Jewish History between the Old and New Testaments

We have little evidence on which to build the kind of history of Israel after the Babylonian captivity that we moderns expect. One reason is because the ancient idea of history was different from our own. We think the historian’s job is to create an objective account of past events. But ancient Israelite historians saw their task as showing how God’s purposes and meanings are made apparent in human history. That means that they and we would disagree about what an accurate historical account is, so they might not have recorded the information that we believe would be important. Adding to the problem is that perhaps beginning during the Babylonian exile and at least with the return to Judea, there appears to have been a program of rewriting the ancient documents to make them conform to a new self-understanding of what it meant to be Jewish, a self-understanding that seems to have been heavily influenced by Persian ideas. And, of course, over the course of 2,600 years many documents and records have been lost or destroyed. These kinds of things mean that our view of Israel prior to the New Testament period is fuzzy, to say the least.

Nevertheless, we have a reasonably good chronology of major events:
606 The fall of Nineveh, capital of Assyria. Babylon (in modern-day Iraq) becomes the major power. Daniel and others are taken to Babylon from Israel.

604 Nebuchadnezzar is king of Babylon.

598 Judah’s king, Jehoiachin, and the prophet Ezekiel (with many others, though not most of the population) are carried captive into Babylon. Lehi leaves Jerusalem.

587 The fall of Jerusalem; the leaders of Judah are taken captive into Babylon. Some, including Jeremiah (who is a hostage), escape to Egypt. Mulek leaves Jerusalem.

562 The death of Nebuchadnezzar and the beginning of the decline of Babylon.

538 Babylon falls to Cyrus, king of Persia (in modern-day Iran).

535 Zerubbabel (the Persian governor) and Jeshua lead approximately 50,000 Jews back to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple.

533 The cornerstone of the Jerusalem temple is laid.

522 The Samaritans have been opposed to the temple construction because they have not been allowed to help rebuild it. Jews, on the other hand, have largely been indifferent to its reconstruction. As a result, work on it has stopped. Haggai and Zechariah encourage the Jews to finish the temple. King Darius of Persia commands the Samaritan opposition to cease.
516 Zerubbabel’s temple, the rebuilt Jerusalem temple, is completed. It is called the second temple.

486 Esther, wife of King Xerxes in Persia (460 is an alternative date), saves her people.

458 Ezra leads a second group of 1,496 back to Jerusalem.

445 Nehemiah (Artaxerxes’s cupbearer) arrives in Jerusalem.

433 Nehemiah returns to Persia to serve Artaxerxes.

431 Nehemiah’s second mission to Jerusalem

323 Alexander the Great’s kingdom breaks up at his death. One of his generals, Ptolemy, takes over Egypt; another, Seleucus, rules Babylonia. The Ptolemies control Palestine.

198 Ptolemaic domination of Palestine ends with the defeat of the Ptolemies by the Seleucids at Caesarea Philippi.

c. 175 Jason purchases the high priesthood from the Seleucid king Antiochus III and replaces his brother Onias III, who was the rightful high priest of the Jerusalem temple. Jason is a “Hellenizer,” one who wishes to make Greek culture the culture of Israel. The ruling classes adopt Greek as their language, and they adopt Greek education, including building a gymnasium. In Greek gymnasia young men exercised and practiced military sports in the nude, which was a scandal to Jews.
Antiochus replaces Jason with Menelaus (who has bought the office for a higher price than Jason paid). Menelaus is not a descendent of the priestly family of Zadok.

Jason joins with anti-Hellenist Jews to de-throne Menelaus. He wants to get his office back; they want to make sure that a descendent of Zadok is the high priest. Antiochus interprets this as an attempt to overthrow his rule. He tears down the walls of Jerusalem and loots the temple. Jason and his followers flee to Leontopilis, in Egypt, where they establish an alternate temple.

Antiochus assumes that the Jews, like people in other places, will be willing to recognize Yahweh as the same as Zeus. He orders the worship of Zeus in the temple and sacrifices a pig on the altar.

The temple becomes a temple to Zeus. The reaction of the Jews is full-scale revolt, led by a priestly family, the Hasmoneans.

The Jews win the right to practice Judaism and to resume temple worship.

Since no Zadokite priest is available to assume the office of high priest, the Hasmonean family takes the office “until there should arise a faithful prophet” (1 Maccabees 14:41).

The Jews win full autonomy, the right to rule themselves within the Seleucid kingdom.
Herod begins his complete reconstruction of the second temple, with priests as masons and carpenters. Though mostly complete by about 13 BC, it is not finished until AD 64 and is destroyed by the Romans in AD 70.

