

The 400 Silent Years

- Date:
The period between Malachi and Matthew covers about 400 years. We do not say that a knowledge of the period is necessary to understand the gospels, but it is advantageous if we are to understand some of the sayings of our Lord and some of the groups He had to face. The Old Testament canon of Scripture closed with Malachi about 397 B.C.

Beginning

The condition of the Jews at the beginning of this four hundred-year period should be remembered. Two hundred years earlier Jerusalem had been destroyed and the people carried into Babylonian Captivity (587 B.C.) Babylon was overthrown by Medo-Persian empire, as had been predicted by Daniel (Chp. 2 & 7) and Cyrus issued the order for the Jews to return and build the temple. Under Zerubbabel a "remnant" returned and twenty-one years later the temple was completed (515 B.C.) Ezra then took a small group to Jerusalem and restored the worship in the temple- followed by Nehemiah twelve years later to rebuild the city walls.

Such is the picture at the beginning of this period between Malachi and Matthew-the Jewish remnant back in Judah, temple and Jerusalem rebuilt, worship restored-but the great masses of the Jews remained in the land of their captivity.

It is in the remnant that we find Jewish history preserved between the Old and New Testaments.

The Political Background

- The Persian - 538 B.C.
- The Greek - 333 B.C.
- The Egyptian - 323 B.C.
- The Syrian - 204 B.C.
- The Maccabean - 165 B.C.
- The Roman - 63 B.C. to Christ

Persian Rule

Notes

During this rule, the rival worship of the Samaritans became established. Back in 721 B.C. the Northern Kingdom of Israel, the ten Tribes, were scattered by Assyria to “the cities Of the Medes.” The Assyrian emperor reseeded The cities of Israel with a mixed people known As the Samaritans. It was from this people that Nehemiah faced opposition on his way to Jerusalem. (Neh 2:10 and 4:1-3) The rivalry Persisted through the New Testament times. The Jews were under the Persian rule at the end of Malachi and remained under them for the first 60 years of the Inter-Testament Period.

Greek Rule

Alexander the Great, at twenty years of age, transformed the face of the world in ten years. He is spoken of by Daniel in his prophecy in Daniel 7:6, 8:1-7 and 21-23.

Egyptian Rule

This was the longest of the six periods in the Inter-Testament Period. The death of Alexander the Great resulted in Judea falling into the hands of the first Ptolemaic ruler, (i.e. Ptolemies were the line of Greek kings over Egypt), Ptolemy Soter. The second Ptolemy (Philadelphus) founded the Alexandrian library and the famous Septuagint translation of the Old Testament was made from the Hebrew to the Greek during this reign. Palestine was becoming the battle ground between Egypt and Syria (Seleucidae were the line of Syrian kings.)

Syrian Rule

This was the most tragic part of the period for the Jews .
With the coming to power of Antiochus Epiphanes in 175 B.C., a reign of terror fell on all Jews. He wrecked Jerusalem, tore down the walls and killed the people. He desecrated the temple in every way – culminating in the offering of a pig on the altar of sacrifice and then erecting statues of false gods on the altar. (Daniel 8:13)

Maccabean Period

This was one of the most heroic periods in all history. The excesses of Antiochus Epiphanes provoked the movement by the aged priest Mattathias, and carried on by his son, Judas Maccabeus. Judas Maccabeus restored the temple and orthodox services were reinstated (following the desecration by Antiochus) Judas Maccabeus was killed in one of the battles with the Syrians. His brother, Jonathan, became leader and high priest, uniting the civil and priestly authority in one person, thus commencing the Hasmonean line of high priests (from Hashman, great grandfather of the Maccabee brothers). Jonathan was killed and Simon, his brother, was made leader. Simon was killed and his able son John Hyrcanus reigned twenty-nine years. After changes among the Hasmonean leaders, the Herod family appears on the scene, leading to the Roman period.

