

Perseverers Class

Introduction to NT: Part 1 - Between the Testaments

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Introduction: Malachi, written about 425 BC., was written by the last prophet before John the Baptist whose ministry began about 15 AD. Between Malachi and the birth of Christ is about 420 years. That period is usually called “between the Testaments.”

From 539-336 BC. Judea was under the dominion of Persia. In 3 great battles beginning in 336 B.C., Alexander the Great of Greece defeated Persia. Judah then came under direct Greek dominion from 336 until the death of Alexander in 323 BC. At that time Alexander’s empire was split between his 4 principal generals. Ptolemy received Egypt and soon brought Judea under his control. That lasted from 323 to 198 BC. At that point Egypt was defeated by Syria, which had been given to Seleucus. His descendants, the Seleucids, controlled Judea from 198-165 B.C. Egypt had treated Judea relatively leniently, but the Seleucids were very harsh, which led to a successful rebellion in 165 BC. From then until 63 B.C. Judea was relatively independent. In 63 B.C. Pompey conquered Syria and assumed control of Judea for Rome.

Impact of These Events on the NT? First, consider **Greek Influence:** Alexander the Great (died in 323 BC. at age 32) is regarded by many as the greatest conqueror of all time. He conquered Persia, Babylon, Palestine, Syria, Egypt, and western India. Alexander’s desire was to found a worldwide Greek empire unified by language, custom, and culture. In about 13 years he achieved much of his dream. His influence resulted in the entire western world beginning to speak and study the Greek language and adopt elements of Greek culture — this process was called “**Hellenization.**” Hellenism was so popular, it persisted long after Alexander’s death. Hellenism was encouraged even in the Roman era. In Alexandria about 200 B.C., the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek (called the Septuagint and is the Bible Jesus often quoted from).

The Old Testament language of Hebrew is a “picture language” (every word conveys a picture). It is excellent for telling stories and describing historical events (as opposed to a highly doctrinal writing like the New Testament). Greek is the language of the NT, “the language of choice by God Himself to convey divine truth to the world.” Of all the languages in the world, no other language is as “exacting” and “precise” as New Testament Greek. It is the language “spoken” by the common man (commonly called **koine Greek**). **Classical Greek** was the scholarly language of philosophers and of “written” business and legal matters). When Paul wrote to the **Romans**, many of whom probably normally spoke Latin, he still chose to write in Greek.

Other New Developments: “Between the testaments,” Judea’s population grew, and many new things came about – e.g., Pharisees, Sadducees, synagogues, Romans, and Essenes. In 47 B.C. Antipater, the Idumaeon, was appointed procurator by Julius Caesar. Antipater’s son Herod (who became known as “the Great”) was made king of Judea around 40 BC. He planned and carried out extensive remodeling of the Temple. When Jesus was born, Herod was king. Herod

built many beautiful buildings including reconstructing the Temple. Herod's Temple was where Jesus taught and worshipped. Herod was a clever politician and an efficient king—but cruel and constantly suspicious. He had 3 of his wives and 3 of his sons killed. Herod died in 4 B.C. Jesus was born before Herod died, likely about 6 BC. Rome divided Herod's kingdom into four parts. In Galilee, where Jesus grew up and spent much of His public ministry, Herod Antipas ruled.

In the Seleucid period (198-165 BC) in Judea, two religious parties emerged: a pro-Syrian Hellenizing party, and Orthodox Jews called the Hasidim or “Pious Ones” who became the Pharisees. The Pharisees added to the Law of Moses through oral tradition, eventually considering their own rules more important than God's. Christ's teachings often agreed with the Pharisees, but He opposed their hollow legalism and lack of compassion.

The two religious groups opposed one another, causing the Jews to be polarized along political, cultural, and religious lines. All went reasonably well until the Hellenizing party decided to replace the existing High Priest (favored by the Orthodox) with their man, Jason. They bribed Seleucus's successor, *Antiochus Epiphanes*, to make this happen, setting off a political conflict that brought Antiochus to Jerusalem in a rage. He was so angry (168 B.C.) he set about destroying every distinctive of the Jewish faith. He forbade sacrifices, out-lawed circumcision, canceled observance of the Sabbath, and disallowed celebrating feast days. He mutilated and destroyed every copy of the Hebrew Bible he could find. He forced the Jews to eat pork and sacrifice to idols. His final act of sacrilege spelled his ultimate ruin. He desecrated the Most Holy Place, building an altar and offering a sacrifice to Zeus. An elderly priest, *Mattathias*, lived with his five sons in a village just NW of Jerusalem. When a Syrian official tried to enforce heathen sacrifice in the village, Mattathias revolted, killed the Syrian official and a renegade Jew who offered a sacrifice, and fled to the mountains with his family. Thousands of faithful Jews joined him.

