

Introduction and “Between the Testaments” from *The New Testament for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: A Concise Guide* (Insight Press, Covington, LA) 2019

# Introduction

I admit a degree of embarrassment when I read *Anne Frank*. The subtitle of the book causes my embarrassment: *The Diary of a Young Girl*. Whenever I read this book, I am reading the *diary of a young girl*.

Between 1942 and 1944, Anne Frank lived with seven others in a secret shelter in Amsterdam, Netherlands, hiding from Nazis. Miss Frank began her diary on June 14, 1942, her thirteenth birthday (what became her diary, which she named “Kitty,” was a birthday gift).

On July 6, 1942, the Frank family moved into their hiding place, Anne bidding farewell to only her cat Moortje. On Wednesday, July 8, 1942, Miss Frank wrote that “the whole world had turned upside down.” Her last entry dates August 1, 1944. Eventually discovered (on August 4), she and sister Margot (three years older than Anne) died at the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in 1945, the exact dates of their deaths unknown (probably February or March).

In “Kitty,” Miss Frank wrote (prior to hiding), as a thirteen-year-old girl, of boyfriends who blew her kisses and tried to hold her arm. She promptly told them to “clear off.” In hiding, she wrote of her oppression of never being able to go outdoors and her fear of being “discovered and shot.” She also wrote, on April 16, 1944, of receiving her first kiss from Peter van Daan: “Oh, it was so lovely, I couldn’t talk much. The joy was too great.”

Every person who reads this diary should feel a bit of embarrassment because Miss Frank never intended it to be read by anyone, unless “I find a real friend,” she wrote. Sadly, she also wrote, “I have no such real friend.”

When one reads *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl*, one reads something that the author never intended to be read. Miss Frank did not write her diary to be read as millions of people have read it since 1947. That simply wasn’t her purpose.

How does this relate to the New Testament? Like Anne Frank, the authors of the New Testament “books” wrote with a specific purpose in mind. The twenty-seven documents that comprise the New Testament were written by Christians, to and for Christians, for specific purposes. The authors never anticipated Christians reading these works beyond their immediate audiences, let alone the twenty-first century.

Since, like *Anne Frank*, the authors didn’t pen these works directly to us, modern-day readers must work a little harder in order to understand them. For example, to the churches at Galatia, Paul wrote, “You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?” (3:1). What prompted Paul to refer to the believers in the churches at Galatia as foolish? Who, specifically, bewitched them? Failure to answer these questions makes Paul’s Galatians letter difficult to comprehend. Contrastingly, answering these questions helps believers understand the letter.

A word about this book. This book is a companion to my 2017, “The Old Testament for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: A Concise Guide.” As with that book, I did not write this book with the scholar in mind. I deliberately omitted most of the critical issues. Readers interested in these should consult other sources. I began each New Testament book with a brief overview entitled, **What This Book Is About**. I then introduced each New Testament book with general matters of *Name, Authorship* and *Date*. A section entitled **Major Themes and Theological Emphases** follows. I provide an **Outline** for each book. Each book concludes with **Applications**, which can be read as both devotional thoughts and/or sermon starters. This final section attempts to bridge the gap between the first and twenty-first centuries.

I am, unapologetically, a born-again Christian. I believe God intended the New Testament books to be read by believers. A non-believer, without the assistance of the Holy Spirit, will experience challenges in an attempt to read and understand these documents.

Believers should read the New Testament. The New Testament records the birth, ministry, death, and resurrection of our Savior, Jesus Christ. The New Testament records the initial development and spread of Christianity. But non-believers should also read the New Testament, for numerous reasons. An unbeliever who reads the New Testament might become a believer. How? From a young boy, other believers impressed on me the ABCs of becoming a Christian. These are simply: Admit one’s sinfulness, Believe in Christ, and Confess Jesus as one’s Savior.

To God be the Glory!

