

## Between the Testaments

### The Period in General

**The Exile** left its indelible stamp on **Judaism** as well as on the Jews. Their return to the land of their fathers was marked by the last rays of the declining sun of prophecy. With Malachi it set in. The interval between the Old and the New Testaments is the **dark period** in the history of Israel. It stretches itself out over about **four centuries**, during which there was neither prophet nor inspired writer in Israel. All we know of it we owe to Josephus, to some of the apocryphal books, and to scattered references by Greek and Latin historians. The seat of empire passed over from the East to the West, from Asia to Europe. The Persian Empire collapsed, under the fierce attacks of the Macedonians, and the Greek Empire in turn gave way to the Roman rule.

### A Glance at Contemporaneous History

For a better understanding of this period and how awesome the advent of Christ was as we enter the NT, we should look at what was happening in world history because the words "**fullness of time**" deal with the all-embracing history of mankind, for whose salvation Christ appeared, and whose every movement led to its realization.

#### 1. **The Egyptian Empire**

In the four centuries preceding Christ, The Egyptian empire, the oldest and in many respects the most perfectly developed civilization of antiquity, was tottering to its ruins. To put it simply, the whole history of Egypt in this period was one of endless and swiftly succeeding changes. In the Ptolemaic Dynasty there was a faint revival of the old glory of the past, but the star of empire had set for Egypt, and the hand of Rome finally smote down a civilization whose beginnings are lost in the dim twilight of history. The Caesarian conquest of 47 BC was followed, 17 years later, by it becoming a Roman province.

#### 2. **Greece**

In Greece also the old glory was passing away. Endless wars sapped the strength of the national life. The strength of Athens and Sparta, of Corinth and Thebes had departed, and when, in **337 BC**, the congress of Greek states had elected Philip of Macedon the leader of united Greece, the knell of doom sounded for all Greek liberty. First Philip and after him **Alexander** wiped out the last remnants of this liberty, and driving Greece to world dominion. It is of note that so many illustrious names adorn the pages of Greek history in a period of such darkness for Israel. Aristophanes, Hippocrates, Xenophon and Democritus, Plato, Demosthenes, Aristotle

and Archimedes, all made their contributions to the world, amid the decay of Greek liberty, in the 4th and 3rd centuries before Christ!

### **3. Rome**

Rome meanwhile was strengthening herself for the great task of world-conquest that lay before her, extending her territorial power and making her name dreaded everywhere. Italy and North Africa, Greece and Asia Minor, etc., were conquered. Her intellectual brilliancy was developed only when the lust of conquest was sated after a fashion, but in the century immediately preceding the Christian era we find such names as Lucretius, Cato and Cicero, Virgil and Horace. At the close of the period between the Testaments, Rome had become the mistress of the world and every road led to her capital.

### **4. Asia**

In Asia, the Persian Empire, heir to the civilization and traditions of the great Assyrian-Babylonian world power, was fast collapsing and was ultimately utterly wiped out by the younger Greek empire and civilization. In far-away India the old ethnic religion of Brahma a century or more before the beginning of our period passed through a reformation inaugurated by Gatama Buddha or Sakya Mouni, and thus Buddhism was born. Another reformer of the Tauistic faith was **Confucius**, the sage of China, a contemporary of Buddha, while Zoroaster in Persia laid the foundations of his dualistic worldview. Really, the period between the Testaments was one of political and intellectual ferment.

## **Historical Developments**

Regarding Jewish history, the period between the Testaments may be divided as follows: (1) The Persian period; (2) The Alexandrian period; (3) The Egyptian period; (4) The Syrian period; (5) The Maccabean period; (6) The Roman period.

### **1. The Persian Period**

The Persian period extends from the **cessation** of prophecy to **334 BC**. It was in the main uneventful in the history of the Jews, a breathing spell between great national crises, and comparatively little is known of it. The land of Palestine was a portion of the **Syrian** satrapy, while the true government of the Jewish people was semi-theocratic, or rather sacerdotal, under the rule of the **high priests**, who were responsible to the satrap. Because of this, the high-priestly office became the object of all Jewish ambition and it aroused **evil passions**. Important to us is the story that begins with one man named John who, because of this evil ambition, killed his brother, a favorite of a general of Artaxerxes' in command of the district. The guilt of the fratricide was especially heinous because the crime

was committed in the temple itself, and before the very altar! Severe repercussions swept over Judea. The Persians occupied Jerusalem, the temple was defiled, the city laid waste in part, a heavy fine was imposed on the people and a lengthy persecution followed. At that time, and frequently afterwards, the Samaritans, ever ready and willing to obey the tyrant of the day, went practically scot-free.

