

“Survey of the Scriptures”

Session #7 – BETWEEN THE TESTAMENTS

Two thousand years before Christ, God called Abraham as father of the chosen people through whom the Messiah would come. The Old Testament records the history of Abraham’s descendants, their rise as a nation to the kingdom age, the division into two kingdoms – Israel and Judah. First Israel was taken in captivity, then Judah. Finally a remnant was restored. This brings us to the four hundred years between Old and New Testaments which are the subject of our study.

With Malachi the work and words of the Old Testament prophets were complete. Between Malachi and Matthew the Hebrew nation received no further revelation from God, but behind the scenes God was preparing for the advent of His Son. To understand events recorded in the New Testament we must know something about the silent centuries between the Testaments.

During this 400 year period Palestine was ruled by six successive military governments, five of which were foreign. First the Persians were in power. Then Alexander of Macedonia claimed the land. After Alexander’s death Palestine was ruled by his successors – the Ptolemies of Egypt and the Syrian kings. Syrian oppression led to the revolt of the Jews under the Maccabees, and the Jewish people were free until the time of the Roman conquest.

The Persian kings were sympathetic toward the Jews. Cyrus, Darius and Artaxerxes allowed Jewish captives to return to Palestine, where they rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem and restored their own form of worship. By the time of Christ the only evidence of Persian rule was that Aramaic – the language made official by Darius – was in common use in Palestine.

Three centuries before Christ, Alexander the Great left Macedonia to conquer the world and to spread Greek culture and customs to the ends of the earth. Greek influence continued for several centuries after the conquest.

The great city of Alexandria in northern Egypt became a center of Greek and Egyptian culture. When Alexander died, this part of his empire was taken over by the Ptolemies. From Alexandria they ruled Egypt and Palestine. Thousands of Jews were brought as captives to Alexandria, among them scribes who were given the task of translating the law and other Hebrew writings into Greek. The translation of the Scriptures made in Alexandria at this time is the Septuagint Version.

Later Syria gained the upper hand over Palestine. The Syrians had become saturated with Greek religion and culture; now they tried to force the Jews to accept Greek religion. Antiochus Epiphanes went so far as to install Greek gods in the Jewish temple, and to

insult the Jews still more offered a pig on the temple altar. He ordered Jewish religion wiped out. But he went too far. Led by their priests, the Jews revolted.

Judas Maccabeus, eldest son of a Jewish priest, reclaimed the temple for Judaism and was victorious in many battles against the Syrians. He and his brothers earned a measure of independence for their people and a few years of peace and prosperity for their country, until the Jews began to fight among themselves.

The countries surrounding Palestine were now occupied by Roman legions. Their commanding officer was ordered by Julius Caesar to put an end to civil strife in Jerusalem. He captured the city in 63 B.C. Later Herod Antipater, who ruled the neighboring country of Idumea, was made governor of Judea.

His son Herod the Great persuaded the Romans to give him the title “King of the Jews.” Herod married a daughter of the high priest and began reconstruction of the temple, but was hated by the Jews as a foreigner and usurper. Fearful that he might lose his throne, Herod murdered the high priest and even members of his own family. It is not surprising that when he heard of the birth of Christ, who was to be King of the Jews, he sought to destroy the Child.

On Herod’s death, Palestine and adjacent territories were divided between his three sons, who were in turn responsible to Rome. Herod Antipas ruled in Galilee and Perea; Philip in Decapolis; Archelaus in Judea, Samaria and Idumea. This brings us to the Palestine of Christ’s time. Archelaus was such a brutal ruler that the people requested his removal; he was replaced by a governor sent from Rome.

There were **three main currents** in the stream of history between Old and New Testaments. There was the **Jewish** religion, pure and simple as revealed by God to Moses but now weighed down with human tradition. There was **Greek** culture, the influence of which was widespread. And there was the political power exercised by the governors and legions of **Rome**.

