

# Intertestamental Judaism, its literature and its significance

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The term 'intertestamental', though very widely current because of its convenience, is a term reflecting the Protestant conception of the biblical canon. This is the conception anciently championed by Jerome, that the OT of the Christian Bible is identical with the Hebrew Bible of the Jews, and so ends its narrative (if not the composition of its books also) in the period of the return from the exile. Between the time of Nehemiah and the time of Christ is an interval of about 430 years, and within these limits the intertestamental period properly lies. However, because of the use regularly made of intertestamental evidence as historical background to the NT, it is customary to extend it to the end of the first century AD, and to include among its literature books written even later, if, like the oldest rabbinical works, they record oral traditions from NT times.

The Roman Catholic OT canon, by contrast with the Protestant, includes narratives from as late as the second century BC (1 and 2 Maccabees) and a book stated in its prologue to have been written in that century (Ecclesiasticus). From the Roman Catholic standpoint, therefore, the period in question is not so much intertestamental as simply post-exilic. Reaction against the Roman Catholic canon has sometimes caused Protestants to ignore the Apocrypha, which it canonizes, but those of a more sober spirit have seen them as, first, containing the most ancient extant interpretation of the OT; secondly, as forming an important part of the historical background which helps us to understand the NT; and, thirdly, as including material which, though not inspired, is on a par with the most edifying religious literature in existence. No Protestant would willingly forego all non-biblical religious literature. Literature which conforms to the teaching of the Bible, and expounds or illustrates that teaching, is undeniably helpful. It is not therefore wise to forego a knowledge of the Apocrypha, even if one's church does not use them liturgically.

The Apocrypha, however, are not the whole of intertestamental literature, nor our only source of knowledge about the intertestamental period. The histories of Josephus, which cover the whole period (in parts sketchily, in parts very thoroughly), are an obvious case in point; and the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls has been a great accession to existing knowledge and existing literature, which has taken place well within living memory. No area of biblical studies has been untouched by this extraordinary discovery, and most of them have been deeply affected, but the fullest light that it has thrown has been on the intertestamental period itself.

Modern literature on intertestamental subjects is partly written by Jews (whose knowledge of Judaism is unrivalled, but who are less directly interested in NT background) and

partly by Christians; but study in this field is increasingly becoming a joint enterprise. Most of the Christian literature is in English or German, with some in French or other languages. The Jewish literature is mostly in English or modern Hebrew. It would be foolish to neglect the modern literature, which is now so abundant and sophisticated, though only a few of the more important titles can be mentioned here;<sup>2</sup> but it needs to be emphasized that to read the modern literature is no substitute for reading the ancient texts themselves. Over and over again one finds OT and NT scholars referring to intertestamental literature in a way which reveals that they have not looked the passage up, or have not read it in its context, or have no idea of the age or nature of the document they are citing, but that they are simply following a secondary source. Evangelical scholars are certainly not blameless here. Only very few of them (such as D. W. Gooding on the Septuagint, F. F. Bruce on the Dead Sea Scrolls and Richard Bauckham on the Pseudepigrapha) can speak from knowledge in this field. But not to read the intertestamental literature, even that substantial part of it for which one now has the help of English translations, is a gratuitous self-deprivation for which nothing can really compensate. To read it gives one the 'feel' of the period in a unique way, rather like visiting the old city of Jerusalem. Moreover, it acquaints the reader with many illuminating facts and ideas which are rarely mentioned in the secondary literature.