## 2. The Alexandrian Period

The Alexandrian period was very brief, 334-323 BC. It simply covers the period of the Asiatic rule of Alexander the Great. In Greece things had been moving swiftly. The Thebans destroyed Spartan power, which in turn were crushed by Philip of Macedon, who then was chosen leader by the unwilling Greeks. Persia became the object of Philip's ambition and vengeance, but he was assassinated before his plans were fulfilled. His son Alexander succeeded him, and thus the "great he-goat," of which Daniel had spoken (Dan 8:8; 10:20), appeared on the scene. In the twelve years of his reign (335-323 BC) he revolutionized the world. He conquered vast territories quickly. He died of disease at 33 years of age. But importantly to us, in his Syrian campaign he came in contact with the Jews. Unwilling to leave any stronghold at his back, he reduced Tyre after a siege of several months, and advancing southward demanded the surrender of Jerusalem. But the Jews desired to remain loyal to Persia. As Alexander approached the city, Jaddua the high priest, with a train of priests in their official dress, went out to meet him, to ask for mercy. A previous dream of this occurrence is said to have foreshadowed this event, and Alexander spared the city, sacrificed to Yahweh, had the prophecies of Daniel concerning him read out loud. He showed the Jews many favors. From that day on they became his favorites; he employed them in his army and gave them equal rights with the Greeks as first citizens of Alexandria, and other cities that he founded. Thus the strong Hellenistic spirit of the Jews was created, which marked so large a portion of the nation, in the subsequent periods of their history.

## 3. The Egyptian Period

The Egyptian period lasted from about 324-264 BC. The death of Alexander temporarily turned everything into chaos. The empire fell apart under four of his generals as was prophesied in the Scriptures (Dan 8:21, 22). Those leaders and their lands were: Cassander – Europe, Lysemicus - Asia Minor, Ptolemy - Egypt and Africa, Seleucius – Syria. Egypt fell to the share of Ptolemy Soter and Judea was made part of it. At first Ptolemy was harsh in his treatment of the Jews, but later on he learned to respect them and became their patron as Alexander had been. Ptolemy Philadelphus, who is famous for the founding of the celebrated

Alexandrian library, succeeded Soter. Like his father he was very friendly to the Jews, and in his reign the celebrated **Greek translation** of the Old Testament Scriptures, **the Septuagint**, was made. As the power of the Syrian princes, the Seleucids, grew, Palestine increasingly became the battleground between them and the Ptolemies. In the decisive battle between Ptolemy Philopator and Antiochus the Great, at Raphia near Gaza, the latter was crushed and during Philopator's reign Judea remained an Egyptian province. And yet this battle formed the turning point of the history of the Jews in their relation to Egypt. The reason for this is that when Ptolemy, drunk with victory, came to Jerusalem, he tried to enter the **Holy of Holies** but was stopped. He became so angry with this that he wreaked his vengeance on the Jews for opposing his plan by a cruel persecution. He was succeeded by his son, a child of 5 years of age, which gave his enemy Antiochus his opportunity to finally invade Egypt. Judea was occupied by the Syrians and passed over into the possession of the Seleucids.

