

# OUR NEW UNDERSTANDING OF THE OLD TESTAMENT / TANAKH

1600 BC  
1500  
1400  
1300  
1200  
1100  
1000  
900  
800  
700  
600  
500  
400  
300  
200  
100 BC  
1 AD  
100 AD

Major Powers  
Middle Bronze Age  
Late Bronze Age  
Iron Age I  
Iron Age II  
Second Temple Period  
Rabbinical Judaism

Hittite New Kingdom  
Egyptian New Kingdom  
Middle Assyrian Empire  
Neo-Assyrian Empire  
Kingdom of Aram-Damascus  
Phoenician city-states  
Neo-Babylonian Empire  
Egyptian XXVth Dynasty

↑ 1976 BC. Traditional Rabbinical date of Abraham's birth.  
1476 BC. Traditional Rabbinical date of the Exodus.

Canaan is an Egyptian province until the end of the Bronze Age Collapse.

Traditional 20th Christian scholarship dates the Exodus to Ramesses II (c. 1250 BC).

**Bronze Age Collapse**  
Greatest catastrophe of the ancient Mediterranean world, far worse than the fall of Rome, 1,600 years later. Cultural collapse throughout the Aegean, Anatolia, the Near East, and Egypt following mass population movements and invasions. Widespread destruction of trade routes and cities, leaving only isolated villages. Canaanite city-states decay, replaced by small villages. Canaanite culture is absorbed into the Philistines, Phoenicians and Israelites. Only Assyria – and to a lesser extent Babylonia – escaped the effects of the Collapse.

**Patriarchs**  
The patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, Jacob (Israel) and Joseph were traditionally dated anywhere from 1800 BC (Middle Bronze Age) to 1400 BC (Late Bronze age). It was assumed that Genesis preserved traditions handed down from that time, more or less accurately depicting the realities of the patriarchs' lives, the origins of the Hebrews in southern Mesopotamia, and their migration into Canaan. Archaeological evidence shows that the period 2000–1650 BC was not a period of migration, but of sedentarization. There is no evidence for a migration into Canaan from either Mesopotamia, or from the desert (the Amorite hypothesis). The account of Genesis is full of anachronisms: camels were not in use at the supposed time of the patriarchs, and many of the places mentioned did not exist until after the time of David, about 1000 BC. It is now believed that the stories of Genesis are literary creations, and that the OT has no recoverable historical information.

**Exodus**  
Traditional dating places Moses and the Exodus anywhere from Pharaoh Thutmose III (c. 1450 BC) to Ramesses II (c. 1250 BC). There is no extra-Biblical evidence for anything like the migration, which would have occurred during a period of exceptional Egyptian strength. The OT reports that the Israelites met resistance from Moab and Edom, but there is no evidence of settlements in those areas until after 1300 BC, which indicates a later than an earlier date. Moreover, Canaan was an Egyptian province during the entire period. Had the Israelites fled to Canaan, they would have only emigrated to an area already under firm Egyptian control. A telling point is that the pharaoh of the Exodus is never named, when the OT is full of names of foreign rulers, many confirmed by archaeological evidence. Modern scholarship concludes that there was no flight from Egypt.

**Conquest of Canaan**  
Joshua and the Judges  
The picture of a lightning conquest of Canaan under Joshua and the united tribes of Israel in any possible traditionally accepted period for the Conquest (anywhere from 1400–1200 BC) is contradicted by archaeological evidence. Many of the cities referred to in the Book of Joshua did not exist in the period, and those that did show no signs of destruction. However, the Book of Judges broadly accords with archaeological evidence, depicting a collection of warring tribes uniting briefly under a leader to launch raids from the hill country.

**Foundation of the Kingdom**  
The Israelite united kingdom was founded in an unusual time when there were no strong states in the region. Assyria, Babylonia and Egypt were in no condition to project their power beyond their borders. The Hittites were long gone. In Syria and Canaan, only small kingdoms and city-states existed (the Syro-Hittite states), of which Israel and Judah were to become typical examples.

The lingua franca of the Middle East is the Semitic language Akkadian.

**Mernepth stele (c. 1210 BC).**  
First non-Biblical evidence for the name Israel. Pharaoh Mernepth describes his destruction of the people of Israel. The text specifically refers to a people rather than an organised state.