## Intertestamental history

The period from Nehemiah to Christ falls into four epochs: the period of Persian rule, until about 331 BC; the period of Greek rule, under the Hellenistic successors of Alexander (first the Ptolemies of Egypt, then the Seleucids of Syria), until 143 BC; the period of independence, under the Maccabean or Hasmonean dynasty, until 63 BC; and the period of Roman rule thereafter. The ancient Jewish authorities for the history of this period are the *Antiquities* and *Jewish War* of Josephus, and, as regards the earlier Maccabean era, the first two books of Maccabees. Worthwhile modern accounts include N. H. Snaith, *The Jews from Cyrus to Herod* (Wallington: Religious Education Press, 1949); W. D. Davies and L. Finkelstein, *The Cambridge History of Judaism* (CUP, 1984 *etc.*, still continuing); and, for the latter part of the period, A. Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilization and the Jews* (ET, Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1959). The final part of the period is treated in detail in F. F. Bruce, *New Testament History* (London: Oliphants, 1969), and in two large works which include much more than just history, and will need to be mentioned again. One of these is Emil Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, the English translation of which, after retaining its usefulness for a hundred years, has now been thoroughly revised and modernized by G. Vermes, F. Millar, M. Black and M.

Goodman (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1973-87). The other is a large project which, despite its Latin title and Dutch place of publication, is composed in English: the *Compendia Rerum Iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum* (Assen: Van Gorcum). The two volumes on history appeared in 1974-6 (*The Jewish People in the First Century*, eds. S. Safrai and M. Stern). Three of the volumes on literature have since been added, and there are more to come.

For social history, J. Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (ET, London: SCM, 1969), should be consulted. It is invaluable.

In addition to books there are journals, which similarly cover all fields of intertestamental study, not just history. Some biblical journals include a good deal of intertestamental material (*Revue Biblique*, *Vetus Testamentum*, etc.), but even more so do journals on Jewish studies, of which the most useful for our purpose are perhaps *Revue de Qumran* (in French, English and German), *Hebrew Union College Annual* (in English and Hebrew), *Journal of Jewish Studies*, *Journal for the Study of Judaism and Tarbiz* (in Hebrew, with English summaries). Archaeological journals of relevance include *Israel Exploration Journal* and *Bulletin of the American Schools for Oriental Research*.

Finally, there are reference books. The twelve volumes of *The Jewish Encyclopedia* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1901-6) continue to be of great value, though they have now been complemented, without being superseded, by the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: EJ, 1971-2 and yearbooks thereafter). For the vocabulary of rabbinical Hebrew and Aramaic, biblical lexicons have to be supplemented by M. Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud and the Midrashic Literature* (London: Luzac, 1903). The intermediate Hebrew and Aramaic of the Dead Sea Scrolls is now developing its own tools.

### Intertestamental religion

The Judaism of the intertestamental period was a religion of separation to the law. This was the achievement of Ezra — something which no religious leader of the Jews had successfully achieved in the time of their independence under the monarchy, when they were constantly lapsing into idolatry; but which the judgment of the exile and the miracle of the return somehow made possible, even in an age when the Jews were regularly under the rule of pagan foreigners. There is no doubt that the Jews were affected by their foreign overlords in their culture, language and thought, and especially by their Greek overlords; but this influence only produced a crisis when it directly challenged the Jewish religion. It was a challenge of this kind by the Hellenistic Syrian king Antiochus Epiphanes which provoked the successful Maccabean revolt. The Hasidaeans, or 'Pious', then took up arms against the Hellenizers (1 Macc. 2:42; 7:12-17; 2 Macc. 14:6); but as soon as religious freedom was achieved, the influence of Hellenism returned. An account of this influence which tends to maximize it is given by M. Hengel in his *Judaism and Hellenism* (ET, London: SCM, 1974), while a somewhat minimizing account is given in the new Schürer; but even those ancient Jewish writers who are most influenced by Hellenism, such as Philo of Alexandria, differ more in degree than in kind from other Jewish writers,

and can hardly be said to form a separate school. In religious thinking, the developing conception of the after-life which characterizes an intertestamental book like 1 Enoch, and the developing conception of the angels and demons which characterizes an intertestamental book like Tobit, are probably in some measure due to the influence of Greek and Persian ideas respectively.