#### **4. The Syrian Period**

204-165 BC: Israel now entered into the valley of the shadow of death. This entire period was almost **uninterrupted martyrdom**. Seleucius Philopator succeeded Antiochus, and though their attitude was bad toward the Jews, neither of these two was notorious for his cruelty to them. The Jewish high priests were still nominal rulers. But all changed when **Antiochus Epiphanes** (175-164 BC) came to the throne. He can be called the **Nero** of Jewish history. The nationalists among the Jews were at that time wrangling with the **Hellenists** for the control of affairs. Using internal strife at this time as an opportunity, Antiochus wreaked bitter hatred on the Jews: He marched on Jerusalem and upon entering the city defiled the Temple by offering a **slaughtered pig** on its altar and spreading **pig's blood** and entrails on the walls and inner parts of the **Holy of Holies**. He also set up an idol, dedicating the temple to the worship of Zeus. All this was the **"abomination of desolation"** foretold by Daniel and was also a precursor to **antichrist** who will come in the End Times. During this time **40,000** Jews were killed in the Holy City, so that the blood literally ran in the streets. He forbade the practice of **circumcision**, and also the observance of the **Sabbath**, and the dietary laws. As before, the **Samaritans** joined in persecuting the Jews. But the very viciousness of the persecution caused it to fail and Israel proved to be made of sterner stuff than her enemies imagined. A priestly family dwelling named Hasmonean after one of its ancestors, consisting of one Mattathias and his five sons, raised the standard of revolt, which proved successful after a severe struggle.

## 5. The Maccabean Period

The Maccabean period, so-called after the name of a son of Mattathias called **Judas** Maccabeus, lasted from **165-63 BC**. Judas succeeded his father as leader and led a guerilla war against Antiochus who could never quell the rebellion and who died of a loathsome disease. Peace was at last concluded with the Jews. Though still nominally under Syrian control, Judas became governor of Palestine. His first act was the purification and rededication of the temple, from which the Jews date their festival of purification, called **Hanukkah**. When the Syrians warred again against them, Judas appealed to **Rome** for aid, which did not come in time to prevent his death in battle. His brother Jonathan succeeded him. From that time the Maccabean history becomes one of endless intrigues. Jonathan was acknowledged by the Syrians as leader of Judea, but was assassinated soon afterward. Simon succeeded him, and by the help of the Romans was made hereditary ruler of Palestine. John Hyrcanus in turn followed him. The people were torn by bitter partisan controversies and two grandsons of John Hyrcanus, Hyrcanus and Aristobulus waged a civil war a generation later. In this struggle the Roman general **Pompey** participated by siding with Hyrcanus, while Aristobulus defied Rome and defended Jerusalem. Pompey took the city and **entered the Holy of Holies**, thereby forever **estranging** Rome from every loyal Jewish heart.

## 6. The Roman Period

During the Roman period (63-4 BC) of the time we are discussing, Judea became a Roman province. During this time there was internal war in Rome between Pompey and Caesar and Judea was temporarily forgotten. But after Caesar's death, under the triumvirate of Octavius, Antony and Lepidus, Antony, the eastern ruler, favored **Herod the Great**, whose intrigues secured for him at last the crown of Judea and enabled him to extinguish the old Maccabean line of Judean princes.

## IV. Internal Developments in This Period

One thing remains, and that is a review of the developments within the bosom of Judaism itself in the period under consideration. It is self-evident that the core of the Jewish people, which remained loyal to the national traditions and to the national faith, must have been radically affected by the terrible cataclysms that marked their history, during the four centuries before Christ. What, if any, was the literary activity of the Jews in this period? What was their spiritual condition? What was the result of their differences of opinion? What preparation does this period afford for the "fullness of time"?

## 1. Literary Activity

The voice of prophecy was utterly hushed in this period, but the old literary instinct of the nation asserted itself; it was part and parcel of the Jewish traditions and would not be denied. Thus in this period many writings were produced, which although they lack canonical authority, among Protestants at least, still are extremely helpful for a correct understanding of the life of Israel in the dark ages before Christ.

### (A) The Apocrypha

First of all among the fruits of this literary activity stand the apocryphal books of the Old Testament. It is enough here to mention them. They are fourteen in number: 1 and 2 Esdras, Tobit, Judith, 2 Esther, Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus, Baruch, Song of the three Holy Children, History of Susannah, Bel and the Dragon, Prayer of Manasses, 1 and 2 Maccabees. As 3 and 4 Maccabees fall presumably within the Christian era, they are not counted among these. All these apocryphal writings are of the utmost importance for a correct understanding of the Jewish issues in the day in which they were written.

### (B) Pseudepigrapha

Thus named from the spurious character of the authors' names they bear. Two of these writings very probably belong to our period of discussion, while a host of them evidently belong to a later date. In this class of writings there is a mute confession of the conscious poverty of the day. First of all, we have the Psalter of Solomon, originally written in Hebrew and translated into Greek—a collection of songs for worship, touching in their spirit, and evincing the fact that true faith never died in the heart of the true believer. The second is the Book of Enoch, a production of an apocalyptic nature, named after Enoch the patriarch, and widely known about the beginning of the Christian era. This book is quoted in the New Testament (Jude 1:14).

