeland.
- The first set of exiles returned under the leadership of the governor Zerubbabel in 538 BCE. The book of Ezra tells the story of these new arrivals and how they laid the foundation for the Second Temple. There were some issues with the locals, which we learned about in our study on Ezra, but the temple was finally completed and dedicated in 516 BCE, marking the end of the Exile after 70 years.
- **[SLIDE - Map of Persian Empire]** Darius I was king of Persia during that time (522-486 BCE). He continued to expand the Persian Empire west into Asia Minor (modern day Turkey). By 516 BCE Sardis, close to the Western end of Asia Minor, had become a second center of his administration, and he had built a road from Susa all the way to Sardis, with waypoints along the road where a messenger could change out horses.
- Darius took on two important titles that had been used by kings as far back as 1000 years before: the Great King and King of Kings. His son, Xerxes, who we will talk about in a minute, took on the full title, "the great king, the king of kings, the king of the provinces with many languages, the king of this great earth far and near, son of king Darius the Achaemenian."
- Darius was concerned about the Scythians, a nomadic people who lived in eastern Europe, West of the Black sea. To reach them, Darius needed to cross over from Asia to Europe, and the logical place to do that was **[SLIDE]** the Hellespont, where the sea was at its narrowest about 720 yards. **[SLIDE]** He hired a Greek engineer named Mandrocles to find a way to get his armies across the straight. **[SLIDE]** Mandrocles designed the first pontoon boat bridge in history: low, flat-decked boats connected with planks and covered in dirt and stones. This design has been used by engineers ever since, including this Pontoon boat bridge that was built over the James River in Virginia during the Civil War.
- **[SLIDE - Map of Persian Empire]** Darius' campaign against the Scythians was unsuccessful, mostly because the Scythians didn't really fight, they just retreated with a scorched earth policy, making it hard for Darius to support his army as he chased them.
- However, he took advantage of the new bridge to instead take on Thrace and Macedonia, taking the first by force and the second by an alliance.
- The Greeks, who lived in the area south of Macedonia, were terrified about what would happen next. The Greek city states were always at odds with each other, and there was no centralized Greek government. Athens and Sparta, the two most powerful cities, were not on the best of terms with each other. However, instead of taking them on, Darius went back home to Susa.
- In 500 BCE, Athens revolted against Persian ultimatums, siding with Greeks who lived in the western part of Asia Minor, an area called Ionia. The Ionians captured Sardis early on, but the war turned against them within a few years and the Ionians were defeated. Then, in 492 BCE, Darius' army crossed the pontoon bridge again, and this time he headed for Athens.
- Athens called on the Spartans for help, but the Spartans said they couldn't come because they were in the middle of a religious holiday. The Athenian hoplites met the Persians at the Battle of Marathon in 490 BCE. Their solid strategic approach to the battle led to a staggering Athenian victory over the Persian army.
- Darius got away, but four years later he raised taxes with plans to take on the Greeks again. However, that year, 486 BCE, he died and left the empire to his son, Xšayaršan (*Kha-sha-yar-shan*), literally "hero among kings", who we know as Xerxes I. In Aramaic, he is called Ahashverosh.
- Xerxes didn't have much of a navy, so he started building ships and also built another pontoon boat bridge across the Hellespont. Then, in 480 BCE, he took his army across the bridge and headed toward Greece.

- This time, Athens, Sparta, and the rest of the Greek city states joined forces in the Hellenic League. The Spartans were tasked with protecting the critical mountain pass of Thermopylae, the main path over the mountains into the southern part of Greece. Xerxes sent his elite troops, The Immortals, up the pass and used a lesser-known passage they were told about by a Greek traitor to get around the Spartan troops and surround them. Leonidas, the king of the Spartans, saw what was happening, and he sent the majority of the Spartan army down the mountain to the South, keeping only 300 of his warriors to slow the Persian advance and give the Greeks more time to prepare. The 300 Spartans fought to the last man in a heroic battle, but in the end Xerxes was able to get over the pass.
- **[SLIDE — 300]** You may have seen their story in a popular movie from 2006.
- While the Spartans fought, the rest of the Greeks retreated to the South, leaving Athens undefended, and the Persians took the city, burning the Acropolis. However, the Greeks tricked Xerxes into fighting them in a sea battle instead of waiting them out and winning in a battle of attrition on land. The Battle of Salamis was a massive success for the Greeks, and Xerxes, who had set himself on the top of a hill in a golden throne to watch the battle, was irate at seeing his defeat laid out in front of his eyes. However, after hearing a false rumor that the Greeks were going to sail up to the Hellespont and destroy the pontoon bridge, he decided to give up and head back to Susa. Once there, he apparently had a big party and decided it was time to find a new wife (Esther).

