

New Testament Survey Class

The Background and Overview of the New Testament and the Four Gospel Records

I. The Inter-Testament Period

The timeline of the New Testament did not begin where the Old Testament timeline ended. There were about 400 years between Malachi and Matthew, and great changes had taken place. An attentive reading of the New Testament will lead us to ask many questions that, for the most part, can only be answered by having a knowledge of the events that happened during this Inter-Testament period.

The Inter-Testament period is known as "The Silent Years" mainly because we have no recorded messages from God in Scripture during this time. This time period was anything but silent because the world changed in many ways religiously and politically. These changes were used by God to prepare the way for the coming of Jesus Christ to Earth.

A. World Powers

At the end of the Old Testament (around 400 B.C.), the _____ was the dominant world power, and they remained so until 333 B.C.

With the conquests of Alexander, the Great, the _____ became the dominant world power, ruling from 333 B.C. until 167 B.C. It was because of this empire that Greek became the common language throughout most of the known world.

After the death of Alexander in 323 B.C., the empire was divided among his four top generals. Two of these generals, Ptolemy and Seleucus, started their own dynasties—the Ptolemy dynasty in Egypt and the Seleucus dynasty in Syria. They contended with each other for the mastery of Palestine until 167 B.C. Sometimes the Ptolemies dominated, and sometimes the Seleucids dominated. Because the Ptolemies dealt kinder with the Jews most of the time, many Jews moved to and settled in Egypt, especially in the city of Alexandria.

Then came the struggle for Jewish national independence under the _____, who sought to be rulers of their own land without outside interference. This period covered 167-141 B.C.

From 141-63 B.C., a family of wealthy Jewish priest-kings, who were descendants of the Maccabees, ruled in Palestine. They were known as the _____ (a name derived from a Hebrew word meaning "wealthy").

In 63 B.C. _____, one of the key military and political leaders of Rome at the time, conquered Palestine. This began the domination of the Jewish people by Rome.

When _____, the first Roman emperor, defeated _____, a Roman general and rival, at the Battle of Actium in 31 B.C., Herod the Great sought and received from Augustus the governorship of Judea, Samaria, Galilee, Perea, and Idumea. _____ was the first of the Herods (a family of Idumaeans [Edomites] descent) and the one in power when Jesus was born. Eleven different members of the Herodian family—Herod the Great, Herod Philip I, Herod Antipas, Herod Archelaus, Herod Philip II, Salome, Herod Agrippa I, Herodius, Herod Agrippa II, Bernice, and Drusilla—are mentioned in the Books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and Acts.

You can see how the Inter-Testament period between the Old and New Testaments was anything but silent. Politically, the dominant world power changed from the Persians to the Greeks and from the Greeks to the Romans. The New Testament Gospel story opens with Palestine under Roman rule.

B. Political Parties and Religious Sects

In the Gospels certain groups of people are mentioned. Some of them previously appeared in the Old Testament, but others originated during the Inter-Testament period. It is important to understand who the different groups were in order to grasp their significance in the New Testament.

1. _____

The Galileans were a political party that arose in northern Palestine. Adherents followed Judas of Galilee, who headed a rebellion against all foreign domination. They were political fanatics who violently opposed Pilate, the Roman leader appointed to rule over Judea.

2. _____

The Herodians were more of a political party than a religious sect. They took their name from the family of Herod the Great and derived their authority from the Roman government. They regarded Jesus as a revolutionary since they were averse to any changes in the political situation.

3. _____

The Levites were the descendants of Levi and were a tribe of Israel that was not counted with the other tribes. They had charge of the Temple and its services. All priests were Levites, but not all Levites were priests. During the days of the Tabernacle, Levites who were not priests were responsible to take down, carry, and set up the Tabernacle. When the permanent Temple was built, they were in charge of the maintenance of the Temple and its articles of furniture. Levites who were priests were in charge of Temple worship.

4. _____

The Pharisees arose during the time of the Maccabees. They were called "separatists" in mockery by their enemies because they "separated" themselves from the ambitious political party in their nation. They were the conservatives of their day, but their religious orthodoxy was spiritually barren. It was for this reason they were severely condemned by Jesus.

5. _____

The Jewish priesthood was ordained by God during the time of Moses. All priests were from the tribe of Levi, and their function was strictly religious. After the return from Babylon, the civil power in Israel passed into the hands of the priests. They were both political princes over the land as well as religious ministers. They were in charge of Temple worship. The head of the priests was the High Priest. During the time of Jesus, the priests, for the most part, were carnal in spirit and were the persistent enemies of Jesus. They ultimately delivered Jesus to Pilate to be crucified (John 18:35).

6. _____

Various officials are indicated by this word. It is used in John 2:8, 9 for the governor of a feast and in John 3:1 for members of the Sanhedrin. The word is translated "prince" or "princes" 11 times, most of which refer to the devil or certain world rulers. In Revelation 1:5, Jesus Christ is called the Prince of the kings of Earth, which means He is the Ruler of all the kings of the world.

7. _____

The Sadducees were the aristocratic and political party among the Jews and were rivals of the Pharisees. In religious beliefs they were the "modernists" of their day, denying the existence of a spiritual world [angels and demons], the Resurrection, and the immortality of the soul (Acts 23:8). They came into prominence during the time of the Maccabees and disappeared after the fall of the Jewish nation in A.D. 70. The High Priest during Jesus' time was a Sadducee.

8. _____

The Samaritans were a mixed race of people living in the province of Samaria. Because of the mixture of peoples living there, idolatrous forms of worship mingled with the worship of the remnant of the Israelites. The result was "They feared the LORD, and served their own gods." (1 Kings 17:33) When the second Temple was being built in 535 B.C., the Samaritans offered their help. The Jews refused their help, and a very strong enmity sprang up between them. This feud was evident in Jesus' day.

9. _____

God commanded Moses to establish judges who would act as a court of law to pass judgments. The number on this court varied but usually had about 70 members comprised of priests, the high priest, and elders. They exercised great authority in interpreting the law. While the term Sanhedrin is not used in the New Testament, this group is identified 24 times as "the council." "Now the chief priests, and elders, and all the council, sought false witness against Jesus, to put him to death." (Matthew 26:59)

10. _____

In New Testament times, the scribes were students, interpreters, and teachers of the Old Testament.

They were also lawyers. They were held in high esteem by the people, but they were avowed opponents of Jesus. Jesus publicly denounced them for making the Word of God of no effect by their traditions.