

Many students of the Bible are not aware of the importance of the 400 years that bridge the time gap between the Old and the New Testaments. Some knowledge of this period would be helpful in comprehending the environment of the New Testament record.

The influence of foreign cultures on the traditional Jewish way of life is an important consideration in the time between the Old and New Testaments.

The Old Testament closes with a small Jewish community firmly re-established in Judea under the guidance of Ezra. Four hundred years later, when the New Testament opens we see a completely different picture. Great changes had taken place in the intervening years since Old Testament times in the religious life of the Jews. Strange new figures move across the stage against the backdrop of the Synagogue and the Sanhedrin – various interest groups such as the Pharisees, Sadducees, Herodians and Zealots - all are familiar names in the New Testament, but completely unknown in the Old. The time between the Testaments is a gripping prologue before the entrance of Christ, the greatest personality ever to appear on the World's stage.

Though Rome dominated the political scene at the time of Christ, the social and religious world had largely adopted the sophisticated culture of Greece. Greek philosophy had even infiltrated the exclusiveness of Jewish religious life. The wealthy educated class seemed particularly susceptible to the cultural and religious philosophy of the Greeks. Every important city in the Holy Land had its theater and stadium. The performances in the theaters had their effect on Jewish thinking, conditioning and molding the people to the democratic philosophy of Greece. Games and physical contests modeled after those held in Olympia were staged in the stadiums, and many young Jews were attracted by these athletic spectacles and took part in them. A number of the more liberal Jews were fascinated by the glamour and pageantry of the Greek religious festivals. They admired the beautiful temples erected to the many Greek gods. Their sons attended Greek schools of philosophy and there absorbed the teachings of Plato concerning an immortal soul. The parable of the rich man and Lazarus as recorded in Luke 16:19-31 gives us an indication of how far such ideas had penetrated into Jewish beliefs at the time. The influence of Greek mythology accounts for the introduction into the Bible narrative of demons, devils and a plurality of gods. Disease and mental disorders were attributed to these imaginary evil spirits. These things were foreign to the Old Testament and the people of God.

This infiltration of pagan ideas did not go unchallenged. The strict orthodox Jew could see the serious danger to the Mosaic system in the wide acceptance of Greek ideology. There was a grave possibility that the Jews might completely lose their traditional exclusiveness. To combat this threat a strong movement took place in the formation of a religious sect to promote and support the traditional Jewish way of life. This group in New Testament times was called the Pharisees.

THE TIME BETWEEN THE TESTAMENTS

The book of Daniel in the Old Testament provides an interesting and very helpful overview of history before it unfolded. The prophecy goes like this:

Daniel 2 The king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar had a dream that bothered him. He asked the skilled and wise people of his kingdom to tell him what the dream was, and in so doing, he would know that if they could figure out the dream, then they could give a good interpretation of it. However none were able to tell him the dream, except one man who ask for some time and his God would tell him what the dream was and what it meant. The man who did this was Daniel, a captive from Israel who had been carried to Babylon to serve in the kings court.

Daniel told the Dream (Daniel 2:27-35). He acknowledged that it was not his interpretation but that of his God, Yahweh, the God of Israel.

Nebuchadnezzar had a dream of an image of a man whose head was of gold, chest and arms of silver, belly and thighs of brass, legs of iron and feet which were mixed iron with clay. Then a stone rolled down and struck the image in the feet, causing the image to crumble. Then the stone ground the image to powder and the stone grew to fill the earth.

Daniel 2:36-45 are the interpretation of the dream as provided by the God of Daniel. The head was the king of Babylon. However, the successive metals of the image were the successive kingdoms that would displace the one before. IE Babylon would be taken over by the silver of the Medes and Persians (two arms), They in turn would be succeeded by the brass of the Greeks and then the iron legs of the Romans would take over. (two legs of the Roman era, IE east and west Rome). The feet of the image were mixed strong and weak, which represented slow decline of the Roman empire into many factions and countries.