Roman Rule

Judea became a province of the Roman Empire. When the Maccabean line ended, Antipater was appointed over Judea by Julius Caesar in 47 B.C. Antipater appointed Herod, his son, governor of Galilee. He was appointed king of the Jews by Rome in 40 B.C. He murdered almost all of his own family including his wife and sons. This was the “Herod the Great” who was king when our Lord was born. This is the political background of the Jews during the 400-year period.

Notes

The Religious Background

The political background changed the Jews but no more than the changes in their Jewish religious customs. There were new groups such as the Scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees and new institutions such as the Synagogue and Sanhedrin.

Because of these changes in Jewry, the period between Malachi and Matthew is important.

The Oral Law, after being given orally for generations was committed to writing about the end of the second century A.D. into the Talmud and it remains the authority for Jews to this day. In our Lord's day the Oral Law was still mainly oral. He contradicted its obstacles in Matthew 15:1-9 and in the Sermon on the Mount he said six times, "Ye have heard that it was said – but I say unto you." His way of referring to the Scriptures was, "It is written."

The Pharisees and Sadducees

The Pharisees held that the Oral Law was given orally to Moses, to Joshua, to the elders, to the prophets and then to the men of the Great Synagogue. The Pharisees were the interpreters of the Oral Law. The Sadducees reject all this, holding to only "the law," meaning the Pentateuch. They denied the spirit world of angels, immortality, resurrection from the dead (Acts 23:8) while the Pharisees affirmed all of these doctrines. They always opposed each other.

The name "Pharisee" means "separatists." "Sadducees" means "righteous ones."

You will find references to the Pharisees in Luke 7:39; 15:2 and Matthew 9:11 just to list a few.

The Sadducees are mentioned in Matthew 16:1; 16:11 and 22:23. Also in Acts 23:6

Notes

The Scribes

From the time of the Babylonian Captivity, there developed a new line of scribes who were not just transcribers or secretaries, but a new body of men who became the expounders, guardians and teachers of the Scriptures. They became a distinguished order in the nation. They must be distinguished from the priests and the Pharisees, i.e., Matthew 5:20, 12:38; 15:1; Mark 2:16; Luke 5:21 but this does not mean that they were alike or even together in function.

Our Lord denounced the scribes because of their corruption and outward piousness – Matthew 23:13-18

The Synagogue

There is not a word about Synagogues in the Old Testament, but as soon as we start the New Testament we find them everywhere. The synagogue did not exist before the captivity but it seems to have originated during that time – when the Jews totally turned away from idolatry. There was no longer a Jewish temple and they needed and longed for the reading of the Scriptures. This is believed to be the way the synagogue came into being.

Synagogue discourses were common in our Lord's time Matthew 4:23; 9:35; Luke 4:15, 44; Acts 13:5; 14:1; 17:10; 18:10

The synagogue was congregational and not priestly. The great institution of preaching had its beginning in the synagogue. It was from this background that the early Christian church, as organized by the apostles, took its main form of worship. The titles given to the New Testament church leaders: Elders, Bishops, Deacons are all carried over from the synagogue.

The Sanhedrin

There is another Jewish institution called the Sanhedrin, which in New Testament times was the supreme civil and religious tribunal of the Jewish nation. With that body must lie the real responsibility for crucifying of the Lord Jesus. Pontius Pilate was merely a rubber stamp of imperial Rome.

The Sanhedrin was made up of the high priest: twenty-four “chief priests” who represented the twenty-four orders of the priesthood: twenty-four “elders” called “elders of the people”; twenty-two “scribes” who interpreted the law in both religious and civil matters. This made a total of seventy-one members of the Sanhedrin.

They had to have the sanction of Pilate for the penalty they imposed on the Lord. They met illegally in the high priest’s palace (John 18:15) instead of in its own council hall. All surrounding their actions in reference to the death of Christ was illegal and wrong.

With this brief and incomplete background, we can see some of the institutions that were established during this 400-year period between Malachi and Matthew.

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