

The first of a 2-part series

Good resource material for this period:

Explore the Book, J. Sidlow Baxter Volume 5, page 14 ff.

Jerome Commentary, 20:14, The Persian Age

Josephus, Antiquities II, 7:1

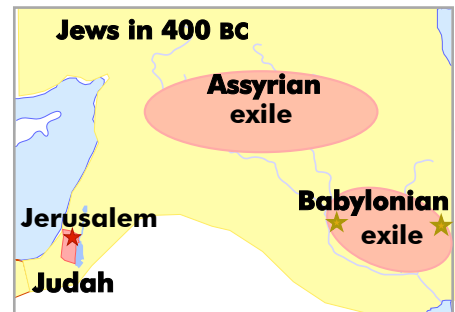
Old Testament Charts, John Walton, page 70

New Testament Charts, H. Wayne House, pages 66-72

Encyclopedia Britannica

Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia 1975 edition

The Old Testament ends c. 400 BC, during the Persian empire. The majority of Jews are settled in Babylon, Persia and the northern parts of the empire. However, about a million Jews are living with a great deal of freedom, in the restored land of Judah. They are considered both a nation and people. The major empires recognize the land as belonging to the Jews and the God of the Jews. The common language is Aramaic.



Jerusalem, the capital, is fully protected with its surrounding wall. People are coming to the temple services and celebrating holy days. As more cities are rebuilt, the boundary of the nation is expanding. Up to 425 BC, **Malachi** the prophet, **Nehemiah**, the governor and **Ezra**, the priest had led the people in spiritual restoration. Malachi and Ezra then continued their ministry for another 25 years. As a result, the Jews want to obey God's laws as summarized in the book of Deuteronomy.

Ezra prepares and protects the nation for the future during the last years of the 400's BC

1st - The Hebrew alphabet

He squares the consonants and introduces vowels written above or below the consonants

2nd - The Hebrew Canon or sacred writings (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.

3rd - 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.

4th - The Great Synagogue - a group of 120 men called *The Sopherim* or *The Scribes*. - 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.*

Ezra does not do these things to become famous or have a great legacy. He does it because he is led by God.

Each of these actions will play a major role over the next 400 years,

to protect God's message

to protect the faith and practice of the Jews.

Without these, there would have been no believing remnant in the first century AD.

For the Jews, the years from Malachi to Jesus are sometimes called the 400 silent years. After Malachi, God does not give them another prophet until John the Baptist.

The Jews believed if God would just give them a list of rules, they could meet His requirements. Exodus 19:8; 24:3, 7

Now they have all of God's words given to Moses and the prophets in **written** form.

With local synagogues, they have teachers always available to explain what God has said, so they **can** obey.

They have all they need for spiritual guidance.

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

God gives them 400 years to discover they cannot keep His laws.

He wants them to see how much they need a Messiah, Savior.

After Malachi, our knowledge of Jewish history comes from many sources.

We get the **Jewish** perspective from the writings of Josephus and the books of Maccabees.

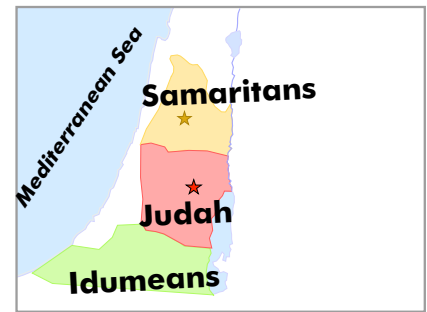
We get the **Western** perspective from Greek and Latin historians - such as Polybius, Tacitus, Appian and Livy.

By 400 BC, the major enemies of the Jews are no longer a threat.

The **Samaritans** had been a problem for the last 100 years.

But now, realizing they will not have any control or influence in the Jerusalem Temple, they build their own temple in Samaria, 40 miles to the north. They continue mixing worship of Israel's God with the worship of their pagan gods.

