

## THE PERIOD BETWEEN THE TESTAMENTS

**Introduction:** From the time we leave Malachi, approximately 400 years pass before the opening lines of the New Testament. In that time many important historical events and transitions occur. Combined, these conditions constitute the "just the right time" for the coming of Jesus Christ. (cf. Roman 5:6)

But first, what happened to the Jews and the entire Mediterranean world during the period between the testaments?

### I. The Babylonian Empire

A. The following major events occurred after the reign of King David:

1. Solomon, his son, becomes king in 970 BC.
2. Upon Solomon's death in 930 BC the kingdom was divided.
  - a. The Northern Kingdom (i.e.-Israel) consisted of ten tribes under the leadership of Jeroboam.
  - b. The Southern Kingdom falls to Babylon in 606 BC.

[1] Daniel and others were taken to Babylon. (Daniel 1:1-7)

[2] Other captives were taken in later deportations - 597 and 586 BC.

3. Just as Jeremiah prophesied Judah returned home in 536 BC - 70 years after being taken captive.

B. During the seventy years of Babylonian captivity, several permanent, significant changes took place in Judaism.

1. The synagogue became the dominant place of worship and instruction.
2. The scribe replaced the priest as the men of greatest spiritual influence.
3. The exile to Babylon also created the *Diaspora*, scattered Jews as many of the Jews never returned to Palestine.

### II The Medo-Persian Empire

A. Under King Cyrus Persia conquered Babylon in 539 BC.

B. In 536 BC Cyrus issued a decree allowing the Jews to return home and rebuild the Temple.

C. A later Persian King (Xerxes or Ahasuerus) married a Hebrew woman (480 BC) who was used by God to save her people. (cf. Esther)

D. Still another Persian King - Artaxerxes I - allowed more Jews to return to their homeland.

1. Ezra was in this group and became a great teacher of the Law. (cf. Ezra 7-10)

2. Nehemiah received permission to return and rebuild Jerusalem's wall in 445 BC.

E. As the Jews returned, animosity grew between the people who had settled in the land during their absence - the Samaritans, Jews who married gentiles.

F. Under Ezra, Nehemiah, and the prophet Malachi revival took place.

G. This takes us to the end of the Old Testament (ca. 400 BC).

H. Persia continued to be the main world power until the coming of the Greek empire.

### III. The Greek Empire

A. While the Greek empire had been predicted by the prophet Daniel (cf. Daniel 2) the time of its domination was not reflected in the scripture.

B. Greece came to power as Philip of Macedon was successful in unifying the Greek city-states under one rule.

1. He reigned from 359 BC to 336 BC.

2. His son, however, became one of the most famed world leaders in history.

C. Alexander the Great succeeded his father in 336 BC and ruled for thirteen years.

1. Alexander was a military genius.

2. Tutored by Aristotle he was consumed with the idea of conquering and unifying the world under the Greek culture.

3. As nation after nation fell, Greek architecture, Greek sports, the Greek language, Greek customs, etc. spread through the Mediterranean world.

4. Alexander and his troops conquered Palestine in 332 BC.
  - a. The Jews offered no military resistance.
  - b. Like the Persians, the Greeks allowed the Jews religious freedom.
- D. After Alexander's death, the worldwide Greek influence continued but fighting broke out among his generals, and the empire fragmented into four parts:
  1. Ptolemy controlled Egypt.
  2. Antipater controlled Greece and Macedonia.
  3. Seleucus ruled Babylonia.
  4. Lysimachus ruled Thrace.
- E. Eventually, two powers, Ptolemy and Seleucus, prevailed.

