

## **#1. BETWEEN THE TESTAMENTS: FROM MALACHI TO MATTHEW**

### **1. Setting the stage for Jesus**

- Over four centuries separate the words of Malachi and Matthew. The prophet Malachi described Israel in about 430BC, and Christ was born between 6 and 4BC according to our modern calendar. This era is sometimes referred to as *the 400 silent years*, but the faithfulness of the Remnant continued and world history rolled along just as Daniel predicted (Daniel 2:24; 7:1-28; 8:1-27; 11:1-35).
- I would like to recommend two books for further study of this interesting period. The first is *New Testament Times* by Merrill C. Tenney. The second is *In the Fullness of Time* by Paul Maier. In my opinion, Tenney's book is the finest single volume work on the intertestamental period and the days of Christ's ministry. Maier's book sheds light on how the church emerged out of the culture of that era.

### **2. Israel in the Intertestamental Period**

- **The Political World:** Daniel saw the fall of Babylon to Persia, and he predicted the rise of Greece, followed by Rome (Daniel 2:39, 40; 7:5-7).
  - The Persians ruled over the Israelites for about 200 years (539-332BC). As we have seen, the Persians allowed the Jews to return to their land and rebuild the Temple and the city of Jerusalem (Ezra 1:1-4). Under Medo-Persian rule, the Jews were considered a subjugated Persian territory (Judea). The Jews maintained some autonomy, with the High Priest exercising a modicum of civil authority. During this time, the Jews experienced almost no interference concerning their worship and tradition from the Persian authorities.
  - Between 334BC and 331BC, Alexander the Great waged war against Darius III. Three decisive battles gave the Persian territories, including the land of Judea, to the Alexander and the Greeks. As predicted by Daniel (8:5-7, 20, 21; 11:3), the Grecian Empire became the dominant world force. Alexander extended religious freedom to the Jews, even offering them an exemption from taxes during their Sabbatical years. However, Alexander's desire to bring Greek culture to these conquered land resulted in what became known as *Hellenism*. His goal was to establish an empire united by the Greek language and a common world-view. After Alexander's death in 323BC, the policy of Hellenization continued. The danger to Israel was that of losing her

Jewish culture and sense of spiritual separateness.

- Fulfilling the prophecy of Daniel 8:22 and 11:4, Greece was divided as a struggle for power among Alexander's generals took place. The Egyptian factor, the Ptolemies, ruled Israel from 301 until 198BC. The Ptolemies granted religious freedom, but incurred economic bondage.
- The Syrian factor of Alexander's empire took control of Israel in 198BC as Antiochus III defeated the Ptolemies (Daniel 11:13-16). Israel was under Syrian, or Seleucid rule until 143BC. The Jews enjoyed religious freedom for about 20 years until Antiochus IV, also known as Antiochus Epiphanes, came to power in 175BC.
- In 170BC, Antiochus ransacked the Temple of Jerusalem, desecrating the sacred precinct in many ways. His belligerence continued, and in 167BC he ordered an intensified Hellenization project that denied religious freedom to the Jews. They were forbidden to keep their laws, observe the Sabbath, offer sacrifices, or observe Holy Days and festivals. They were forbidden to practice circumcision of their male children and copies of the Torah were destroyed. Furthermore, Antiochus set up pagan altars in the Temple, and the Jews were ordered to offer unclean sacrifices and eat pork and other forbidden foods. Antiochus became a forerunner of Antichrist as he became the first pagan king to persecute the Jews for their faith in Jehovah (Daniel 8:9-14, 23-25; 11:21-35).
- An aged priest named Mattathias, along with his five sons, began a civil war against Antiochus and his successors. Judas Maccabeus, one of the five sons, was the first leader of this revolt. His name literally means *The Hammer*. Civil war raged for 24 years (166-142BC), and the Jews won independence from Syria, partly because the emerging Roman Empire was drawing Syrian troops away from Israel.
- The descendants of Mattathias the priest founded the Hasmonean Dynasty. The name is based on Hashmon, an ancestor of the Maccabees. The Hasmoneans took control of the high priestly office, though they had no right to do so because they were not descendants of Zadok (Numbers 25:10-13; Ezekiel 40:46; 48:11). The Hasmoneans began to embrace Hellenistic ways, even though such practices were the initial cause of the Maccabean Revolt. Greek influence continued in Israel from 142BC until 63BC because of Hasmonean leadership.
- In 63BC a Roman general named Pompey seized control of Palestine. Pompey intervened between Aristobulus II and John Hyrcanus II, both of whom claimed to be the High Priest. The result of the Roman military insertion into the affair was the subjugation of Israel to Rome (Daniel 2:40; 7:7).
- After years of political unrest, Rome made Herod the Great ruler of Judah. He ruled Israel from 37BC until 4BC and was considered *King of the Jews* when Jesus was

born (Matthew 2:1, 2).

