

Context I: A Brief History of Ancient Judaism

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Terminology

CE: abbreviation for “Common Era”; a less christocentric method of ordering the western calendar than AD (*anno domini* or “in the year of our Lord”).

BCE: abbreviation for “Before the Common Era”; a less christocentric method of ordering the western calendar than BC (“Before Christ”).

canon: an authoritative list or collection of books accepted as holy scripture.

canonical: designation for a book accepted as holy scripture.

noncanonical: designation for a book not accepted as holy scripture.

Christology: teaching concerning the role or identity of Jesus.

Gentiles: a term applied by Jews to designate non-Jews.

If we hope to understand who Jesus was and what he did we need an understanding of the context in which he lived. However one views Jesus’ religious role and significance, one cannot deny that he was a Jew living and working in first-century Galilee and its environs. But such a determination is not without its problems. How do we define Judaism in the first-century? How does it differ from Judaism today? Was there a “normative” (i.e., typical) Judaism in Jesus’ day, or was there more than one expression of Judaism (much like there are several Jewish and Christian denominations today)? Was Judaism as it was practiced by the literate elite (and therefore represented in literature) different from that practiced by the peasantry? If there was indeed a spectrum of expressions of Judaism in antiquity, where should we place Jesus on that spectrum?

None of these questions can be answered without some knowledge of first-century Judaism, and first-century Judaism cannot be understood without knowledge of the major events in Jewish history that came before it. This knowledge will be presented to you in three forms: a brief overview of important events and concepts in Jewish history (see below), an episode of the series *Testament* (which we will view in class), and additional material delivered in the class lecture.

There are five pivotal events in Jewish history about which you should be aware:

1. The Exodus (ca. thirteenth-century BCE)
2. The Babylonian Exile (587–538 BCE)
3. The Maccabean Revolt (167–164 BCE)
4. The Beginning of Roman Occupation (63 BCE)
5. The Fall of the Temple (70 CE)

1. The Exodus

The Exodus is the story of a migration of Jews, or Hebrews as they were known then, from Egypt to Palestine in the thirteenth century BCE. The ancient Hebrews were neither a race nor a politically-defined group. The term Hebrew referred to a social stratum of people who lacked citizenship; the ancient Hebrews, then, were “wanderers” or “nomads” who roamed the deserts of the eastern Mediterranean. Sometimes they formed guerrilla bands attacking caravans or raiding villages, or they hired themselves out as mercenary soldiers, or they were forced into slave labour on public projects. These nomads shared many of the religious ideas as other peoples in the region, including the worship of a family (or *pantheon*) of gods and the myth of a primordial flood. Some ideas, however, were peculiar to the nomads. As wanderers, their gods had to be portable, so they had no temples, and they believed that their principle deity, a desert god sometimes called Shaddai (“the Mountain One”), followed them in their travels and could be addressed most directly upon the mountain tops (or “high places”).

Scholars believe groups of ancient Hebrews entered the border villages and towns of Egypt over a long period of time looking for work and relief from famine. Some rose to prominent positions in government thanks to mercenary skills. The family of Moses, the hero of the Exodus, may have done so for both Moses and Aaron, his brother, are Egyptian names, and Moses appears to have had some prominence among his people and some standing in the court. As the story goes, Moses demands Pharaoh to release his fellow Hebrews from servitude. When Pharaoh refuses, God inflicts ten plagues upon the Egyptians. Pharaoh relents and releases the Hebrews. Moses then leads his people on a forty-year journey from Egypt into the Sinai Peninsula and finally to Palestine (at that time named Canaan). This journey was subsequently commemorated in the Jewish festival of Passover, named for the plague that killed the sons of the Egyptians but which “passed over” the houses of the Hebrews. The Exodus was an important, formative event for the Hebrews. It was (and is) remembered as a time of escape from oppression and of the acquisition of independence. Emotions tend to run high in Jerusalem during Passover celebrations. As we will see later in the course, the festival was of great concern for the Romans who occupied the city in Jesus’ time, for many Jews saw Roman domination as similar to bondage under the Egyptians.