#### **IV. The Post-Greek/Pre-Roman Years**

- A. The Ptolemies had political and military control over Palestine from 323 BC to 198 BC.
  1. Under their rule, Greek influence continued to grow stronger.
  2. The increased use of the Greek language led to the need for a translation of scripture into that language.
    - a. The Septuagint (LXX) was produced about 250 BC.
    - b. It was the Bible for the Jews of the *Diaspora* and later.
- B. The Seleucids under Antiochus III, wrestled control of Palestine from the Ptolemies in 198 BC. (cf. I Maccabees 1:15)
  1. Thirty years later, his son Antiochus IV Epiphanies was on the throne.
  2. Antiochus Epiphanies tried to conquer the Ptolemies in Egypt but was forced out by upstart Rome.
  3. He retreated through Palestine and vented his embarrassment and anger upon the Jews. (I Maccabees 1:20-53)
  4. For two years, he murdered, plundered, and enslaved.
    - a. He desecrated the temple, stripping it of her treasures.
    - b. On December 16, 167 BC, Antiochus Epiphanies even offered a pig on the holy altar. (I Maccabees 1:54-64)
- C. A Jewish priest named Matthias and his five sons led a revolt against the Seleucids in 166 BC.
  1. From the hill country, they organized guerilla fighters. (I Maccabees 2:1-70)
  2. Matthias died the following year and the leadership of the revolt passed to his son Judas.
    - a. His nickname was Maccabeus. (i.e. – the hammer)
    - b. He was a brilliant military strategist.
  3. Judas Maccabeus took control of Jerusalem.
    - a. He constructed a new altar and refurbished the temple.
    - b. He rededicated the temple to the Lord on December 14, 164 BC.
    - c. Hanukkah (Feast of Lights) is the annual Jewish holiday season that celebrates this event.
  4. Under Maccabean leadership, Palestine ridded itself of Syrian (i.e. - Seleucid) influence, particularly through a treaty made with Rome in 139 BC.
  5. During the Maccabean reign, three groups came to prominence that would have great influence on Palestine in Jesus' day.
    - a. The Maccabees (priests) became the Hasmoneans Priest.
    - b. The Hasidim became the Pharisees.
    - c. The Hellenists became the Sadducees.

#### **V. The Roman Empire**

- A. Rome took control of Palestine under Pompey in 63 BC.
- B. While Roman power dominated the civilized world throughout the period of time covered by New Testament literature; Rome basically allowed conquered territories to govern themselves.
- C. After Pompey's conquest of Palestine, the rule of Palestine was given to Antipater. 87

1. Antipater was an Idumean, not a Jew.
  2. A cunning manipulator, he managed to secure this position.
  3. He was the beginning of the Herodian dynasty.
- D. After Antipater, Herod the Great reigned from 37 BC to 4 AD.
1. He was called Herod "the Great" because of his great building projects.
  2. But Herod was a cruel, ruthless man. (e.g. - Matthew 2)
- E. After Herod's death, Palestine was divided to three of his sons - Philip, Antipas, and Archileus.
- F. Under the Roman Empire, several things were in place for the "fullness of time."
1. A common language.
  2. General worldwide peace.
  3. Widespread poverty among conquered peoples.
  4. Slavery was enforced.

## **BACKGROUND STUDY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT**

**Introduction:** The Old Testament constantly pointed to a coming Messiah and a new covenant that He would bring. Some background information will help us better appreciate the full meaning of the New Testament and its setting. Christ came, the apostles were called, and the church grew and flourished in the following world environment.

### **I. The Roman World of the 1st Century.**

- A. The political structure of the Roman Empire.
1. By New Testament times, Rome had evolved from a republic to a monarchy.
  2. The following chart lists the emperors of the first century along with New Testament references and significant biblical events.
  3. While the role of the emperor was ultimately important, more central to the New Testament story was the rule of provinces.
    - a. Proconsuls appointed by the Roman Senate ruled the safer provinces.
    - b. Procurators appointed by the emperor governed the less secure areas.
  4. Citizenship was a feature introduced to the world through Rome.
    - a. One could be a citizen of Rome based on birth, imperial grant, or purchase.
    - b. Later, the right of citizenship was extended to all free persons.
    - c. Paul appealed to his citizenship to stop unfair punishment. (Acts 22:25-29)
  5. Roman law was a major contribution to the civilized Western world.
    - a. Roman law was direct and to the point.
    - b. Little emphasis was placed on intent or extenuating circumstances.
    - c. The enforcement of this law was swift and even-handed.
  6. The travel and communication infrastructures were central to the spread of the gospel.
    - a. Generally safe Roman roads connected the cities.
    - b. The seas were cleared of pirates.
    - c. A common language (i.e., Greek) was spoken.
- B. The beliefs and religion of the Romans.
1. Astrology and superstition abounded. (cf. Acts. 8:9-24)
  2. Traditional Greco-Roman polytheism lingered on.
    - a. By the 1<sup>st</sup> century, these traditional deities were beginning to be mocked.
    - b. A few areas still had thriving cults. (cf. Acts 19:27. 34, 35)
  3. Mystery religions had become quite popular (e.g. Zoroastrianism, Isis, and Serapis – like modern cults).

4. Emperor worship became extremely important by the end of the first century.
  - a. From Augustus on emperors were deemed deities upon their death.
  - b. This tradition seemed to combine patriotism and religion, imposing greater control on the people.
  - c. When Domitian came to the throne (A.D. 81-96) he proclaimed himself "*dominiset deus*" (i.e., Lord and God) and ordered worship of himself.
    - [1] Because of their long-standing monotheism, Jews were exempt from this mandate.
    - [2] Viewed as an upstart cult, Christianity received no such exemption.
5. Of key importance is the fact that none of the above created a great sense of morality among the people.