But there is less and less inter-marriage between the Jews and the Samaritans.



The **Edomites**, descendants of Esau, had their nation south of the Dead Sea.

However the Nabatean Arabs had taken over their land and forced them just south of Judah.

Later on, when the Greek language comes into use, the area will be called Idumea and the Edomites will be called Idumeans.

From this point on, there will be no more physical attacks by the Samaritans or Edomites against the Jews.

However, Samaritan hostility will continue from generation to generation and will be seen 400 years later in New Testament times.

As for the Jews themselves, in the land of Judah, they have been under a **governor**, their **civil** leader and under the **high priest**, their **spiritual** leader.

The Jews choose their head priest;

The Persians choose which Jewish man will be their governor.

Zerubbabel had been their first governor with **Joshua**, the high priest.

Nehemiah had been their last godly governor with **Ezra** as priest and **Eliashib**, the high priest.

After Nehemiah, the appointed Jewish **governors** become corrupt, interested only in power and money.

So in **380 BC**, the Persians remove the position of governor.

The Jewish high priest will be their only leader and authority.

The Persians assume a spiritual leader will do a better job than a civil leader. That would have been true if the priests and their families were really spiritual and concerned for the welfare of the people. But authority and power have corrupted them as well.

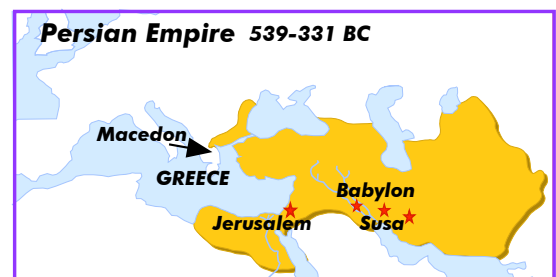
By **350 BC**, a man named **Jonathan** is **high priest**. Both he and his brother want this top position. Jonathan already has it, so to keep from losing it, he murders his brother in the Temple. (Jonathan kills Joshua during the time of Persian king Artaxerxes III Ochus 359-338). With this, the Persian government reacts. They impose a fine and take away more of the Jews' independence. Ordinarily this would have been a real setback for the Jews.

But Persian is having her problems.

Her leaders have no leadership qualities. Nations within the empire want their freedom.

In addition, a nation outside of Persia's empire is also restless – the nation of Greece

They still remember the attack of Xerxes, 150 years earlier, when he tried to conquer Greece. (480 BC). Altho he had been soundly defeated in a famous naval battle, Greece has always talked of revenge and retaliation. The problem was the Greek states were always fighting each other.



However c. **335 BC**, Philip, the king of Macedon or northern Greece, gains control and bring unity to the Greek states.

With this unity, he plans war against Persia. But before he can follow thru, he is assassinated by one of his own people.

This means his son will take over. He is just 20 years old, but already well prepared.

He has studied logic under Aristotle.

He learned military strategy from his father.

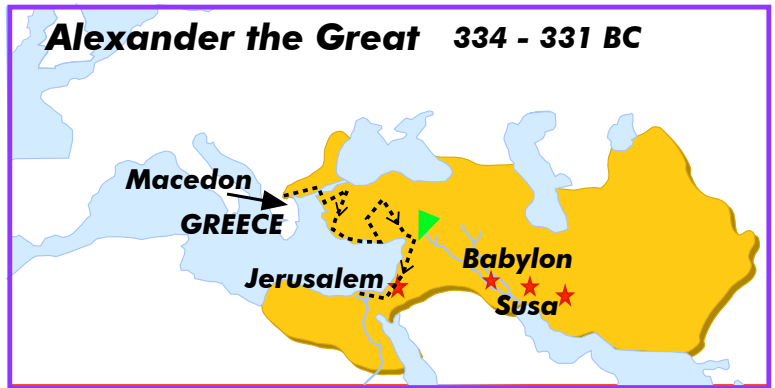
Since early childhood, he has loved to take risks.