A religion of separation to the law (as embodied in the Pentateuch) was almost bound to develop different schools of interpretation of that law. By the time of the third Maccabean leader, Jonathan (high priest 152-142 BC), the three contending parties of the Pharisees, Sadducees and Essenes had emerged from the earlier Hasidaeans, and the basic distinction between them was their rival interpretations of the pentateuchal law, though they differed also in their beliefs on eschatology, spirits and predestination. The traditionalist Pharisees were probably the earliest school of thought to emerge, as well as the largest, being followed by the Sadducees and Essenes as movements aiming to reform the traditional interpretation by direct appeal to Scripture; but other reconstructions of the history are common, and in any case the movements did not become contending parties until the time of Jonathan. Even in the temple, where the Sadducees held the high priesthood from 100 BC onwards, Pharisaic influence was powerful. An important account of the Pharisees is L. Finkelstein, *The Pharisees: the Sociological Background of their Faith* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1938), and of the Sadducees, J. Le Moyne, *Les Sadducéens* (Paris: Gabalda, 1972), while the Essenes are best treated in the literature on the Dead Sea Scrolls, which are generally reckoned their work. Perhaps the writer may also refer to his own article 'The Pre-History and Relationships of the Pharisees, Sadducees and Essenes: a Tentative Reconstruction' (*Revue de Qumran* 11:1, Oct. 1982).

Much intertestamental literature reflects Pharisaic tendencies, and much Essene. No unmistakably Sadducean work has survived.

The Zealots, who were so active in the first century AD in fomenting rebellion against the Romans, seem to have been drawn partly from the Pharisees and partly from the Essenes. Except in their refusal to recognize any king but God, they were not a distinct school of thought.

The characteristic religious institution of the intertestamental period was the synagogue. It may have begun somewhat earlier, but in intertestamental times it spread to virtually every Jewish centre, both in Palestine and in the Dispersion. It provided non-sacrificial worship every sabbath day, consisting of the reading and exposition of Scripture, and prayer. The teachers of the synagogue were usually lay scribes or elders of the Pharisaic school, who now fulfilled the duty of 'teaching the law' which in the time of Ezra had been fulfilled by priests and Levites. The synagogue was not in opposition to the temple but complemented it, though for the greater part of the lives of most Jews it provided their regular centre of worship, which was accessible to them even when the temple was not. It was this that made it possible for Judaism to exist, as at Qumran, apart from the temple, and later to survive the destruction of the temple. On the history of Jewish worship, the standard work is now J. Heinemann, *Prayer in the Talmud* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1977), which

extends further than its title suggests. Reference may also be made to my *Daily and Weekly Worship: from Jewish to Christian* (Nottingham: Alcuin/Grove, 1987).

Intertestamental religion, as reflected in its literature, is at its best the true faith of the OT, but its most frequent weakness is in the area of soteriology. Both Jesus and Paul charge their opponents with shallow conceptions of sin and salvation, and there is plenty of evidence, in rabbinical sources especially, to justify this charge, despite the attempt of E. P. Sanders to disprove it by novel and unconvincing interpretations both of the Jewish material and of the Christian (*Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, London: SCM, 1977; *etc.*).

### Intertestamental literature

The literature of the period is commonly divided into seven main categories (apart from the NT and the earliest patristic literature, which themselves have much to teach us about Judaism). The categories are these:

(i) *The Apocrypha*. These are books often found in Greek and Latin biblical manuscripts, but not Hebrew. Some of them were originally written in Greek, possibly in the Dispersion, though others originated in Hebrew or Aramaic, probably in Palestine. Considerable parts of the original Hebrew of Ecclesiasticus have now been recovered. The biblical manuscripts in which we find these books are of Christian origin, and they probably got into these progressively after AD 200, when Christians (still without their Bible between two covers) were in some cases becoming a bit vague about the distinction between the OT books and other edifying Jewish books which they read. Tobit, a pious story with a Persian background, is perhaps the oldest of these books (third century BC?). The Wisdom of Solomon and Ecclesiasticus are both wisdom books, the latter written by a scribe of the early second century BC. 1 Maccabees is an excellent history, written about 100 BC. 2 Esdras (4 Ezra) is the latest of these books, a semi-Pharisaic apocalypse, written about AD 100, with later Christian chapters added at the beginning and end. R. H. Charles (ed.), *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1913), is probably still the best critical edition.