**Gods of the Patriarchs and Judges**  
El and Asherah  
The chief gods of the Patriarchs and the Judges during the conquest of Canaan were El (later Elohim in Hebrew), the chief god in the Canaanite pantheon, and his consort Asherah (Astarte, Ishtar). El has many titles such as El Elyon 'God Most High', El Shaddai 'God the Destroyer', or in personal forms such as the 'God of Abraham', 'God of Jacob'. The patriarchs encounter El directly through dreams and visions (not through the mediation of prophets or priests). They build altars and offer sacrifices where they see fit (not at a central temple). El is clearly a family god. 'Israel', a Canaanite word, takes its name from the god El. Asherah was later obliterated from post-Exilic Judaism, and remained only in the OT as a willfully misinterpreted linguistic relic taken to be 'otem', 'tree', or 'grove'.

**Gods of the Kingdoms**  
Yahweh and Asherah  
In the OT, while God is often called El, his personal name is Yahweh (just as the personal name of the national god of Moab is Chemosh). Yahweh was the god of several tribes in northern Arabia, in particular the Kenites (or Midianites) and the Edomites. Yahweh was identified with the old Hebrew god El to become the national god of the Israelite kingdoms. The OT remembers this process in the story of Moses' father-in-law, Jethro the Kenite. The identification of El and Yahweh was probably accelerated by King Saul, an Edomite. Asherah remained as El-Yahweh's consort.

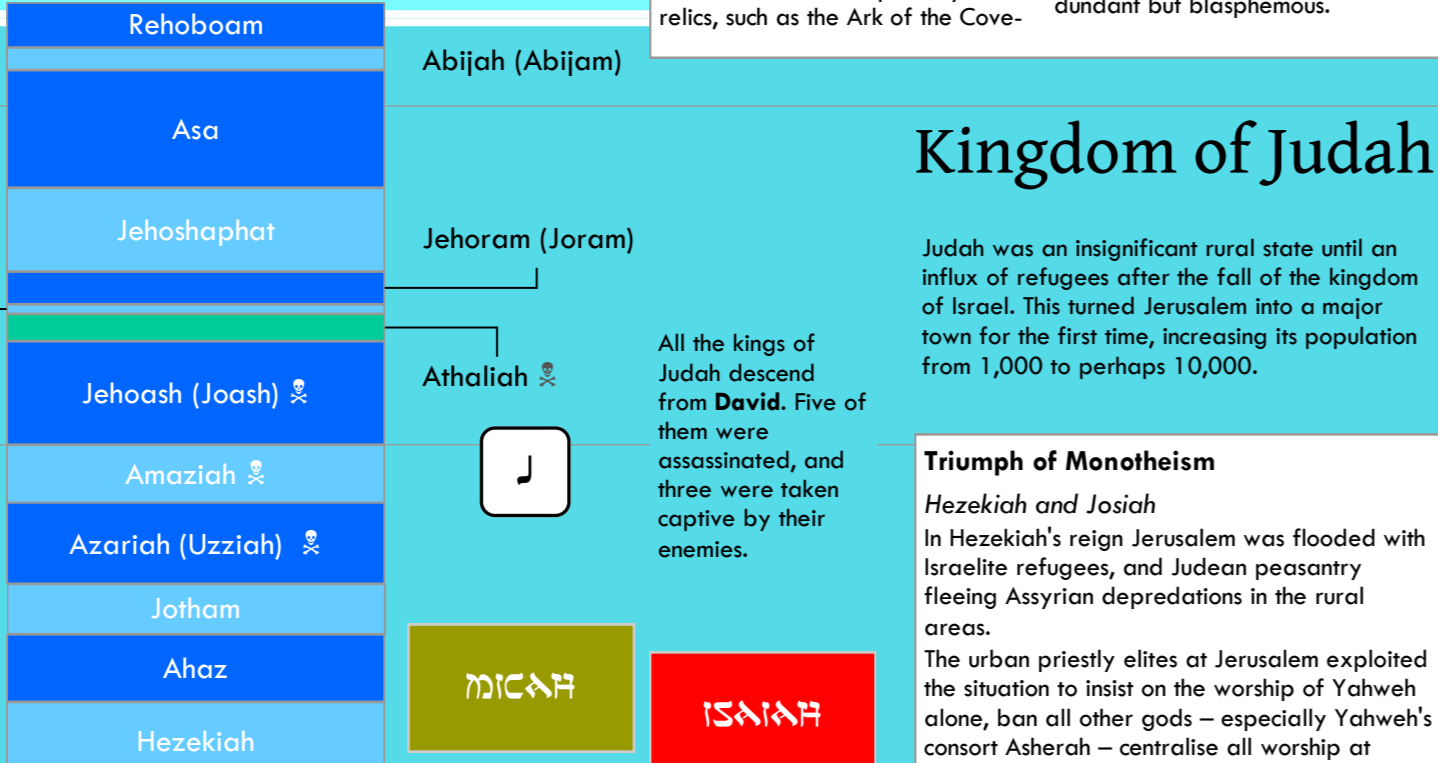
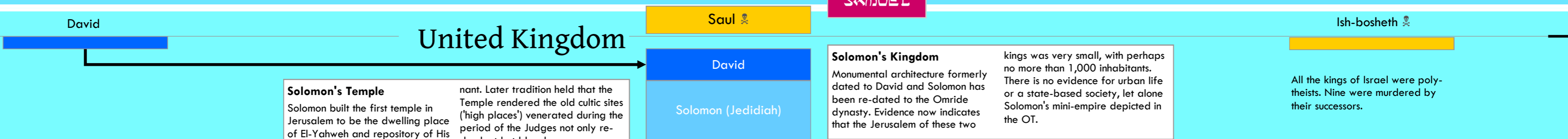
**Origin of the Israelites**  
The archaeological evidence indicates that the Hebrews/Israelites emerged out of late Bronze age and Early Iron age Canaanite society (1300–1100 BC) in the northern central hill country between the river Jordan and the plains occupied by the Philistines. Large numbers of new agricultural villages sprang up in this time in sparsely inhabited territory, replacing the Canaanite city-states destroyed during the Collapse. These villages probably came to identify themselves as Israelite through common experiences in the highlands, prohibitions on intermarriage, and an allegiance to the god El-Yahweh.