His name is **ALEXANDER**.

In 334 BC, at 20 years of age, Alexander takes command of 35-40,000 troops. Tradition says he is told in a dream he will conquer the Persian empire.

Leaving Greece, he attacks the Persian military base in northwest Asia Minor. He quickly defeats 5 cities, one after the other. He conquers the Persian navy along the Asia Minor coast.

By November 333, Darius III, king of Persia, hears of these attacks, gathers an army and goes west to resist Alexander. But the Persian king is defeated and barely escapes with his life. (At Issus) Now it is just a matter of time before the Persian empire comes to an end.



Alexander moves south along the Mediterranean coast and conquers Phoenicia, Syria, Samaria and the Gaza strip. Gaza is the home of the Philistines. Alexander destroys their cities and kills all the people.

This means in 332 BC, everything connected with the **Philistines** - the people, their race and their nation all come to an end. As with many of these ethnic groups, the Philistines become extinct. In other words, there are no people today who can claim a right to their land based on an ethnic connection with the Philistines.

When the Jews hear about the cities and people Alexander has destroyed, they fear for their lives. According to Jewish tradition, when Alexander gets close to Jerusalem, the high priest, along with other priests, go out to meet him, asking for mercy. There is something about the scene that reminds Alexander of his dream. Believing it is a confirmation of his success, he now sees the Jews as his friends and allies. Wanting a blessing from their God, he asks the Jewish priest to offer a sacrifice for him at the Jerusalem Temple.

From then on, he always gives preferential treatment to the Jews. We see this when he moves south and conquers Egypt. He creates a special city named after himself - Alexandria. To develop it, he offers not only the Greeks, but also the Jews, full rights of citizenship if they are willing to live there. He wants the Jews because of their business and scholastic abilities.

Alexander and his armies leave Egypt in 331 BC and continue their conquest, first north to Damascus and then east. Once again they defeat Darius and his armies. They occupy the Persian palaces one by one - Babylon, Susa, Persepolis. Over the next 8 years the Greeks march further and further east, taking all of the Persian empire - the countries we know today as Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

When they come to big rivers, the soldiers put straw inside their folded tents, use them as floats and go across the river. When they come to 12,000 foot mountains, they wait until spring and then go up and over, despite snow and hardships. It seems as if nothing can stop them. Looking at a map we discover Alexander and his armies come within 150 miles of the Chinese border.



No one knows how history might have been affected if he had continued, but his troops say *no*. As one of his generals tells him, *A noble thing, O king, is to know when to stop*. History says that for 3 days Alexander weeps because he cannot conquer any more lands. Knowing his soldiers are close to rebelling, he turns back, conquering Kashmir and northern India.

They arrive back in Babylon in 323 BC. Alexander and his troops covered 35,000 miles on foot in just 11 years. They conquered 1½ million square miles.



Alexander has been able to control all this territory and people, but tragically, he cannot control himself. By this time he is an alcoholic. When he gets a high fever, he has no resistance. He is left paralyzed, unable to speak. Alexander dies in Babylon, just 32 years old. He conquered all, but enjoyed nothing.

The Persian empire had always encouraged nations to keep **their** laws, culture, religion and politics. Alexander changed this concept completely. He was convinced the Greek way of life was the best. So he developed Greek colonies and cities thruout the empire - from

Greece to India.

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

During these years Alexander had soldiers from many language groups that joined his army. He wanted a common language for them. So he created a simplified Greek language.

It was so effective and practical for uniting the world, that later when the Romans developed their empire, they continued to use this common Greek for the everyday language. The word *common* in Greek is *koiné*.

ALEXANDER'S INFLUENCE

Greek cities thruout empire

Greeks marry into other cultures

Simplified Greek - koiné

**Greek thought, customs, religion
Hellenism**

The acceptance of Greek thought, Greek customs and Greek life becomes known as Hellenism. 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.