Greek History Up to Alexander

- **[SLIDE] [SLIDE - Map of Peloponnesian War]** After pushing back the Persian threat, the Greek city states continued to have their own internal struggles. Less than 20 years later, in 461 BCE, these struggles erupted into the First Peloponnesian War. This was during the lifetime of the Athenian philosopher Socrates, as well as during the time when Ezra and Nehemiah were busy rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem.
- **[Timeline]** The First Peloponnesian War ended in 446, but peace was short lived. The Second Peloponnesian War started up in 431 BCE.
- These wars were mostly centered around the question of whether Athens or Sparta (and their respective leagues of other Greek cities) should lead the Greek people.
- The Second Peloponnesian War was broken up into three phases and lasted until 404 BCE. In the end, Sparta came out on top, after gaining the financial support of the Persian king Darius II.
- The Peloponnesian Wars resulted in the democratic city of Athens never regaining its pre-war prosperity. It also led to widespread poverty throughout the Greek city states, including in Sparta, with many Greek soldiers selling their services as mercenaries to make ends meet.
- However, Greek culture was not decimated. Socrates was sentenced to death in 399 BCE, mainly because he regularly embarrassed people by making them appear ignorant and foolish. However, his student Plato went on to become one of the most important thinkers in Western philosophy. Plato's own student, Aristotle, was arguably even more influential, with his Aristotelian philosophy, characterized by deductive logic and analytical methods, which lead to the development of modern science.

Xenophon

- **[SLIDE]** The Persians, meanwhile, had their own struggles and internal issues. When Artaxerxes II inherited the throne from his father, Darius II, in 404 BCE, he had to fight off a threat to his new rule by one of his brothers, Cyrus the Younger (not the Cyrus of the Bible), who was ruling as a satrap in Sardis, in the western part of Asia Minor.
- Cyrus the Younger hired an army of 10,000 Greek mercenaries to help him seize the throne of Persia, and marched them from western Anatolia toward the Persian capital of Susa.

- **[SLIDE - Map of the 10,000]** Xenophon, a professional soldier and writer, was part of that expedition, and he wrote a book about the expedition called *Anabasis*. Cyrus' army finally encountered Artaxerxes II at the Battle of Cunaxa on August 1, 401 BCE. Cyrus lost the battle in a stunning defeat, and was killed in the process.
- The Greek mercenaries, now worried they would not make it home, started the long retreat, heading north toward the Black Sea, where there were some Greek outposts that might be able to help them. That journey, which took almost a year, was extremely difficult, but Xenophon saw some interesting sights along the way.
- **[SLIDE Walls of Nineveh]** One of those sights was the ancient Assyrian city of Nineveh, which had been destroyed by the Babylonians in 612 BCE, about 200 years earlier. Xenophon says:
 - From this place they marched one stage, six parasangs, to a great stronghold, deserted and lying in ruins. The name of this city was Mespila, and it was once inhabited by the Medes [he was incorrect about this]. The foundation of its wall was made of polished stone full of shells, and was fifty feet in breadth and fifty in height. Upon this foundation was built a wall of brick, fifty feet in breadth and a hundred in height; and the circuit of the wall was six parasangs. (Xenophon, *Anabasis* 3.4)
- This reconstruction of the walls of Nineveh does not really do them justice, but consider the size and power of a city with walls 50 feet wide and 150 feet tall.

Pan-Hellenism

- **[TIMELINE]** In 395 BCE, the so-called Corinthian War saw the Athenians fighting alongside the Egyptians against the Persians and the Spartans, which lasted until 387 BCE. The war wasn't good for anyone, and just led to more poverty in the Greek cities.
- In 380 BCE, a Greek orator and teacher named Isocrates published a speech called *Panegyricus*, calling on all Greeks to stop fighting and recognize their common heritage. He was promoting the idea of Pan-Hellenism, which is the adoption of the language, culture, and values of the Hellenes, the Greek people. Hellene comes from a root word meaning "to shine" or "to burn." Isocrates said,
 - "So far has our city [Athens] outpaced the rest of humankind in thought and in speech that her pupils have become the teachers of the rest of the world; and she has brought it about that the name Hellenes suggests no longer a race but an intelligence, and that the title Hellenes is applied rather to those who share our culture than to those who share a common blood..."
- This idea of Pan-Hellenism was not accepted by all of the Greek people, but the influence of Greek culture was spread to the rest of the known world much more quickly by a new king who came up in the second half of the 4th century.