This prophecy of Daniel is revisited 2 more times emphasizing different aspects of the successive kingdoms. In Daniel 8 the successive kingdoms are even named! 20 The ram which thou sawest having two horns are the kings of Media and Persia.21 And the rough goat is the king of Grecia: and the great horn that is between his eyes is the first king.

With Daniels prophecies in mind, let's consider the history outside of the Bible, but laid out in the Bible.

The following is an outline of the period of history between the prophetic book of Malachi which is the last book of the Old Testament and the Gospel of Matthew, the first book of the New Testament.

THE TIME BETWEEN THE TESTAMENTS

432 B.C. - MALACHI

Malachi prophesied about the time of Nehemiah. There are approximately 432 years of prophetic silence.” Daniel 9 is a prophecy of the time period until the coming of the Messiah that had been promised as the ‘seed’ of the woman, and of Abraham and of King David. There was a period of prophetic darkness that lasted until the angel appeared to Zacharias, the father of John the Baptist.(Luke 1:11, 12)

330 B.C. - ALEXANDER THE GREAT

After the Medes and the Persians had conquered Babylon, they ruled from about BC 536 to BC 333 when Alexander the Great came on the scene. A young man with great battle skills, his war campaign ran across the middle east conquering all the nations all the way to Persia in a very short period of time. The words of Daniel’s prophecy put it this way in Daniel 8:7 “he stamped upon him (Persia); and there was none that could deliver the ram (Persia) out of his hand.”

328 B.C. - ALEXANDER INVADED EGYPT

Alexander built the city of Alexandria in Egypt. It was a model city. As a result, the majority of the Alexandrian Jews spoke only Greek and had little knowledge of their mother tongue. They were much more liberal in their religion and way of life than the orthodox Jews of the Holy Land.

When we think of the Jew of the dispersion as they were carried into the nations, we should consider the Alexandrian Jews with those in Babylon, as representing the major Jewish communities outside of Jerusalem.

305 B.C. - DIVISION OF GREEK EMPIRE AS A RESULT OF ALEXANDER'S DEATH

The division of the Greek Empire is shown in Daniel's vision by a leopard with four heads (Daniel 7:7). The leopard represents Alexander's Greek Kingdom. The four heads symbolize the four generals who succeeded him, and the empire was divided among them with the following territories:

1. Ptolemy - Egypt
2. Selucius - Syria
3. Lysimachus - Macedonia
4. Cassander - Greece and Macedonia

THE TIME BETWEEN THE TESTAMENTS

300 B.C. - SELEUCUS CONQUERED SYRIA

The Holy Land formed a highway between Egypt and Syria. It was inevitable that it would become the arena in which many conflicts between these two nations would take place. The rivalry between these nations was a powerful factor in the ebb and flow of fortune for the little buffer state of Israel.

275 B.C. - PTOLEMY PHILADELPHUS-SECOND RULER OF GRAECO-EGYPTIAN DYNASTY

This man founded the great library in Alexandria which contained the literature of all nations. The philosophy and science of the world was represented in the archives of this great institution. It was brought to the attention of Ptolemy Philadelphus that his library lacked a great literary work that had its origin in the Jewish race. This of course was the writings of the Old Testament Scriptures. He was told that the wisdom of these books surpassed anything that had ever been written. He was so impressed that he sent to Jerusalem for scholars to come to Egypt and translate these books from Hebrew into Greek. This was done and the translation takes its name 'Septuagint' or 'the seventy', from the 70 scholars who tradition records, accomplished this work. The importance of this translation cannot be over emphasized for it enabled the thousands of Jews scattered abroad in Greek speaking communities to have the Holy Scriptures in the common language of the time. Many Jews, particularly those in Egypt and North Africa, were unable to understand Hebrew, and so this Greek translation restored their Scriptures and made possible the great work of the evangelists of the New Testament. The Septuagint version was almost universally used in the time of Christ and the First Century Church. Here again we see God's providence in the preparation for the missionary work that was to take the Gospel of Salvation to the ends of the earth.

