

THE 400 YEARS BETWEEN THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS

by Ray C. Stedman

At the close of the book of Malachi in the Old Testament, the nation of Israel is back again in the land of Palestine after the Babylonian captivity, but they are under the domination of the great world power of that day, Persia and the Medio-Persian empire. In Jerusalem, the temple had been restored, although it was a much smaller building than the one that Solomon had built and decorated in such marvelous glory.

Within the temple the line of Aaronic priests was still worshipping and carrying on the sacred rites as they had been ordered to do by the law of Moses. There was a direct line of descendancy in the priesthood that could be traced back to Aaron.

But the royal line of David had fallen on evil days. The people knew who the rightful successor to David was, and in the book of Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, his name is given to us. It was Zerubbabel, the royal prince, yet there was no king on the throne of Israel, they were a puppet nation, under the domination of Persia. Nevertheless, although they were beset with weakness and formalism as the prophets have shown us, the people were united. There were no political schisms or factions among them, nor were they divided into groups or parties.

Now when you open the New Testament to the book of Matthew, you discover an entirely different atmosphere -- almost a different world. Rome is now the dominant power of the earth. The Roman legions have spread throughout the length and breadth of the civilized world. The center of power has shifted from the East to the West, to Rome. Palestine is still a puppet state -- the Jews never did regain their own sovereignty -- but now there is a king on the throne. But this king is the descendant of Esau instead of Jacob, and his name is Herod the Great. Furthermore, the high priests who now sit in the seat of religious authority in the nation are no longer from the line of Aaron. They cannot trace their descendancy back, rather, they are hired priests to whom the office is sold as political patronage.

The temple is still the center of Jewish worship, although the building has been partially destroyed and rebuilt about a half-dozen times since the close of the Old Testament. But now the synagogues that have sprung up in every Jewish city seem to be the center of Jewish life even more than the temple.

At this time the people of Israel were split into three major parties. Two of them, the Pharisees and Sadducees, were much more prominent than the third. The smaller group, the Essenes, could hardly be designated as a party. Not long ago, however, they came into great prominence in our time and took on new significance because they had stowed away some documents in caves overlooking the Dead Sea -- documents which were brought to light again by the accidental discovery of an Arab shepherd boy and are known as the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Now, what happened in these four hundred so-called "silent" years after the last of the inspired prophets spoke and the first of the New Testament writers began to write? You remember there is a word in Paul's letter to the Galatians that says, "When the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law." (Gal. 4:4) In other words, the time of our Lord's birth was God's appointed hour, the moment for which God had been long preparing. Some of the exciting preparations took place during that time of "silence," however, and you will understand your New Testament much better if you understand something of the historic events during the time between the Testaments.

After Malachi had ceased his prophesying and the canon of the Old Testament closed -- that is, the number of the books in the Old Testament was fulfilled and the inspired prophets ceased to speak -- God allowed a period of time for the teachings of the Old Testament to penetrate throughout the world. During this time, he rearranged the scenes of history, much as a stage crew will rearrange the stage sets after the curtain has fallen, and when the curtain rises again there is an entirely new setting.

In about 435 B.C., when the prophet Malachi ceased his writing, the center of world power began to shift from the East to the West. Up to this time, Babylon had been the major world power, but this was soon succeeded by the Medio-Persian empire, as you remember from ancient history. This shift had been predicted by the prophet Daniel, who said that there would rise up a bear who was higher on one side than the other, signifying the division between Media and Persia, with the Persians the predominant ones (Dan. 7:5).

At the height of the Persian power there arose in the country of Macedonia (which we now know as Greece), north of the Black Sea, a man by the name of Philip of Macedon, who became a leader in his own country. He united the islands of Greece and became their ruler. His son was destined to become one of the great world leaders of all time, Alexander the Great. In 330 B.C. a tremendous battle between the Persians and the Greeks entirely altered the course of history. In that battle, Alexander, as a young man only twenty years old, led the armies of Greece in victory over the Persians and completely demolished the power of Persia. The center of world power then shifted farther west into Greece, and the Grecian empire was born.