R. Kelvin Moore

# Between the Testaments<sup>1</sup>

For many Bible readers, the historical period between the Old and New Testaments remains a mystery. Admittedly, this period presents a challenge as readers attempt to understand not only the Hebrews (Jews), but the Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, and Romans as well. Nations and empires ebbed and flowed during these turbulent centuries. At times, the Jews prospered and at other times, they declined. At times, the Jews lived in peace and, at other times, they lived amid war. At times the Jews fought their enemies and, at times, they fought one another.

While complicated, readers of the Bible need to possess some understanding of this era. Without at least a cursory grasp of the events that occurred in this time frame, some issues in the New Testament can become unnecessarily obscure. Why, for example, did the Jews have so much hatred for King Herod (king of Judah at the birth of Jesus Christ), even as he tried to befriend them? What led to the war between the Jews and the Romans in AD 66–70? This war concluded with the destruction of the temple.<sup>2</sup>

Volumes have been written (both the history and the theological developments) in attempts to understand and explain these years. The following presents a brief historical overview of the rise and fall of the Babylonian, Persian, and Greek empires. Perhaps of greater interest for Bible readers, the following presents a brief overview where these empires (including the Roman Empire) intersected with the Hebrews/Jews. For greater detail (both historical and theological), readers should consult additional sources. For quick reference, a list of significant individuals (both Jews and non-Jews, along with dates [some dates are debated]) and terms can be found at the end of this section.

## **The Rise and Fall of Babylon (605–538 BC)**

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<sup>1</sup>Some refer to this period as the “interbiblical period” and others as the “intertestamental period.” This has also been referred to as the “silent years,” since no biblical prophet provided a written account of his message following Malachi (lived/ministered approximately 450–400 BC). The overview presented here dates from 586 BC to AD 70—from the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians to the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans, a slightly longer period than some identify as “between the testaments.”

<sup>2</sup>Many refer to this as the First Jewish Revolt. A second revolt occurred AD 132–135. Fighting desperately once again, the Jews suffered tremendous losses, estimated at 850,000. In the aftermath of the Second Jewish Revolt (also known as the Bar Kochba Revolt) and a Roman victory, the Romans designated Jerusalem a Gentile city and renamed it Aelia Capitolina. The Romans forbade the Jews, on penalty of death, from entering Aelia Capitolina. Israel ceased to exist as a geographical nation until 1948. Constantine (died AD 337) eventually allowed Jews to enter Aelia Capitolina, annually, on the ninth of Ab (the day of the destruction of Jerusalem’s temple in AD 70) in order to lament their loss. The fact that the author of Hebrews did not write about this war and temple destruction leads some to date the letter pre-AD 66–70.

What historians refer to as the Neo-Babylonian Empire began in 605 BC when Babylon and allies defeated the Assyrians and the Egyptians at the battle of Carchemish. In comparison to the Assyrian and Persian Empires, Babylon reigned for a short period: 605–539 BC. The Persian King Cyrus the Great ultimately conquered Babylon.

In 550–549 BC, Cyrus led a rebellion against, and ultimate victory over, the nation of Media, thus creating the Median-Persian (also Medo-Persian) empire. Prior to this victory, no one even knew the name Cyrus. Additionally, when the power of the Assyrian Empire waned, Cyrus recognized the opportunity and seized the day. Cyrus' now Median-Persian Empire defeated Assyria. The meteoric rise of Cyrus marked the beginning of the end of the Babylonian Empire.

Babylon's final King, Nabonidus (555–539 BC), enjoyed archaeology. He didn't enjoy war. A glaring weakness can now be seen in his initial failure to recognize the threat that came in the form of Cyrus. When Nabonidus did understand Cyrus' ambition, he attempted to counter Cyrus' power by allying with Lydia, Egypt, and Sparta. Cyrus defeated Lydia. Sparse historical records exist to explain Cyrus' actions between 546 and 540 BC. Some historians believe Cyrus attacked Babylon immediately. Certainly, hesitation didn't define Cyrus. Regardless of Cyrus' activity or inactivity between 546 and 540 BC, in 539 BC, he defeated the Babylon army at the Tigris River (when Nabonidus retired, his son Belshazzar ascended the throne and reigned as regent). The location of Cyrus' victory meant he controlled the all-important irrigation canals that supplied water to Babylon. In October, 538 BC, Cyrus entered Babylon without further bloodshed, thus ending the Babylonian Empire (and gave Cyrus control of both Syria and *Palestine*).

