

# Lesson #1A - Introduction to the Life of Jesus

400 BC to 0 AD 2019

A comment about the use of dates in these lessons.

The birth of Jesus is the point from which our Gregorian calendar is fixed. After Jesus' birth, the dates count up from 0 to 2000. It is referred to as AD – the Latin abbreviation for “in the year of our Lord”. Before the birth of Jesus, dates count down from 2000 to 0. It is referred to as BC, meaning “before Christ”.

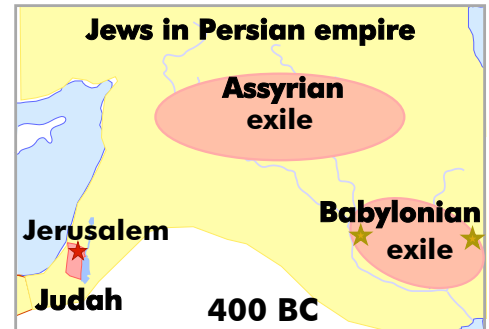
Most of the world today uses the letters CE meaning “common era”, or BCE – “before the common era”. The purpose is to avoid using the name *Christ*. However, their “common era” still begins with the birth of Jesus. So in these lessons, we will continue to use the terms BC and AD.

The Old Testament ends c. 400 BC, when the Persian empire was in control.

The majority of Jews are settled in Babylon, Persia and the northern parts of the empire.

However, about a million Jews are living in the land of Judah. Persia considers them a nation. They believe the land belongs to the Jews and the God of the Jews. The common language is Aramaic.

Some 25 years earlier, Malachi the prophet, Nehemiah, the governor and Ezra, the priest had led the people in spiritual restoration. As a result, the Jews wanted to follow God.



Thru these years, God shows **Ezra** 4 ways to protect the message of God and the faith of the Jews for the future.

## 1<sup>st</sup> - The Hebrew alphabet

Ezra changes the Hebrew way of writing. Hebrew consonants are squared and Hebrew vowels are now written either above or below the consonants. This enables everyone to read the language with accuracy and clarity.

HEBREW CONSONANTS			Ezra's
BC 1200	700	450	

HEBREW VOWELS		
		BG
		BG
		BG

## 2<sup>nd</sup> - The Hebrew Canon or sacred writings (Tanakh, Old Testament)

He confirms which books of Jewish literature and history are God-given.

He adds the final books of Psalms, Ezra and Nehemiah.

He declares the Hebrew Canon or sacred writings are now complete or closed.

## 3<sup>rd</sup> - The synagogue

A meeting place in any neighborhood or town where there are at least 10 Jewish men.

It becomes the place to worship, pray and receive instruction.

## 4<sup>th</sup> - The Great Synagogue - a group of 120 men called *The Sopherim* or *The Scribes* who have 3 responsibilities.

As **teachers** in synagogues

After reading God's Word from the Hebrew scroll, they translate it into the Aramaic, explain it and show how to apply it, so the Jews can live godly lives.

As **protectors** of the faith, they are to keep alive the expectation of their coming Messiah.

As **guardians** of the faith, when anyone says he **is** the Messiah, the Sanhedrin must investigate and then decide for the nation, *Yes, He is our Jewish Messiah or no, He is not our Messiah and this is why.*

Thruout the centuries, the Jews believed if God would just them a list of rules, they could meet His requirements and be right with Him. Exodus 19:8; 24:3, 7

With these actions of Ezra, they now have all of God's words given to Moses and the prophets in **written** form. With local synagogues, they will have teachers who can explain what God said, so they can obey.

They have everything they need to follow God.

If ever they could be right with God by **just** keeping His laws, these would be the years.

God gives them **400** years to try it out. He wants them to discover they can never be good enough. They can never completely keep His laws. He wants them to discover they need their coming Messiah, not as King, but first of all as Savior. Only He can make them right with God the Father.

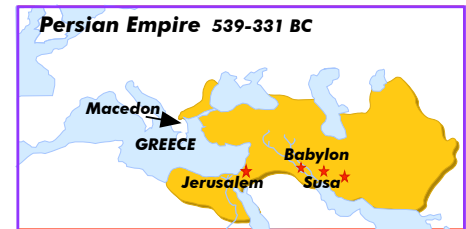
This time period, between Malachi and Matthew is sometimes called **The 400 Silent Years**.