**Samuel**  
Samuel is traditionally held to be the last of the Judges and first of the Prophets. He installed Saul as king, but later denounced him because Saul failed to heed God's command to kill all the Amalekite women, children and infants (1 Samuel). Samuel thereafter supported David over Saul.

**Solomon's Kingdom**  
Monumental architecture formerly dated to David and Solomon has been re-dated to the Omride dynasty. Evidence now indicates that the Jerusalem of these two kings was very small, with perhaps no more than 1,000 inhabitants. There is no evidence for urban life or a state-based society, let alone Solomon's mini-empire depicted in the OT.



The geopolitical situation during the time of the two kingdoms of the Hebrews, about 900–750 BC.



**Israel and Judah**  
Some scholars hold that there never was an ethnic, political or religious bond between the two domains of Israel and Judah, and that the supposed relation was a fabrication of the Maccabean kings to justify their annexation of Israel (Samaria as it was known by that time). The evidence of the OT is that David, a Judean warrior, imposed his rule on Israel after the death of Saul's son Ish-bosheth. David's dynasty lost control of Israel to Jeroboam the despot son of Rehoboam.

The earliest clear evidence for the examples of monotheism in the OT are found in Isaiah.



**Assyrian Conquest of Israel**  
Sargon II of Assyria completed the conquest of Israel (722), and its ten of the twelve Hebrew tribes. Following their usual practice, the Assyrians deported 25% of its population, mainly from urban areas. Modern Samaritans (supported by genetic evidence) claim to be the descendants of the population that was not deported. Rabbinical Judaism holds that the Ten Lost Tribes disappeared from history, and that later inhabitants were Gentile immigrants. It denounces the Samaritans as syncretists with no Hebrew ancestry.