Prior to Babylon's victory over Assyria and Egypt in 605 BC, the Egyptians controlled Palestine. Thus we read Israel's King Jehoahaz was dethroned by the Egyptian Pharaoh Neco (2 Kgs. 23:33). However, the subsequent chapter in 2 Kings reveals the Israelite King Jehoiakim rebelled against, not an *Egyptian* king, but the *Babylonian* King Nebuchadnezzar. How did Israel cease to be dominated by the Egyptians and come to be under Babylonian rule? The answer is the Babylonian defeat of Assyria and Egypt in 605 BC. This victory gave Babylon control of Palestine. In 605 BC, the Babylonians took Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah to Babylon (Dan. 1:6; readers will probably recognize the latter three by their Babylonian names: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego).

In 597 BC, Israel's King Jehoiakim rebelled against Babylon and, conveniently, died while Babylon besieged Jerusalem (some believed Jehoiakim was murdered). At this time, the Babylonians took Ezekiel into captivity (2 Kgs. 25:11, although Ezekiel is not mentioned by name, also Ezek. 1:2–3). Jehoiakim's son, Jehoiachin, reigned over Israel for three months before Nebuchadnezzar dethroned him and enthroned Zedekiah. The author of 2 Kings informs readers of Zedekiah's rebellion (24:20b and following). Nebuchadnezzar, probably exhausted by Israel's insurrection, besieged Jerusalem. In 586 BC, Nebuchadnezzar conquered Jerusalem and burned "every important building" (2 Kgs. 25:9), including the temple. He also destroyed the wall protecting the city. In 586 BC, Nebuchadnezzar took many Hebrews to Babylon as prisoners of war. From 586 to 539 BC, some Hebrews lived in Jerusalem and Palestine while others lived in Babylon, most of them as prisoners. Most of those living in Palestine and Babylon eked out a meager existence, living on the edge of survival.

## **The Rise and Fall of Persia (538–330 BC)**

The Persian Empire, one of the truly great empires of history, reigned over two hundred years. Beginning with Cyrus in 538 BC, the Persian Empire controlled lands from the Persian mountains to Ethiopia and into modern-day Europe.

Whereas Assyria and Babylon treated captors cruelly, the Persians practiced tolerance. Cyrus believed that happy, more content captives would be easier to control. Thus Cyrus attempted to make his captives happy. He allowed captives to return to native land(s) (known as resettlements) and encouraged captives to rebuild their places of worship (Ezra 6:3–5).

Not only did Cyrus free the Hebrews living as prisoners in Babylon and allow them to return to Palestine, he also generously authorized the Hebrews to draw funds from the imperial treasury in order to finance Hebrew reconstruction projects (Ezra 6:8). Cyrus' humanitarian policy gained him the goodwill of almost all the ancient world. Some historians acclaim Cyrus as one of the world's greatest liberators and humanitarians.

Cyrus died in battle in 529 BC. Cyrus' son, Cambyses, succeeded him. Cambyses died in 522 BC and was succeeded by Darius I (died 486 BC). Darius continued Cyrus' policy of tolerance. The Hebrews rebuilt their temple during the reign of Darius I, rededicating it in 516/515 BC.

Significant events occurred in Israel and Jerusalem during the reign of the Persian King Artaxerxes I (465–424 BC). Ezra arrived in Jerusalem in the seventh year of Artaxerxes I (or 458 BC, check Ezra 7:7) and made significant changes. Ezra, known as the father of modern Judaism, "restructured" Judaism around the Law (Neh. 8:1–9—the Babylonians forbade the Hebrews from their normal temple-connected worship). Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem in the twentieth year of this same Artaxerxes I (or 445 BC). Once the spiritual condition of the Hebrews stabilized under Ezra, Nehemiah led the effort to rebuild Jerusalem's walls (Neh. 1:1–6:15). The walls provided Jerusalem her first line of defense. Without the walls, the Hebrews had little means to protect their beloved city. Without the walls, the existence of Jerusalem would be tenuous at best.