175 B.C. - ANTIOCHUS IV (Epiphanies)

Antiochus became King of Syria and desired to bring the glory of Greece to Syria and Palestine. He erected cities on Greek lines in all the countries that he conquered. He insisted the Jews must worship Greek gods and forced them to repudiate the faith of their fathers. A revolt, led by an aged priest named Mattathias and his five sons, took place. Upon the death of Mattathias, Judas one of his sons was given command of the Jewish forces. The adopted family name, Maccabee, means "Hammer" and probably derives its significance from the blows struck for freedom. Judas Maccabee was a military genius and succeeded in delivering his people from Syrian domination.

THE TIME BETWEEN THE TESTAMENTS

164 B.C. - JUDAS MACCABEUS

Established Jewish independence. In 164 B.C., he cleansed the temple, which had been desecrated by Antiochus, and re-instituted the ritual of the law which had been suppressed. The profaned altar that had been set up was completely removed and a new one built. The feast of the dedication is mentioned in John 10:22.

147 B.C. - ROME CONQUERED GREECE

133 B.C. - ROME ESTABLISHED ITS SUPREMACY IN ASIA MINOR

65 B.C. - JUDEA BECAME A ROMAN PROVINCE

Pompey captured Jerusalem. He presumptuously entered the temple and profaned it by his intrusion of the Holy Place. He incurred the Jew's hatred by this act. Their bitter resentment to Roman domination was to continue throughout New Testament history.

THE HERODIAN DYNASTY

47 B.C. - ANTIPATER

Antipater, an Idumean, rose to power in Judea under Roman sponsorship. He was a friend of Caesar and furnished material and military aid to him in his Egyptian campaign. He became a powerful politician in Jewish affairs and was the real power behind the Jewish authorities at this time. He was the father of Herod the Great.

37 B.C. - HEROD THE GREAT

Herod was brought up in Rome and when a very young man, was made Governor of Galilee. He was an imposing figure and a resourceful Governor. His ability attracted the notice and admiration of Caesar Augustus who made him King of the Jewish State. He improved the Holy Land with many construction projects. Caesarea, which he named after the Emperor, was one of the most important cities in the East. The greatest of all his building enterprises, was the reconstruction of the Temple at Jerusalem, but in spite of all his endeavors to cultivate the friendship of the Jews, they still despised him. They rejected him as a foreigner with no right to the throne of David. He was a ruthless, ambitious politician, with no mercy on those who opposed him. This immoral and depraved ruler, in his later years, eliminated the rivals within his own family with the same dispatch as he did his enemies. Herod is notorious for his effort to kill the baby Jesus by ordering the death of all the infants in Bethlehem. Matthew 2:16

THE TIME BETWEEN THE TESTAMENTS

4 B.C. - 6 A.D. - ARCHELAUS (Matthew 2:22)

Herod's elder son by his Samaritan wife Malthace, succeeded him. He was like his father in character and disposition. His intemperate nature drove him to such excesses that the Jews sent a protest to Rome which resulted in his exile.

4 - 40 A.D. HEROD ANTIPAS (Matthew 14:13)

Herod's younger son by Malthace. He was the ablest of Herod's sons and, like his father, was a great builder of cities. Tiberias, the capital of Galilee, was built by him and named in honor of the Emperor Tiberius. This was the Herod who caused John the Baptist to be beheaded and was called by Jesus "that old fox".

34 A.D. - HEROD PHILIP I (Matthew 14:13)

Son of Herod the Great by his fifth wife, Mariamne.

4 - 34 A.D. - HEROD PHILIP II (Luke 3:1)

Son of Herod the Great by his seventh wife, Cleopatra.

37 A.D. - 44 A.D. - HEROD AGRIPPA I (Acts 12:1-23)

Sentenced the apostle James to death and imprisoned Peter.

48 - 94 A.D. - HEROD AGRIPPA II (Acts 25:13)

Son of Herod Agrippa I. Was given the title of King by Roman authority. He and his sister Bernice heard Paul's defense before the Roman procurator Festus.

THE TIME BETWEEN THE TESTAMENTS

The following information will be helpful in the study of the gospels.