A year after that historic battle, Alexander the Great led his armies down into the Syrian world toward Egypt. On the way, he planned to lay siege to the city of Jerusalem. As the victorious armies of the Greeks approached the city, word was brought to the Jews in Jerusalem that the armies were on their way. The high priest at that time, who was a godly old man by the name of Jaddua (who, by the way, is mentioned in the Bible in the book of Nehemiah) took the sacred writings of Daniel the prophet and, accompanied by a host of other priests dressed in white garments, went forth and met Alexander some distance outside the city.

All this is from the report of Josephus, the Jewish historian, who tells us that Alexander left his army and hurried to meet this body of priests. When he met them, he told the high priest that he had had a vision the night before in which God had shown him an old man, robed in a white garment, who would show him something of great significance to himself, according to the account, the high priest then opened the prophecies of Daniel and read them to Alexander.

In the prophecies Alexander was able to see the predictions that he would become that notable goat with the horn in his forehead, who would come from the West and smash the power of Medio-Persia and conquer the world. He was so overwhelmed by the accuracy of this prophecy and, of course, by the fact that it spoke about him, that he promised that he would save Jerusalem from siege, and sent the high priest back with honors. How true that account is, is very difficult at this distance in time to say; that, at any event, is the story.

Alexander died in 323 B.C. when he was only about thirty-three years old. He had drunk himself to death in the prime of his life, grieved because he had no more worlds to conquer. After his death, his empire was torn with dissension, because he had left no heir. His son had been murdered earlier, so there was no one to inherit the empire of Alexander.

After some time, however, the four generals that had led Alexander's armies divided his empire between them. Two of them are particularly noteworthy to us. One was Ptolemy, who gained Egypt and the northern African countries; the other was Seleucus, who gained Syria, to the north of Palestine. During this time Palestine was annexed by Egypt, and suffered greatly at the hands of Ptolemy. In fact, for the next one hundred years, Palestine was caught in the meat-grinder of the unending conflicts between Syria on the north and Egypt on the south.

Now if you have read the prophecies of Daniel, you will recall that Daniel was able, by inspiration, to give a very accurate and detailed account of the highlights of these years of conflict between the king of the North (Syria) and the king of the South (Egypt). The eleventh chapter of Daniel gives us a most amazingly accurate account of that which has long since been fulfilled. If you want to see just how accurate the prophecy is, I suggest you compare that chapter of Daniel with the historical record of what actually occurred during that time. H. A. Ironside's little book, *The 400 Silent Years*, gathers that up in some detail.

During this time Grecian influence was becoming strong in Palestine. A party arose among the Jews called the Hellenists, who were very eager to bring Grecian culture and thought into the nation and to liberalize some of the Jewish laws. This forced a split into two major parties. There were those who were strong Hebrew nationalist, who wanted to preserve everything according to the Mosaic order. They resisted all the foreign

influences that were coming in to disrupt the old Jewish ways. This party became known as the Pharisees, which means "to separate." They were the separationists who insisted on preserving traditions. They grew stronger and stronger, becoming more legalistic and rigid in their requirements, until they became the target for some of the most scorching words our Lord ever spoke. They had become religious hypocrites, keeping the outward form of the law, but completely violating its spirit.

On the other hand, the Hellenists -- the Greek lovers -- became more and more influential in the politics of the land. They formed the party that was known in New Testament days as the Sadducees, the liberals. They turned away from the strict interpretation of the law and became the rationalists of their day, ceasing to believe in the supernatural in any way. We are told in the New Testament that they came again and again to the Lord with questions about the supernatural, like "What will happen to a woman who has been married to seven different men? In the resurrection, whose wife will she be?" (Matt. 22:23-33) They did not believe in a resurrection, but in these questions they were trying to put Jesus on the spot.

