

Second Baptist Church of Doylestown

Bible Study Notes

5-15-19

THE TIME BETWEEN THE OLD & NEW TESTAMENTS

The Interlude in our English Bible is scarcely noticeable. A simple turn of the page and you leave behind the Old Testament to enter the New Testament. If you are reading the Bible chronologically, like a story, you find that the first chapter of Matthew re-acquaints you with characters you've already come to know and admire: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, and more. Yet a new character—indeed, a person who will claim to be the main character of the entire Bible—is now introduced: Jesus Christ.

You'll also soon notice that the world in which Jesus travels bears little resemblance to the one left behind in Malachi. The Eastern empires of the Israelites' captivity—Babylon, Assyria, and Persia—no longer dominate the region. Instead, a new power has risen in the West: the empire of Rome. Its boundaries extend from the Mediterranean to North Africa and even Europe. Its ruler in Palestine, a cruel and self-serving king named Herod, sits enthroned over the Jews.

You will recall that the northern kingdom of Israel had been taken into captivity by Assyria, and then the southern kingdom of Judah later went into captivity in Babylon. All of this occurred because the people had sinned and refused to remain faithful to God. The prophets had warned the people over and over, but they refused to believe. In Malachi, the Israelites had recently returned to Judah and their capital city from Babylonian captivity and rebuilt the temple, their center of worship. Under the guidance of priests and prophets, the community's leaders since ancient times, they had sought to repopulate the land, drive out their enemies, and learn again how to worship God in the way he desired. In Matthew, however, the Jews are settled and secure under the Pax Romana, the peace of Rome. They no longer worship in the temple alone but also in dozens of synagogues scattered throughout the country's towns and villages. Priests continue to provide leadership, but the people now look to a new array of religious authorities as well, including Pharisees, Sadducees, and teachers of the law (also known as scribes). Over all of these authorities sits a governing body called the high council (or Sanhedrin), which functions something like a religious Supreme Court.

Most noticeable, perhaps, is the lack of prophets. Whereas Malachi had followed a succession of prophets going back hundreds of years, not a single divine spokesperson appeared before the nation during the years between the Old and New Testaments. Anyone who claimed to be a prophet was proven to be an imposter. For more than 400 years, the heavens seemed closed to the nation of Israel. They heard nothing from God. Nothing but silence.

Then, one ordinary night in the tiny village of Bethlehem, Jesus was born. With his first cries, God's voice once again graced the land. For Jews with ears to hear and eyes to see, it became clear throughout Jesus' life that he was the Son of God, the Savior for whom they had been waiting. God had used the years of silence to prepare the perfect time and place for Jesus' arrival. During the years between the Testaments—years of war and upheaval, flawed heroes and unfulfilled hopes—God had set the stage for the final era of salvation history, an era of Good News for Jews and Gentiles alike.

THE PERSIAN PERIOD (539–336 B.C.)

In the very first year of his reign, Cyrus the king of Persia had freed the Israelites from their captivity and encouraged them to return to their homeland (Ezra 1). His successor, King Darius, continued Persia's pro-Israel policy, even threatening with capital punishment those who hindered the Israelites from rebuilding

their temple and resettling their land (Ezra 6). The Jews dwelt in relative peace. However, several key developments began to reshape their practice of religion. Likely as a result of their many years in exile, the Jews began to worship in local synagogues spread throughout the Persian empire. They continued this new practice in their own land, even after the temple was rebuilt. Although priests served in the temple and performed the required sacrifices, worship in the synagogues centered on the study of the Law, and teachers of the law became the influential preservers and interpreters of the law. People with questions about God became more likely to turn to a teacher of the law than a priest.

During this time, the Israelites also came into religious conflict with the Samaritans. Descendants of Israelites who had been left behind during the Babylonian exile, the Samaritans had intermarried with Babylonians, Syrians, and others. As a result, their worship grew syncretistic, incorporating elements of pagan religions with worship of Yahweh, the God of Israel. While the Jews rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem, the Samaritans built a rival temple in the north. The ensuing religious and ethnic strife between Jews and Samaritans proved to be long lasting, which made it all the more amazing when Jesus later took the time to speak to an adulterous Samaritan woman (John 4).

THE HELLENISTIC PERIOD (336-165 B.C.)

With the fall of Persia to Alexander the Great, the age of the great Eastern empires ended. Western might came to dominate the Mediterranean and Middle East. Indeed, the Greek empire became the largest the world had ever seen, extending even into western India. Although Alexander the Great died young amidst suspicious circumstances, his empire continued under the rule of his generals, who split it into four sections. Ptolemy Soter claimed both Egypt and Israel.