After Malachi in 400 BC, God does not speak to them thru another prophet until John the Baptist c. 6 BC.

Altho the **Bible** does not tell us about events during this 400 year period, we have the Jewish perspective from the writings of Josephus and the books of Maccabees. We have the Western perspective from Greek and Latin historians - such as Polybius, TÁCitus, Áppian and Livy.

#### 400 BC

The Jews were under the Persian empire. However, in their land of Judah (also called Israel), they had godly leadership divided between a governor and a high priest - a political and a spiritual leader.



#### 300's BC

The Jews continued under the Persian empire. However, by 350 BC, the political governors in Judah became corrupt, interested only in power and money. So from 350 BC until the Roman empire, the Jews no longer had governors as their political leaders. The high priest became both their political and spiritual leader.



Near the end of the 300's, **Alexander the Great** comes on the scene. In just 11 years, 334 - 323 BC, he conquers the Persian empire. His influence and the Greek empire changes history.

He developed Greek cities and colonies thruout the empire.

He encouraged his Greek soldiers to marry women of other nations so they could teach them Greek culture

Because of different languages thruout the empire, Alexander develops a simplified form of Greek. It becomes the language

common to everyone. It is therefore called koiné - common Greek.

Alexander believes the Greek way is the best. He wants everyone to accept Greek thought, Greek customs and the Greek religion. This becomes known as "Hellenism" - getting people to do it the Greek way.

Because Alexander was so good to the Jews, they began to like his ideas and ways. It is in the 300's BC that many Jews become **Hellenized** - they prefer the Greek ways over the Jewish ways.

In 323 BC Alexander dies an alcoholic. He is only 32 years old.

#### ALEXANDER'S INFLUENCE

**Greek cities thruout empire**

**Greeks marry into other cultures**

**Simplified Greek - koiné**

**Greek thought, customs, religion  
Hellenism**

Alexander's huge empire is now divided into 4 areas, each ruled by one of his 4 generals.

The Jews are involved with only 2 of the areas.

At first they are controlled by the Greeks ruling from Alexandria, Egypt. The Greek kings in Egypt are called the Ptolemies.

Later the Jews are ruled by the Greeks ruling from Antioch, Syria. The Greek kings in Syria are called the Seleucids.



## 200's BC

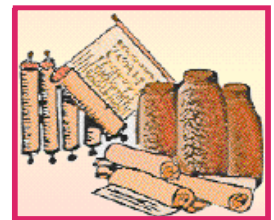
It is during the 200's that the Jews are controlled by the Greek kings ruling from Egypt.

Particularly in Egypt, the Jews are given special treatment and privileges. As a result, many of the Jews become Hellenized. They give up their Jewish ways for the Greek way of life.

Many other Jews start using the tools Ezra gave them.

### The Jewish sacred writings

They are translated from Hebrew into koine, common Greek. It becomes known as the **Septuagint**. Because of Ezra, the Jewish translators do not have to guess at which letter or word it is. They also know exactly which books are considered sacred and given by God.



### Synagogues

Jews living outside of Jerusalem begin to develop Ezra's idea of synagogues. They build places of local worship in Jewish communities throughout the Greek empires. It will be the synagogues that keep their faith and practice alive.

### The Great Synagogue; the Sanhedrin or Council

The Jews in Judah are part of the Egyptian Greek empire - the Ptolemy Empire. The high priest is still the Jewish leader.

He is helped by the 120 men in the *Great Synagogue*.

But now in the 200's, the number is changed from 120 to 70.

The name is changed to *Sanhedrin* or *Council*.

They will continue to help the high priest in his decisions.

They will continue teaching, reminding the people to expect their Messiah

They will investigate anyone who claims to be the Messiah.

