

Class 3: The Context of the New Testament

Brian Criscuolo

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DEL REY BIBLE INSTITUTE

NEW TESTAMENT 101

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The Context of the New Testament**

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Although we celebrate the accessibility of the Scriptures in the language of the people, we cannot overlook the basic fact that it is far easier to translate words on a page than it is to capture the deeper sense of those words . . . The history Paul shared with the Corinthians, the cultural assumptions Luke shared with his audience, those experiences of imperial Rome shared between the author and addressees of the book of Revelation, such shared histories, assumptions, and experiences shape how these authors' words and phrases might be heard. They thicken the significance of the words of parables or letters or homilies. Precisely because these pools of assumptions could simply be taken for granted by Paul, Luke, and John, they therefore do not sit on top of the pages of our New Testament . . . We need more than the words on the page. We need to be oriented to the background assumed by people in the NT era. We need context . . . Greater awareness of the context within which the NT books were written helps us better to hear its words and to interpret them with greater precision . . . To attend to the NT, we need a better grasp of the first-century world of Peter and Paul, Priscilla and Phoebe, as well as of the years, movements, struggles, and literatures that gave the NT era its shape.

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Four Eras of Judaism during Inter-Testament Period

1. The Persian Period (539 - 331 B.C.)



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- 722 B.C. Israel (10 northern tribes) falls to Assyria
- 605 B.C. Judah (2 southern tribes) falls to Babylon
- 586 B.C. Babylon destroys Jerusalem and Temple and brings Judah into exile

2 Kings 25:1-21, Now in the ninth year of his reign . . . Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came, he and all his army, against Jerusalem . . . So the city was under siege until the eleventh year of King Zedekiah . . . Now on the seventh day of the fifth month, which was the nineteenth year of King Nebuchadnezzar . . . a servant of the king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem. He burned the house of the LORD, the king's house, and all the houses of Jerusalem . . . Now the bronze pillars which were in the house of the LORD, and the stands and the bronze sea which were in the house of the LORD, the Chaldeans broke in pieces . . . They took away the pots, the shovels, the snuffers, the spoons, and all the bronze vessels which were used in *temple* service . . . So Judah was led away into exile from its land.

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- 586 B.C. Babylon destroys Jerusalem and Temple and brings Judah into exile
- 539 B.C. Persians defeat Babylon; **Cyrus** allows Jews to return to Jerusalem (Ezra 1:1-4)

Ezra 1:1-3, Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia. . . the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he sent a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also *put it* in writing, saying: “Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, ‘The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and He has appointed me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever there is among you of all His people, may his God be with him! Let him go up to Jerusalem which is in Judah and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel;

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- 516 B.C. Temple rebuilt (Ezra 1:5-6:22) under Haggai and Zechariah.
- 458 B.C. Walls rebuilt under Ezra (and Nehemiah 444 B.C)

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Four Eras of Judaism during Inter-Testament Period

2. The Greek Period (331 - 143 B.C.)

A. Alexander the Great (331 - 323 B.C.)

- Allowed for the rapid and thorough spread of the Greek culture
- The Greek language became the common trade & diplomatic language
- Many Jews adopted Greek ways, customs, speech
- When he died his four generals divided his empire

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Four Eras of Judaism during Inter-Testament Period

2. The Greek Period (331 - 143 B.C.)

- A. Alexander the Great (331 - 323 B.C.)
- B. The Ptolemies (321 - 198 B.C.)
 - Hebrew Torah was translated into the common Greek language (280 B.C.)

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Four Eras of Judaism during Inter-Testament Period

2. The Greek Period (331 - 143 B.C.)

- A. Alexander the Great (331 - 323 B.C.)
- B. The Ptolemies (321 - 198 B.C.)
- C. The Seleucids (198 - 143 B.C.)
 - Hellenism swept Palestine
 - Hellenistic Jews vs. Hasidim Jews (later Pharisees)
 - Apocryphal and Pseudepigraphal writings appeared
 - Old testament was completely translated to Greek (180 B.C.)