## II. Palestine in the 1st Century.

### A. The political situation in Palestine.

1. When Pompey conquered the area for Rome in 63 BC, he placed Antipater in charge of Palestine.
  - a. Antipater was officially made procurator in 55 BC
  - b. He was assassinated in 43 BC.
  - c. After some turmoil, Antipater's son, Herod (the Great), was appointed "King of the Jews" in 37 BC.
2. The New Testament has frequent references over a number of years to the Herodian dynasty. To the casual reader, they can be confusing. The following chart may be helpful:
3. Upon the death of Herod the Great in 4 BC, Palestine was divided among his three sons.
  - a. Archelaus was made tetrarch of Judea.
  - b. Antipas was made tetrarch of Galilee and Perea.
  - c. Philip became the tetrarch of the northern parts of the Transjordan.
4. Archelaus was such an atrocious leader that Rome removed him from office in AD 6.
5. It was because of his removal that authority in Judea was turned over to a series of Roman procurators.

## FIRST CENTURY PROCURATORS OF JUDEA

### Date of reign Name Scripture

- A.D. 6-10 Coponius
  - A.D. 10-13 M. Ambivius
  - A.D. 13-15 Annius Rufus
  - A.D. 15-26 Valerius Gratus
  - A.D. 26-36 Pontius Pilate Luke 3:1; 23:1
  - A.D. 36-38 Marcellus
  - A.D. 38-41 Maryllus\*\*
  - A.D. 44-46 Cuspius Fadus
  - A.D. 46-48 Tiberius Alexander
  - A.D. 48-52 Ventidius Cumanus
  - A.D. 52-59 M. Antonius Felix Acts 23, 24
  - A.D. 59-61 Porcius Festus Acts 24:27
  - A.D. 61-65 Albinus
  - A.D. 65 Destruction of Jerusalem
  - A.D. 70 Gessius Florus - Destruction of Jerusalem
  - A.D. 72 Vettulenus Cerialis
  - A.D. 72-75 Lucilius Bassus
  - A.D. 75-86 M. Salvienus  
Flavius Silva
  - A.D. 86 Pompeius Longinus
- \*\*Herod Agrippa I ruled over Judea in AD 41-44

B. The cultural situation in Palestine:

1. Most of the Jews were poor.
  - a. Fishermen, farmers, and craftsmen eked out a meek existence.
  - b. Little slavery existed among the Jews.
  - c. Few social or class distinctions divided the people.
2. A wealthy aristocracy developed among a few priestly families.

C. The spiritual life of the Jews:

1. Jewish tradition has taken precedence over the Law of Moses.
  - a. The Law had become even more precious during the Babylonian exile.
  - b. However, the very scribes who revered and taught the law soon became guilty of building a great list of traditions that came to supersede the true law. (cf. Mark 7:1-13)
2. The synagogue had become more important in everyday Jewish life than the temple.
3. The temple was primarily honored for being the focal point of the great feast days (Passover, Pentecost, and Feast of the Tabernacles).
4. The priesthood was dominated by the Jewish "liberals" who were the puppets of the Roman procurators.
5. Several parties arose in Judaism.
  - a. The Pharisees, a small strict, and respected group, committed to keeping the Law flawlessly. In their separatism, they often fostered hypocrisy.
  - b. The Sadducees were the wealthy aristocrats who collaborated with Rome. They were generally unpopular with most of the Jews.
  - c. The Zealots were a militant, radical group of Jewish patriots bent on ridding the land of Roman dominion.
  - d. The Sanhedrin was the supreme court of Judaism. It heard major disputes over social and religious issues.
6. Because Christianity was born in the bosom of Judaism, it is extremely important to understand this background.

**III. A Quick Look at the New Testament.**

A. The New Testament was written over a 50-year period.

B. We call it the New Testament, New Covenant, because that's what it is.

1. Jeremiah prophesied that a new covenant would be established. (Jeremiah 31:31-34)
2. The blood of Jesus established this new covenant. (cf. I Corinthians 11:23-25; Hebrews 8:6-8)

C. We don't know exactly when or how the present canon of 27 books came together.

1. The first grouping of accepted books dates back to about AD 140.
2. Although there was some dispute over a few books, consensus was reached very early in the history of the church as to which books were inspired by God.
3. Major tests for "canonicity" included:
  - a. Was it written by an apostle or a close associate of an apostle (e.g. Mark and Luke)?
  - b. Content?
  - c. Corroboration with other scripture?
  - d. Was the letter or book accepted by faithful churches from the earliest of times?
4. Undoubtedly the providence of God was the key factor in bringing the New Testament to us.