

# BETWEEN THE TESTAMENTS

A Brief Introduction to the 400 Silent Years

By Walk Thru The Bible Staff

Though called the “400 silent years,” the centuries between the Old Testament and the New Testament were anything but silent. They were filled with the sounds of marching armies and clashing swords. Israel had ceased to exist as an independent nation in 586 B.C., but the longing of God's people for national restoration and messianic deliverance had intensified under the oppressive policies of the ruling nations.

What was absent, and thus “silent,” was the voice of prophecy which had illuminated the history of Israel since the time of Moses. During the long period from Samuel down to Malachi, towering figures like Elijah, Isaiah and Jeremiah had constantly proclaimed, “Thus saith the Lord!” The prophets were the nation's conscience under the authority of God. Their voices were now silent.

Religious activity and “sacred” writing did not cease with the prophecy of Malachi, however. Following the close of the Old Testament canon shortly before 400 B.C., an entire list of Jewish apocryphal (“hidden” or “obscure”) writings appeared, some of which found their way into the Latin Vulgate Bible of St. Jerome (ca. A.D. 380), and after the Council of Trent (1557-1563), into Roman Catholic Bibles of today. Jewish religious literature formed only a small part of the voluminous Literary output of the Hellenistic period, but Jews like Philo of Alexandria (ca. 25 B.C. - A.D. 50), and later Josephus (ca. A.D. 37-100), were able to compose philosophical and historical works in Greek which appealed to the broader Greco-Roman culture on the basis of their intellectual and literary merits.

Since the Old Testament era ended by ca. 400 B.C., and the New Testament contains almost nothing about the period immediately before the birth of Jesus, we must consult the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha (so-called “false writings”) of the intertestamental period, as well as secular Roman historians, for information about events in the fourth to the first centuries B.C. Josephus, an early commander of the Jewish rebels in Galilee during the first Jewish revolt of A.D. 66-73 (who later went over to the Romans), is an extremely valuable source for Jewish history. The Church Fathers, and particularly St. Augustine (A.D. 354-430) and his disciple Orosius (ca. A.D. 415), offered a Christian interpretation of the events of those difficult centuries. Augustine pointed out that the period before Christ was one long, lamentable episode of rapine, slaughter, and violence (*City of God* 2.3; 3.1). The darkness of the era contrasted with the light of the coming of the Son of God, and on this point the Church Fathers reiterated themes first enunciated in the Gospels.

## **Powers of the Period**

At the close of the Old Testament, the vast Persian Empire was in power throughout the Middle East, and Judah was only a tiny corner of its great provinces. An entirely new and different government, the similarly vast but Mediterranean-based Roman Empire, was in control in the opening pages of the New Testament. Between the Persian and Roman Empires, Israel came

under the Hellenistic (or Greek-influenced) rule of the empire of Alexander the Great and its eastern successor states, the Ptolemaic (Egyptian based) and Seleucid (Syrian based) kingdoms. And for a period of about one hundred years, Israel existed as an independent nation. Though absent from the Biblical record, those years were not unimportant. Many of the New Testament's political and religious institutions, as well as intellectual and spiritual themes, developed during this time.

Political events in the broader world shaped Jewish life in a number of ways. In Palestine, the Jews were profoundly affected by the political events unfolding in Egypt and Syria. Alexander's defeat of the Persian army at Issus in 333 B.C. opened his way to the conquest of Syria, Palestine, and Egypt. For more than a century after his death in 323 B.C., Palestine was ruled by the Ptolemies, a line of Greek kings who descended from one of Alexander's generals based in Alexandria, Egypt. Then in 198 B.C., the Seleucid-line of kings, descended from another of Alexander's generals, seized control of Palestine and continued to rule from Antioch in Syria until the Jews finally revolted and won their autonomy in 142 B.C. Under the Ptolemies, the Jews enjoyed religious freedom, but the Seleucid rulers attempted to force Hellenism on them and destroy Judaism.

The Jewish revolt against the pagan Greco-Syrian regime began at the time that Antiochus IV, called Epiphanes (175-164 B.C.), tried to suppress the Jewish religion. The Hebrew festivals and the Rite of Circumcision were forbidden on pain of death. In 167 B.C., Antiochus defiled the altar at the temple in Jerusalem with swine's flesh and established the worship of Olympian Zeus. This desecration (the "abomination of desolation") provoked a long and extremely bloody struggle between the militarily powerful Seleucid kingdom and the Jews, who were resourceful and determined, though badly outnumbered.