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2. The Greek Period (331 - 143 B.C.)

- A. Alexander the Great (331 - 323 B.C.)
- B. The Ptolemies (321 - 198 B.C.)
- C. The Seleucids (198 - 143 B.C.)
- D. The wicked Antiochus IV (175-163 B.C.)
 - Called himself Epiphanes meaning “the revealed One”
 - Hellenized Jerusalem – gymnasium, track, theater, clothing
 - Plundered Temple
 - Erects heathen temples
 - Outlawed Judaism

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1 Maccabees 1:54 and 59, Now on the fifteenth day of Chislev, in the one hundred and forty-fifth year, they erected a desolating sacrilege upon the altar of burnt offering. They also built altars in the surrounding cities of Judah. . . And on the twenty-fifth day of the month they offered sacrifice on the altar which was upon the altar of burnt offering

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- D. The wicked Antiochus IV (175-163 B.C.)
- E. The Maccabean Wars

1 Maccabees 2:23-26, When he had finished speaking these words, a Jew came forward in the sight of all to offer sacrifice upon the altar in Mo'de-in, according to the king's command. ²⁴ When Mattathi'as saw it, he burned with zeal and his heart was stirred. He gave vent to righteous anger; he ran and killed him upon the altar. ²⁵ At the same time he killed the king's officer who was forcing them to sacrifice, and he tore down the altar. ²⁶ Thus he burned with zeal for the law, as Phin'ehas did against Zimri the son of Salu.

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- D. The wicked Antiochus IV (175-163 B.C.)
- E. The Maccabean Wars
 - Mattathias rebels against Seleucids / Syrians
 - Mattathias and sons are at the center of this rebellion
 - Judas “Maccabeus” defeats the Syrians and recaptures Jerusalem
 - Feast of lights (Hanukkah) is a reminder of this victory

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1 Maccabees 4:54-56, At the very season and on the very day that the Gentiles had profaned it, it was dedicated with songs and harps and lutes and cymbals. All the people fell on their faces and worshiped and blessed Heaven, who had prospered them. So they celebrated the dedication of the altar for eight days, and offered burnt offerings with gladness; they offered a sacrifice of deliverance and praise.

Chronology of Major Events Related to the Study of the New Testament

334 BC	Alexander the Great assumes power after the assassination of his father, Philip of Macedon, and begins his conquest of the Persian Empire.
332–330 BC	Alexander the Great conquers Palestine and initiates a long Greek occupation of the land.
323 BC	Alexander the Great dies. Control of the conquered lands, including the land of Israel, is divided among his successors (<i>diadochoi</i>). Israel is first under the control of Ptolemy, headquartered in Alexandria.
281–100 BC	Origins of the Septuagint (LXX), the translation of the Pentateuch into Greek (ca. 281 BC), and subsequently other OT and apocryphal books.
198–142 BC	Seleucid control of Palestine passes from the Ptolemies following the defeat of Ptolemy V at Pan (Banias) by Antiochus III (called “the Great”).
169 BC	Antiochus IV (called Antiochus Epiphanes) invades Egypt; he ruthlessly subjugates Palestine, including attempting to force the Jews to offer sacrifices to pagan deities.
168–167 BC	Mattathias Maccabeus, a Jewish priest, leads Jews in their revolt against the Seleucid dynasty.
165 BC	Religious freedom is won by Judas Maccabeus, “the Hammer,” who inherited from his father, Mattathias Maccabeus, leadership of the Jewish revolt against the Seleucid dynasty.
159–142 BC	Jonathan Maccabeus succeeds Judas Maccabeus as leader of the rebellion against the Greeks.