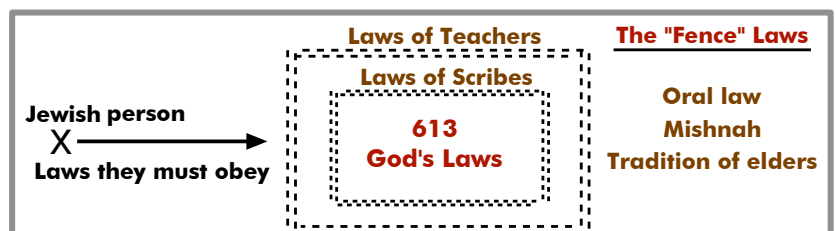
In addition, they become the Jewish religious supreme court. They will decide religious legal issues.

The development of the **Mishna, the oral traditions**.

The Sanhedrin knows Jewish history. They know their ancestors went into exile in the 500's BC because they disobeyed God's laws. The phrase, *God's laws*, in the Old Testament and the Gospels means the 613 laws of God as summarized in the books of Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy. We only talk about the 10 commandments, but God gave the Jews a total of 613.

The Sanhedrin was aware that even when people knew God's laws and heard them explained, they still broke them. So as protectors of the faith, they now believe they should make *additional* laws to act like a fence around God's laws. To each of God's 613 laws, they add hundreds and thousands of new laws as a protection.

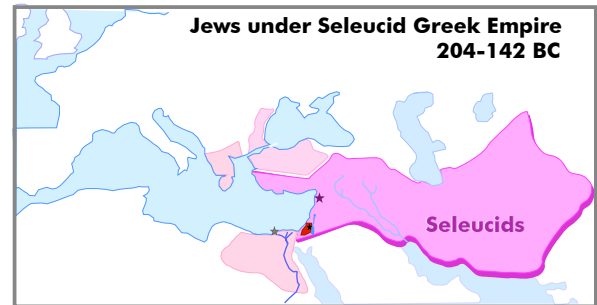
For example, to keep the Jews from breaking God's one Sabbath law, they make 1500 of their own laws of what Jews could or could not do on the Sabbath.



The Sanhedrin do this because they believe if the Jews keep their laws, the *fence* laws, it will keep them from breaking God's laws. At this time, they are careful to say God's laws are absolute. Their laws are merely guidelines but not equal to Scripture. However, by the time of Jesus, ideas have changed and the Sanhedrin believe it is a greater sin to break their fence laws than to break God's laws.

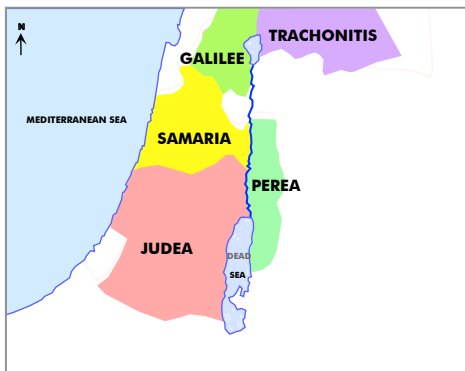
These laws are not written down. They are memorized by the Sanhedrin. This is why they become known as the **oral law, oral tradition, the Mishnah, tradition of the fathers**.

At the end of the 200's BC, the Jews are financially oppressed by the Greek rulers in Egypt. So Jewish leaders go to the Greeks in the north - in Syria and ask to be under them. In 204 BC, Greeks ruling from Antioch, Syria take over the Jews and the land of Israel. This ruling family is known as *Seleucids*.



### 100's BC

The Jews will be under the Seleucids the first half of the 100's - from 204 - 142 BC.



It is in the 100's BC, the Greeks divide Israel into 5 provinces: Judea, Samaria, Galilee, Trachonitis and Perea.

Under the Syrian Greek empire, the high priest, is still the Jewish spiritual leader. He shares power and authority with the Sanhedrin. The majority of Sanhedrin is pro-Jewish. It wants a strong Jewish identity for the nation. It wants strict Jewish laws. But a minority have become Hellenized and wants to bring Greek thinking into Jewish life.

In the 170's, a Jewish man is high priest and pro-Jewish. His Jewish brother is pro-Greek and **wants** to be high priest. He gives a bribe to the Syrian Greek king, who then names **him** as high priest. Over the next years there is continual fighting over who will be the Jews' spiritual leader.

