

**THE INTER-TESTAMENT PERIOD
OR
THE FOUR HUNDRED SILENT YEARS**

The period from Malachi to Matthew covers about 400 years. I'm not saying that an advanced knowledge of this period is necessary to understand the Gospels, but it sure helps to understand some of the sayings of our Lord and some of the groups He had to face.

The Old Testament canon of Scripture closed with Malachi about 397 B.C.

The Beginning

We want to look at the condition of the Jews at the beginning of this 400 year period. Two hundred years earlier Jerusalem had been destroyed and the people carried into Babylonian captivity (587 B.C.). The Assyrians destroyed the Northern Kingdom of Israel 135 years earlier (722 B.C.).

Babylon was overthrown by the Medo-Persian empire, as had been predicted by Daniel (Chapters 2 and 7), and Cyrus issued the order for the Jews to return and build the Temple. Under Zerubbabel a "remnant returned twenty one years later; the Temple was completed (515 B.C.). Ezra took a small group to Jerusalem and restored the worship in the Temple; followed by Nehemiah twelve years later to rebuild the city walls.

This gives us a glimpse of the beginning of the period between Malachi and Matthew. The Jewish remnant was back in Judah; the Temple and Jerusalem had been rebuilt and worship was restored, but the great masses of the Jews remained in the land of their captivity.

It is in the remnant that Jewish history is preserved between the Old and New Testaments.

The Political Background

The history of the Jews between Malachi and Matthew runs in SIX periods:

1. THE PERSIAN - 538 B.C.
2. THE GREEK - 333 B.C.
3. THE EGYPTIAN - 323 B.C.
4. THE SYRIAN - 204 B.C.
5. MACCABEAN - 165 B.C.
6. THE ROMAN - 63 B.C. to Christ

The Persian Rule

The Persian rule over the Land of Promise continued until Alexander the Great conquered it in 333 B.C. This was the second empire mentioned by Daniel. This means that the Jews were under the Persian rule at the end of Malachi and remained under them for the first sixty years of the Inter-Testament period.

During this same period, the "rival worship" of the Samaritans became established. Back in 721 B.C. the Northern Kingdom of Israel (the ten tribes) were scattered by Assyria to the cities of the Medes. The Assyrian emperor repopled the cities of Israel with a "mixed" people known as "Samaritans". It was from this people that Nehemiah faced opposition on his way to Jerusalem (Nehemiah 2:10 and 4:3). The rivalry between Samaritan and Jew persisted through the New Testament times.

The Greek Rule

Alexander the Great, at the age of 20, transformed the world in ten years. He is spoken of by Daniel in his prophecy in Daniel 7:6, 8:1-7, 21-23.

The Egyptian Rule

This was the longest of the six periods of the Inter-Testament Period. The death of Alexander the Great resulted in Judea falling into the hands of the first Ptolemaic ruler (the Ptolemies were the line of Greek kings over Egypt), Ptolemy Soter. The second Ptolemy (Philadelphus) founded the Alexandrian library, and the famous Septuagint translation of the Old Testament was made from Hebrew to Greek during his reign.

The Land of Promise for God's people was rapidly becoming a battle ground between Egypt and Syria. Seleucidae were the line of Syrian Kings.

The Syrian Rule

This is one of the most tragic parts of the Inter-Testament Period for the Jews. With the coming to power of Antiochus Epiphanes in 175 B.C., a reign of terror fell on all Jews. He wrecked Jerusalem, tore down the walls and killed the people. He desecrated the Temple in every way; culminating with the offering of a pig on the altar of sacrifice, and then erecting statues of false gods on the altar (Daniel 8:13).

The Maccabean Period

The excesses of Antiochus Epiphanes provoked a movement by the aged priest Mattathias, and carried out by his son, Juda Maccabeus. Judas Maccabeus restored the temple and orthodox services were reinstated (following the desecration by Antiochus Epiphanes). Judas Maccabeus was killed in one of the battles with the Syrians. His brother, Jonathan, became leader and high priest uniting the civil and priestly authority in one person. This was the beginning of the Hasmonean line of high priests (Hashman was the great grandfather of the Maccabee brothers). Jonathan was killed and Simon, his brother, was made leader. Simon was killed and his son John Hyrcanus reigned twenty nine years. After changes among the Hasmonean leaders, the Herod family appears on the scene, leading to the Roman Period.