Alexander the Great

- **[SLIDE]** In 359 BCE a new king, Philip II, was crowned in Macedonia, a nation just north of the Greek city states. While the Macedonians had not been a threat to Greece since being defeated by the Persians under Darius the Great, the waning of Persian influence had led to both Macedonia's northern neighbor Illyria and the Athenians to the south wanting to install their own puppet king in the region.
- Philip had other ideas. He built up an army, trained them in the superior Greek fighting methods, and defeated the Illyrians in battle. He then started expanding the Macedonian area of influence to the north and east.
- Philip had one son and heir, Alexander, who had been born to a Greek mother. As a boy, the future king was intelligent and precocious, and Philip hired the Greek philosopher Aristotle to be his tutor.
- In 338 BCE, Philip and Alexander met the army of Athens in battle, defeating them easily, but then, in a surprise move for any conqueror in the ancient world, they released all the prisoners and treated the city with respect. Athens conceded, as did much of the other Greek cities (except Sparta).

- Meanwhile, the Persians were having major issues, including a coup by a former general, who killed the king of Persia and his heirs and took over the kingdom.
- In 336 BCE, while preparing to take on the failing Persian empire, Philip was murdered. Alexander, then only 20 years old, ascended to the throne.
- Alexander quickly put down rebellion in Athens and other cities, took over the rest of Greece, and set his sights East.
- **[SLIDE - Map of Alexander's Empire]** He started out with an army of about 34,000, and defeated a Persian army near the ancient site of the city of Troy, close to the Hellespont. The Persian Empire's western capital, Sardis, surrendered without a fight, effectively giving Alexander control of Asia Minor.
- He continued to head East, eventually reaching Babylon, which he set up as his new empire's capitol, bringing his wife, children, and most of his court to him there.
- He also expanded the army to more than 250,000 men, including Persians, Medes, and other defeated peoples.
- He eventually met Darius III, king of Persia, in battle at the Issus River in Syria, and achieved a quick victory. Darius fled, leaving his wife and children behind and refusing to come back and bow the knee to Alexander.

Jerusalem

- After that battle, Alexander headed south to secure the rest of the eastern coast of the Mediterranean and to take Egypt from Darius.
- This is where we once again encounter the Jewish people in our story.
- There are two accounts of how Alexander the Great became the ruler over Israel. One is found in the Babylonian Talmud ([Yoma 69a](#)), and the other is found in the Jewish historian Josephus' book *Antiquities of the Jews* ([11.321-339](#)).
- The two stories differ slightly, but the account generally goes like this:
 - As Alexander was heading South toward Egypt he defeated the Phoenician city of Tyre, then Gaza, and headed to Jerusalem. The high priest at that time put on his priestly garments and walked out of the city flanked by the Men of the Great Assembly, the leaders and teachers in Israel at that time.
 - When Alexander saw the high priest, he got off his horse and bowed down before the priest.
 - His escort questioned this act of deference, but Alexander said that he had seen a vision of the high priest while he was still in Macedonia, telling him to go East and conquer the Persians.
 - The Jewish leaders then took Alexander into the Temple to offer a sacrifice to the LORD. They also showed him a prophecy from the Book of Daniel, written more than 200 years earlier, that foretold the rise of Alexander and the defeat of the Medo-Persian Empire.
 - **[READ Daniel 8:3-8, 20-22]**
- After taking control of Jerusalem, Alexander headed to Egypt, taking control of that once great nation from Darius III and having himself named Pharaoh. He also founded the city of Alexandria in 331 BCE, but left a few months later and never returned.
- **[SLIDE - Alexander's Conquests]** Alexander continued his quest to defeat the Persians, which he finally succeeded in doing in 330 BCE.
- Now ruling as the Great King of Persia, Alexander set his sights on conquering India.

- However, the battles and the travel through the mountains there were very difficult, and eventually his army refused to continue. He finally conceded, and headed back to Babylon to consolidate his power. The main problem with Alexander's empire was that the rapid expansion did not lend itself to the creation of the normal infrastructure needed for a large empire.
- But before Alexander could do anything about that problem, he came down with a fever that worsened quickly, and he died about 10 days later.