The revolt started when an aged priest, named Mattathias, killed a Syrian emissary and a Jew who tried to renounce Judaism, at the village of Modin in 167 B.C. He fled with his sons and other zealous nationalists into the hills, and began a campaign of guerrilla warfare against the Syrians. He died the following year, but his sons led a long series of desperate but brilliant military campaigns which climaxed in the recapture and purification of the temple in 164 B.C. The eldest son, Judas (165-161 B.C.), earned the nickname Maccabeus, "the Hammer," because of his stunning victories over superior Syrian forces. When Judas was killed in battle, his brother Jonathan accepted leadership of the revolt (161-142 B.C.). After the death of Jonathan, Simon (142-134 B.C.), the last of the Maccabean leaders, was named "leader and High Priest forever, until there shall arise a faithful prophet," and established the Hasmonean dynasty. The name was adapted from Hashmon, an ancestor of the Maccabees. The apocryphal books of First and Second Maccabees and Josephus' *Antiquities of the Jews* tell about this momentous struggle for freedom.

From the time of full Jewish autonomy under Simon in 142 B.C. until conquest by the Romans in 63 B.C., several additional territories were conquered and added to the Hasmonean state. Galilee became a stronghold of Judaism, but the Samaritans, the mixed descendants of the northern kingdom of Israel, resisted Jewish assimilation and retained their religious and cultural distinctives.

The period of Hasmonean rule after the time of Simon was marked by strife and intrigue seriously weakening the Jewish state. Hostility between the Sadducees and Pharisees became so intense that the two parties actually engaged in open warfare. When the state was on the verge of civil war, the Roman general Pompey saw an opportunity to intervene and advance Roman interests. He invaded Palestine and captured Jerusalem in 62 B.C. The Jewish state became a province of the Roman empire, which controlled Palestine indirectly through appointed governors.

Pompey became dictator at Rome in 52 B.C. but was defeated by Julius Caesar in 45 B.C. Caesar was subsequently assassinated and civil war erupted. During this period of political turmoil, Herod Antipater, an Idumean (Edomite), cleverly maneuvered his way into power in Judea and won the favor of the Roman rulers. Cleopatra VII of Egypt (51-30 B.C.) assisted Mark Anthony in his struggle against Octavian (Augustus), but was defeated at Actium. Before his defeat, Anthony gave Herod the Great, the son of Antipater, the honorary title, "King of the Jews," which the majority of the Jews never acknowledged because of Herod's Idumean heritage. Because he held the title "King of the Jews," Herod ordered the slaughter of the infants of Bethlehem when he heard reports about the birth of the Messiah, the legitimate King of the Jews.

### **Spiritual Climate**

The political and cultural developments which shaped this period contribute significantly to the unfolding drama described in the Gospels and Book of Acts the coming of Israel's Messiah, His rejection by the Jewish nation, and the birth and growth of the Christian Church. During the turbulent centuries from the conquests of Alexander the Great (336-323 B.C.) to the invasion of Palestine by the Roman general Pompey (63 B.C.), a spiritual climate developed which was fertile ground for the proclamation of the gospel.

In the Bible, the songs of Mary and of Elizabeth (Luke 1:42-55), and the prophetic blessings of Zacharias and Simeon (Luke 1:68-79; 2:29-32), as well as many other New Testament references to Old Testament messianic promises (cf. Matthew 4:14-16), show dramatically the longing of the common people for deliverance. It is true, however, that many of them, including Jesus' own disciples, thought primarily of this messianic deliverance as political in nature.

The psychological and spiritual climate of the times extended beyond the messianic expectations and hopes of the Jewish people. In fact, the hope for a savior was a general feature of the ancient world as well. An often quoted example of this is from the Latin Poet Virgil (70 B.C. - A.D. 19), who, in the year 40 B.C., spoke of the earth as longing for deliverance through the virgin birth of a baby boy in a future golden age (*Eclogue* 4:4-60), and symbolically hailed Augustus, the Roman Emperor, in particular, as the long-awaited savior in both his *Georgics* and in the *Aeneid*.

### **Cultural Influences**

Alexander the Great was more than a great conqueror. He was a student of the philosopher Aristotle and was committed to a vision of unifying the world under his rule by the spread of Greek culture. The Mediterranean world had already been introduced to Hellenic culture

through the many colonies established by the Greeks in the centuries before Alexander, but the Persian Empire was huge, alien from the Greek way of life, and hostile to Greece. From Alexander's point of view, it needed to be conquered and converted to Hellenism. Although Alexander's Macedonian Empire did not last beyond his lifetime, he was tremendously successful as a missionary for Hellenistic culture. In the centuries following his rule, Greek kingdoms were established not only in Syria-Palestine and Egypt, but as far away as Pakistan and modern Afghanistan in Central Asia.