Now there was also a young rebel Jewish priest who married a Samaritan, went down to Samaria, and in rebellion against the Jewish laws, built a temple on Mount Gerizim that became a rival of the temple in Jerusalem. This caused intense, fanatical rivalry between the Jews and the Samaritans, and this rivalry is also reflected in the New Testament.

Also during this time, in Egypt, under the reign of one of the Ptolemies, the Hebrew scriptures were translated for the first time into another language, in about 284 B.C. A group of 70 scholars was called together by the Egyptian king to make a translation of the Hebrew scriptures. Book by book they translated the Old Testament into Greek. When they had finished, it was given the name of the Septuagint, which means 70, because of the number of translators. This became the Greek version of the Hebrew Bible. From it many of the quotations in the New Testament are derived. That is why New Testament quotations of Old Testament verses are sometimes in different words -- because they come from the Greek translation. The Septuagint is still in existence today, and is widely used in various parts of the world. It is still a very important document.

A little later on, about 203 B.C., a king named Antiochus the Great came into power in Syria, to the north of Palestine. He captured Jerusalem from the Egyptians and began the reign of Syrian power over Palestine. He had two sons, one of whom succeeded him and reigned only a few years. When he died, his brother took the throne. This man, named Antiochus Epiphanes, became one of the most vicious and violent persecutors of the Jews ever known. In fact, he is often called the Antichrist of the Old Testament, since he fulfills some of the predictions of Daniel concerning the coming of one who would be "a contemptible person" and "a vile king." His name (which he modestly bestowed upon himself) means "Antiochus the Illustrious." Nevertheless, some of his own courtiers evidently agreed more with the prophecies of Daniel, and they changed two letters in his title. from Epiphanes to Epipames, which means "the mad man."

His first act was to depose the high priest in Jerusalem. thus ending the long line of succession, beginning with Aaron and his sons through the many centuries of Jewish life. Onias the Third was the last of the hereditary line of priests. Antiochus Epiphanes sold the priesthood to Jason, who was not of the priestly line. Jason, in turn, was tricked by his younger brother Menelaus, who purchased the priesthood and then sold the golden vessels of the temple in order to make up the tribute money. Epiphanes overthrew the God-authorized line of priests. Then, and under his reign, the city of Jerusalem and all the religious rites of the Jews began to deteriorate as they came fully under the power of the Syrian king.

In 171 B.C. Antiochus invaded Egypt and once again Palestine was caught in the nutcracker of rivalry. Palestine is the most fought-over country in the world, and Jerusalem is the most captured city in all history. It has been pillaged, ravished, burned and destroyed more than 27 times in its history.

While Antiochus was in Egypt, it was reported that he had been killed in battle, and Jerusalem rejoiced. The people organized a revolt and overthrew Menelaus, the pseudo-priest. When report reached Antiochus (who was very much alive in Egypt) that Jerusalem was delighted at the report of his death, he organized his armies and swept like a fury back across the land, falling upon Jerusalem with terrible vengeance.

He overturned the city, regained his power, and guided by the treacherous Menelaus, intruded into the very

Holy of Holies in the temple itself. Some 40,000 people were slain in three days of fighting during this terrible time. When he forced his way into the Holy of Holies, he destroyed the scrolls of the law and, to the absolute horror of the Jews, took a sow and offered it upon the sacred altar. Then with a broth made from the flesh of this unclean animal, he sprinkled everything in the temple, thus completely defiling and violating the sanctuary. It is impossible for us to grasp how horrifying this was to the Jews. They were simply appalled that anything like this could ever happen to their sacred temple.

It was that act of defiling the temple which is referred to by the Lord Jesus as the "desolating sacrilege" which Daniel had predicted (Matt. 24:15), and which also became a sign of the coming desolation of the temple when Antichrist himself will enter the temple, call himself God, and thus defile the temple in that time. As we know from the New Testament, that still lies in the future.