The Breakup of the Empire

- **[SLIDE]** His military commanders were unsure what to do with the empire Alexander had built. Alexander's wife was pregnant with his presumed heir, but until the baby was born could not be crowned. Alexander's brother, Philip, a simpleminded and easily controlled man, was crowned the nominal king by the army in Babylon, but the four main leaders under Alexander split up the kingdom into satrapies and named themselves the rulers of the largest portions:
 - Perdikkas became the co-regent in Babylon, ostensibly helping the simpleminded Philip rule.
 - Ptolemy became satrap of Egypt
 - Antigonus became satrap of most of Asia Minor,
 - Lysimachus became satrap of Thrace
 - Antipater (not to be confused with the Antipater who comes later) became satrap of Macedonia.
 - and six other leaders became satraps over other smaller portions of the empire.
- The lack of a single, solid successor was a major problem, and this break-up of the empire was really just the precursor to all out war. The so-called Wars of the Successors (Wars of the Diadochi) started pretty much immediately.
- In an effort to prove himself the rightful heir of Alexander's empire, Ptolemy stole Alexander's body and took it with him to Egypt, burying it in Memphis, but it was later moved to Alexandria.
- Perdikkas was assassinated by his army officers, led by a man named Seleucus, whom Ptolemy then awarded with a satrapy over Babylon.
- **[SLIDE - War of the Successors - [source](#) or [source](#)]** The wars continued for about forty years, from 321 until 281 BCE, and in the end there were essentially three kingdoms:
 - The Ptolemaic Empire in Egypt
 - The Seleucid Empire in Asia Minor, Syria, Babylon, and Persia
 - and the Antigonid Empire in Thrace and Macedonia
- Seleucus built Antioch in Syria during this period as a major capital city, alongside Sardis, Babylon, and another new city, Seleucia.
- In 278 BCE, the Gauls, a group of Celtic people who at that time controlled most of southern Europe, crossed the Hellespont and threatened the Seleucid Empire. Antiochus I, the Seleucid emperor at that time, fought them off, but they settled in northwestern Asia Minor. The area became known as Galatia and the people were the Galatians.
- Over the rest of the third century BCE the main contention between the Ptolemaic and Seleucid Empires was this little strip of land along the Eastern side of the Mediterranean Sea: Israel and Phoenicia. They fought over these lands constantly.

Growth of Rome

- **[SLIDE]** By about 265 BCE, the city state of Rome had expanded its influence over most of the Italian peninsula. At the same time the city of Carthage in North Africa (which tradition says was founded in 814 BCE by Elyssa, the great-niece of Queen Jezebel) had expanded its influence over most of North Africa and the island of Sicily.
- **[SLIDE - Map of Rome]** In 264 BCE, Rome invaded Sicily, kicking off the First Punic War, which lasted until 241 BCE.
- However, Rome was not as advanced at shipbuilding or naval warfare as Carthage. They relied at first on ships from other cities they had conquered, but after a Carthaginian warship ran aground on Italy, the Romans took it apart and used it as a template to build new ships. Within a few years, the two navies were equally matched.
- This was emblematic of the Roman approach to most things: They copied their military strategies, laws, government, and even mythologies from other cultures.
- However, the Roman Republic had a long way to go before it would grow into the empire that we are more familiar with from the Apostolic period 250 years later.
- The First Punic War ended with Rome in control of Sicily.
- **[TIMELINE]** Over the next few years, Carthage set up an outpost in the Iberian Peninsula (modern day Spain). When a man named Hannibal became the leader of this new outpost in 221 BCE, he acted on a lifelong hatred of the Romans and swore to invade and destroy Rome. Hannibal kicked off the Second Punic War in 218 BCE by building an army of 100,000 infantry, 20,000 cavalry, and 37 elephants and heading toward Italy overland through the Celtic-controlled lands of what is now southern France. The main issue with this route was the Alps, which no one thought Hannibal would be able to cross with such a large force.
- And they were almost correct. The crossing took 15 days, and Hannibal lost 36,000 men and 34 of his elephants.
- He continued on from there, heading south toward Rome and defeating multiple Roman counterattacks along the way. The largest battle, held at Cannae, resulted in the deaths of 50,000 Romans.
- However, for some reason Hannibal never directly attacked Rome, so the war dragged on for years. Rome eventually decided to take the battle to Carthage, sending an army to North Africa led by the Roman general Scipio.
- After hearing of the imminent attack, Hannibal left Italy and sailed home to defend Carthage. In 201 BCE, the Carthaginian senate finally surrendered. Hannibal was allowed to stay in Carthage, but eventually fled from an assassination plot. He ended up in the Seleucid Empire, acting as a military advisor to Antiochus III in his war against Rome.