The Roman Rule

Judea became a province of the Roman Empire. When the Maccabean line ended, Antipater was appointed over Judea by Julius Caesar in 47 B.C. Antipater appointed his son, Herod, as governor of Galilee. He was appointed King of the Jews by Rome in 40 B.C. He murdered almost all of his own family, including his wife and sons. This was the "Herod the Great" who was king when Jesus was born.

This is the Political background of the Jews
during the 400 year period.

Now we will examine the Religious Background.

The RELIGIOUS Background During the Four Hundred Years

The political background changed the Jews, but no more than the changes in their Jewish Religious customs. There were new groups such as the Scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, and new institutions such as the Synagogue and Sanhedrin. Because of the changes in Jewry, the period between Malachi and Matthew is very important.

The ORAL LAW, after being given orally for generations, was committed to writing at the end of the second century A.D. into the TALMUD, and it remains the authority for Jews to this day. In Jesus' day the Oral Law was still mainly oral. Jesus contradicted them in Matthew 15:1-9, and in the Sermon on the Mount, He said six times, "Ye have heard that it was said, but I say unto you". His way of referring to Scripture was, "It is written".

The Pharisees and Sadducees

The Pharisees held that the Oral Law came to them through Moses. They were the interpreters of the Oral Law.

The Sadducees rejected all this, holding to only "the Law", meaning the Pentateuch. They denied the spirit world of angels, immortality, and the resurrection of the dead (Acts 23:8), while the Pharisees affirmed all these doctrines. They opposed each other.

The name Pharisee mean "separatists". Sadducees means "righteous ones". When you read in the New Testament about either of these groups, now you have a historical context to understand the contrasts.

The Scribes

From the time of the Babylonian Captivity, there developed a new line of scribes who were not just transcribers or secretaries, but a new body of men who became expounders, guardians, and teachers of the Scriptures, They became a distinguished order in the nation.

They must be distinguished from priests and the Pharisees, in that while they are mentioned in Scripture along with Pharisees, this does not mean that they were alike or even together in function. Jesus denounced them because of their corruption and outward piousness.

The Synagogue

There is not a word about synagogues in the Old Testament, but as soon as we start the New Testament we find them everywhere. The synagogue did not exist before the captivity, but it seems to have originated during that time; when the Jews had totally turned away from idolatry. There was no longer a Jewish temple and they needed and longed for the reading of the Scriptures. This is believed to be the way the synagogue came into being.

The synagogues were "congregational" and not "priestly", and synagogue discourses were common in our Lord's day. The great institution of "preaching" had its beginning in the synagogue. It was from this background that the early Christian church, as organized by the apostles, took its main form of worship. The titles given to the New Testament church leaders: Elders, Bishops, and Deacons are all carried over from the synagogue.

The Sanhedrin

The Sanhedrin, in New Testament times, was the supreme civil and religious tribunal of the Jewish nation. It is this body that must bear the REAL RESPONSIBILITY FOR CRUCIFYING JESUS. Pontious Pilate was merely a "rubber stamp" of the Roman Empire. Many times when the Sanhedrin is referred to in the Gospels and Acts, the Greek word "sunedrion" is translated "council".

The Sanhedrin was made up of the high priest; twenty four chief priests who represented the twenty four orders of the priesthood; twenty four elders called elders of the people and twenty two scribes who interpreted the law in both religious and civil matters. This made a total of seventy one members of the Sanhedrin.

There is no more tragic verse in Scripture than Matthew 26:59!

They had to have the sanction of Pilate for the penalty they imposed on Jesus. They met illegally in the high priest's palace (John 18:15) instead of in its own council hall. Everything surrounding their actions in reference to the death of Jesus was illegal and wrong.

With this brief back ground we are able to see some of the institutions and intrigues that came to pass during the four hundred year period between Malachi and Matthew. For more material on this period, read Books 11, 12, and 13 of Josephus, and I and II Maccabees.

FOR NEXT WEEK

WE WILL STUDY THE INTRODUCTION TO THE
NEW TESTAMENT AND THE FOUR GOSPELS.
THE FOLLOWING WEEK WILL TAKE US TO MATTHEW