When Alexander died in 323 BC, he had no qualified heirs. It was only natural, therefore, that those who helped him create the empire should enjoy the power and glory. The vast empire is divided into 4 areas, one for each of his 4 generals. The 4 areas are Greece, Asia Minor, Egypt and Syria. In theory, dividing the spoils among the victors is an excellent idea. But in practice it does not work.



The generals start fighting among themselves as to whether the empire should remain united or be permanently divided. The general who controls the area of Syria says, *unite so there is just 1 big empire*; the general who controls the area of Egypt says, *divide it; let's have 4 Greek empires*. So for the next 23 years the generals ruling from Syria and Egypt fight each other and the Jews are caught in the middle.

SUMMARY – THE 300's BC

The Jews' enemies, Samaritans and Edomites, are no longer a threat

The **Persian** government...

...removes the position of Jewish governor because the governors after Nehemiah become corrupt

...gives Jewish leadership and authority to the high priests – but they also become corrupt

...takes away much of the Jews' independence as a nation

The **Persian** kings become weak and lack leadership abilities

Alexander the Great defeats the Persians and develops the **Greek** empire

His empire is then divided between his 4 generals

The Jews are caught between the empires of the **Syrian Greeks (Seleucids)** and the **Egyptian Greek (Ptolemies)**

Finally in 301 BC, **Ptolemy** - the Greek general ruling in Egypt - gains control - **the Jews become part of his empire**. The word *Ptolemy* is a title used by all the Greek kings who rule out of Egypt. It means *king*, like the Egyptian title *Pharaoh*. Alexandria is the capital of the Egyptian Greek empire. The Jews are under Ptolemy rule from 301 – 204 BC.

During the 200's BC, the Jews have amazing privileges and freedom. It is when they begin to use the tools Ezra gave them.

POLITICALLY

The **high priest** is still their leader.

The Scribes or **The Great Synagogue**, formed by Ezra, are the group of men that help him in his decisions.

They now change their name to **Sanhedrin** or **Council**.

They change their number from 120 to 70.

Two times in the life of Moses, God chose 70 men to help him make decisions for the people. (Exodus 24; Numbers 11.) So for the Jews, the number 70 had a symbolic meaning. The number 7 was connected with completeness or deity; the number 10 with government and authority. Seven times ten equals 70. This number, therefore, became symbolic of **God-appointed authority and leadership**.

Now in the 200's BC, like the 70 who helped Moses, there are 70 in the Sanhedrin who help the high priest.

Sanhedrin or **Council**.

They will continue their role of:

Teaching

Keeping the expectation of the Messiah

Investigating anyone who claims to be the Messiah

They now add the role of Jewish religious supreme court

They will decide all legal issues and disputes that are religious.

SPIRITUALLY

Ezra's **alphabet** and the **Old Testament Canon** become vitally important.

The **Old Testament Canon is translated from Hebrew into Greek**

The **Temple** becomes the center of Jewish life.

Holy Days

The Feast of Passover and Feast of Tabernacles are now celebrated on a national scale.

Not only local Jews come to Jerusalem, but also the Jews scattered thruout the Greek empire, the "**Diaspora**".

Synagogues

It is these scattered or dispersed Jews that develop Ezra's idea of synagogues. They build places of local worship in Jewish communities thruout the Greek empire. For Jews living so far from Jerusalem and the Temple, it will be the synagogues that keep their faith and practice alive.

Because of the synagogues, during the 200's BC, God's laws are studied and explained in great detail.

However the Scribes from the Sanhedrin are concerned. They know their ancestors went into exile because they disobeyed God's laws. They want to do everything in their power to keep that from ever happening again. From experience, they have seen that even when people know God's laws and hear them explained, they still break them. So they come to a decision that will forever alter their culture and practice of faith.