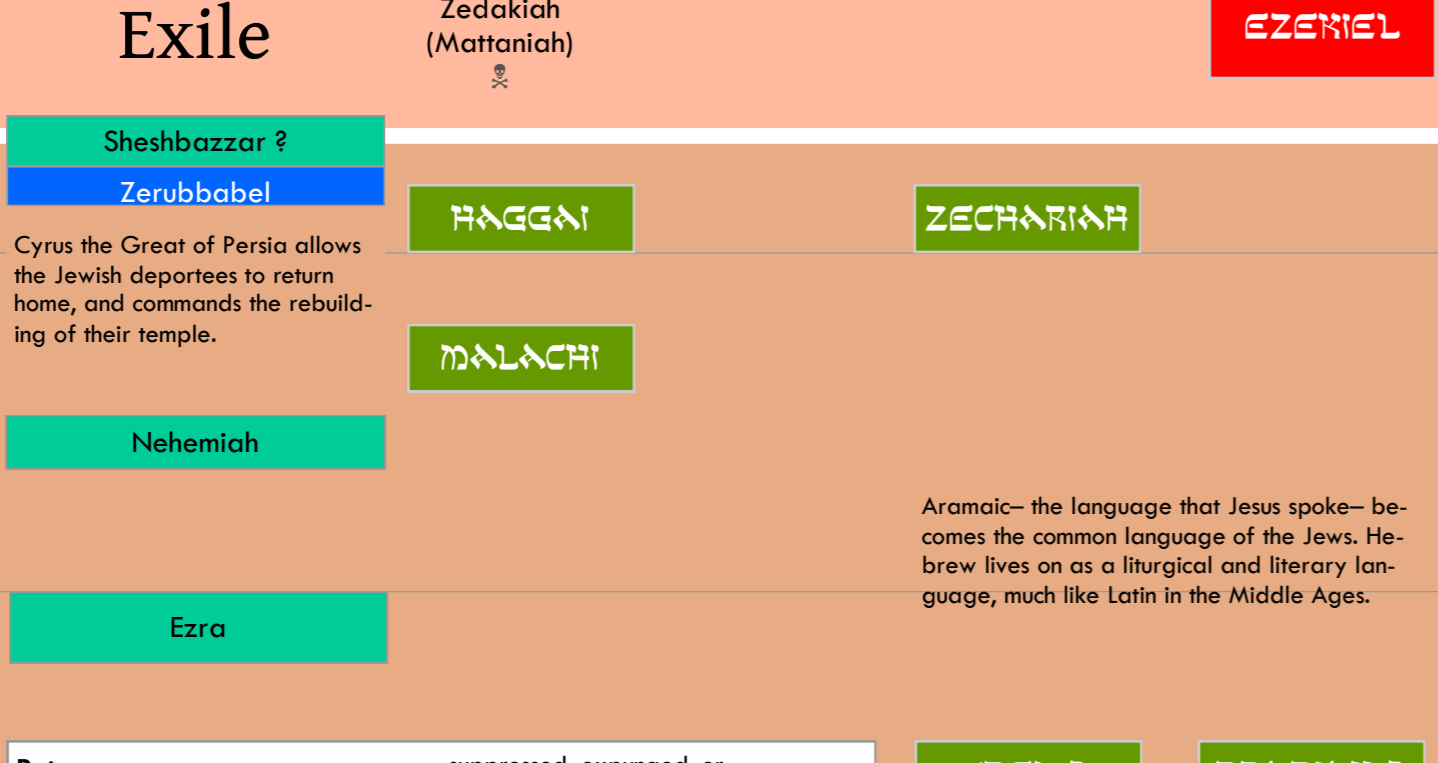
Aramaic supplanted Akkadian as the lingua franca of the Middle East.



**Exile**  
The Babylonian Conquest of Judah  
Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylon captured Jerusalem (597) installing Zedekiah as a puppet. Zedekiah's failed rebellion led to the destruction of Jerusalem. Perhaps the elite 10% of the population were deported to Babylon. Yahweh's dwelling place, Solomon's Temple, was destroyed (587) and with it the ancient sacred relics of the Ark of the Covenant, Aaron's Rod, and the tablets of the Ten Commandments. During the Exile, the Judean scribes were forced to construct a new theology and a new religion to explain their god's defeat by the Babylonians.