Politically, little changed for the Jews under Greek and Ptolemaic rule. They continued to live and worship under the authority of a distant and foreign ruler, much as they had for generations. Culturally, however, they became more and more influenced by Greek (Hellenistic) civilization. Alexander's strategy for preserving his empire had been to unite the diverse, subjugated peoples around a common culture. The Ptolemaic dynasty carried out this policy with vigor, promoting Greek language and thought by all possible means. Thousands of Jews were forcibly resettled in Alexandria. Although Jews both at home and abroad resisted adapting to Greek religion, they couldn't escape all aspects of Hellenistic influence. They soon began to speak Greek, the trade language of the empire. Their worship came to reflect a Greek preference for aesthetics over content. More significantly, a group of Jewish scholars during this time translated the Old Testament from its original Hebrew into Greek. Called the Septuagint, this Greek translation came to be widely used by Jews everywhere. Jesus himself later quoted from the Septuagint, as did many New Testament authors.

In 198 B.C., the Syrian section of the empire overthrew the Egyptian section. For the first time, Israel came under the rule of a leader who tried to stamp out Judaism completely. Antiochus Epiphanes desecrated the temple, forbade sacrifices to Yahweh, outlawed circumcision, forced Jews to eat pork, and canceled Sabbaths and feast days. Some Jews attempted to conciliate Antiochus and cooperate with his demands; others resisted. These two groups were known as the Hellenists and the Hasidim (pious ones), forerunners of the Pharisees. Also, a group loyal to the high priest emerged, the precursors of the Sadducees.

The conflict in Israel finally reached a boiling point when an elderly priest named Mattathias refused to offer a required pagan sacrifice. Mattathias killed a Syrian officer and a reprobate Jew, fled to the hills, and called faithful Jews everywhere to join him in rebellion. During the ensuing guerrilla war, Mattathias's son, Judas Maccabeus, eventually overcame the Syrians and achieved independence for Israel—its last period of self-rule until the emergence of the modern state of Israel in 1948.

THE MACCABEAN PERIOD (165-63 B.C.)

However, independence proved to be both short-lived and disastrous. As the political dynasty of the Maccabees, also called the Hasmoneans, assumed both the throne and the office of high priest, the nation became beset by infighting. The Sadducees supported Hasmonean rulers as both kings and priests, whereas the Pharisees insisted that a true king could only be a descendant of David and a priest could only be a descendant of Aaron. The founder of the Essenes (the community which preserved for posterity the Dead Sea Scrolls) may have also founded his Qumran community around this time, in reaction against the Hasmoneans. As successive rulers became more and more unpopular (for example, Alexander Janneas was pelted by Jews at a festival when he attempted to perform his priestly duties—he responded by massacring 6,000 of them) the country became increasingly unstable.

Israelite factions turned to mercenaries and outside nations for support. By the time the growing Roman empire turned its attention toward Israel, the nation was able to offer little resistance. In 63 B.C., Pompey sacked Jerusalem. Soon the Jews were once again under the command of a foreign ruler, in this case an Idumean named Antipater who had been installed by Rome. Antipater's son, Herod the Great, followed him as king of the Jews, and it was under his rule that Jesus was born—and that all the Jewish boys in Bethlehem under the age of two were killed.

THE ROMAN PERIOD (63 B.C.-A.D. 135)

Finally, *God's silence ended*. As Matthew opens his Gospel, the Jews are now unwilling subjects of the Roman empire. They are allowed freedom of worship and limited authority in overseeing their own affairs. But they long for more. They read the prophecies of the Old Testament and watch expectantly for the promised Messiah. They dream about the day that Israel will once again be the powerful nation it was under King David. They worship under the guidance of the high priest, dispute religious matters in the high council (Sanhedrin), struggle to survive under Rome, and all the while await the coming Savior. Yet they expect a warrior, and not the baby lying in a manger that *God's angels* announce.

And Jesus will never live up to their expectations. Both of the main religious factions will disapprove of him. The Pharisees are the legalists of the day. They devote themselves to the law of Moses and apply it strictly to everyday life. They believe in the supernatural, angels, and the resurrection. They take their religious traditions seriously, so they cannot accept Jesus' disregard for their rules and his claim to forgive sins. The Sadducees are the rationalists of the day. They are skeptical toward religion. Although they believe in a literal interpretation of Moses' law, they do not allow it to have much impact on their everyday lives. They deny the supernatural and the resurrection; they focus on temporal, political concerns. They see Jesus primarily as a threat, a rabble-rouser who might catch the attention of Rome and thus imperil the nation.

In the end, these factions come to agree on one point, at least—that Jesus must be killed. They work together in the high council to sentence him. They stir up crowds and pressure the Roman authorities to have Jesus crucified. They succeed. Yet in the end, it was *God's plan* that ultimately succeeded. His suffering Servant lived and died as the payment for sin, and he rose again as the hope of the world.

Looking back on the years between the Old and New Testaments, it is clear that God brought about the perfect political and religious setting for the work of his Son. Instigated by the Jewish religious factions the Romans put Jesus to death. The power and highway system of Rome allowed the message of his resurrection to spread. And through the writing of the New Testament, the Greek language proclaimed the gospel in a tongue nearly everyone could understand. As Paul wrote in Galatians 4:4: "But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son." The New Testament tells the story.