The first stage of what we now understand as Orthodox Judaism began in this period between the Babylonian destruction of the first temple in 587 BC and the Roman destruction of Herod’s temple in AD 70. (The next major and perhaps most important period of Orthodox Judaism’s development occurred after the destruction of the second temple.) We know little about what Judaism was like prior to the Babylonian captivity. As already mentioned, it appears that the religious books were edited and perhaps rewritten afterward to make them conform better to the new ways in which the Jews understood themselves after their experiences in Babylon and Persia. Most scholars believe that in pre-Babylonian Judaism God had a consort, and at least one scholar (Margaret Barker) has argued that in early Judaism God had a Son. But such claims belong to scholarly speculation.

Adding to the confusion is that archaeological evidence suggests that the Babylonians carried off only a relatively small portion of the population, mostly political and religious leaders. In fact, the depiction of the Samaritans in Ezra and Nehemiah may portray the reaction of the majority who had been left behind and who became angry at or resentful of the minority (and now foreign) leaders who returned and sought to impose themselves and new ideas onto the community that had escaped deportation.
Issues such as these meant that the question of identity—“Who is a Jew, and what does it mean to be one?”—was important to those living during the intertestamental period and into New Testament times. Also important were questions of ritual and temple purity. As we have seen in the Old Testament, the Jerusalem temple had not always been the only temple. Since about the time of Josiah, however, there has been only one temple, and there is a desire to keep it ritually pure. Given the temple’s status as what identifies Judaism, and given the things that have happened to it under the Seleucid rulers, and especially given that the temple physically symbolized the relation of God to Israel, this emphasis on purity is quite understandable. Out of these sorts of question about identity and purity arose the two primary political groups in Jerusalem during Jesus’s life, the Pharisees and the Sadducees.

The Pharisees were a fundamentalist, anti-Hellenist (i.e., anti-Greek) group trying to preserve Judaism in the face of what they perceived to be the encroachment of Greek and Roman culture. The word *pharisee* may mean “separatist,” signifying those who want to remain separate from the dominant Greco-Roman culture. The Pharisees were a socio-political movement that had considerable political influence in Jerusalem, though more before the time of Christ than during. They believed that the temple had become corrupt. Their response to that corruption and to the hellenization of Israel was a focus on reading and interpreting the Torah (the Law) and on careful obedience to it, which they understood to be more important than temple worship and sacrifice. Worship was centered on the home and synagogue rather than
on the temple. As Richard Draper says, the Pharisees sought to make the ritual purity that was required of priests serving in the temple the standard for ordinary believers in order to create a holy community.\(^1\) Probably few priests who offered temple sacrifices were Pharisees, but probably most scribes (sometimes referred to as lawyers) were. Scribes not only copied religious texts to preserve them, but they were called on to interpret the Law and to settle disputes over its interpretation.

Though there was only one temple, the Jerusalem temple, most communities seem to have had a synagogue. Sacrifices were done in the temple but not in the synagogues, which were devoted to worship and the study of the Law. If we can infer backward from later Judaism, we can assume that men and women sat separately in these synagogues and listened to a leader read and interpret passages from the Law (Torah) and the rest of the books that we now refer to as the Old Testament. The synagogue was not only a place of worship, it was also the seat of local government: the elders of the synagogue were also the civic authorities of the community.

The term Sadducee may be another pronunciation of the word Zadokite. (And Zadok may be a form of the word zadik, meaning “righteous.”) The Sadducees were a political party with the rulers of the temple at its center, the extended family of the high priest. In theory the descendants of the Hasmoneans were ruling until they could be replaced by a descendant of Zadok. For Sadducees, temple worship was the heart of Judaism, which explains the animosity between them and the Pharisees. The Sadducees were Hellenists, meaning that they cooperated with the Seleucids and then the Romans,
both Greek speaking, and they were willing to adopt Greek culture. This made them an aristocratic minority.

There were also other groups, such as the people of Qumran, the Essenes. They were a monastic sect who, like the Pharisees, were opposed to the corruption of the temple. They appear to have awaited the coming of the Messiah (who would destroy the “sons of darkness”) by studying scripture. But we know even less about the Essenes than we know about the Pharisees and Sadducees—and we know about the latter mostly through reports in the New Testament, where they are not treated in a particularly objective manner.

It cannot be emphasized enough that our knowledge of what happened during the intertestamental period is sketchy. Knowing something about that history, even something sketchy, can help us understand the events we are reading about. For example, knowing the animosity between the Pharisees and Sadducees makes the cooperation of their leaders in Jesus’s trial and condemnation all the more striking.

But it is important to remember that our job as students of the New Testament is not that of the historian. We are doing textual exegesis and thinking about what the results of that exegesis mean for our own lives, which is very different from writing history. It is closer to the job of the ancient historian than it is to that of the modern: our job is to see the hand of God in human history, including our own lives, not to give a reportorial, “photographically” accurate account of the events. As a result, even when we delve into what we can know and understand of the history of the time period, we should do so in support of our exegesis. History is relevant to the degree that it helps us understand the meaning of what we read.