Greek culture was the most advanced in the world. It presented an alluring and sophisticated blend of science and philosophy, with a rich heritage of politics, religion, literature, architecture, and art. The crowning touch was provided by the great public athletic festivals, glorifying youthfulness and bodily perfection. Athletes at the Olympics and at other games were treated almost like gods. The Romans admired and copied many aspects of Greek culture while promulgating their own brand of classical civilization, which included a strong Hellenic component. The Olympian deities, for example, were worshipped at Rome but under their Latin names.

The pervasive presence of Hellenistic culture, and especially of the Greek language, stretching over the vast area from present day France to Afghanistan in Central Asia made communicating the Gospel in the form of the written Greek New Testament relatively easy. The strong system of Roman roads, combined with the orderliness of Roman government and law, brought a large part of the known world within the reach of the early apostles. Travel and communication within this extensive sphere were probably easier and less restrictive in Paul the Apostle's lifetime than at any time before or since, including our own era.

Hellenistic culture also exercised a powerful, permeating, and seductive appeal for many Jews, with tremendous social impact. Hellenism became so popular that it was viewed as a threat to Jewish identity, because some aspects of Greek culture violated the Mosaic Law, and many Jews were in fact backward-looking traditionalists who were resistant to change. Fissures in the social fabric of Judaism therefore appeared early in the Hellenistic period and intensified throughout the following centuries under both Greek and Roman rule. During the intertestamental period and all through New Testament times, the Jewish people faced constant pressure from Greek and Roman culture.

Differences among the three cultures were noticeable. Many Greeks were highly oriented to the powers of the human mind, to intellectual activity, and to theoretical solutions about the future as exemplified in Plato's *Republic* and parts of Aristotle's *Politics*. By contrast, the Hebrews were often firmly anchored in the past, in traditions to which they were emotionally committed. The typical Roman might be unlike either of these models, but rather was intensely practical, focused on the present, and convinced of his superiority on the basis of his strength of will.

Quite naturally then, each of these types of persons would have different interests and goals. The Hebrew tended to emphasize religion, the Greek intellectual and cultural pursuits, and the Roman power and domination. They each responded to different bases of authority. For the

Jews, it was the Law and the Commandments. For the Greek, it was the demands of his culture. For the Roman, especially the Roman soldier or official, it was the authority of Caesar himself.

A new dimension was added to the cultural conflict when the Church came into existence. For Christians, their authority was Christ, not Caesar. They were concerned about eternity more than an earthly past, present, or future. They believed they should be motivated and controlled by the Spirit of God, not by tradition, law, intellect, emotion, or will. Their attention was focused on the scriptures, and their goal was evangelization.

### **Jewish Religious and Political Institutions**

Among the Jewish religious and political institutions created during the intertestamental period as a result of cultural tensions were religious parties like 1) the Pharisees, a strict sect which opposed Hellenism, insisted on obedience to the law and extreme religious purity; 2) the Sadducees, the aristocratic faction which supported the Jerusalem priesthood and controlled worship in the temple; 3) the Scribes, a group of professional students of Scripture; 4) and the Essenes, an ascetic group which produced the Dead Sea Scrolls but are not mentioned by name in the New Testament. There were also political factions such as 5) the Zealots, who were fanatically resistant to Roman rule; 6) the Publicans who paid the Romans for the opportunity to collect taxes and then overcharged their countrymen to make a profit; 7) and the Herodians, the supporters and partisans of King Herod who were enthusiastic in endorsing Roman culture.

Traces of these tensions appear in the pages of the New Testament. For example, one of Jesus' disciples was a Zealot, and both Jesus and Paul the Apostle came into conflict with the Pharisees and Sadducees on a number of occasions. The New Testament world was therefore inescapably caught up in the midst of the ongoing Hellenic-Jewish cultural conflict. For the most part, Hellenistic culture and its Roman adaptations swept everything before it: politics, philosophy, education, literature, art, architecture, entertainment; even Jewish styles of dress and of food were influenced by the Greeks. And it was into this world that Jesus, the Messiah came.

Despite the historical break, the four centuries between the Old and New Testaments contain important developments for the understanding of the background and issues of the New Testament. It is obvious that God was at work in history. The apostle Paul summed up the entire era brilliantly in Galatians 4:4, when he said, "in the fullness of time, God sent forth His Son," meaning that when the timing was exactly right in terms of world history, Jesus Christ was born. When the long-expressed Jewish Messianic hopes were at last fulfilled, Christ and his followers could proclaim the Good News in a world that was politically, culturally, philosophically, economically, and spiritually receptive.