The final Persian king, Darius III (Codomannus), reigned from 336 BC to 330 BC. Little did Darius know, but Philip of Macedon (359–336 BC) laid plans to destroy Persia. Philip's son, Alexander the Great, defeated Persia's Darius III in 330 BC.

### **The Rise and Fall of Greece (330–63 BC)**

Alexander the Great defeated Persia's Darius III in 330 BC (Darius' own people murdered him). Thus, the 330 BC date marks the end of the Persian Empire. The date for the fall of the Greek Empire presents more of a challenge for reasons explained below.

Philip of Macedon envisioned a Greece-controlled world. In 336 BC, Philip died (murdered) before fulfilling his dream. Philip's son Alexander succeeded his father and possessed the considerable skills necessary to accomplish his father's dream.

Known as Alexander the Great, Alexander built one of the greatest empires in the history of the world. The importance of Alexander can be seen in his vision to spread Greek ideas and culture.<sup>3</sup> Some of Alexander's soldiers aged to the point they could no longer keep pace with the younger soldiers as Alexander's conquests continued. Alexander allowed these soldiers to remain in conquered territories. Here, many Greek soldiers married native women and reared their children in the Greek way. While the mighty Greek Empire divided (into 4 parts) at Alexander's death, each part remained *Greek*. Contemporarily, numerous civilizations all around the world feel the impact of Alexander the Great and the Greek Empire he helped build.

Before making provisions for the administration of his conquered lands, Alexander died of fever, in Babylon, in 323 BC. Eventually, after Alexander's death, the unity of his Empire collapsed and was divided among four of his generals: Lysimachus, Cassander, Ptolemy, and Seleucus (Lysimachus ruled Thrace and much of Asia Minor, while Cassander ruled Macedonia and Greece).

The dating of the end of the Greek Empire remains a challenge because the fall of these, in essence, four kingdoms, occurred at different times. Seleucus defeated Lysimachus and Cassander in 281 BC, adding Lysimachus' and Cassander's territory to his own (the Seleucid kingdom), thus bringing the rule of Lysimachus and Cassander to an end. This meant Seleucus controlled the totality of the Alexander's empire except territories controlled by Ptolemy (or, Egypt and Palestine). What historians refer to as the Ptolemaic Dynasty dissolved in 30 BC. Rome eventually subdued all of these kingdoms. The 63 BC date listed here marks the Roman conquering of the Seleucid Empire in Palestine.

For over a century, two of Alexander's generals, Ptolemy and Seleucus, and their descendants, struggled among themselves for control of Palestine. Initially Ptolemy ruled Egypt (the Ptolemaic Dynasty in Egypt reigned until the death of Cleopatra VII in 31 BC), Cilicia, Petra, Cyprus and *Palestine*. Seleucus controlled the rest of Asia (thus the Seleucid Empire of Syria, Babylon, Persia and India). But Seleucus desperately wanted Palestine under his control. He died in 281 BC.

The sons of Seleucus inherited their father's passion for control of Palestine. Antiochus III (known as Antiochus the Great, 223–187 BC) came to the Seleucid throne in 223 BC. After two failed attempts to wrestle Palestine from Ptolemaic control, Antiochus succeeded in 199 BC. The Ptolemies would never again control Palestine.

What did a Seleucid victory mean for the Jews? The quietness they enjoyed under Ptolemaic control ended. Oppression under Seleucid control would begin in earnest under Antiochus IV.