These books constitute the Deuteronomistic history, created during the Exile by the same school that created Deuteronomy in Josiah's reign, and possibly associated with Jeremiah. The history insists that the Jews must worship only Yahweh (but it is not clear if the existence of other gods is denied); that this worship can only rightfully occur at Jerusalem; and that only the line of David can rule (an attack on the legitimacy of the former kingdom Israel). The books present a cyclic view of history in which the Jews alternate between fidelity and apostasy to Yahweh. They rationalise the Babylonian destruction of Judah as the long-delayed vengeance of Yahweh on the sins of wicked king Manasseh, the virtues of good king Josiah notwithstanding.

These books (and some of Deuteronomy) were compiled in the Persian period by an editor referred to as the Redactor, possibly Ezra. The Redactor used three sources: E (from the kingdom of Israel), E refers to God as El. E only communicates in visions, intermediary angelic messengers, or through natural phenomena.



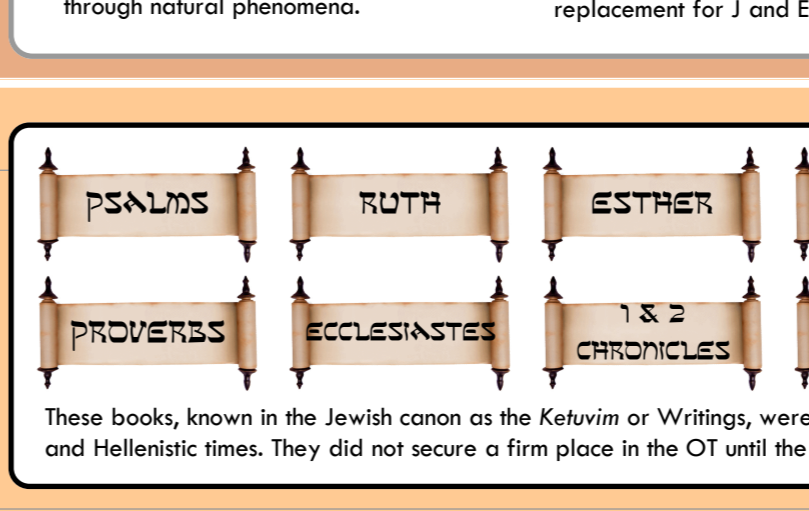
Aramaic—the language that Jesus spoke—becomes the common language of the Jews. Hebrew lives on as a liturgical and literary language, much like Latin in the Middle Ages.

These books, known in the Jewish canon as the Ketuvim or Writings, were written in Persian and Hellenistic times. They did not secure a firm place in the OT until the 2nd century AD.

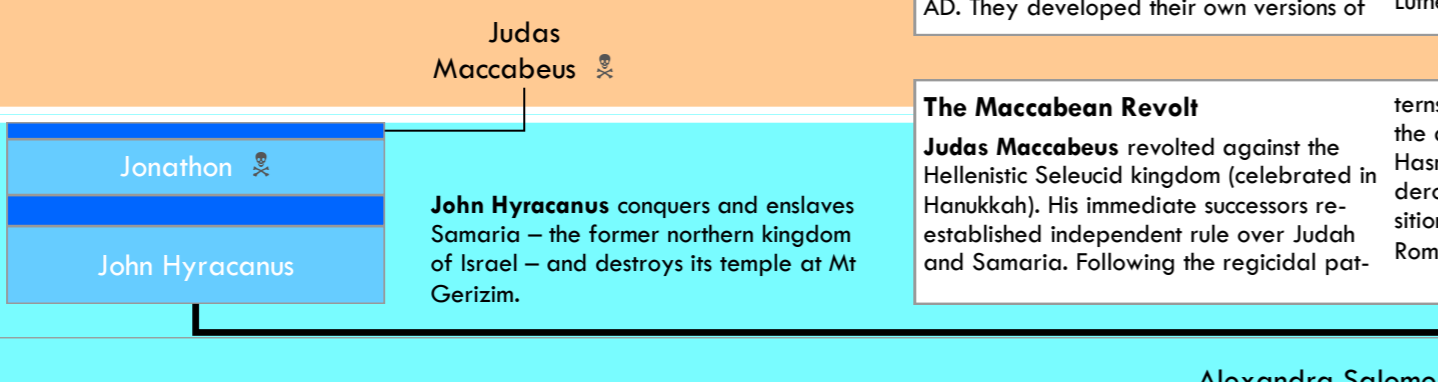
This is a large body of Jewish religious literature flourishing from the Hellenistic period; much influenced by Persian Zoroastrianism, and in turn influential in early Christian thought. The only work of this genre accepted into the OT is Daniel, although some elements are present in Joel, Haggai, Isaiah, and Zechariah. The works provide a vision of the end times; as related by a heavenly messenger, or a figure from the past, such as Enoch or Abraham. They portray the present as bleak, but assert through often fantastical imagery the ultimate triumph of God and the nation of Israel. Unlike the OT prophets, the authors assert the resurrection of the dead; the existence of an afterlife; and introduce ideas of a Messiah. In this literature, God becomes more transcendent and vengeful rather than just. Contrarywise, evil becomes personified as Satan and a fallen host of angels, now termed demons.