Antiochus III The Great

- **[SLIDE]** Meanwhile, as Rome was busy defending itself against Hannibal and the Carthaginians, the Seleucids were doing their best to expand their empire.
- Antiochus III, called Antiochus the Great, continued the fight with the Ptolemaic Empire for control over Israel. In 198 BCE, the Seleucids won the Battle of Panium, ending Ptolemaic control over Israel for good.
 - **[SLIDE]** The Battle of Panium occurred near Banias Spring at the foot of Mount Hermon in Northern Israel. The spring feeds the Banias River, a main tributary of the Jordan River.
 - **[SLIDE]** This site was the location of an ancient shrine to Ba'al, which the Ptolemaic Greeks converted into a shrine to their god Pan. After gaining control of the area, the Seleucid Greeks built a temple on

the location. 200 years later, in 3 BCE, Herod's son, Philip II built a city on this site called Caesarea Philippi.

- The worshippers of Pan believed that the Banias Spring was a gateway to the underworld, and that their fertility gods used the water as a passageway to Hades. As a result, the spring was known as the “Gates of Hell.”
 - Jesus visited this area during his ministry, and it is here that he had an interesting interaction with Peter.
 - **[READ Matthew 16:13–20]**
- When the Ptolemaic Empire had control over Israel, they had permitted the Jews considerable cultural and religious freedom, but the Seleucids king Antiochus III went further. He actually gave them the right to enact the Torah as the law of the land.
 - The Greek control over Israel, whether under the Ptolemies or the Seleucids, led to a heavy Greek cultural influence, the Hellenism that Isocrates preached in favor of, which we will talk more about later.
- But Antiochus the Great was not just interested in fighting the Ptolemies. He wanted to take on the Romans, too. He crossed the Hellespont in 196 BCE with his new military advisor, Hannibal, and worked his way toward Greece, which was under Roman control.
- **[TIMELINE]** The Romans and Seleucids met in 191 BCE in the pass of Thermopylae (remember that place?), and Antiochus the Great lost thousands of troops and was forced to retreat into Asia Minor.
- In 188 BCE Antiochus III the Great was finally forced to sign the Treaty of Apamea, which ended the Roman–Seleucid War. It also required Antiochus to give up all Seleucid land West of the Taurus Mountains (essentially the eastern border of Asia Minor), and required that any man who was next in line for the Seleucid throne be held as a political hostage by the Romans until he was crowned king himself. This allowed the Romans to exert considerable pressure on the Greeks, and kept the Seleucid kings subservient to Roman rule.

Diaspora

- **[SLIDE]** Let's turn our attention back to the Jewish people.
- The release of the Jews to go back to Israel in 539 BCE unfortunately did not mean the end of the actual exile. Not all of the Jews came back to Israel. Many Jews who had been exiled, both from the Northern tribes of Israel and from Judah, continued to live, and even thrive, in various locations around the Mediterranean.
- **[SLIDE — Map]** Four centers of Jewish life emerged over this time and were all very active by the Apostolic period: Babylon, Egypt, Asia Minor, and Syria.
- **[SLIDE]** Babylon
 - The Babylonian Jewish community was apparently small, but still significant, during this time, even after the return of the exiles to Israel under Cyrus the Great.
 - However, after the First Jewish Revolt in 70 CE, the Babylonian community really grew in prominence, eventually generating the highly influential Babylonian Talmud.
- **[SLIDE]** Egypt:
 - Remember that after the destruction of the First Temple, many of the remaining Jews who had evaded capture by the Babylonians escaped to Egypt, despite the specific warning of the Prophet Jeremiah (chapters 42-43) against doing so.

