

Dr. Anthony J. Tomasino, Judaism Before Jesus,

Session 1, The Big Picture

© 2024 Tony Tomasino and Ted Hildebrandt

This is Tony Tomasino on Judaism Before Jesus, session 1, the Big Picture.

Now the time between the Old Testament and the New Testament is something of a mystery to many people. Many Christians find it to be a bit of a shock when they go from the familiar world of the New Testament to the less familiar world of the Old Testament and wonder how it was that we came from this period where we're speaking Hebrew and where we're living under the rule of the Babylonians to this time where suddenly we are dealing with the Romans and the Roman Empire, and we're writing in Greek.

It is a large period of darkness for many people that Protestants have traditionally referred to as the 400 silent years. Now fact is it really is anything but silent. It is a time of great literary and theological and cultural development for Judaism and the world of the Old Testament and the world of the New Testament are very different and the peoples that we encounter in these different eras are almost like different species of human beings.

So, when we look at the materials that we have in the Bible, particularly our Protestant Bibles, it's going to feel jarring to us somewhat as in the Old Testament, we see things like the great kingdoms, the empires of Assyrians, and the Babylonians. We read about things like the Hebrew kings and the apostasy and the struggle against idolatry, and then we get to the New Testament, and we're reading about a completely different set of obsessions. The obsession with the idea of the resurrection of the dead is really a central theme of the entire New Testament.

This idea that Jesus rose from the dead becomes really the core theme of the entire New Testament, and yet that notion of resurrection is almost absent in the Old Testament, and so we wonder where did it come from and to us, it might seem a mystery, but we can see if we look at some of this intertestamental literature the way that that idea developed over time. But that's only one of the themes that we will see. One of the ideas that will be explored here as we talk about the intertestamental period.

So, I'm your lecturer. My name is Tony Tomasino, and I am a pastor in a church in Michigan right now. I was previously a professor of Old Testament and intertestamental studies, and we are going to explore together some of the ideas, events, and themes that shape the New Testament world.

Now, we think of this as the 400 silent years, but as I've already mentioned, it's anything but silent. The amount of data we have is vast and oftentimes contradictory. The amount of information that is available to us now is far more than has been available to us in the past, and still, we're trying to sort it all out.

My own thinking has changed over the years as new discoveries have been made or as we just look at old discoveries in a new light. So, what I'm going to try to do is I'm trying to be selective as we go through this time, and I'm going to emphasize a number of historical events that are very significant but a major theme that I'm going to be trying to strike upon is how we see the New Testament world coming into existence. How we see this world is formed on the basis, on the foundations of the Old Testament world, and we're going to bridge that gap between the two, between the world of the Old Testament and the world of the New Testament, and hopefully, we'll see that the world of the New Testament isn't some strange jarring kind of discontinuity but rather a kind of a natural progression of a lot of what we see happening in the Old Testament.

Now, personally, the way that I like to learn is I like to get a big picture of things first, and then I like to come back and fill in the blanks and talk about the details, and so that's what we're going to do in this lecture. We're going to get the big picture, and then we're back as we go through our next lectures, and we're going to focus more on details, we're going to fill out this picture, we're going to take and pause for a little while to look at some texts, we're going to look at some ideas, some themes and we're going to see how all of this plays in together to make this wonderful bridge between the Testaments. So, let's start with the Old Testament.

Most of us are familiar with the story, but it never hurts to review it a little bit, right? So, the Bible begins in the beginning, quite literally in the beginning. The words, of course, of the first chapters of the Bible refer to the creation of the world, and from the story of the creation, we quickly move on to the creation of a people. putting dates on things is always very dangerous, particularly when you're talking about the Old Testament time period. A lot of times, we are reconstructing things based on genealogies, and so we have these famous chronologies from people like Bishop Usher, which were based upon adding numbers together and coming up with these dates.

We have a different sense of the way that genealogies work now than Bishop Usher did, and we realize that those genealogies tend to be rather selective, and oftentimes, they tend to work by different rules than the way modern genealogies work. So, setting dates on things in the Old Testament isn't always the wisest course of action. Nonetheless, as we say, fools rush in where angels fear to tread, so I'm immediately going to put a date on something here.