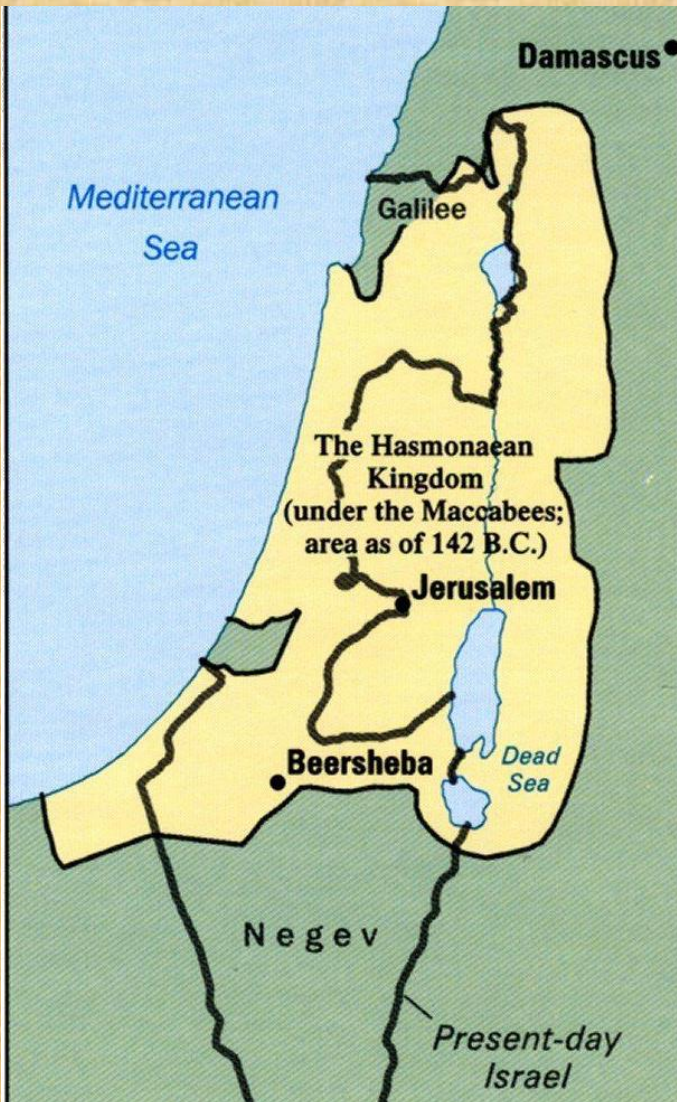
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3. The Hasmonean Period (143 - 63 B.C.)



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Four Eras of Judaism during Inter-Testament Period

3. The Hasmonean Period (143 - 63 B.C.)

- The name comes from the family name of Mattathias (Hashmon)
- Divisions into Judea, Samaria, Galilee
- High priest became a religious and civil authority
- Simon negotiated a treaty with Rome in 139 B.C., economic conditions improved, justice was administered
- John Hyrcanus furthered the Jewish state but some of his actions lead to internal strife and war.
- Internal divisions became part of life for the Jews

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4. The Roman Period (63 B.C. - NT Period)



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Four Eras of Judaism during Inter-Testament Period

4. The Roman Period (63 B.C. - NT Period)

- Rome intervened in Jewish civil strife in 63 B.C.
- Herod the Great rose to favor and ruled from 37 – 4 B.C.
- Herod's sons, grandsons, and great grandsons, continued the Herodian reign
- The Jewish world Jesus was born into:
 - Politically stable (but opposition to the Messiah came quickly)
 - Upper Class was devoted to selfishness and skepticism
 - Teachers were lost in shows of ceremonialism and boasting
 - People were misled by false ideals with the masses neglected and living in unrestrained sin

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Greek Influence During the Inter-Testament

1. An Attempt to Hellenize Palestine

- Antiochus IV tried to force the culture on the Jews
- Some Jews wanted to assimilate

1 Maccabees 1:11, In those days went there out of Israel wicked men, who persuaded many, saying, Let us go and make a covenant with the heathen that are round about us: for since we departed from them we have had much sorrow.