- When Alexander the Great designed the city of Alexandria, there were so many Jews in Egypt that he assigned 1/4 of the city to the Jews. So, Alexandria became largest and most important Jewish settlement outside Israel.
- **[SLIDE] Syria**
 - Antioch, built by Seleucus as one of the capitals of his empire, boasted the second largest Jewish community in the Diaspora after Alexandria.
 - Josephus says that Seleucus I Nicator (305–280 B.C.E.) even gave the Jews of Antioch citizenship in the Seleucid Empire.
 - In addition, a large number of people converted to Judaism there.
 - This community became central to the growth of the Nazarene sect (the early Christian community) in the first century.
- **[SLIDE] Asia Minor**
 - At the end of the third century B.C.E. Antiochus III the Great issued a command to transfer 2,000 Jewish families from Babylonia to Phrygia and Lydia, regions in the western half of Asia Minor, in order to settle them in the fortified cities as garrisons. The first synagogues in Asia Minor were apparently built at that time.
 - Cicero (106-43 BCE) mentions the large numbers of Jews in Asia Minor.
 - The book of Acts and Paul’s epistles, along with the writings of Josephus, tell us that there were Jewish communities in many regions of Asia Minor: Ionia, Mysia, Lydia, Caria, Lycia, Phrygia, Lycaonia, Cappadocia, Galatia, Bithynia, Paphlagonia, Pisidia, Cilicia, and others.
- Scholarly estimates of the Jewish population of this era range from 700,000 to 5 million in Israel and from 2 million to 5 million in the Diaspora, the prevailing opinion being that about one-tenth of the population of the Mediterranean world in the time of Yeshua was Jewish.
- Synagogues
 - Most scholars believe synagogues were developed that during the Babylonian captivity during the 6th century BCE or possibly as late as the 4th century BCE.
 - As early as the 3rd century BCE, there were inscriptions mentioning *proseuchai*, or Jewish prayer houses.
 - A synagogue was not (and is not) a replacement for the Temple. It is a place to study the Torah and participate in other aspects of Jewish life in community.
 - In Alexandria there were numerous synagogues throughout the city, of which the largest (The Great Synagogue of Alexandria) was so famous that the Jerusalem Talmud tells us, “Rebbi Yehudah said, anybody who did not see the double stoa of Alexandria did not ever see the glory of Israel.” ([y. Sukkah 5:1](#))

Hellenizing Influences

- **[SLIDE]** Unfortunately, Jews in the Greek period, both in Israel but especially in the Diaspora, were heavily influenced by Greek, or Hellenist, culture.
- Hellenism involved the adoption of the Greek language and writing system, its myths and religion, and its technology and art. It resulted in heavy syncretism between Greek paganism and Judaism.

- Papyrus documents discovered in Africa provide evidence that an illegitimate Jewish temple was built in Elephantine, Egypt, as well as evidence of syncretistic practices connected to pagan cults.
- In c. 145 BCE a deposed high priest named Onias IV established another illegitimate temple at Leontopolis in Egypt that continued to be used until the Romans shut it down in 73 CE after the destruction of Jerusalem.
- Hellenism was visible in the overall adoption of Greek culture in everyday life, as well.
- Alexander the Great was the source of much of this Hellenization. He set up schools throughout his empire to teach children Greek language and culture, and he built gymnasiums, central cultural centers associated with exercise (especially gymnastics and wrestling), medicine, and communal bathing, in the cities he conquered.
- Greek was the language of trade and culture, the common tongue necessary for travelers. We see this trend in Israel in that Greek forms of names displaced the Hebrew and Aramaic originals.
 - Many Jews, especially those who were either Hellenized or had to deal with non-Jews in business, started to use two names, Hebrew and Greek. We see this trend continue through the Apostolic period (Kefa/Petros, Shaul/Paul).
 - In the 3rd century BCE, all of the Jewish papyri in Egypt started to be written in Greek instead of Aramaic, indicating the expansion of Greek influence under the Ptolemaic Empire.
- During the early Greek period, the High Priests were the most powerful people in the land of Israel. The Oniad family were the hereditary Aaronic priests, and they ruled over the people from the Temple.