### (C) The Septuagint

This great translation of the Old Testament was begun around 285-247 BC and completed somewhere about the middle of the 2nd century BC. Internal evidence abounds that the translation was made by different hands and at different times. The text of the Septuagint raises various interesting questions in regard to the Hebrew text that was used in the translation, as compared with the one we now possess. But one thing may well be said of it: the Septuagint contributed perhaps more than any other thing to prepare the world for the "fullness of time."

## 2. Spiritual Conditions

The return from Babylon marked a turning point in the spiritual history of the Jews. From that time onward, the **lust of idolatry**, which had marked their whole previous history, **utterly disappears**. In the place of it came an almost intolerable spirit of exclusiveness, a striving after legalistic holiness, these two in combination forming the very heart and core of later **Pharisaism**. The holy books, but especially **the law**, became an object of almost idolatrous reverence; **the Spirit** was utterly lost in the form. And as their own tongue, the classic Hebrew, gradually gave way to the common Aramaic, the rabbis and their schools strove ever more earnestly to keep the ancient tongue pure; worship and life each demanding a separate language. Thus, the Jews became in a sense bilingual, the Hebrew tongue being used in their synagogues, the Aramaic in their daily life, and later on, in part at least, the Greek tongue of the conqueror. A spiritual aristocracy very largely replaced the former rule of their princes and nobles. As the core of their religion died, the bark of the tree flourished. Thus, tithes were zealously paid by the believer (compare Mt 23:23), the Sabbath became a burden of sanctity, the **simple laws of God** were replaced by cumbersome human inventions, which in later times were to form the bulk of the Talmud, and which crushed down all spiritual liberty in the days of Christ (Mt 11:28; 23:4, 23).

And yet, though scattered far and wide, the Jewish people became world-wide missionaries of the knowledge of the true God, of a gospel of hope for a world that was hopeless, a gospel which wholly against their own will directed the eyes of the world to the fullness of time and which prepared the fallow soil of human hearts for the rapid spread of Christianity when it ultimately appeared.

## 3. Parties

During the Greek period the more conservative and zealous of the Jews were all the time confronted with a tendency of a very considerable portion of the people, especially the younger and wealthier set, to adopt the manners of life and thought and speech of their masters, the Greeks. Thus the **Hellenistic** party was born, which was bitterly hated by all true-blooded Jews, but which left its mark on their history, till the date of the final dispersion (70 AD). From the day of Mattathias, the Chasids or Hasideans (1 Macc 2:42) were the true Jewish patriots. Thus the party of the Pharisees came into existence. The more secular-minded **Sadducees**, who were wealthy, of fine social standing, wholly free from the restraints of tradition, and utterly **oblivious** of the **future life**, opposed them. These parties bitterly opposed each other till the very end of the national existence of the Jews in Palestine, and incessantly fought for the mastery,

through the high-priestly office. Common hatred for Christ, for a while, afforded them a community of interests.

#### **4. Preparation for Christianity**

Throughout this entire dark period of Israel's history, God was working out His own Divine plan with them. Their Scriptures were translated **into Greek**, which had become the common language in the East after Alexander. Thus the world was prepared for the word of God, even as the latter in turn prepared the world for the reception of the gift of God, in the gospel of His Son. The Septuagint thus is a distinct forward movement in the fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise. As the sacrificial part of Jewish worship declined, through their wide separation from the temple, the eyes of Israel were more firmly fixed **on their Scriptures**, read every Sabbath in their synagogues, and, as we have seen, these Scriptures, through the rendering of the Septuagint, had become the property of the **entire world**. Thus, the synagogue everywhere became the great missionary institute, imparting to the world Israel's Messianic hopes. On the other hand, the Jewish people, embittered by long-continued martyrdoms and suffering, utterly carnalized this Messianic expectation more and more as the yoke of the oppressor grew heavier and the hope of deliverance grew fainter. Thus, when their Messiah came, Israel **did not recognize Him**, while the **heart-hungry heathen**, who through the Septuagint had become familiar with the promise, humbly **received Him** (John 1:9-14). The eyes of Israel were blinded for a season, 'till the fullness of the Gentiles shall be gathered in' (Rom 9:32; 11:25).