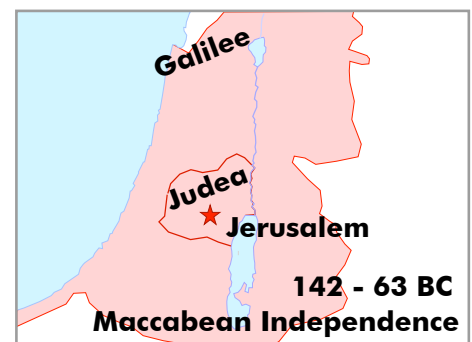
Finally the Syrian king comes with his armies and desecrates the Temple in Jerusalem. He demands the Jews worship him. He forbids all Jewish practices and says the Greek gods must be worshipped.

Some Jews co-operate because they want to, others do it out of fear. A smaller group of Jews refuse to co-operate. They choose to be faithful to God, no matter what. They become known as the believing remnant. They are led by a local Jewish priest named Mattathias and his 5 sons. They become known as the Maccabees. After 3 years of fighting, the Jews are able to take control of the Jewish temple and gain their spiritual freedom.

Over the next 23 years, the 5 brothers lead volunteer armies against the Syrian Greek troops.

Finally in 142 BC, the Jews are given complete **independence** as a people and nation. They are no longer a part of any Greek empire. This is their first independence from Gentile rule since the days of Nebuchadnezzar, some 450 years earlier.

Simon, the last of the 5 Maccabean brothers becomes the spiritual leader - the high priest. Because he is so wise and godly, the Jews say that all the following spiritual leaders should come from his family. It becomes known as the **Maccabean** line or **Hasmonean** line. That was another family name.



During this time, many people as well as the Sanhedrin see the dangers of Hellenism. They are convinced Jewish faith and practices should be completely **separated** from Greek ideas and beliefs. They talk so much about being separate, they become known as the **separatists**. The Greek word is **Pharisee**.

From this point onward, Jewish people are divided about their identity - nationally, religiously and culturally.

Those who want **all things Jewish** are considered **Pharisee** in belief - separatists.

They are conservative, wanting separation from Gentile influence.

Jews who are open to **Greek ideas** are **Sadducee** in belief.

They want to be more inclusive in the nation, in religious beliefs and culture. They are Hellenists.

In the Sanhedrin - Two-thirds are pro-Jewish **separatists** - **Pharisees**.

One third are pro-Greek Hellenists - **Sadducees**.

## 100 - 6 BC

Under Maccabean leaders, the Jews are free for 70 years from 142 to 63 BC.

Their area of rule eventually covers all the land of Judah.

They would have been free even longer if their spiritual leaders had not been so greedy.

But in 63 BC, once again 2 Jewish brothers fight over spiritual leadership.

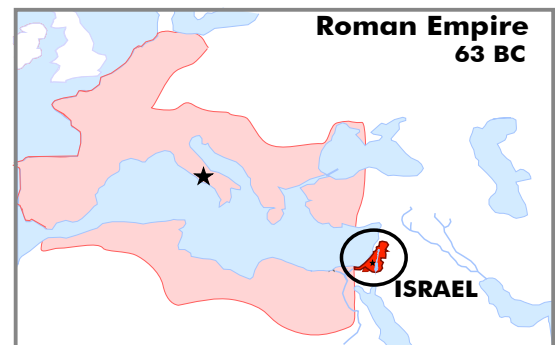
One is the current high priest. The other wants to be.

By this time, the Roman empire is developing.

So each brother goes to the Roman general in the area and tells him,

*If you name me as high priest and put my brother in prison, in return, I will turn over the nation of Israel to become part of the Roman empire.*

General Pompey is delighted. So in 63 BC he attacks Jerusalem, takes control, names one brother as high priest and puts the other in prison. Jewish independence comes to an end because personal power was more important than national freedom.



In 40 BC, Octavius is the new Caesar. He names an Idumean man as governor of Judea. Idumean is the Greek name for Edomite. This man tells Caesar he wants a title that sounds more important. So instead of being called *governor*, he is given the title, *king* over Judea.

To impress the Jews and get their support, he uses Roman money to beautify Jerusalem and enlarge the Jewish temple. He marries a woman from the Maccabean line of rulers.

He is in power for 36 years and does many impressive things.