The call of Abram, the beginning of the Israelite people and the father of the nation, happens in Genesis chapter 12 the call of Abram probably occurs sometime around 2000 BC, what we call the Bronze Age, and in those days, we hear that God speaks to a man by the name of Abram and says, I am going to make you into a nation, I'm going to give you a land, I am going to make you a blessing to those who bless you and a curse to those who curse you, and we're going to see that through you all the peoples of the world will be blessed or will bless themselves, however, we accurately translate that. But at any rate, this is the beginning of Israel. The book of Genesis then goes on to talk about the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, we have a lot of stories about these people who formed the foundation of the nation, and Israel becomes the father of the 12 tribes of Israel, and near the end of the book of Genesis we see the people of Israel migrating down into Egypt and that's where the whole story of Joseph comes in.

But the Israelites go to Egypt, according to the first chapter of the book of Exodus, where they are enslaved the book of Genesis and later books tell us that there were 400 years of slavery there in Egypt and then after their 400 years of slavery, God raises up a man by the name of Moses and Moses is the one who delivers the people, well God is the one who delivers the people, but God uses Moses to deliver the people from their captivity there in Egypt and he takes these people forth, gives them the laws that we find in the Torah, the laws of Moses in the Pentateuch, and those laws constitute most of the rest of the first five books of the Old Testament. So, Moses comes to the edge of the promised land at the end of the book of Deuteronomy; he dies there on the plains of Midian and hands over the reins of leadership to his protege Joshua, who fit the battle at Jericho, fit it very well, thank you very much. Joshua brings the people into the land that God had promised to Abraham so very long ago.

Now, after Joshua, the reign of leadership is passed to these people called the judges, and the judges are charismatic leaders who are raised up by God to deliver the nation from their captives also, I think that it's fair to say that many of these people also had sort of judicial roles whereby we call them judges rather than simply calling them warlords or something like that. But the period of judges lasts for a period of time, and there's a great deal of controversy about how long the period of judges lasted, but that's not really important to us right now. All we know is there was a period of judges here, and it laid the foundations for what's about to happen because at the end of the book of Judges we see the first rumblings of discontent with the system of charismatic leadership and then we come to the books of kings where the people cry out and say we need kings because the leadership of the judges proved to be insufficient.

So, the first king of Israel, a fellow by the name of Saul, probably around 1050 BC and we're starting to get into the period here where we can date things with a little bit more surety. Now that's also relative but a little bit more surety now about where

we are on our timeline. So, approximately 1050 BC or so God chooses a man by the name of Saul to become the king of Israel, Israel's first king.

Saul is disobedient to God in well a couple of major kind of ways and because of his disobedience God chooses another man, a fellow by the name of David, a man after God's own heart, meaning not that David always was pursuing God but rather that God for some reason was always pursuing David. So, God chooses David to become king. David and Saul struggle for a while.

Eventually David becomes a king of a fairly substantial empire. After his days he is replaced by his son Solomon. Solomon becomes king over this empire and expands the kingdom even more.

During his days, the great temple of the Lord was built in Jerusalem, and this is, of course, a major milestone because the temple became central to Israel's identity as a people. They are a people who look to the temple as the foundation, as the center of their faith. Now, after the days of Solomon, well, Solomon is disobedient to God as practically every king of Israel is to some extent or another, but because of his apostasy, God judges the nation, and Israel divides into two kingdoms.

The northern kingdom which consists of 10 tribes, again the numbers and the identity is a little bit muddled at times, but at any rate we have the 10 tribes of the north which eventually found the center of their kingdom in Samaria and that becomes the capital of their kingdom eventually. The southern kingdom of Judah with their capital remaining at Jerusalem. So, the northern kingdom, according to the books of Kings, has no good kings.

The main reason they have no good kings is because they have set up their own shrine at Bethel and other shrines around the land and God has declared that his favorite place is in Jerusalem. Now, there are other reasons why they don't like the kings of the north as well, but that's, you know, more or less really one of the main reasons. So, because the northern kingdom is regarded as an apostate, God brings a nation to judge the kingdoms here, and that nation is Assyria.

