

Dr. Anthony J. Tomasino, Judaism Before Jesus, Session 1, The Big Picture

Abstract:

Dr. Anthony Tomasino provides a historical and theological bridge between the Old and New Testaments, focusing on the often-overlooked **intertestamental period**. He challenges the notion of the "400 silent years" by highlighting the **vibrant cultural and literary developments** that shaped the world Jesus entered. The narrative traces Israel's journey from the **Old Testament kingdoms** through successive eras of foreign dominance under the **Persians, Greeks, and Romans**. Tomasino emphasizes how key concepts, such as the **resurrection of the dead**, evolved during this timeframe to become central New Testament themes. By examining the rise of figures like **Alexander the Great and Herod the Great**, the lecture illustrates the natural progression from ancient Hebrew traditions to the complex Jewish society of the first century. Ultimately, the source aims to show that the New Testament is a **logical continuation** of the Israelite story rather than a sudden departure from it.

Briefing Document:

Judaism Before Jesus: The Intertestamental Transition

Executive Summary

The period between the Old and New Testaments, often referred to as the "400 Silent Years," was a transformative era characterized by intense literary, theological, and cultural development. Far from silent, this period provided the necessary bridge between the Hebrew-speaking, Babylonian-ruled world of the Old Testament and the Greek-speaking, Roman-dominated world of the New Testament. Key shifts during this time include the emergence of central New Testament themes—such as the resurrection of the dead—and a succession of foreign occupations that became increasingly alien to the Jewish people in language, culture, and ideology. This document synthesizes the historical progression from the foundations of Israel

through the reign of Herod the Great, illustrating how the New Testament world was a natural progression of Old Testament foundations.

The Myth of the "Silent Years"

While traditional Protestant perspectives often view the intertestamental period as a "large period of darkness," historical data reveals a vast and dynamic era.

- **Theological Evolution:** Central New Testament concepts, such as the resurrection, are nearly absent in the Old Testament but become foundational by the time of Jesus. This development is traceable through intertestamental literature.
 - **Cultural Shifts:** The transition from the Old Testament to the New Testament involves a move from Hebrew to Greek and from Near Eastern (Semitic) governance to Western (Roman) imperial rule.
 - **Continuous Progression:** The New Testament is not a "jarring discontinuity" but a natural progression of the historical and religious forces set in motion during the Old Testament and refined in the centuries following.
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Foundations: From Patriarchs to the Divided Kingdom

To understand the intertestamental period, one must recognize the milestones that formed the Jewish identity.

Early History and the First Temple

- **The Patriarchs (~2000 BC):** The nation began with the call of Abram (Genesis 12) in the Bronze Age. The lineage followed through Isaac and Jacob, eventually leading to the migration to and enslavement in Egypt.
- **Exodus and Law:** Under Moses, the people were delivered after 400 years of slavery, receiving the Torah (Pentateuch) before entering the Promised Land under Joshua.
- **The Monarchy (~1050 BC):** After the era of the Judges, Israel established a monarchy. Saul was the first king, followed by David and then Solomon.

Solomon's reign was marked by the construction of the First Temple in Jerusalem, which became the center of Israel's identity.

The Divided Kingdom and Assyrian Conquest

Following Solomon's apostasy, the nation split:

- **Northern Kingdom (Israel):** Consisted of ten tribes with Samaria as its eventual capital. It was judged for its apostasy and shrines at Bethel. In 722 BC, the Assyrians conquered the north, deporting the population and creating the "ten lost tribes." This event led to the emergence of the Samaritans through intermarriage and foreign repopulation.
- **Southern Kingdom (Judah):** Centered in Jerusalem, Judah initially survived the Assyrian threat under King Hezekiah.

The Babylonian Exile and Persian Restoration

The Babylonian Empire, led by Nebuchadnezzar, eventually crushed Judah due to its own apostasy (notably under King Manasseh).

The Exile (587 BC – 538 BC)

- **Destruction:** In 587 BC, the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and Solomon's Temple, taking the leading citizens into captivity.
- **The "Good Figs":** The prophet Jeremiah distinguished between those taken to Babylon (the upper-class "good figs") and those left in the land ("bad figs" or "people of the land").
- **Identity Formation:** In Babylon, the Jewish community "closed ranks," solidifying many of the traditions now found in the Old Testament to distinguish themselves from their neighbors.

The Persian Period and the Second Temple

- **Cyrus the Great:** In 538 BC, Cyrus of Persia conquered Babylon and issued a decree allowing captives to return home.

- **The Diaspora:** While some returned to rebuild, many Jews remained in Babylon, forming a vibrant community that lasted until the Muslim conquests.
- **The Second Temple (515 BC):** Rebuilding began immediately but was not completed for 20 years. Older generations wept upon its completion, as it was a "shadow" of Solomon's original temple.
- **Ezra and Nehemiah (~445 BC):** Ezra served as a spiritual leader who standardized and imposed the Laws of Moses. Nehemiah, acting as governor, rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem, re-establishing it as a formal city.