The Maccabean Era (165-63 BC): When Mattathias died, 3 of his sons, one after the other, carried on the Maccabean Revolt: *Judas* (166-160 BC), *Jonathan* (160-142 BC), and *Simon* (142-134 BC). They were successful. By 165 BC, they had retaken Jerusalem, cleansed the temple, and restored biblical worship. These events are commemorated as the Feast of Dedication (Hanukkah). Fighting against Syria continued in outlying areas, but the Jewish independence finally was achieved under Simon's leadership in 142 BC. For about seventy years the Jews were independent under the reign of the Hasmonaeon dynasty (the High Priesthood). Orthodox Jews, now called *Pharisees* (which literally means “*separatists*”) refused to recognize any king not of the lineage of David. Those who opposed the Pharisees and supported the Hasmonaeans were called *Sadducees* (from a Hebrew word meaning “*righteous*”). The Pharisees added extensive oral tradition to the Law of Moses. Eventually their rules were considered most important. Sadducees represented the aristocrats and wealthy, wielded power through the Sanhedrin, and rejected all but the Mosaic books of the OT. They refused to believe in resurrection and were attracted to all things Greek. The Pharisees and the Sadducees hated each other, but when Jesus came, He became the common enemy of both parties.

The Impact of Rome (beginning 63 BC.): The NT is filled with references to Rome and its impact on the Jews. The beginning of Rome was centuries before the NT events. Rome was founded in the 8th century B.C. It became a republic in the 5th century BC. In the 1st century BC, Pompey conquered the eastern Mediterranean, including Judea. Julius Caesar conquered Gaul. From 63 B.C., Rome dominated Judea. During a struggle for power, Julius Caesar was assassinated. His adoptive son, Octavian, took control. Octavian became known as Augustus—the same Caesar Augustus we read about in the story of Jesus’ birth. Augustus ruled until 14 AD. Tiberius ruled during Jesus’ time of ministry. The peace and economic stability brought about by Rome allowed Christianity to grow and flourish—Christian missionaries could travel widely on Rome’s good roads and plentiful ships. The gospel spread throughout the empire. Nero ruled during the ministry of both Paul and Peter. Rome taxed and controlled the Jews. Roman governor Pontius Pilate presided over the trial of Jesus. Felix and Festus heard Paul’s case. Jesus was executed on a cross by Rome.

Preparing the Way for the Advent of Christ: “Between the testaments” events set the stage for Christ. These events (especially Hellenism) had a profound impact on the Jews. The Jews began to disagree about facets of their religion, while people in other nations also became dissatisfied with their idolatrous religions. Many Romans and Greeks were attracted to the Hebrew Scriptures and saw them as superior to their mythologies. After the Septuagint translation (about 200 BC.), Hebrew Scriptures were widely available in Greek, the language of the people.

In Judea after 63 B.C., the Jews grew despondent. They were once again a conquered nation, now chaffing under Rome. They felt oppressed, polluted, and rigidly controlled. Given Rome’s power over the whole Mediterranean area, it seemed nothing could possibly free them from bondage? There was little reason for hope. Their faith in God caring for them was low. But one thing they remembered, the promised Messiah could save them if only He would appear. Thus were people primed and ready for Messiah. God was moving in other ways to prepare for Messiah. The influence of Alexander the Great’s policies had made Greek the common spoken language throughout the Mediterranean area. Roman rule brought law, a stable government, excellent roads and bridges, systems for doing things (from collecting taxes to governmental activities), a wide-ranging enforced peace, and freedom to travel the Roman world in relative safety. These things were vital to the spread of the gospel by Jesus’ disciples.

Rome also brought *slavery*; it is estimated that more than 70% of people in the Roman Empire were slaves. Rome was built on slavery. In fact, slavery was an accepted fact throughout the ancient world and was significant in economic and societal life. Slaves frequently were acquired by victory in war. Often entire populations, as well as soldiers, were enslaved. After destroying Jerusalem in 70 AD, Emperor Titus sold ninety-thousand Jewish slaves. Some slaves were highly skilled workers and trusted administrators. Frequently, slaves were better off than free laborers. Laws were passed to protect slaves, giving them rights, even private possessions. Slaves could be ransomed and freed.

Writings Between the Testaments: The most significant writings to the Jews were the Apocrypha (meaning hidden things). The Apocrypha constitute a group of 13 books: 1-2 Esdras, Tobit, Judith, Rest of Esther, Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus, Baruch, Letter of Jeremiah, Additions to Daniel, Prayer of Manassas, and 1-2 Maccabees. The Jews never gave canonical status to these writings. They are not in the Hebrew Bible. But they were included in the Septuagint. In the 2nd century AD, the 1st Latin Bibles were created by translating the Septuagint including the Apocrypha. The churches Council of Carthage in 397 A.D. gave unqualified canonical status to the Apocrypha. The reformers later repudiated the Apocrypha as unworthy and contradictory to the doctrines of the standard OT canon. However, Luther did say they contain valuable information. Of Protestants, as far as I know, today only Anglican's read them liturgically, but, as I understand, they treat them as useful but secondary writings.