But he is always afraid that family members are trying to remove him as king.

So over the years, he murders 2 of his sons, his wife from the Maccabean line, her 3 brothers and her mother. It is this man - **Herod the Great**, that is king of Judea when Jesus is born in Bethlehem.

Herod killed family members because he thought his position as **king** was threatened. No wonder he reacts when the Magi ask him, *Where is he that is born king of the Jews?* If he killed his own sons, it is not surprising that he kills all baby boys 2 years and under in the area of Bethlehem. This background explains his actions.

We have looked at 400 years of history that produced dramatic changes for the Jews and their nation.

At the end of Malachi, the Jews were recognized as a people and nation. **Aramaic** was the common language. They were under the Persians during the 300's BC.

During the Greek empires, **Greek** became the common language.

The Jews were under Alexander at the end of the 300's

They were under the Greek Ptolemies in the 200's

And under the Seleucids for the first half of the 100's.

During these centuries, Greek ideas, beliefs and culture started appealing to many. But it also gave concern to others.

This is why under the Maccabees, many Jews wanted to remain totally Jewish, separate from Gentile or Greek influence.  
This was from the mid-100's to 63 BC

The Jews are under the Romans from 63 BC onward into the New Testament times.

The people and Sanhedrin continue to be divided into parties based on their identity

Some are in the Sadducee party known for its pro-Greek or **Hellenist** ideas and beliefs.

The majority however, are in the Pharisee party, known for its pro-Jewish, separatist beliefs.

**The Sanhedrin** has now developed into 3 branches, plus the high priest making a total of 71

The three branches are: - *the chief priests, scribes and elders.* Mt 16:21

There are **24 chief priests**, known as **The Sadducees**.

They are from the Sadducee party, known for their pro-Greek, Hellenists views and beliefs.

They oversee the priests who serve in the Temple and influence who is chosen as high priest.

They are an elite group of priests from several wealthy Jewish families who have bought these positions.

There are **22 scribes** known as **The Scribes or The Teachers of the law**.

They are from the Pharisee party, known for their pro-Jewish beliefs - *separatists*.

They are the **teachers** – the “explainers” of the law.

They keep alive the expectation of a Messiah.

At first, they explained the 613 laws of God.

Now, (in the days of Jesus), they spend all their time teaching the *fence* laws - the Mishnah.

There are **24 elders**. These are older members of the Sanhedrin, known as **The Pharisees**.

They obviously are from the Pharisee party known for their pro-Jewish, separatist beliefs.

They are the **enforcers** of the law.

At first, they were concerned about people breaking **God's** laws.

Now all their attention is focused on the people breaking **Mishnah** laws.

They bring them before the entire Sanhedrin to reprimand, fine or put them in prison.

As the New Testament opens, because 400 years have passed and their promised Messiah has not come, many Jews have decided to make God's promises come true in their own way.

Some are involved in politics, to influence Roman decisions about their nation.

Some have become more like the world in order to be accepted.

Some have become more strict in following rules their leaders made, thinking this will bring their Messiah.

It is only a minority, a believing remnant, that is still waiting for and expecting His coming. As they wait, they are faithful in what they believe and how they live. When it seemed like things were at their worst, God kept His promise and sent His Son.

In our days, we believe that Jesus will come for us, His Body, the Church. But years have gone by and He has not come. As a result, many Christians have decided to make God's promises come true in their way.

Some say we can do it thru politics - we can bring in the kingdom.

Some say if we are more like the world, the world will accept us.

Others suggest if we follow more man-made rules, God will accept us.

We, who are still waiting for and expecting His coming, are in the minority.

Our responsibility is to remain faithful in our beliefs based on Scripture. This means we need to keep learning and studying God's Word.

We are to remain faithful in how we live, sharing our faith with those who are seeking. But most of all we are to be faithful in doing whatever God puts in front of us to do. It may be spiritual ministry, secular work or being involved with family and friends, living a full life and enjoying His blessings.

One thing we can be sure of - when it seems like things are at their worst, God will send Jesus once again. We who have accepted His payment, whether we are alive or have died, we will meet Him in the clouds to be with Him forever. According to God's Word, this is our future and our certainty.