Mishnah, the oral traditions

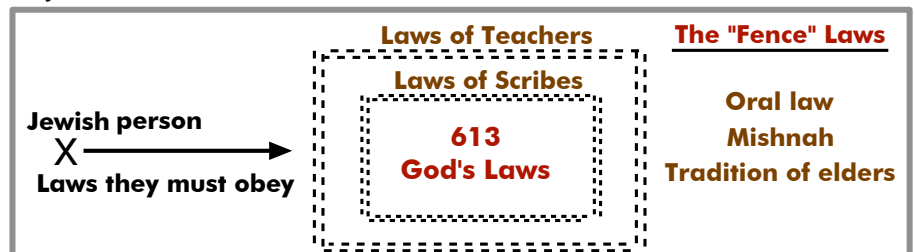
The Jewish keepers of the faith believe their people need **more** laws. These new laws will act like a fence around God's laws. If the Jewish people keep the laws of the scribes, the "fence" laws, it will keep them from breaking God's laws. They are careful to say God's laws are **absolute**.

Their laws, the laws of the scribes, are merely guidelines but **not** equal to Scripture. God gave His people 613 laws in the books of Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy. To these laws the scribes add

hundreds and thousands of new regulations as a protection or fence.

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

In this period of Jewish history, these laws are not written down. They are memorized by the Jewish Sanhedrin. This is why they became known as the oral law, the *Mishnah*, *the oral traditions*, or *the traditions of the fathers*.



All these laws of the Scribes are bad enough. But 200 years later, teachers of the Sanhedrin add more laws as greater fences or protection. Now they say the previous guideline laws were really **oral laws** that God gave to Moses at the same time He gave him the written law. Therefore **these orals laws are now equal to Scripture**.

By the time of Jesus, the Sanhedrin believe

it is a greater sin to break the man-made laws than to break God's laws.

The Ruling Ptolemies - Egyptian Greek kings who are over the Jews

Ptolemy I, one of Alexander's generals, rules in Egypt for 39 years, until his death - from 323 - 284 BC.

Ptolemy II comes to power and rules for 38 years - from 284 - 246 BC. His name is Philadelphus.

He is always associated with the famous **Alexandrian Library**.

Technically, his father **built** it, but it is **Ptolemy Philadelphus** who **develops** it.

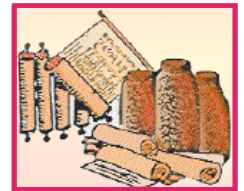
Eventually it will have 700,000 volumes.

He wants to have the best of all the world's literature, in the Greek language, so everyone can read it.

Since Jews work for him in his palace, he knows they have sacred writings written in Hebrew. So he appoints 70 qualified Jews who are living in Egypt to translate their sacred writings from Hebrew into common or koiné Greek. (In this situation, the number 70 does not have any special significance, because a Greek king is the one who decided the number)

Because of Ezra, the Jews know the **exact number of books** that are considered as sacred and God-given.

They can translate with accuracy because they have the **squared letters and written vowels**.



But these Jews are Hellenized Jews - they have accepted the Greek way of thinking and living. They believe all Jewish literature is the same and has the same value. So when they finish with Ezra's books, they **add** favorite stories from other Jewish literature.

This is the first time Hebrew sacred writings have been written in another language - the koiné Greek. Numerous copies are made. But unfortunately, each copy is different. They all contain the original books Ezra set aside as sacred, but depending on the preference of the translators, one copy might have 7 additional Jewish stories, another 10 and another 8. Because these 70 Jews are honest scholars, they always make sure everyone knows which are the originals of Ezra and which are added.

The original books Ezra said were sacred, are called the **first group of writings** - the Canon.

The additional books are the **2nd group of writings**; in Greek, called the **deutero-canonical** books - 2nd canon.

From this group of some 14 or more, 7 books are eventually kept.

Today they are still called the *deutero-canonical* books.