Antiochus IV Epiphanies

- **[SLIDE] [TIMELINE]** In 175 BCE, Antiochus III's second son Antiochus IV Epiphanies took over the Seleucid empire after the death of his older brother. Antiochus IV usurped the throne from his brother's infant son, who was in Roman custody when the king died, and apparently killed him a few years later.
- According to ancient sources, after he became king of the Seleucid empire, Antiochus IV began selling off the rights of the high priesthood in the Temple in Jerusalem. In 175 BCE, Jason, the brother of the current high priest Onias III, bribed Antiochus for the title. Jason's original name was *Yeshua* or *Yehoshua* (Jesus or Joshua), but he changed it to a Greek version of the same name (*Iason*) to signify his Hellenistic views. Jason served as the high priest from 175 to 171 BCE, and he expanded Hellenistic influences by building a Greek-focused settlement and gymnasium near Jerusalem, along with implementing Greek educational institutions throughout the land.
- Meanwhile, Antiochus really didn't want a fight with Rome, so after securing his empire he patched up relations with the Romans and signed a new treaty of alliance with them.
- However, he did have his sights set on Egypt. The Ptolemies, the Greek family that was still ruling over Egypt, were demanding the return of Israel/Syria, and they even started raising an army to come take it by force. But Antiochus got his army together faster, and headed into Egypt, taking over everything but the city of Alexandria and capturing King Ptolemy VI.
- He set up Ptolemy VI as a puppet king in Memphis then went back home, but the city of Alexandria revolted and chose a new king, a brother of Ptolemy, and the two men quickly agreed to rule together.
- Antiochus didn't like this arrangement, so he headed down to Egypt again in 168 BCE, deciding to attack Alexandria this time. However, as he was traveling on the road to Alexandria he was stopped by a Roman ambassador who warned him leave Egypt or risk a fight against Rome. The ambassador drew a circle in the dirt around Antiochus and told him to decide before stepping outside the circle. The Romans didn't want to upset the balance of power by allowing the Seleucids to take more territory.

- Antiochus decided not to pick a fight with the Romans, so he retreated, heading back into Israel and taking his frustrations out on the Jews.

The Maccabees

- **[SLIDE]** In 171 BCE, after just four years in power, Jason had been outbid for the position of High Priest by a man named Menelaus. Menelaus had an even more extreme approach to Hellenism than Jason, but the Jews of Jerusalem were all largely Hellenized, so that was not a problem. The main issue was the widely-held belief that Menelaus gave 1,800 talents of gold from the temple to Antiochus, which did not go over well with the masses. In 167 BCE, Jason heard a rumor that Antiochus had died in battle in Egypt, so he launched a coup against Menelaus and started what was essentially a civil war in which Menelaus was supported by the wealthy aristocrats and Jason by the masses.
- Antiochus Epiphanes heard about this civil war while on his way back from Egypt. He stepped in on the side of Menelaus in 167 BCE. The resulting war was brutal, with thousands of Jews in Jerusalem killed, especially any that were either friendly with the Ptolemies or on the side of Jason.
- But that wasn't enough for Antiochus IV Epiphanies. He proclaimed the practice of Judaism to be illegal. The book of 1 Maccabees, written about 60 years later, says,
 - “He insolently entered the sanctuary and took away the golden altar, the lampstand for the light with all its utensils, the offering table, the cups and bowls, the golden censers, and the curtain. The cornices and the golden ornament on the façade of the temple—he stripped it all off. And he took away the silver and gold and the precious vessels; he also took all the hidden treasures he could find.” (1 Maccabees 1:21-23)
- He then defiled the temple by erecting an altar to the Greek god Zeus, offering pigs as sacrifices, and more. The Temple services were interrupted for three years (167-164 BCE) as a result. 1 Maccabees continues:
 - “The king sent letters by messenger to Jerusalem and to the cities of Judah, ordering them to follow customs foreign to their land; to prohibit burnt offerings, sacrifices, and libations in the sanctuary, to profane the sabbaths and feast days, to desecrate the sanctuary and the sacred ministers, to build pagan altars and temples and shrines, to sacrifice swine and unclean animals, to leave their sons uncircumcised, and to defile themselves with every kind of impurity and abomination; so that they might forget the law and change all its ordinances. Whoever refused to act according to the command of the king was to be put to death.” (1 Maccabees 1:44-50)
- So, Antiochus forbade three main religious rites which outwardly distinguished the Jews from the surrounding pagans: circumcision, the keeping of the Sabbath and the festivals, and the abstinence from unclean food. 1 Maccabees continues:
 - “... the king erected the desolating abomination upon the altar of burnt offerings, and in the surrounding cities of Judah they built pagan altars. They also burned incense at the doors of houses and in the streets. Any scrolls of the law that they found they tore up and burned. Whoever was found with a scroll of the covenant, and whoever observed the law, was condemned to death by royal decree.” (1 Maccabees 1:54-57)
- When the book of Maccabees says, “the king erected the desolating abomination upon the altar of burnt offerings,” the reference is to the prophecy found in Daniel 11:31-32, which says:
 - “Forces from him will arise, desecrate the sanctuary fortress, and do away with the regular sacrifice. And they will set up the abomination of desolation. And by smooth words he will turn to godlessness those who act wickedly toward the covenant, but the people who know their God will be strong and take action.