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<sup>3</sup>This was known as Hellenism. At the end of this overview, Hellenism is defined as the attempt of Alexander the Great to create a world dominated by Greek culture, ideas, and language. Hellenism created major issues, unintentionally, for the Jews. Hellenism was polytheistic in its religious approach, meaning the Jews had the option to continue to worship their God (Yahweh) or choose to worship Greek gods (Antiochus IV changed this, see overview). Tension arose when some Jews tolerated polytheistic Hellenism (even embracing it) while other adamantly opposed it. This, in many cases, set Jew against Jew, especially in Jerusalem. This tension played a major role in what historians and theologians refer to as the Maccabean Rebellion.

Antiochus III died in 187 BC. The Jews probably lived well under his reign. That changed with the ascension of Antiochus IV (Epiphanes, 175–164 BC). Antiochus IV coerced the Jews to pay exorbitant taxes. These taxes played a role in the Maccabean Rebellion (or Maccabean Revolt, begun 167 BC). Another factor stoking the fires of rebellion was Antiochus IV's choice to continue Alexander's policy of promoting all things Greek (Hellenism). Initially, the movement known as Hellenism tolerated other gods (in the case of the Hebrews, the worship of Yahweh. Yahweh is the name of the Hebrew God in the Old Testament, translated with uppercase letters "LORD." But Antiochus IV attempted to destroy the Jewish religion and coerce Greek religious beliefs on the Jews, especially the worship of Zeus and Greek deities. Antiochus attempted to abolish Jewish sacrifices, even placing an altar to Zeus on the altar of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem, desecrating the Jewish temple. Antiochus IV threatened any Jew found possessing a copy of the Law of Moses with death. He had many Jews assassinated.

The Maccabean Rebellion began in earnest in the village of Modein, Palestine. Here Greek officers demanded Jews sacrifice to Greek gods. The local Jewish priest Mattathias steadfastly refused. When another Jew agreed to make the sacrifice, Mattathias killed him. He also murdered a Greek officer. Mattathias fled, along with his five sons (Judas, John, Simon, Jonathan, and Eleazar) and supporters.

When Mattathias died, the banner of rebellion fell to his son Judas, surnamed "Maccabaeus" (the "Hammerer"; from the Aramaic *makkaba*, hence the Maccabean Rebellion).<sup>4</sup> Judas, a gifted guerilla warrior, united the Jews against Antiochus IV and won victory after victory. After one such victory in 164 BC, Judas cleansed the Temple in Jerusalem of Antiochus IV's desecration and rededicated the Temple to Yahweh in December, 164 BC. Modern-day Jews celebrate this cleansing in the annual Festival of Hanukkah ("Dedication," also spelled Chanukah and Chanukkah). Jews, during Hanukkah, light candles and lamps to symbolize that darkness will inevitably give way to light. The rebellion which Mattathias (and sons) initiated against Antiochus IV and the Seleucid kingdom originally won Jewish autonomy and eventually, as the Seleucid kingdom faltered, complete Jewish independence.

When Judas died the rebellion lacked leadership. Mattathias' three remaining sons (John, Jonathan and Simon; Eleazar died previously) fled. John eventually died in battle and Jonathan died in prison. Simon continued the conflict. Winning a few more battles, all went well with Simon and the Jews until 135 BC., the third year of the reign of Antiochus VII (Sidetes, 138–128 BC). In 135 BC, Antiochus VII initiated steps to bring Palestine back under full Seleucid control. Simon died in 135 BC, murdered by his son-in-law. Simon's son John Hyrcanus succeeded his father. Antiochus VII proclaimed a truce, offering generous terms which Hyrcanus accepted.

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<sup>4</sup>Mattathias founded what became known as the Hasmonean Dynasty, Hasmonean (meaning "wealthy" in Hebrew) being Mattathias' family name. The Hasmonean Dynasty existed from approximately 142 to 63 BC. Important Jews during the Hasmonean Dynasty include John Hyrcanus, Aristobulus I, Salome, Alexander Jannaeus, Hyrcanus II, Aristobulus II, and Antipater. The intervention of Rome for the first time in Palestine itself, in 63 BC, led to Rome gaining control of Palestine, ending the Hasmonean Dynasty.