(ii) *The Pseudepigrapha*, i.e. books under false names. Not all of these are in fact under false names, whereas some of the Apocrypha are. They include the very old story of Ahikar (the Aramaic fragments of which were found at Elephantine, and date from the fifth century BC), and the Letter of Aristeas, giving a partly legendary account of the translation of the Pentateuch into Greek at Alexandria (probably second century BC). Also included are apocalypses and similar pseudo-prophetic works, the oldest of which (1 Enoch, Jubilees and perhaps the Testaments of the Twelve Prophets) date from the third to second century BC and are of Essene outlook, embodying Essene interpretations of the Pentateuch and Essene eschatological beliefs. There are two new English editions: J. H. Charlesworth (ed.), *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1983-5), and H. F. D. Sparks (ed.), *The Apocryphal Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), the latter being rather misleadingly named. Also indispensable (however eccentric) is J. T. Milik's edition of the Aramaic fragments of 1 Enoch from Qumran: *The Books of Enoch* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976).

(iii) *The Dead Sea Scrolls*. These were discovered in our own generation, preserved in jars, mostly at Qumran in the Judean desert, now believed to have been an Essene centre. Though fragmentary, they are often substantial, and were written between the third (or fourth) century BC and the first century AD. They include Hebrew biblical manuscripts a thousand years older than any we previously possessed, Essene apocalypses in the original languages, and previously unknown sectarian works. The Manual of Discipline (or Community Rule) and the Damascus (or Zadokite) Document consist of regulations for the lives of their communities. The Temple Scroll is a pseudonymous interpretation of the pentateuchal law, comparable to Jubilees. There are also biblical commentaries, often understanding the text as foretelling their own sectarian history, and liturgical works. The Dead Sea Scrolls quote the OT with conventional formulas implying divine authority, in the manner later found in the NT, Philo and the Mishnah. The texts are slowly being edited in the volumes *Discoveries in the Judaean Desert* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955, *etc.*) and elsewhere. The best translation of the new texts is probably G. Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962), and the best introductions, which complement each other, are F. M. Cross Jr., *The Ancient Library of Qumran and Modern Biblical Studies* (London: Duckworth, 1958), J. T. Milik, *Ten Years of Discovery in the Wilderness of Judaea* (ET, London: SCM, 1959) and G. Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls: Qumran in Perspective* (London: Collins, 1977). On the interpretation of the texts, the writings of J. M. Baumgarten are of particular value: *Studies in Qumran Law* (Leiden: Brill, 1977), and there are many articles in journals. On the relation between Qumran and Christianity, the writings of F. F. Bruce give judicious guidance. On the much discussed Qumran calendar, first found in 1 Enoch, reference may be made to my own article 'The Earliest Enoch Literature and its Calendar' (*Revue de Qumran* 10:3, Feb. 1981). On Qumran exegesis, see F. F. Bruce, *Biblical Exegesis in the Qumran Texts* (London: Tyndale Press, 1960).