The Exodus was an important event also because it was during the Hebrews’ sojourn in the desert that they made a covenant with the desert god. This covenant is an agreement between the Hebrews and their god, thereafter named Yahweh, who promises to protect and support the Hebrews in return for their worship and obedience. Moses is said to have met with Yahweh on Mount Sinai where he received the Ten Commandments as the core of this agreement. Yahweh’s demands of the Hebrews are referred to as the *Torah* or “Law” (though “guidance” or “direction” is perhaps a better translation). The Torah is handed down in five books of the Hebrew Bible—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy—all said to be written by Moses. Torah, therefore, refers both to the terms of the covenant between Yahweh and the Hebrews and to the texts in which these terms are recorded. Later, Torah is expanded to include additions to the Law believed to be transmitted orally since Moses’ time. Included in the Law are the declarations that the Hebrews must worship no other god but Yahweh and

that they must keep one day of the week free from work. This day of rest is known as the *Sabbath*.

After the Exodus, the desert-wandering Egyptian Hebrews settled in Canaan among other former nomads. These nomads included a group who traced their lineage to Abraham, another prominent Hebrew leader who migrated with his family from southern Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq). As the Hebrew Bible tells it, Abraham's offspring are the ancestors to Moses' Hebrews in Egypt. In reality, however, Abraham's migration and the migration from Egypt to Palestine with Moses likely occurred around the same time. Only later were the two stories arranged chronologically. In Palestine the Hebrew tribes became farmers, formed a tribal confederacy, and adopted Israel, the name of an ancient ancestor, as the name for their new state.

Over time the confederacy decided to model their neighbours by transforming Israel into a kingdom. Early Israelite kings were inaugurated in a ceremony that involved anointing the incumbent king with oil. Thus the king was called *messiah*, or "anointed one." The most famous early Israelite king was David (1004–963 BCE), a member of the tribe of Judah. Under David's rule Israel won many battles with its enemies. Among his accomplishments was the conquest of Jerusalem, which became his capital. There David's tribe of Judah and the tribe of Benjamin set up residence leaving the remaining ten tribes to populate the northern region of Israel. The time of David's rule was subsequently seen as a golden age in Jewish history. When the fortunes of the Jews seemed particularly low, some would hope a messiah like David would arise to lead them once again in glory.

2. *The Babylonian Exile*

The Exile refers to a time when the land of the Hebrews was decimated and its people were taken away in bondage to Babylon. The story of the Exile begins with David's son Solomon. Upon succeeding David, Solomon built a great temple to Yahweh in Jerusalem. Unfortunately, Solomon's use of conscript labour for this and other building projects as well as other controversial policies led to the alienation of the ten northern tribes. Upon Solomon's death in 921 the kingdom split into two: Judah (later called Judea) in the south, and Israel in the north. It is from the name of the southern kingdom that the Hebrews received the name Judeans, the precursor to the modern name "Jews."

In 721 Israel's capital Samaria was conquered by the kingdom of Assyria and a large portion of its population was deported. The Assyrians colonized the vacant area, bringing in tribes from Babylonia, Elam, Syria, and Arabia into the territory where they intermingled with the remaining Israelites to form a group of people known as the Samaritans. The Assyrian empire was in turn conquered by the Babylonians who further expanded their domain into Judah in 587/586 BCE. In the battle Solomon's Temple was destroyed and many of the people of Judah were deported to Babylon. Fifty years later, the Babylonians were overrun by the Persians who allowed the Jews to return home and granted Judah some autonomy. In an effort to consolidate and rejuvenate the nation, the Jewish leaders rebuilt the Temple and created many of the institutions associated with Judaism today. You might say that Judaism was created in the return from Babylon. For more on the Jews' return from exile see the video *Testament: Mightier than the Sword*.