The Assyrians were a Semitic people to the north located in Mesopotamia, a very cultured people, a very fierce people, and remarkable in their ways. The Assyrians produced some of this gorgeous artwork, and here we see an Assyrian king with his foot upon the shoulder of probably an Israelite there, according to some of the people who've studied these things. But the Assyrians managed to conquer most of the Middle East, including Israel and Judah, and both Israel and Judah paid tribute to Assyria.

Eventually Israel joined into a coalition of nations which rebelled against Assyria and when they rebelled, well it didn't work out as they had planned. And so, the

Assyrians destroyed the kingdom of Israel. They deported most of its people to various regions around the Assyrian empire, brought in people from other areas to repopulate that land, that northern area.

We speak of the ten lost tribes of Israel. This is what we're talking about. We're talking about that time when these people were deported from Israel, and other peoples of foreign descent were brought in.

Now, very likely, there were still Israelites there, and there was probably some intermarriage and all kinds of things going on at that time. And we're going to have to come back to this later because there's a whole group of people who become very important in the New Testament called the Samaritans who are the recipients you might say of this action by the Assyrians. But at any rate, Judah kind of dodges the bullet with the Assyrians, and because the people of Judah have been sort of blessed by God we see this wonderful story of how King Hezekiah in his day is delivered from the Assyrians, and we see that God has a special place in his heart for the faithful of Judah, they are spared at this point.

But alas and alack it shall not continue this way for long because the politics of the Middle East are about to grind Judah under their wheels as well. Now the Bible, of course, has one explanation for this. The Bible's explanation is that Judah also was apostate, particularly a certain king by the name of Manasseh who set up altars to the god Baal and who sacrificed children and all kinds of fun stuff like that.

But because of Manasseh's apostasy, God said enough is enough, and Judah is going to suffer the same fate as Israel, its northern neighbor. So, this came across not from the Assyrians but rather from other Semitic peoples, the people called the Babylonians. Babylon of course is a great ancient kingdom and the Babylonians had been around for many, many ages.

At this time the Babylonians were coming into a sort of renaissance, particularly under the leadership of a fellow by the name of Nebuchadnezzar. And because of Nebuchadnezzar's leadership, the Babylonian kingdom managed to reach out and conquer the Assyrians and other lands around them, and eventually Judah too came into their sway. Now, Judah apparently did not learn a lesson from their brothers, the Israelites, because Judah rebelled against the Babylonians.

In 587 BC the Babylonians came and laid siege to Jerusalem. Jerusalem was destroyed, mostly. The walls were knocked down.

The great temple of Solomon was destroyed, and the king of Judah was taken away as a captive to Babylon along with many of the leading citizens of Judah. So this introduces the period that we call the Babylonian exile. Now the prophet Jeremiah had predicted that this period would last for 70 years.

It had also been predicted it would last for 40 years. Well, it all depends on how much you count as an exile, I suppose, because in 587 to 538, 538 officially, the exile ends for reasons I'll get to a minute, but not all the Israelites returned immediately. In fact, many of the people of Judah chose to remain in Babylon, and it took a while for the rebuilding of Jerusalem and for the recovery of the nation from this devastation which was wrought upon them.

So, from 587 to 538, a large population of really upper-class Jews were living in Babylon. Jeremiah refers to these people who were actually carried away and taken to Babylon as the good figs, the good people, whereas the people who were left in the land he referred to as the bad figs, the people who were of better questionable morals, we might say. They eventually came to be known as the people of the land, but that's not a good term.

We're not talking tree huggers here. We're talking about people who adopted the ways of their neighbors and people who lost a lot of the distinctives of what it meant to be a Judahite, a worshipper of the Lord, whereas meanwhile, up in Babylon, the Jewish community was closing ranks, and I use that word Jewish here and I realize it's kind of an anachronism at this point, but we'll let that slide. The people there who were closing ranks were defining themselves against their neighbors, and many of the important traditions that we find in the Old Testament were beginning to be solidified by this community there in Babylon.