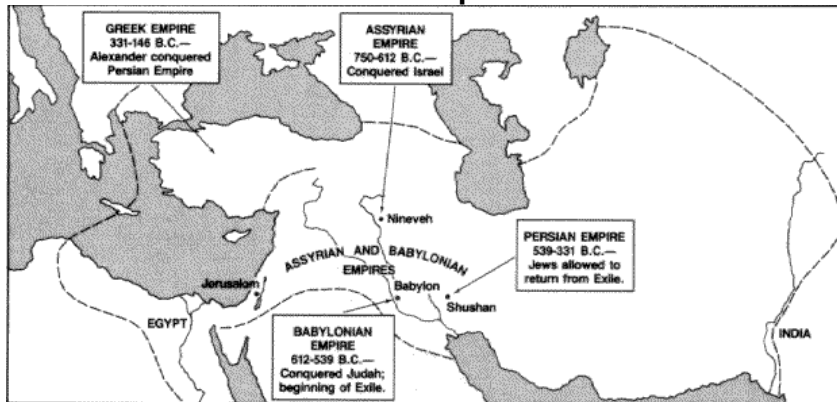
***"But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. (Galatians 4:4-5)***

***"God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds; who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become so much better than the angels, as He has by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they. (Hebrews 1:1-3)***

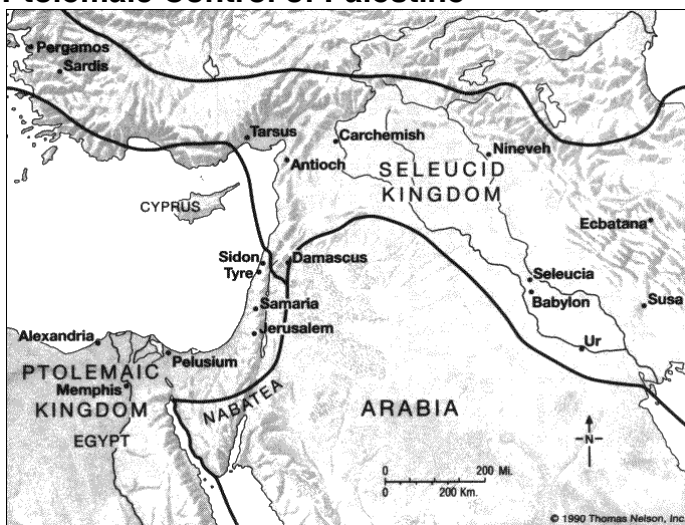
## Bridging the Testaments

The map below shows Palestine as a subject region within four successive world empires, beginning with the Assyrian Empire in 750 b.c. and concluding with Alexander's Greek Empire of 331–146 b.c. After his death in 323 b.c., Alexander's leading generals divided the empire and established their own dynasties. Two of these controlled Palestine: first the kingdom of Ptolemy, which held Palestine from 323 b.c. until 198 b.c. when, by battle, it was lost to the kingdom of Seleucus. Then the Syrian Seleucids ruled until the strengthening revolt of the Jewish Hasmonean family (later called the Maccabees) gained complete independence in 143 b.c. Jewish independence of Judea lasted until the Romans occupied the region under general Pompey in 63 b.c. The Romans continued to occupy the whole of Palestine throughout all of New Testament history. Maps illustrating these shifts of political power over Palestine may be found below.