- **The Religious World**

- **The Diaspora** - is the dispersion of Israel that began in 722BC with the Assyrian invasion of the Northern Kingdom, and culminated in 586BC with the captivity of Jerusalem and the Southern Kingdom of Judah. When the Persians granted permission for Israel to return home, most of the Jews did not go back. The result is that Israel was largely a group of colonists in Persia. Under the Greek and Roman influences, the Jews spread throughout the Mediterranean area as well as all Mesopotamia. By the time of Jesus, the majority of Jews lived outside of Israel.
- **The Teachers of Israel: The Scribes and Rabbis** - in an attempt to complete the repentance of sins that caused the Exile, many Jews began a serious study of The Law in order to walk in full covenant obedience to Jehovah. The Scribes were scholars who were considered experts in the Law, and the Rabbis were teachers who passed along the Scribal interpretations of The Law.
- **The Septuagint** - because of the efforts of Hellenization, most of the Diaspora Jews became primarily Greek speaking people. Tradition says that around 250BC, Ptolemy Philadelphus brought together 70 scholars who translated the Hebrew text of the Old Testament into Greek. The Latin word for *seventy*, Septuagint became the name of the translation. It is also known as LXX. It was probably translated in Alexandria, Egypt. Though one tradition says it was translated in 70 (or 72) days, other scholars believe the LXX was probably a work spanning several decades and was completed by 125BC.
- **The Synagogue** - with the destruction of the Temple in 586BC, the synagogue became a place for worship and education for the Jews of the Exile. The synagogues became so entrenched in Jewish society, that they continued to flourish until after the time of Jesus, even though the Temple was restored by Zerubbabel in 516BC and expanded by Herod almost 500 years later. It is said that to establish a synagogue required a membership of ten adult Jewish males. The synagogue form of worship has been adapted by Christian congregations since the earliest days of the Church.
- **The Sanhedrin** - was a collection of leaders in Israel, consisting of between 23 and 71 men who were arbiters of affairs in Israel. Essentially they were the Supreme Court of Israel. The establishment of Sanhedrin (*sitting one*) can be traced back as far as 76BC. The Great Sanhedrin ceased functioning in about 358AD.
- **The Sadducees** - these were Hellenized, aristocratic Jews who held much civil authority in Israel. They wielded control over temple worship and policy. This group rejected all of the Old Testament except the Torah.

- **The Pharisees** - the group defined as *Holy Ones*. They probably originated in the Maccabean Revolt as part of the fight against Hellenism. When the Hasmoneans embraced the Greek culture, this sect *separated* themselves from apostate Judaism (the meaning of the name is *to separate*). Though a minority in Israel, they were highly respected in Jewish society.
- **The Zealots** - were a sect in New Testament times who violently opposed the subjugation of Israel by Rome. They were active from the early days of Herod until the Fall of Jerusalem and Masada in 70AD.
- **The Essenes** - according to Jewish tradition, these men were a branch of the Pharisees who conformed to the most rigid laws of Levitical purity and sought to attain utter holiness. They lived communally by the work of their hands, and devoted their time to study, prayer, benevolence, and refrained from sensual pleasures. Many lived a celibate life. Their goal was to understand the highest mysteries of heaven and cause the expected Messianic time to come. It has been posited by some that John the Baptist, who was *in the wilderness until the day of his appearing to Israel*, was a part of an Essene community near the Dead Sea.

**In Bethlehem of Judea, in about 6BC, Jesus Christ was born. In Galatians 4:4, Paul said Jesus came forth *in the fullness of time*. The events of the 400 *Silent Years* show us that God was anything but silent. He was working in nations, preparing hearts, and ruling over a world that was ready for redemption and ready at last for Messiah!**