Daniel the prophet had said the sanctuary would be polluted for 2300 days. (Dan. 8:14) In exact accordance with that prophecy, it was exactly 2300 days -- six and a half years -- before the temple was cleansed. It was cleansed under the leadership of a man now famous in Jewish history, Judas Maccabaeus. He was one of the priestly line who, with his father and four brothers, rose up in revolt against the Syrian king. They captured the attention of the Israelites, summoned them to follow them into battle, and in a series of pitched battles in which they were always an overwhelming minority, overthrew the power of the Syrian kings, captured Jerusalem, and cleansed the temple. The day they cleansed the temple was named the Day of Dedication, and it occurred on the 25th day of December. On that date Jews still celebrate the Feast of Dedication each year.

The Maccabees, who were of the Asmonean family, began a line of high priests known as the Asmonean Dynasty. Their sons, for about the next three or four generations, ruled as priests in Jerusalem, all the time having to defend themselves against the constant assaults of the Syrian army who tried to recapture the city and the temple. During the days of the Maccabees there was a temporary overthrow of foreign domination, which is why the Jews look back to this time and regard it with such tremendous veneration.

During this time, one of the Asmonean priests made a league with the rising power in the West, Rome. He signed a treaty with the Senate of Rome, providing for help in the event of Syrian attack. Though the treaty was made in all earnestness and sincerity, it was this pact which introduced Rome into the picture and history of Israel.

As the battles between the two opposing forces waged hotter and hotter, Rome was watchful. Finally, the Governor of Idumea, a man named Antipater and a descendant of Esau, made a pact with two other neighboring kings and attacked Jerusalem to try to overthrow the authority of the Asmonean high priest. This battle raged so fiercely that finally Pompey, the Roman general, who happened to have an army in Damascus at the time, was besought by both parties to come and intervene. One side had a little more money than the other, and persuaded by that logical argument, Pompey came down from Damascus, entered the city of Jerusalem -- again with terrible slaughter -- overthrew the city and captured it for Rome. That was in 63 B.C. From that time on, Palestine was under the authority and power of Rome.

Now Pompey and the Roman Senate appointed Antipater as the Procurator of Judea, and he in turn made his two sons kings of Galilee and Judea. The son who became king of Judea is known to us as Herod the Great. ("Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem saying, 'Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?'" (Matt. 2:1, 2)

Meanwhile, the pagan empires around had been deteriorating and disintegrating. Their religions had fallen upon evil days. The people were sick of the polytheism and emptiness of their pagan faiths. The Jews had gone through times of pressure and had failed in their efforts to re-establish themselves, and had given up all hope. There was a growing air of expectancy that the only hope they had left was the coming at last of the promised Messiah. In the East, the oriental empires had come to the place where the wisdom and knowledge of the past had disintegrated and they too were looking for something. When the moment came when the star arose over Bethlehem, the wise men of the East who were looking for an answer to their problems saw it immediately and came out to seek the One it pointed to. Thus, "when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son."

It is amazing how God utilizes history to work out his purposes. Though we are living in the days that might be termed "the silence of God," when for almost 2,000 years there has been no inspired voice from God, we must look back -- even as they did during those 400 silent years -- upon the inspired record and realize that God has already said all that needs to be said, through the Old and New Testaments. God's purposes have not ended, for sure. He is working them out as fully now as he did in those days. Just as the world had come to a place of hopelessness then, and the One who would fulfill all their hopes came into their midst, so the world again is facing a time when despair is spreading widely across the earth. Hopelessness is rampant everywhere and in this time God is moving to bring to fulfillment all the prophetic words concerning the coming of his Son again into the world to establish his kingdom. How long? How close? Who knows? But what God has done in history, he will do again as we approach the end of "the silence of God."

Prayer:

Our Father, we are constantly encouraged as we see the fact that our faith is grounded upon historic things; that it touches history on every side. It is integrally related to life. We pray that our own faith may grow strong and be powerful as we see the despair around us, the shaking of foundations, the changing of that which has long been taken to be permanent, the overthrowing of empires and the rising of others. Lord, we are thankful that we may look to you and realize that you are the One who does not change. The One whose word is eternal. As the Lord Jesus himself said, "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my word shall never pass away." We pray in Christ's name, Amen.

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