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Greek Influence During the Inter-Testament

1. An Attempt to Hellenize Palestine

- Antiochus IV tried to force the culture on the Jews
- Some Jews wanted to assimilate

1 Maccabees 1:44-49, For the king had sent letters by messengers unto Jerusalem and the cities of Juda that they should follow the strange laws of the land, And forbid burnt offerings, and sacrifice, and drink offerings, in the temple; and that they should profane the sabbaths and festival days: And pollute the sanctuary and holy people: Set up altars, and groves, and chapels of idols, and sacrifice swine's flesh, and unclean beasts: That they should also leave their children uncircumcised, and make their souls abominable with all manner of uncleanness and profanation: To the end they might forget the law, and change all the ordinances.

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Greek Influence During the Inter-Testament

1. An Attempt to Hellenize Palestine

- Antiochus IV tried to force the culture on the Jews
- Some Jews wanted to assimilate
- Hellenism rejected by Hasidim who supported traditional Judaism (→ Pharisees)

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Greek Influence During the Inter-Testament

1. An Attempt to Hellenize Palestine

2. Greek Philosophies

- Plato (427-347 B.C.): The world is only a shadow of eternal realities.
- Aristotle (384-322 B.C.): Reality resides in individual things themselves.
- Zeno (c. 300 B.C.): Stoicism – pantheism (divine world soul)
- Epicurus (c. 300 B.C.): Epicureans – pursue pleasure

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Greek Influence During the Inter-Testament

1. An Attempt to Hellenize Palestine
2. Greek Philosophies

Acts 17:16-20, Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was being provoked within him as he was observing the city full of idols. So he was reasoning in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing *Gentiles*, and in the market place every day with those who happened to be present. And also some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers were conversing with him. Some were saying, “What would this idle babbler wish to say?” Others, “He seems to be a proclaimer of strange deities,” — because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, “May we know what this new teaching is which you are proclaiming? For you are bringing some strange things to our ears; so we want to know what these things mean.”

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Greek Influence During the Inter-Testament

1. An Attempt to Hellenize Palestine
2. Greek Philosophies
3. Greek Mystery Religions

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Greek Influence During the Inter-Testament

1. An Attempt to Hellenize Palestine
2. Greek Philosophies
3. Greek Mystery Religions

General characteristics of Greek Religions

- Not exclusive. Worship of many gods was expected
- No need to give up your other religions or evangelize
- Primarily concerned with gaining material blessings and avoiding the gods wrath
- No centralized temple. No religious texts
- No expectation of a personal faith

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Greek Influence During the Inter-Testament

1. An Attempt to Hellenize Palestine
2. Greek Philosophies
3. Greek Mystery Religions
 - Secret Societies
 - Based on cycles of nature
 - Could belong to multiple cults

Acts 17:32, Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some *began* to sneer . . .

1 Corinthians 15:35, But some will say, “How are the dead raised? And with what kind of body do they come?”

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Greek Influence During the Inter-Testament

1. An Attempt to Hellenize Palestine
2. Greek Philosophies
3. Greek Mystery Religions

A number of the facts listed above about mythical beings that predated Jesus are up for debate. Back when I wrote this I took the content to be factual (I was less careful then), but the truth is that there is much discussion around these details. . . . I have removed a couple of points already, and will be cleaning it up more as I have time. I'd currently give that section an 85% accuracy rating.

Footnote from *The Bible is Fiction: A Collection of Evidence*, written by Daniel Miessler

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Greek Influence During the Inter-Testament

1. An Attempt to Hellenize Palestine
2. Greek Philosophies
3. Greek Mystery Religions
4. Greek Language
 - Widely spoken in the promised land
 - Basis for commerce
 - International language
 - Koine (common) Greek vs. literary Greek
 - Jesus and the apostles had contact with Greek people (Mark 7:26, John 12:20-21, Acts 14-19, Acts 6:1, Acts 11:20)

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Greek Influence During the Inter-Testament