The Hellenistic Era and the Struggle for Independence

The arrival of Greek influence marked a significant shift toward Western culture and more aggressive foreign intervention.

Alexander the Great and the Seleucids

- **Alexander's Conquest:** A Macedonian genius who dismantled the Persian Empire, spreading Greek culture across Egypt, Asia Minor, and the East.
- **The Diadochi:** After Alexander's death, his empire was split. The Seleucid and Ptolemaic Empires fought for control over Judah, with the Seleucids eventually dominating.
- **The Antiochan Persecution:** King Antiochus Epiphanes attempted to forcibly Hellenize the Jews and "stamp out" their religion, leading to violent purges in Jerusalem.

The Hasmonean Revolt (167 BC – 63 BC)

In response to Antiochus, the Jews revolted in 167 BC. By 140 BC, they achieved independence from the "yoke of the Gentiles" for the first time since 605 BC. This Hasmonean Kingdom eventually expanded to a size comparable to David's empire but was plagued by internal infighting.

The Roman Era and the Rise of Herod

The Roman arrival in 63 BC ended Jewish independence and set the stage for the New Testament world.

Increasing Foreignness of Overlords

A distinct trend in the history of Judah is the geographical and ideological distancing of its rulers:

| Empire | Origin/Language Group | Relation to Judah |
|----------------|---------------------------------|--|
| Assyria | Mesopotamia / Semitic (Aramaic) | Culturally similar/familiar language. |
| Babylon | Mesopotamia / Semitic | Viewed as "faraway" and "weird" but still Eastern. |
| Persia | Indo-Aryan | Non-Semitic; eclectic but generally tolerant. |
| Greece | Mediterranean / Greek | Geographically and ideologically very different. |
| Rome | Italy / Latin & Greek | Most remote, foreign, and culturally distinct. |

Herod the Great

Appointed during the Roman period, Herod was a complex figure who:

- **The Temple Expansion:** He rebuilt and expanded the Second Temple into a magnificent structure, creating the largest temple complex in the world.
- **The Slaughter of the Innocents:** Attempted to eliminate the prophesied Messiah by killing male infants in Bethlehem. This event creates a "meta-narrative arc" mirroring the Pharaoh's actions in Exodus—where a tyrant seeks to destroy a "deliverer" who threatens his reign.

Conclusion

The intertestamental period was the crucible in which the modern Jewish identity and the foundations of Christianity were forged. It was a time when the hope kindled in the days of Abraham—of a suffering servant or a new Moses who could bridge the

gap between God and His people—reached a fever pitch under the pressure of increasingly foreign imperial rule.

Study Guide:

Study Guide: Judaism Before Jesus – The Big Picture

This study guide is based on the lecture by Dr. Anthony J. Tomasino regarding the historical and theological developments during the intertestamental period. It explores the transition from the world of the Old Testament to the world of the New Testament, covering the major empires, figures, and shifts in Jewish identity.

Short Answer Quiz

Instructions: Answer the following questions in two to three sentences based on the information provided in the source context.

1. **Why does the lecturer argue that the "400 silent years" is an inaccurate label for the intertestamental period?**
2. **What is one of the most significant theological differences between the Old Testament and the New Testament regarding the afterlife?**
3. **According to the text, what was the primary significance of the reign of King Solomon for Israel's identity?**
4. **How did the Assyrian conquest lead to the group of people known in the New Testament as the Samaritans?**
5. **Describe the distinction the prophet Jeremiah made between the "good figs" and the "bad figs" during the Babylonian exile.**
6. **What was the impact of the decree issued by Cyrus the Great in 538 BC?**
7. **In what ways did the Second Temple, completed in 515 BC, differ from the original Temple of Solomon?**

8. **What were the specific roles of Ezra and Nehemiah in rebuilding the Jewish community under Persian rule?**
 9. **How did the nature of Jewish "overlords" change culturally and linguistically from the Assyrian period to the Roman period?**
 10. **What historical parallel does the lecturer draw between Herod the Great and the Pharaoh of the Exodus?**
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Answer Key

1. **The "400 silent years" is considered inaccurate because the era was actually a time of immense literary, theological, and cultural development for Judaism. Far from being "silent," the period produced a vast amount of data that bridge the gap between the Hebrew-speaking world of the Old Testament and the Greek-speaking Roman world of the New Testament.**
2. **The concept of the resurrection of the dead is a central, core theme of the New Testament, particularly regarding the rise of Jesus. In contrast, this notion is almost entirely absent in the Old Testament, developing primarily during the intertestamental period through various literatures.**
3. **The primary significance of Solomon's reign was the construction of the Great Temple of the Lord in Jerusalem. This structure became the foundation and center of Israel's faith, serving as a permanent milestone for their identity as a people.**
4. **When the Assyrians destroyed the Northern Kingdom, they deported many Israelites and brought in foreign peoples to repopulate the land. The Samaritans emerged from this environment, likely representing a mix of the remaining Israelites and the foreign populations introduced by the Assyrian policy.**
5. **Jeremiah referred to the upper-class Jews carried away to Babylon as "good figs" because they closed ranks and solidified their religious traditions against their neighbors. The "bad figs" were those left in the**

land, who often adopted the ways of their neighbors and lost the distinctiveness of their Judahite faith.