**Return**  
Nehemiah and Ezra  
Modern scholarship reverses the order of the Biblical books and places Nehemiah about 50 years before Ezra. The returnees recast themselves as elite 'exiles' with a claim to Judean land superior those who never left Judah, to the extent that they claim that they return to an empty land (against all archaeological evidence). Under Ezra and Nehemiah, they radically reconstructed their religion. Traditional Judean polytheism was suppressed, expunged, or reinterpreted in the sacred texts: the tree of life, symbol of Yahweh's wife Asherah, survived only in the menorah. The returnees demanded a preservation of bloodlines that excluded those who never left, and especially the inhabitants of the northern kingdom of Israel. Thus begins Second Temple Judaism, which emphasises new and more important roles for the priesthood, a focus on the written law, and a determination not to be polluted by foreign blood.

**Septuagint (LXX)**  
A translation of the OT into the Greek widely spoken by the Jewish diaspora at the time, begun in the Egypt of Ptolemy II about 270 BC. Tradition holds that the Torah (first five books of the OT) was first translated by 72 scholars, hence the name. Later parts of the OT were translated and incorporated over several centuries. The LXX became the standard for early Christians, and partly for this reason was rejected by the Jews by the 2nd century AD. They developed their own versions of the OT from Hebrew and Aramaic texts, later compiled into what is known as the Masoretic text, which was standardised only in the 9th century AD. The LXX shows that the canon of the Torah and the Deuteronomistic history was decided by this time, but not the Writings. The LXX contains many books (known as the Apocrypha) that are accepted as canon by Catholic and Orthodox Christians, but rejected both by Jews and most Protestant churches (following Martin Luther's lead).



**Second Temple Literature**  
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**The Maccabean Revolt**  
Judas Maccabeus revolted against the Hellenistic Seleucid kingdom (celebrated in Hanukkah). His immediate successors re-established independent rule over Judah and Samaria. Following the regicidal patterns dating back to Saul and then through the divided kingdoms, the Maccabean (or Hasmonean) kingdom collapsed into murderous civil war, ended only by the imposition of a Roman peace. 'What have the Romans ever done for us?'



**63 BC. The Roman general Pompey brings Judah into as a client state.**  
The Romans install Herod as king after a civil war with the last of the Maccabees. Herod vastly enlarges the temple.

**Second Temple Judaism**  
The three major divisions or sects of Judaism described by the Roman historian Josephus are the Sadducees, Essenes and Pharisees, all of which formed in the Maccabean period. There is little evidence for the Sadducees apart from Josephus. He describes them as elites associated with the Temple and the apparatus of the state, adopting a realpolitik in accommodating their Hellenistic masters. They rejected any notion of an oral law outside the written Torah, and denied the existence of the afterlife. They disappear after the 1st Jewish-Roman War. The Pharisees, of whom the apostle Paul was one, insisted on the existence of an independent oral law. It is believed that modern Judaism descends from them. The Essenes were a smaller separatist movement dedicated to an ascetic and communal life. There is little evidence they influenced later Judaism or Christianity.

**70 AD. 1st Jewish-Roman War.**  
Jerusalem burnt to the ground. Second Temple destroyed. End of classical Judaism.

**Roman Client State**  
The Romans install Herod as king after a civil war with the last of the Maccabees. Herod vastly enlarges the temple.

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**MAJOR PROPHET**  
**MINOR PROPHET**  
**OTHER PROPHET**

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