3. *The Maccabean Revolt (167–164 BCE)*

Judea occupied an important geographical area in the world. It lay between two superpowers: Egypt in the south and the great eastern empire (led at various times by the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, etc.) to the north. Control of Judea was important for both of these empires, and over the centuries between the Exile and the Maccabean Revolt, Judea changed hands quite often. By the second-century BCE, Judea was part of the Persian Empire. The ruler of this empire was Antiochus Epiphanes IV. Epiphanes was a great supporter of Greek culture. As the *Testament* video reveals, Greek culture had spread throughout the Mediterranean world thanks to the conquests of Alexander the Great (356–323 BCE). By the time of Alexander's death the Greek Empire encompassed Egypt, Asia Minor (modern Turkey), Palestine, and Persia. In his newly-acquired lands Alexander promoted the use of the Greek language, built Greek-style cities, and encouraged the adoption of Greek religion. This process of change is called Hellenization after the Greek word for Greece (Hellas). Upon Alexander's death the Greek Empire was divided among four of his generals: the Antigonids in Greece, the Attalids in Asia Minor, the Seleucids in Persia, and the Ptolemies in Egypt. All four of these powers continued to promote Greek culture among their peoples.

Some Judeans welcomed Hellenization. Constructing Greek-styled cities brought financial and political benefits to states within the empires. But, for many Jews, Epiphanes, the Seleucid ruler of Palestine in the second century, went too far. Records from the time tell us he banned circumcision and set up an image of himself as Zeus in the Temple. Ultimately, a revolt broke out in 167 BCE led by the Hasmoneans, a family of Jewish priests also nicknamed the Maccabeans. In three years the Maccabeans regained control of Jerusalem, and by 142 BCE Judea was back under Jewish control. The Maccabean Revolt is important because it is an example of Judean resistance against those who would restrict their religious practices. Typically the Judeans lived happily under the rule of foreign kings but if they felt that their covenant with God was threatened, they took up arms and fought hard for their freedom.

4. *The Beginning of Roman Occupation (63 BCE)*

Independent rule in Judea did not last very long. In 63 BCE the Roman general Pompey marched into Judea as part of Rome's efforts to acquire all of the lands once held by Alexander. Ironically, Roman was transformed in the process, for the Romans, too, embraced Greek culture. As a result, most of the people living in the new Roman Empire likely did not notice the change in power. As for Judea, the Romans appointed Herod the Great king in 40 BCE. Herod became known for his legendary cruelty, and he was not well-liked by his own people. They essentially considered him a puppet of Rome. But he left his mark in great building programs, including several Greek-style cities, and a major renovation of the Temple.

After Herod's death in 4 BCE, the emperor Augustus split the kingdom among members of Herod's family. Galilee to the north was ruled for some time by Herod's son Herod Antipas, but Judea in the south soon came under direct Roman administration (see

the map in your reader). More detail on the political setting of Jesus' life will be provided in the coming weeks.

5. *The Fall of the Temple (70 CE)*

Revolt did break out in Judea in 66 CE, beginning, significantly enough, in Galilee. The revolt ultimately led to the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE. Jerusalem was consumed by fire, and its people sold as slaves, or massacred, or saved to die in the arenas. Judea was renamed Palestine and Jerusalem was rebuilt as a non-Jewish city called Aelia Capitolina. Jews outside the immediate area of Jerusalem were largely unaffected but all Jews no longer had their locus of worship, culture, and history. To survive, Judaism quickly reinterpreted itself as a religion based more on texts than temple. The *Testament* video suggests that it is in the ashes of the Temple that Jews formally decided what texts to include in its canon of scripture and that Christians began to create their own scripture. For the Jews, this development was led by a group called the Pharisees. Along with establishing a canon of scripture, the Pharisees also recorded the teachings of prominent rabbis (teachers) and produced commentary on the Torah.

Additional clashes with the Romans occurred in 115–17 and 128–35 CE. A Jewish state would not be seen again for 1800 years.