6. **Cyrus the Great, the King of Persia, issued a decree that allowed all captives in Babylon, including the Judahites, to return home to their lands. While many returned to rebuild Jerusalem, a vibrant and significant Jewish community chose to remain in Babylon, which was the cultural center of the world at the time.**
7. **When the Second Temple was completed, the older generation who remembered Solomon's original Temple wept because the new structure was merely a shadow of the former's glory. However, the site remained central to Jewish life until Herod the Great eventually replaced it with a massive, magnificent complex that became one of the wonders of the world.**
8. **Ezra served as the spiritual leader who standardized and imposed the laws of Moses upon the people of Judah to refound their religious identity. Nehemiah served as the governor responsible for the physical security of the people by rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, which defined it once again as a city.**
9. **Over centuries, the ruling powers became increasingly remote; the Assyrians were Semitic and spoke Aramaic (similar to Hebrew), while the Persians were Indo-Aryans with a different language. By the time of the Greeks and Romans, the overlords were geographically distant and ideologically and culturally foreign compared to anything the Jews had previously experienced.**
10. **The lecturer notes a "meta-narrative arc" where both figures attempted to destroy a potential deliverer by killing infants. Just as Pharaoh cast Israelite babies into the Nile to prevent a rise against his power, Herod the Great ordered the slaughter of the innocents in Bethlehem to eliminate the threat he perceived from the birth of the Messiah.**

Instructions: Use the source context to develop comprehensive responses to the following prompts.

1. **The Evolution of Foreign Rule:** Trace the succession of empires that ruled over the Jewish people from the Babylonian Exile to the Roman Conquest. Analyze how each transition affected the geographical and cultural distance between the Jewish people and their overlords.
2. **The Construction of Jewish Identity in the Diaspora:** Discuss how the Babylonian exile served as a turning point for Jewish identity. Contrast the experiences of those who returned to Jerusalem with those who remained in Babylon, and explain how this period helped solidify religious traditions.
3. **Hellenism and Resistance:** Examine the impact of the Greek conquest under Alexander the Great and the subsequent Seleucid rule. Specifically, analyze the actions of Antiochus Epiphanes and why they triggered the Hasmonean (Maccabean) revolt.
4. **The Significance of the Temple(s):** Compare the three iterations of the Temple mentioned in the text: Solomon’s Temple, the modest Second Temple of Zerubbabel, and the expanded Temple of Herod the Great. How did these structures function as markers of Jewish history and national status?
5. **Bridging the Testaments:** Dr. Tomasino argues that the New Testament world is a "natural progression" rather than a "jarring discontinuity." Using specific examples from the text—such as language, theology, and politics—evaluate how the intertestamental period provides the necessary context for the New Testament.

Glossary of Key Terms

| Term | Definition |
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| 400 Silent Years | A traditional Protestant term for the period between the Old and New Testaments, challenged by historians due to the era's significant cultural and theological developments. |

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| Alexander the Great | The Macedonian general and king who conquered the Persian Empire, spreading Greek culture across the East. |
| Antiochan Persecution | A violent purge led by Antiochus Epiphanes intended to stamp out the Jewish religion, leading to a major Jewish revolt. |
| Antiochus Epiphanes | A Seleucid king whose zealous attempts to Hellenize the Jews and suppress their religious practices led to the Maccabean revolt. |
| Apostasy | The abandonment or renunciation of a religious or political belief, frequently cited in the Old Testament as the reason for Israel's divine judgment. |
| Cyrus the Great | The Persian king who conquered Babylon and issued a decree in 538 BC allowing the Jewish exiles to return to Jerusalem. |
| Ezra | A spiritual leader during the Persian period who was commissioned to standardize and impose the laws of Moses on the Jewish people. |
| Hasmonean Kingdom | The independent Jewish state established following the revolt against the Seleucid Greeks, lasting until the Roman conquest in 63 BC. |
| Herod the Great | The Roman-appointed king of Judea known for his massive building projects (including the Temple) and the "slaughter of the innocents" mentioned in the New Testament. |
| Intertestamental Period | The era between the completion of the Old Testament and the beginning of the New Testament, characterized by the transition from Persian to Greek and then Roman rule. |
| Maccabean Revolt | The Jewish uprising beginning in 167 BC against the Seleucid Empire, which eventually resulted in temporary Jewish independence. |
| Nehemiah | A governor under the Persian Empire who led the efforts to rebuild the defensive walls of Jerusalem. |

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| Samaritans | A group of people in the New Testament who resulted from the Assyrian policy of deporting Israelites and repopulating the Northern Kingdom with foreign settlers. |
| Second Temple Period | The era of Jewish history extending from the completion of the rebuilt Temple in 515 BC to its destruction by the Romans in 70 AD. |
| Seleucid Empire | One of the successor states of Alexander the Great's empire that controlled Syria and Mesopotamia and attempted to impose Greek culture on the Jews. |
