Hellenism: Big Ideas

* Esther’s revisions are in Greek, which means they were probably written between 300-100 BCE or even later (Koine Greek or “street Greek” was the common commercial language of the first-century CE Roman Empire, and the gospels and Paul’s letters were written in it). Aramaic, a version of Persian, was still spoken by people like Jesus in more remote communities.
* These revisions probably coincided with the creation of the Septuagint, or Greek translation of the Hebrew bible, thought to be dictated by God but probably written between 300 and 132 BCE. The Septuagint is the basis of the Old Latin, Slavonic, Syriac, Old Armenian, Old Georgian, and Coptic versions of the Christian Old Testament.
* Three separate sources of Hellenistic influence existed in Jewish communities. Hellenism sought to merge Jewish theology with Greek philosophy and science; it was responsible for a great deal of important philosophy that influenced Christianity.
  + Hellenized Cilician-Western Syrian Jews (themselves descendants of Babylonian Jewish migrants who had long adopted various elements of Greek culture and civilization while retaining a generally conservative, strict attachment to Halakha),
  + Non-Jewish, 'Classical' Greeks, Macedonian Greeks and Greco-Syrian gentiles, or
  + Descendants of Greek or Greco-Syrian converts to mainstream Judaism – known as proselytes (Greek: προσήλυτος/proselytes) and Greek-speaking Jews born of mixed marriages.
* Most Greek texts did not make it into the final Hebrew bible. In part that was because of their age; in part it was because of the persecutions of Antiochus and the Seleucid dynasty. But finally, Hellenism embraced a view of Judaism that was integrated into the world, and Judaism ultimately defined itself as global but separate from the people around it.
* The tension between Greek culture, which celebrated the naked body, and the Jewish culture, which abhorred nudity, reflected a larger cultural divide about the nature of death, appropriate diet, and education. Still, Persian and Greek ideas about angels, demons, and the afterlife did make their way into late second-temple Judaism, as reflected in Daniel.
* Hellenism and other Greek mystery religions were extremely important to Paul as he first began to define his new Jesus movement.

Big Ideas: Additions to Esther and Jonah

* The apocryphal additions to Esther reflect its continued popularity--despite its lack of traditionally religious themes—and a desire to redeem it among the Jewish people, for whom it seemed to be an important text, at least by the first century CE.
* Though grouped with the prophecies in the Christian Old Testament, Jonah is a story about a prophet set in the distant past at the time of the Assyrian invasions (it was probably written in the second temple period).
* If read as a Jewish text—not a Christian one—Jonah seems to have been a humorous take on the anti-foreign influences among Jews. It suggests that God prophecies to all communities, not just Jewish communities. Its humorous additions include sentient fish, praying livestock, and a long prayer by Jonah to God delivered while inside the fish.
* This story shows everyone—Assyrians, sailors, fish, even farm animals—obeying Yahweh while Jonah does everything he can to disobey him, even when doing so risks everyone’s lives.
* Jonah doesn’t believe Yahweh will destroy Nineveh because he believes God has mercy on everyone, not just Jewish people, and not just human beings.
* Nobody is sure what kind of plant Jonah tries to shade himself with at the end of the story.