

Sunday School Handout

The 400 Years Between the Testaments

As we begin a study of the Gospel of Matthew, I think it will help us to understand some of the history before the New Testament. After the days and writings of Malachi (last book of the Old Testament), heaven went silent, and would stay that way for approximately 400 years, until the angel Gabriel appeared to the priest Zacharias serving in the Temple in Jerusalem (Luke chapter 1). The angel gave the announcement of the birth of John the Baptist, the forerunner of the Lord Jesus.

Although this 400-year period was a silent period as far as Scripture is concerned, many things changed in the world. The Old Testament closed with the Medo–Persian Empire being the dominant world power, and Egypt was also a nation to be reckoned with. During the 400-year period between the Old and New Testaments, both faded from the scene as great nations. World power shifted from the East to the West, from the Orient to Europe, and from Medo–Persia to Greece.

When the New Testament opens, Rome is the world ruler. Below are some important historical events for this time of change. Remember that dates should be considered as approximate.

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| 480 B.C. | Xerxes, the Persian, was victorious against the Greeks at Thermopylae but was defeated at the battle of Salamis. From this point forward, the west would dominate the east for world power. |
| 333 B.C. | Out of the West there came that “goat” which Daniel records in the 8 th chapter of Daniel. This was Alexander the Great, the goat with the great horn. He led the united Greek forces to victory over the Persians. |
| 332 B.C. | Alexander the Great visited Jerusalem. He was shown the prophecy of Daniel which spoke of him; therefore he spared Jerusalem. Jerusalem was one of the few cities that he ever spared. |
| 323 B.C. | Alexander the Great dies, and his world empire was divided among four of his generals. |
| 320 B.C. | Judea was annexed to Egypt by Ptolemy Soter (Alexander’s general who became Pharaoh in Egypt). |

- 312 B.C. Seleucus (another of Alexander's generals) founded the kingdom of the Seleucidae, which is Syria. He attempted to take Judea, and so Judea became the battleground between Syria and Egypt.
- 203 B.C. Antiochus the Great (6th ruler of Seleucid Empire) took Jerusalem, and Judea came under the control of Syria.
- 170 B.C. Antiochus IV Epiphanes took Jerusalem and defiled the temple. He had been mentioned in Daniel as the "little horn" (Dan. 8:9). An evil man bent on destroying Judaism.
- 166 B.C. Mattathias, Jewish priest, began a revolt against Syria. This is the beginning of the Maccabean period. Judas Maccabaeus, whose name means "the hammer," was the military leader of the revolt.
- 63 B.C. Pompey, Roman general and statesman, took Jerusalem, and Israel came under the control of Rome. Israel was under Roman control from this time, till the birth of Christ, and throughout the New Testament period.
- 40 B.C. The Roman senate appointed Herod I (Herod the Great) client king of Judea. A very wicked man, who did many construction projects throughout Judea.
- 37 B.C. Herod the Great conquers Jerusalem, kills Antigonus, the last of the Maccabean king-priests.
- 31 B.C. Caesar Augustus became emperor of Rome.
- 19 B.C. Herod the Great begins expansion of the Temple in Jerusalem. It begins in around 20 B.C. (before birth of Christ), and continues for over 40 years (well into the time of the New Testament).
- 4 B.C. Our Lord Jesus was born in Bethlehem.

Many changes took place in Judea during these 400 years. After the Babylonian captivity, the Jewish nation turned from idolatry, to striving for legal holiness. The Law became an idol to them. The classic Hebrew language was replaced by Aramaic in everyday speech, although Hebrew was retained for worship in their synagogues. The synagogue seems to have come into existence during or right after the captivity, and became the center of religious life for the Jews.

Also, during this time, there arose a few groups of people that are mentioned many times in the New Testament; but were never even heard of in the Old Testament: Pharisees, Sadducees, Scribes, and Herodians.

Even though this 400 year period was a time of silence from God, it was a time of great literary activity. The Old Testament was translated into Greek (Septuagint) in Alexandria, Egypt, around 285 to 247 B.C. This translation was done by six members from each of the twelve tribes. The name Septuagint, means "seventy." This translation was used by Paul, and was likely quoted by Christ.

The Apocrypha was written in this era. These are fourteen books which bear no marks of inspiration.

Looking back at this period, God was preparing the Jewish people, the Greek civilization, the Roman Empire, and all the people of the world for the coming of a Savior. The advent (first coming of Christ) happened by the Hand of God, and as the Apostle Paul writes in Galatians in "the fulness of time."

Randy Skidmore, 12-4-23

Source: J. Vernon McGee, introduction to Gospel of Matthew