(iv) *Bible translations*. The greatest work of Hellenistic Judaism was the Septuagint translation of the OT, which began with the Pentateuch about 275 BC, and from which the religious Greek of the NT is largely drawn. Some books of the OT were translated much more literally than others, possibly because (as with the Aramaic targums) some of the translations were designed to be read in the synagogue, others not; but the question also arises whether what looks like a paraphrastic translation may not sometimes be due to a divergent text of the original, a question much discussed in the writings of D. W. Gooding and E. Tov. The existence of some divergent Hebrew texts of Septuagintal type has been put beyond doubt by the Qumran discoveries. The Septuagint was often revised, as by 'proto-Theodotion' in the first century AD, and there are later Greek translations; and what has survived in manuscripts as the 'Septuagint' is not always the Old Greek version. The Septuagint has generated a very large literature, to which S. P. Brook *et al.*, *A Classified Bibliography of the Septuagint* (Leiden: Brill, 1973), provides a guide. The surviving Aramaic translations, or targums, are of later date, but especially those on the Pentateuch reflect early tradition, and, though derived from the synagogue liturgy, do not always contain the same interpretations of the text as are found in the rabbinical literature. The Qumran Targum on

Job and the newly discovered Targum Neofiti on the Pentateuch are of particular interest. Targumic renderings seem sometimes to be echoed in the NT.

(v) *Philo*. The first Jewish writer of this period who has left extensive writings, Philo was an older contemporary of Jesus, an Alexandrian Jew writing in Greek. Most of his works are expositions of parts of the Pentateuch, interpreting the text in the light of Greek philosophy. He has also left several accounts of the Essenes and an account of the related Therapeutae. His works are edited, with an English translation, in the Loeb series (Heinemann).

(vi) *Josephus*. The second voluminous Jewish writer, Josephus, was a historian, living in the latter half of the first century AD. He was a Palestinian priest and Pharisee, and a leader in the first Jewish revolt of AD 66. His works are in Greek, though this was not his first language. They are edited, with an English translation, in the Loeb series. His *Jewish War* and *Life* are chiefly concerned with the first Jewish revolt. His *Antiquities* retells the history of his nation from Adam to the destruction of the temple in AD 70. *Against Apion* is an apology for his *Antiquities* against Greek critics.

(vii) *The rabbinical literature*. This was an attempt to write down Pharisaic oral tradition (previously memorized) after Pharisaism had triumphed over its rivals. The earliest parts are legal: they are the Mishnah (c. AD 200), the Tosephta, the *baraitas* or quotations from similar but lost compilations, preserved in the two Talmuds, and the Halakik Midrashim (or legal commentaries) on the last four books of the Pentateuch, all these probably dating from the third century AD. The Talmuds themselves (the Palestinian or Jerusalem Talmud and the Babylonian Talmud) are later commentaries on the Mishnah, produced by the rabbinical schools of Palestine and Babylonia. The rabbinical literature quotes rabbis back to the first century BC and even earlier, and in the older compilations these attributions should not be lightly disregarded. The rabbinical literature is written in Hebrew and Aramaic, but much of it has now been translated into English: the Mishnah by H. Danby (London: OUP, 1933), the Tosephta by J. Neusner (New York: Ktav, 1977-86), the Babylonian Talmud by I. Epstein *et al.* (London: Soncino, 1935-52), *etc.* Other parts have been translated into French and German. There is a vast secondary literature in many languages.

A general guide to all this literature can be found in the new Schürer and in the relevant volumes of the *Compendia Rerum Judaicarum*, mentioned earlier.

### The significance of intertestamental study

At the beginning of this article, three uses of the study of intertestamental literature were mentioned. It remains to illustrate these uses.

#### (a) *The intertestamental literature as religious literature of worth*

Like the surviving religious literature of any other period of history, the intertestamental literature is not all equally well written or edifying. It was no accident that the early Christians read the books which we call Apocrypha much more than the rest of the literature, with the result that these books (but very little else of the literature) began to be included in biblical manuscripts. Judith is a stirring romance

of religious zeal. Wisdom and Ecclesiasticus are classics of wisdom-piety (the latter including also, in ch. 43 and chs. 44-50, a beautiful religious nature-poem and the great catalogue of 'famous men'). 1 Maccabees is not just good history but a narrative of heroic faith which has few equals. Outside the Apocrypha, Josephus's accounts of the actions and character of Herod the Great are painfully graphic; but not much else in the literature deserves mention from this point of view. 1 Enoch has been described as one of the world's twelve worst books (and for that reason alone one would be tempted to think that the Epistle of Jude quotes it only as an *argumentum ad hominem*, though there is also the more substantial reason that otherwise Jude is unique in the apostolic circle in treating pseudepigrapha with this sort of respect). The Mishnah must be one of the duller books in existence: there are reasons why it has to be read, despite its length, but the prudent reader only attempts a small portion at a time!