So, 538, what's so special about 538? Well, now we're coming to near the end of the Old Testament, and at this point, there is a remarkable figure. Sometimes he's been called the first true individual in the history of the world, which is an interesting way to describe this man, but Cyrus the Great has been called one of the few people who actually earned that title, the Great. Cyrus was the king of Persia, the Persian Empire. We're going to talk a lot about Cyrus in the next lecture, but Cyrus managed to conquer the Babylonian Empire, and when he conquered Babylon, he issued a decree that allowed the captives in Babylon, not just the people of Judah, but all the captives were now allowed to go free.

Many of the people, many of the Judahites, returned home to Jerusalem in the captivity. Many more remained in Babylon. And you can kind of understand why if you think about it. Babylon was kind of the cultural center of the world in those days.

You've got all the fruit and all the wine and all the fun you can want. You can go down to Babylon, and you can observe the great works of architecture and so on. If you go back home to Jerusalem, you're going back to ruins and to work because you've got to rebuild the place.

Many of the people of Judah remained in Babylon and formed a very vibrant Jewish community there. In fact, that Jewish community in Babylon would remain well into the time of Jesus, well beyond the time of Jesus, and really up until the time of the Muslim conquests.

Meanwhile, we have people going back home to Jerusalem for the wonderful task of rebuilding their nation. So, one of the most important things for them at this point is a new temple. And so, the second temple, they apparently began work on the temple pretty much immediately but it wasn't completed until 515 BC.

So, about 20 years after the time when they began the work, they actually completed the work. And we're told in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah that when the people saw their new temple, they wept, not with joy; they wept because those who were old enough to remember what the old temple had looked like realized that this new one was just a shadow of the former temple's glory. But we read in the prophets like Zechariah who speaks about how God talks about how he's going to rain his glory down upon that temple and how he was going to restore his people even in the midst of their poverty in this time.

So, the construction of this new temple begins the period that we call the second temple period for obvious reasons. This is the second temple. Solomon's temple was the first temple and this now is the second temple.

Now, we kind of cheat here a little bit because we say that the second temple period ends in 70 AD, and technically, that's true because that was when the temple was destroyed by the Romans. However, the temple that was destroyed by the Romans is not the same one that was built by Zerubbabel in this period because a fellow by the name of Herod the Great, who we'll spend a lot of time talking about later, built a new temple around the old temple. Then he disassembled this old temple and had it hauled out of the doors, and this new temple of Herod was a magnificent structure, one of the great wonders of the world and even to this day, as far as I know, the largest temple complex ever to exist.

So that's down the line a little ways. But anyway, the last historical episode in the Old Testament, at least in our Protestant Old Testament, is the ministries of Ezra and Nehemiah. Now there's a lot of questions about which one of these guys came first and exactly when they worked but it's right around 440-445 BC, sometimes in that period.

We know that, well I can't say we know anything because we don't really know anything, but for the most part, the work of Ezra and Nehemiah is chronicled in some first-person accounts that they give and also then some narrative that was added by somebody else. But the books that have been assembled give a chronicle of the way that these two governors, now Judah doesn't have kings at this time, they've got

governors, they're under the Persian Empire at this point, but these two governors are commissioned, each one to do their task of helping to rebuild and refound the Jewish people. Ezra is primarily the spiritual leader in this time.

He is given the task of standardizing the laws and really of imposing the laws of Moses upon the people of Jerusalem and of Judah, which is a much smaller place than it used to be in the days of King David. And then we've got Nehemiah, who has the primary task of rebuilding the wall of the city. In those days, a city without a wall was hardly considered a city at all.

And so rebuilding the wall was a matter of pride, a matter of national security, but really more pride, because having a wall defined you, according to a Jewish tradition, really, later on in the Mishnah and other Jewish texts, we're told really that the difference between a people and a city is a wall. So, the wall is what made them the city and created Jerusalem as an entity again. Well, we are about to enter the intertestamental zone.

Now, for us Protestants, of course, it is big, dark strangeness. For Catholics, it's probably still a big dark strangeness, but not so much of a big dark strangeness. Okay.