1. An Attempt to Hellenize Palestine
2. Greek Philosophies
3. Greek Mystery Religions
4. Greek Language
5. Greek Bible
 - New vernacular for the Jews in Egypt (Torah / Pentateuch translated by 280 B.C., Rest of Hebrew Scriptures by 180 B.C. “Septuagint” / LXX)
 - Greek theological vocabulary already familiar to readers
 - Unified Greek Bible
 - Helped Jews’ acceptance of God’s revelation in language other than Hebrew

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Greek Influence During the Inter-Testament

1. An Attempt to Hellenize Palestine
2. Greek Philosophies
3. Greek Mystery Religions
4. Greek Language
5. Greek Bible
6. Greek Influence during the New Testament
 - Hebrew roots still present in the New Testament writings

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Roman Influence During the Inter-Testament

- World Centralization
 - Emperor was unifier, so conflict with Christianity unavoidable
- World Infrastructure & Communication
 - Highways & shipping lanes enabled world traffic
 - God's providence: missionary trips enabled!
- World Peace (Pax Romana)
 - Stability contributed to spread of Christianity
- World Spiritual Disorder
 - Diverse and confused spiritual world
 - No salvation or redemption for sinners

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Religion in Israel

Pharisees

- “to separate”
- Grew out of the Hassidim “pious ones” during the silent years
- Believed in separating from Gentile practices by developing a system of regulations and traditions.
- Placed their traditions as equal with scripture.
- Popular among the masses and seen as spiritual.
- Wielded tremendous power in Israel even though they were a small group.

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Religion in Israel

Scribes

- Class of Israelites who were well educated teachers and interpreters of the law
- Most belonged to the party of the Pharisees
- Formulated the oral law

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Religion in Israel

Sadducees

- Originated during the silent years
- Wealthy, political authorities, nobility
- Had a lot to lose and so they cooperated with Rome
- Ceased to exist after the destruction of the temple in AD 70
- Refused the oral law of the Pharisees
- Limited the authority of scripture to the Torah
- Did not believe in angels, demons, resurrection, or a coming Messiah.

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Religion in Israel

Essenes

- Originated during the days of the Maccabees
- Roots possibly trace back to the Hassidim
- Lived in isolated communities in Judea (Qumran)
- Lived a rigid and strict lifestyle

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Religion in Israel

Herodians

- Political party
- Accepted Hellenization
- Enemies of Pharisees (except in the case of Christ)

Mark 3:6, The Pharisees went out and immediately *began* conspiring with the Herodians against Him, *as to* how they might destroy Him.

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Religion in Israel

Zealots

- Advocated the overthrow of Rome
- May be linked to the Sicarii
- Responsible for revolts in the first century
- Brought about the Roman wars of A.D. 66-72 and the destruction of Jerusalem

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Religion in Israel

Sanhedrin

- National Council of the Jews (governing body)
- Traced back to John Hyrcanus
- Involved in civil and religious matters
- Referred to as: “council,” “council of elders,” and “senate.”
- Identified as being made up of: “chief priest and Pharisees,” “chief priests, elders and scribes,” and “rulers, elders and scribes.”
- Made up of men of differing religious and political views

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Religion in Israel

Synagogue

- “gathering of people” or “congregation”
- Place where Jews gathered to study Scriptures and worship God
- Traced back to Babylonian captivity (destruction of the Temple)

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Religion in Israel

Temple

- Originally built by Solomon and finished in 959 B.C.
- Herod the Great rebuilding project 19 B.C. – A.D. 64
- Destroyed by Romans in A.D. 70

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The Theology and Identity of Judaism

- Overly Zionistic and Messianic
- Ready to fight for their land
- Awaiting one who would lead them into political freedom
- Many Jews including the religious leaders had been Hellenized

Luke 7:9, Now when Jesus heard this, He marveled at him, and turned and said to the crowd that was following him, “I say to you, not even in Israel have I found such great faith.”

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The Theology and Identity of Judaism

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Acts 6:1, Now at this time while the disciples were increasing *in number*, a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic *Jews* against the *native* Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving *of food*.