Seleucid control of Palestine ended with the death of Antiochus VII in 128 BC. From 128 BC to 63 BC, the Seleucids fought among themselves. In 63 BC, Rome invaded the Seleucid kingdom, eventually setting up the previous Seleucid kingdom as a Roman client state. The Maccabean Rebellion initiated a period of Jewish independence, aided by the protracted erosion of the Seleucid Empire.

### **From the Rise of the Roman Empire in Palestine to the Fall of Jerusalem (63 BC–70 AD)**

Alexander the Great and the advancement of all things Greek (Hellenism) laid the foundation for the Roman Empire, which emerged en force in the second century BC. As presented in the previous section, Palestine came in direct contact with Rome for the first time when Palestine came under Roman control in 63 BC. These same Romans played a major role in Palestine until the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD (and later).

Those living in the eastern world between 63 and 43 BC witnessed two turbulent decades, the Jews included. Caesar appointed Antipater procurator of Judaea in 47 BC. Before being murdered in 43 BC, Antipater delegated authority over Jerusalem to his son Phasaël and authority in Galilee to his son Herod. When Phasaël died by suicide, in prison, Rome appointed Herod king of Judah. Herod immediately set about, ruthlessly, to quell rebels in Galilee and Jerusalem. He besieged and captured Jerusalem in 37 BC and executed several dissidents.

Although a poor start, Herod attempted to establish better relationships between him, his government, and the Jews. But for the Jews, in the end, Herod was still an Idumaean, a descendant of Esau and the hated Edomites, and Herod held the office many Jews believed rightfully belonged to someone else (a Hasmonean—see footnote 4). Many Jews could not accept Herod's vicious manner of eradicating anyone opposing him. Many Jews hated Herod with a vengeance.

Herod's methodical execution of anyone he perceived as a threat to his reign is well-known. Herod attempted to legitimize his rule by marrying Marianne, a Hasmonean princess. Since they came from the Hasmonean line, Herod executed three of his sons, perceiving them as rivals and eventually executed Marianne too (as well as Marianne's mother Alexandra). Herod had another rival drowned. Supported by Rome, albeit through cruel means, Herod controlled Palestine until his death in 4 BC.

The Gospel of Matthew records the birth of Jesus during the reign of Herod the Great: "After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod.... When King Herod heard this [the birth of the king of the Jews, Jesus] he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him" (Matt. 2:1–3). Understanding Herod's instability and propensity for violence helps modern readers understand that Herod, being disturbed, disturbed "all Jerusalem" too.



After Herod's death, Rome governed Palestine through procurators (an officer of the Roman Empire entrusted with management of the financial affairs of a province; some translations render this word as "governor"). Many readers of the New Testament will recognize the name of the procurator Pontius Pilate (AD 26–36). Unwise and obstinate even when in the wrong, Pilate oversaw the crucifixion of Jesus, proclaiming, "I am innocent of this man's blood" (Matt. 27:11–26). Pilate had Jesus flogged and then "handed him over to be crucified" (Matt. 27:26). Another of these procurators, Valerius Gratus (AD 15–26, Pilate's predecessor), more than anyone else, created the environment (including significant tax increases) which inevitably led to the AD 66–70 Jewish-Roman War and annihilation of Jerusalem.

Beginning in AD 44, procurators over Palestine inherited a challenging task. Procurators ruled amid a false claim by one to be Israel's messiah (Theudas), a devastating famine, and a dispute between Jews and Samaritans. The Jews became more and more rebellious, despising Roman occupation and authority. Almost unavoidably, matters digressed into total war, beginning in AD 66. When Vespasian became Emperor of Rome in AD 69, he dispatched his son Titus to crush Jewish resistance. After a five-month siege, Titus captured Jerusalem's temple.

In the end, the numerous factions of Jews united against one foe: Rome. The Jews fought desperately and bravely, many making their final stand within the temple itself. In the end, Titus, supported with four legions and auxiliary forces, won. The Romans burned the temple. The year was AD 70.