The translation of the Hebrew sacred writings for the Alexandria Library, plus copies for many other places, continues for the next 100 years. As current translators die, they are replaced. Because the work continues so long, it becomes known as **translation of the 70**. We know it by its Latin title - **SEPTUAGINT**, meaning 70. In speech it is always called **Septuagint**. However in writing, it is LXX - the Roman numerals for 70.

Ptolemy II - Ptolemy Philadelphus is known for his library in Alexandria and the Septuagint translation.

He dies in 246 BC.

Ptolemy III is known for his financial oppression of the Jews. He rules from 246 - 221

It starts with the nephew (Joseph) of the high priest in Jerusalem. He has the perfect plan to get rich.

He goes to Egypt and gets permission from Ptolemy to be his tax collector in Judah.

He also gets 2000 Greek troops to enforce the collection.

When he gets back to Judah, he tells the Jews how much they owe. It is twice as much as the king requires.

When the Jews refuse or cannot pay, this nephew confiscates their property, home, animals, children, or any other possessions they might have. He gives the required tax money to the king, but keeps all the rest for himself and his uncle, the high priest. Ptolemy knows what the nephew is doing, but does not care, as long as he gets his money.

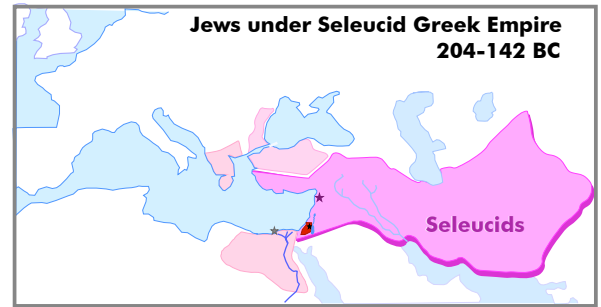
So the **king** get his tax, the **high priest** and his family get wealthy and the **Jews** become poor.

With this financial oppression, the Jews go to the Greeks who are ruling in the north - in Syria. The Syrian Greeks (Seleucids) tell the Jews to rebel. They will come and rescue them.

In **204 BC**, the Jews rebel.

Syria moves in and takes control of Judah.

From this point on, the Jews will never again be under Ptolemy rule.



SUMMARY – THE 200's BC

Ezra's idea of synagogues develop thruout the empire

The Sanhedrin of 70 members lead the Jewish nation

They add their own laws (Mishnah) to God's laws

The Jewish sacred writings are translated into Greek

Many Jews are developing a preference for the Greek ideas and way of life - Hellenism

In 204 BC, the Jews are free from over 100 years of Ptolemy rule.

These 200 years of Jewish history show us that nations, leaders and people had free-will to make choices.

Some choices brought reward; other choices brought consequences.

The **free-will** of people and nations is one side of history. God holds people and nations responsible

The other side of history is **God's sovereignty**.

This means because God is God, He can utilize whatever choice a nation or person makes –
good or bad and use it to accomplish His purpose.

By the 1st century AD, God had gathered all the choices of nations and leaders –
all the choices of the godly and ungodly Jews.

He then used them together to create a world ready for Jesus to appear as Messiah, Savior.

(A stable empire ruling in peace, a common language, marvelous roads for travel, a postal system, etc.)

The same is true in our day. Nations and people are using their free-will; many times their choices are shocking and tragic. To us, it looks like everything is nothing but disaster and heartbreak.

But God is sovereign and is utilizing all these choices and actions

He is setting the scene - to prepare the world for the return of Jesus for us, the Church.

He is also setting the scene for Satan's kingdom, which must happen before God's Kingdom can come.

Once we understand and believe that God is using events to bring about the return of Jesus...

instead of living in fear, we can live with expectancy and thanksgiving.

In regards to us...

We are accountable to God for our choices. Wrong choices bring consequences; good choices bring blessing.

In regards to God...

God is Sovereign - His plans and purpose for the world and for us will be accomplished.