Persian Empire. The Persian Empire was, at its height, the largest empire the world had ever seen to that time. And it was a remarkable thing.

It managed to spread all the way down to Egypt at one point. It didn't manage to keep it, but it spread down there. Conquered some portions of Greece at times.

And we will get into the struggles between Persia and Greece because that is one of the most pivotal events of world history. But we'll be talking about that later. But the Persian Empire managed to control a large portion of land for about a couple hundred years.

For the most part, the Jews were pretty happy under the Persian Empire. The Persians were pretty tolerant of different views and of the native customs and religions within certain limits, which we'll talk about a little bit later. But the Persian Empire grew to a point where really its style of leadership could not maintain the geographical range of their conquests.

So, from 500 to 479 BC, we have a series of conflicts between the Persians and the Greeks. And this series of conflicts is going to decide not only the destiny of Persia and of the Greek world, but it's going to decide really the destiny of the Jewish people and of us as well in a lot of ways. Wonderful thing.

They say that history is always written by the victors. And we have these wonderful images of the Persian wars, thanks to movies like 300 and other Hollywood productions which portray the Persians as these crazed barbarians and the Greeks as these noble and powerful warriors and all this kind of wonderful stuff. But the important thing is here that we remember that because of their conflicts, and which primarily began because of issues and struggles regarding certain colonies in Asia Minor over here, these two countries, these two nations would come into major conflict.

And that conflict would continue for some time until, eventually, it would be the Greeks who would be victorious. The Greeks are primarily victorious because of the genius of one man, a fellow by the name of Alexander the Great. Now, Alexander is a remarkable figure, and we're going to talk for a long time about Alexander because he, again, is one of the great individuals and one of the people who probably was responsible for some of the most monumental changes that took place in the world in this time.

And so, we're going to spend quite a while talking about him. But Alexander the Great was a general from Macedonia, general slash king, who took it upon himself to expand the Greek empires over into the realms of the East. He came into direct conflict with the Persian Empire.

And because of his own personal brilliance, more than anything else, but also because he inherited the several people before him, he managed to overcome this massive empire and bring them under the thrall of Macedonia and the Greeks. So, Alexander's empire spread, we can see, over a huge area, if you consider the Persian portions, which he had conquered. He had managed to conquer Egypt, he managed to conquer all of Asia Minor, and, of course, all of Greece.

But his empire did not survive his death. After Alexander died, several of his generals began a squabble, and the squabble eventually led to the disintegration of his empire. But, you know, even so, there were, in the fat case of the Jews and of Judah, there were two very substantial powers that were left to fight over Judah.

And those two substantial powers were what we call the Seleucid Empire and the Ptolemaic Empire. Well, the Seleucid Empire eventually kind of won that little struggle. The Seleucids had a policy of trying to encourage the spread of Greek culture among the peoples that they had conquered.

And one of the most zealous of their kings was a fellow by the name of Antiochus Epiphanes. Antiochus Epiphanes, again, is one of those figures who is going to play a major part in the history of the Jews. But at this point, all we need to know is that he decided that the Jewish religion was a problem.

And so, because of his conviction that the Jewish religion was the issue with why the Jews were so recalcitrant, he decided to stamp out the Jewish religion, at least in the realms that he controlled. And so, at this point began what we call the Antiochan persecution, where bloody and violent purges occurred in Jerusalem, which led to the people eventually crying out against this, rising up against Antiochus and rebelling against foreign leadership. We sometimes refer to this as the Maccabean revolt.

That's not really an accurate term for reasons that we'll go into later. Hasmonean is actually a little more accurate, but we'll talk about that when we get there. But in 167 BC, the Jews revolted against the Greek overlords, against Antiochus Epiphanes.

And eventually, after a fairly lengthy struggle, they won their independence from the Greeks. Now, think about this. From 580, well actually from 605 BC until approximately 140 BC, the Jewish people had been ruled by foreigners.

And now, in 140 BC, according to the Book of Maccabees, they were freed from the yoke of the Gentiles. They achieved their independence at last. But alas, this too shall pass, because on the horizon there is another power which is turning its greedy eyes toward the east.