THE PHARISEES

About 200 years before Christ the scribes who were faithful to the traditions of the Law re-instituted by Ezra began to actively oppose the Greek philisophical trend among the people. Early in the 2nd century B.C. this group was called the Hasidim, i.e. God's loyal ones. As time progressed their party grew in influence and power and appeared under another name, Pharisees Le. the separated ones. The name Pharisee first appears in the period just before the Maccabean war. This minority group protested the abandonment of certain traditions of the Mosaic Law and Rabbinical teaching. Their fervent opposition to anything non-Jewish was a powerful factor in preserving the doctrines and practices of the Nation's way of life under the state. They were the party of the people and though they were rightfully condemned by Christ, they performed an important function by preserving the Law for the Jewish people. They were the bitter enemies of the Sadducees. From this class came such sincere and devoted disciples as Paul, Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea.

THE TIME BETWEEN THE TESTAMENTS

THE SADDUCEES

The priestly aristocracy. Under the Herod's and the Romans, they held the predominant place in the Sanhedrin. They had little in common with the masses but were politically acceptable to Herod and the Roman rulers. They rejected the doctrine of the resurrection and denied the existence of angels. They were noted for their conservatism. The Sadducees were in constant conflict with the Pharisees on religious and political grounds.

THE HERODIANS

A Jewish political party that saw in Herod the last hope of retaining a Jewish national government. They believed that co-operation with Rome was the most practical way to retain Jewish identity.

THE ESSENES

These were the purists, devoted Old Testament scholars, living a semi-monastic life in wilderness communities. The Dead Sea Scrolls are their records. These scrolls are invaluable, proving the authenticity of our present day Bible. The Essenes were looking for the coming Messiah. They hated the priesthood and despised the hypocrisy of their times. They believed in complete immersion as the proper form of baptism and went through a daily purification ritual. John the Baptist, while not a member of their community, came from the wilderness area of Judea where they were most strongly represented. This important and interesting sect is not mentioned in the Bible.

THE SCRIBES

The Scribes seem to have come into prominence following the time of Ezra. They were experts in the exposition of the Law of Moses. They had tremendous prestige among the common people and were consulted in all religious matters. In early history, the Scribes were drawn from the priests, but later, were accepted from all the educated classes. The Scribe's education generally started at a very early age and continued through one of the great Rabbinical schools. At the age of 30 the Scribe would be qualified to teach as a Rabbi in the synagogue. They were sometimes called lawyers (of religious law) and people gave them recognition and respect in public places. Jerusalem was the center of the great Rabbinical schools of philosophy. Paul found it expedient to take advantage, in one of his addresses, of the fact that he had been taught by Gamaliel, one of the noted Rabbis of his day.

THE TIME BETWEEN THE TESTAMENTS

THE SYNAGOGUE

Synagogue means congregation. They probably had their origin during the exile in Babylon when worship according to the temple ritual was impossible. The synagogue developed as a place of prayer and instruction of the scriptures. It served a three-fold purpose, worship, education and the government of the civil life of the community. Every city, town and village had its synagogue and a connecting school where children from the age of five were taught the traditions of their people and the principles of the Law of Moses. It was the gathering place for the community on the feast days and the Sabbath. Acts 15:21.

THE SANHEDRIN

Sanhedrin refers to the council chamber. Its members were comprised of 71 respected and learned men drawn from Jewish society. This powerful judicial body was composed of lawyers, elders, scribes and those who by reason of wisdom or prestige were acceptable to the religious ruling class. Its function was to make decisions and judge religious matters, doctrinal disputes and cases of heresy. It was empowered to render decisions which did not involve capital punishment. Judgments which would incur the death penalty required the confirmation of the Roman procurator. An exception to this ruling is found in the case of a Gentile violating the barrier which divided the inner court of the temple from the court of the Gentiles. In this case, the Sanhedrin was granted the power to pass the death penalty. A striking illustration of procedures of the Sanhedrin is found in connection with the trial of Christ. For the sake of political expediency, they became the deciding factor in the tragedy of putting an innocent man to death.