#### (b) *The intertestamental literature as the earliest interpretation of the OT*

The oldest of the intertestamental literature is not much (if any) younger than the youngest of the OT literature, and sometimes there is a direct dependence, either in the works as a whole or in particular passages. Where this is so, there are strong historical grounds for using the intertestamental work to interpret the canonical. Even when the difference of age is much greater, and no direct dependence can be seen, the interpretation indicated by the intertestamental literature may still be historically prior to any other, and, as coming from the same nation and the same religious community, is entitled to respect. The Pharisaic interpretation of the pentateuchal ceremonial, as embodied in the rabbinical literature, must be weighed against what we know of the Sadducean, Essene and Samaritan interpretations, and against what recent scholarship has deduced from archaeological discoveries and from parallels in other Near-Eastern cultures of antiquity; but it remains very important. There are few expositions of Leviticus more illuminating than that of C. D. Ginsburg in Ellicott's *Bible Commentary*, based upon the rabbinical literature.

Those developments of religious thought in the intertestamental period which are usually attributed to Persian or Greek influence, particularly those relating to angels and demons and to the life to come, are probably from another viewpoint interpretations of the OT. The foreign influence is sometimes very apparent, as when Tobit gives a Persian name to a demon, or when Wisdom (followed afterwards by Philo and Josephus) asserts the immortality of the soul. Nevertheless, the developments were probably justified in the minds of those who made them as interpretations of the OT. The OT does speak of angels and demons, however little it tells us about them, and it does hint (in the Prophets and Psalms) at a future life for believers more significant than the shadowy existence of Sheol. The intertestamental developments are in some ways *speculative* interpretations of what the OT has to say, and an important consideration for Christians is whether the NT endorses them. In some respects the developments are rejected by the NT, and in others ignored, but in others again they are endorsed.

(c) *The intertestamental literature as background to the NT*  
This final use of the intertestamental literature is the amplest of the three. To begin with, the intertestamental literature

(with some help from Greek and Roman sources) traces the history of the Jews from the fifth century BC to the first century AD, which connects the two Testaments.

Then again, it explains what has happened to OT institutions which reappear in a modified form in the NT. Why are scribes and not priests teaching the law to the people? Why is the passover meal held outside the temple court, using wine as well as the instituted elements, and with the participants reclining rather than standing? These are questions of a kind that can only be answered from the intertestamental literature.

Yet again, the intertestamental literature enables us to put the NT narratives into a historical setting. Though old, A. Edersheim's *Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (1883) makes use of it for this purpose in a uniquely illuminating way.

Lastly, the intertestamental literature throws direct or indirect light on a host of phrases and passages of the NT. Strack-Billerbeck's *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch* (Munich: Beck, 1922-61) is the standard guide here, and it would be worth learning the German language just to be able to use that book. Help can also be gleaned, however, from G. Dalman, *The Words of Jesus* (ET, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1902), *Jesus-Jeshua* (ET, London: SPCK, 1929), *Sacred Sites and Ways* (ET, London: SPCK, 1935); I. Abrahams, *Studies in Pharisaism and the Gospels* (CUP, 1917-24); and D. Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism* (London: Athlone Press, 1956).

<sup>1</sup> *Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church and its Background in Early Judaism* (SPCK, 1986).

<sup>2</sup> For a fuller bibliography, see S. F. Noll, *The Intertestamental Period: a Study Guide* (IVCF, USA, 1985).