- That's exactly what Antiochus did: He set up an abomination in the temple, and he brought Hellenism in with force.
- In 164 BCE, after about three years of this, Mattathias, a priest who lived in Modein (about 3 miles north of Jerusalem) and his five sons revolted.
 - A representative of the king came to Modein to "help" the people sacrifice to the Greek gods. He tried to convince Mattathias to be the first person in to offer a pig on an altar.
 - Mattathias refused, declaring that he and his sons would stay faithful to their covenant with God.
 - When another Hellenized Jewish man stepped up to offer the sacrifice, Mattathias killed him, then he killed the king's envoy, and destroyed the altar. Afterwards, he said, "Let everyone who is zealous for the Torah and who stands by the covenant follow me!" (1 Maccabees 2:27) and headed off into the hills.
- Mattathias and his sons were joined by many other Jews, including a group known as the Hasideans.
 - In Hebrew their name was *hasidim*, "pious ones." They were apparently a militant religious group devoted to the strict observance of the Torah, the Law. At first they supported the Maccabean movement, but later they opposed it, regarding it as too political (see 1 Maccabees 7:12–18).
 - Scholars debate who the Hasideans were and what became of them. Some believe that they were the predecessors of the Pharisees, while other believe that they were the predecessors of the Essenes. Either way, they were a Jewish sect that was committed to the proper worship of the God of Israel.
- Mattathias had five sons, one of whom was named *Yehudah HaMaccabee*, Judah the Hammer. Before Mattathias died in 166 BCE, he named Judah the commander of the Jewish rebel force.
 - The family name of Mattathias and his sons was the Hasmoneans. Because of the valor of Judah Maccabee, the army they raised against the Seleucid Greeks was called the Maccabees.
- There were a few key ways the Maccabees fought early on that made them successful.
 - First, they made a ruling that it was acceptable to fight on Shabbat. Some of the Hasideans who had stood up to the Seleucids before had been determined not to defend themselves on the Sabbath, instead being strict in their observance of the laws about not carrying or doing other labor on the Sabbath. That led to a major loss of the Hasideans when the Greeks attacked them on a Sabbath. The Maccabees reasoned that this was a losing strategy and that defending oneself on the Sabbath was an acceptable violation of the rest day.
 - Second, the Maccabees didn't take on the Seleucids directly in open battle. They knew that the majority of the Jews in the Maccabean army were not professional soldiers, so they instead launched surprise attacks, entering towns unexpectedly, taking out the small numbers of local troops, destroying the pagan altars, and circumcizing any Jewish boys who had not been admitted into the Abrahamic Covenant. They also took action against Hellenist Jews, in an effort to root out the Hellenizers among the people. Whenever the larger garrison of troops in Jerusalem was sent out to attack them, the Maccabees would disappear once again into the hill country.
- Eventually, though, after Mattathias' death and after the army had grown in size, Judah Maccabee started taking on the Seleucid Greek forces more directly. The first battle they fought against a commander name Apollonius they won outright, killing Apollonius and scattering his army. Judah took Apollonius' sword and fought with it in every battle from then on.
- In 166 BCE, the Maccabees defeated another Seleucid force, and Antiochus finally started to pay attention to the threat. In September 165 BCE, Judah defeated two Seleucid forces led by generals Nicanor and Gorgias in the Battle of Emmaus. The Seleucids regrouped and gathered a larger army to attack from the south.

- Finally, in December 164 BCE, Judah Maccabee defeated the Seleucid Greeks in Jerusalem. The temple had been defiled, pagan sacrifices had been performed on the altar, and the Greeks had done their best to make the temple into a pagan house of worship. The Maccabees set about cleaning up the temple and preparing to initiate the sacrifices to God once more, but they encountered a problem when they tried to re-light the menorah. The Talmud tells us the story:
 - “When the Greeks entered the Sanctuary they defiled all the oils that were in the Sanctuary by touching them. And when the Hasmonean monarchy overcame them and emerged victorious over them, they searched and found only one cruse of oil that was placed with the seal of the High Priest, undisturbed by the Greeks. And there was sufficient oil there to light the candelabrum for only one day. A miracle occurred and they lit the candelabrum from it eight days. The next year the Sages instituted those days and made them holidays with recitation of *hallel* and special thanksgiving in prayer and blessings.” ([b. Shabbat 21b](#))
- This is the celebration of the Festival of Dedication or Chanukkah (חֲנֻכָּה), also known as the Festival of Lights.