The Hasmonean kingdom lasted until 63 BC and managed to conquer quite a bit of territory here. At its height, it was probably about the size of the Kingdom of David back in the old days. But it was not to stay that way, in part because of external pressures, but also in part because in fighting.

In 63 BC, the Romans arrived in the east, and the arrival of the Romans had a predictable outcome. The Romans found it to be to their advantage to conquer Judah. The Romans were very practical people.

They wouldn't have conquered Judah unless they felt it was worth it. And they decided that this time it was worth it. And so, the Romans added Judah to Judea, as it's called by this point, to their empire in 63 BC.

Interesting thing to note at this point, if you look back at the history of the conquests of Judah, we go back to Assyria. Assyria is located in this area here. And the Assyrian people were very similar in some ways to the Israelites.

They're both Semitic peoples. The language that was spoken by the Assyrians was Aramaic, which is very similar in its ways to Hebrew. And so they had a kind of a, in a way, you might call it a kinship.

Now, the Assyrians were a much more powerful and much more ruthless people in their way than were the Israelites. I kind of think of them as sort of like the Romulans versus the Vulcans. And you Star Trek fans will know what I'm talking about.

But at any rate, the Assyrians were, in a way, familiar to the Jews. Now Babylon, who's the next overlords of Jews, are a little farther away geographically, because they're way down here in this area, but instead of up in here in this area, and also a little more ideologically differentiated from the people of Israel and Judah. When Hezekiah, in the book of Isaiah, is showing the Babylonians around his storehouses, Isaiah, the prophet, comes up to him and says, so who are these guys? And Hezekiah says, oh, they come from this faraway land called Babylon.

And Isaiah says, well, you know, these Babylonians you're talking about are going to come and carry all this stuff away someday. And Hezekiah says, well, at least it's not going to happen in my day. But anyway, the point being here that the people of Judah thought of Babylon as being a far away, weird kind of foreign land.

Well, you ain't seen nothing yet, because when the Persians come along, the Persians aren't even a Semitic people. They are rather an Indo-Aryan people. The Persian language is not one of the Semitic language groups.

It's a different language. Now the Persians adopt a lot of Babylonian kind of customs and so on, because that's the kind of way the Persians were. They were very eclectic people who liked to borrow from here and there and everywhere.

And so, in some ways, the Persian culture sort of adapted more to the Eastern kind of style, but they were foreigners. I mean, they were quite different from what Judah was used to. And then along come the Greeks from over here, geographically much further away than Persia, and ideologically, language-wise, culture-wise, very different from anything that the Jews had experienced before.

And then, of course, now the center of power is in Rome. Geographically, ideologically, and culturally, we see the face of the overlords becoming more and more strange, more and more foreign, more and more remote from what the people of Judah had known in the days past. One more figure that we're going to talk about here, and this is going to be where we're kind of going to end our historical overview, and that is a figure of Herod the Great.

Now, Herod, of course, we know from the New Testament as the fellow who was responsible for the slaughter of the innocents, where he killed all the babies in the area around Bethlehem in order to try to kill off Jesus. So, the slaughter of the innocents is one of those great episodes in the Bible that kind of draws this major, what we might call a meta-narrative arc between the Old Testament and New Testament because way back at the beginning of the story, we see a pharaoh casting

the babies of the Israelites into the Nile River to drown them in order to kill off the potential of deliverance, the possibility of the people rising up against him. And now we have Herod the Great killing off the babies of Israel in order to try to kill the deliverer, the Messiah, the one that he viewed as a threat to his kingdom, to his reign.

So that will be where our historical survey will end, but we're going to talk a little bit more about what it was that Herod was so afraid of at the very end, that hope that was kindled in the hearts of the people of Judah back in Old Testament days, back even in the days of Abraham, that hope that one day they would be a people who would be bound to their God in this loving covenant relationship, that hope that God was going to send someone who could lead them into righteousness and be that new Moses, to be that suffering servant, to be that one who could build the bridge between God and his people. And that will be where our survey of intertestamental Judaism will end.

This is Tony Tomasino on Judaism Before Jesus, session 1, the Big Picture.