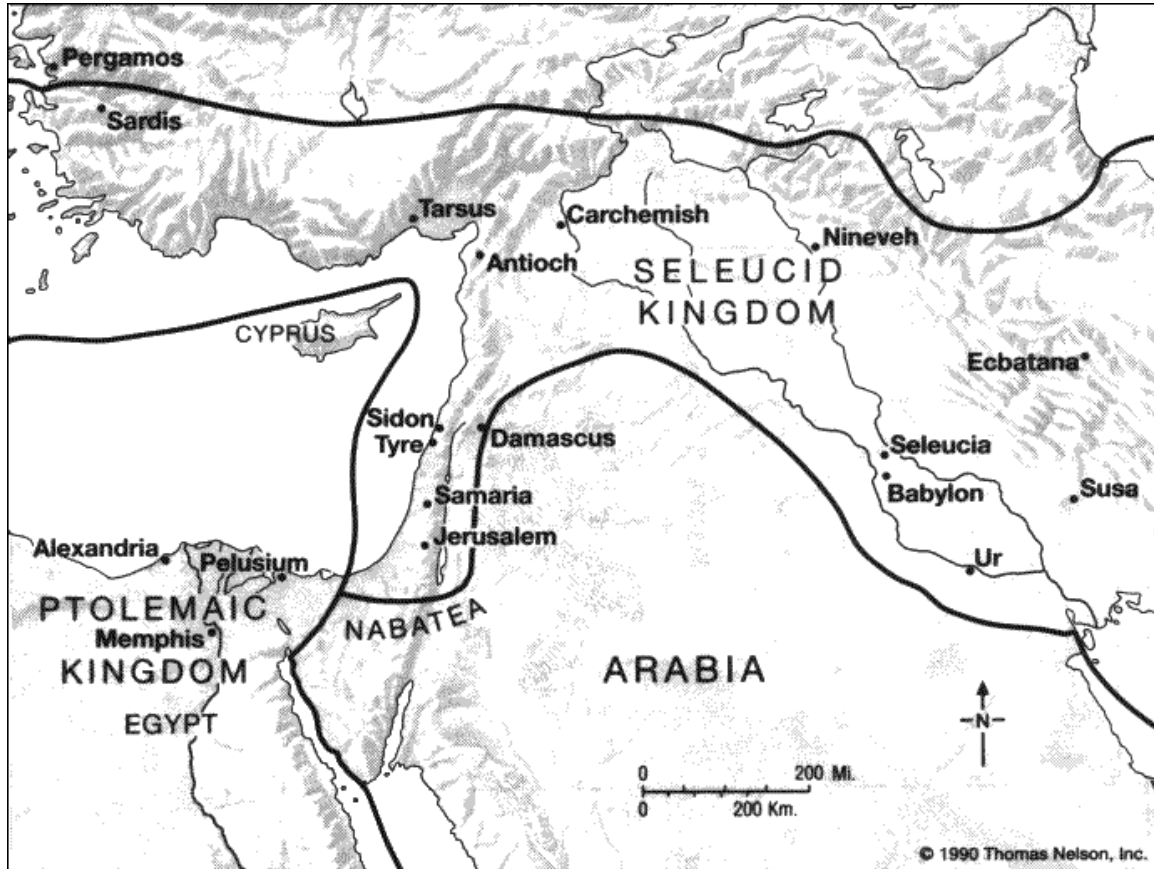
## Succession of Four World Empires



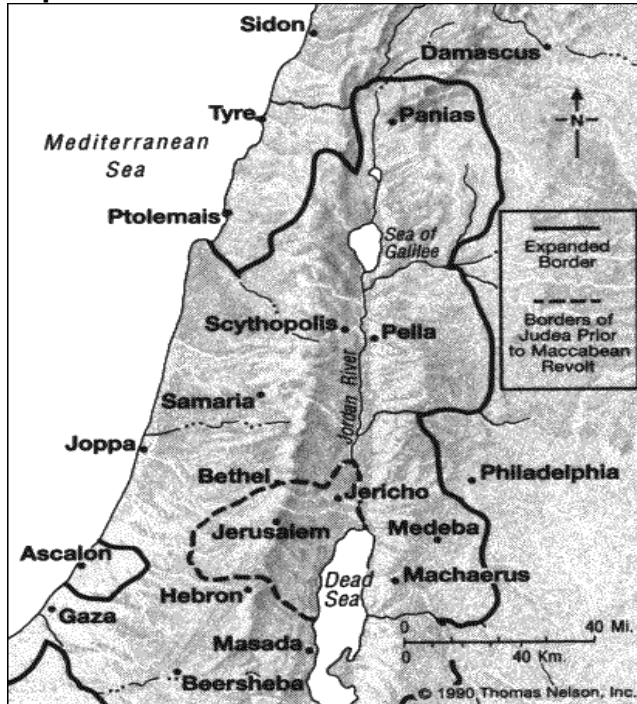
## Ptolemaic Control of Palestine



### Seleucid Control of Palestine



### Expansion of Palestine Under the Maccabees



## Roman Control of Palestine