The **Hebrew religion** was symbolized by the temple at Jerusalem, the center of worship for the Jews. By this time their religion had lost its early purity and the temple services were no more than empty ritual and form. But the temple was sacred to the Jews and any defilement of it by Gentile overlords led to fierce resentment and insurrection.

Jews living in other countries or in districts too far away for them to attend temple gatherings, met in synagogues for daily prayers. The sacred Scriptures were kept in the synagogues and were read and expounded by rabbis.

To the Jew, no matter where he lived, his religion was of utmost importance. Wherever he went he took the books of law and tradition as a standard of living, and his faith – which was belief in one God.

Two religious groups with whom we become familiar through the New Testament are the Sadducees and Pharisees. The wealthy and influential Sadducees were priests, but not all priests were Sadducees. In Maccabean times members of this sect had taken over the government of the country and later they kept on good terms with their overlords. They emphasized the importance of the book of Moses.

The Pharisees or “pious ones” would have nothing to do with politics. Strictly orthodox, they controlled the religious life of the Jews. They accepted the whole Old Testament canon, but these cold legalists added endless rules and regulations in their interpretation of the law. Among the Pharisees were the scribes, who had advanced from copyists and guardians of the law to become rabbis or teachers.

There were other religious sects as well as priests and Sadducees, Pharisees and scribes, among them the Essenes and a monastic group living at Qumran near the Dead Sea. Apparently all these groups possessed copies of some of the Scriptures. The Qumran group hid their precious scrolls in caves when the land was invaded.

From these recently discovered Dead Sea scrolls and from the historical writings of Philo and Josephus we learn something of the different religious sects in Palestine just prior to the Christian era.

The second current in the stream of history was **Greek culture**. Alexander’s armies were followed by athletes, artists and philosophers who came spreading Greek customs and language. In countries bordering Palestine even Greek religion was accepted and the many gods of Greece were worshiped with other pagan gods.

Gymnasiums were built and Greek games became popular throughout the Empire. In Jerusalem one high priest even encouraged the priests to take part in the games, but he was bitterly opposed by the Pharisees. In his letters the Apostle Paul made many references to Greek sports.

Many schools of philosophy had arisen in Greece and their teachings spread to occupied countries. The Apostle Paul grew up in Tarsus, where eminent teachers lectured at the Greek university. Paul’s love of truth and freedom reflect Greek influence and his writings reveal his familiarity with the teachings of the Epicurians, Stoics and other schools of philosophy.

Gradually the Greek language was used everywhere; thus it became the instrument for the spread of the gospel. Other languages were still heard in Palestine, however. Hebrew was taught in the schools and many people still spoke in Aramaic.

Roman occupation influenced the political history of Palestine. Governors and rulers were subject to the emperor in Rome and many Roman troops were stationed in the country to see that law and order were maintained. Rome also imposed heavy taxes. Paul was a Roman citizen, a fact which ranked him with the aristocracy and gave him certain privileges.

The Roman Empire was held together by a network of roads, trade, good mail service and well-trained legions. Its citizens were free to travel. In a physical sense, never were circumstances more favorable for the spread of Christianity; in a spiritual sense, never was the simple truth of the gospel more needed!

While the Jews still believed in God, under the Pharisees their religion had become cold, steeped in tradition, weighed down with petty rules and regulations which stifled spiritual growth. The Greeks gloried in their intellect and physical strength, but were pagan in religion. Rome's political power was backed by fierce and brutal occupation forces.

"When the fullness of time was come, God sent forth His Son." Christ came to this land – an outpost of the Roman Empire, and to these people, steeped in Judaism and influenced by Greek culture.

In His teaching, Christ swept away the trappings of tradition with the fresh wind of God's truth. His words stirred resentment and hate in the scribes and Pharisees. He taught that all men were equal and there was no room for religious, intellectual or national pride.

"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life," Jesus said. He came, not only as the Messiah of the Jews, but to be the Savior of the world – the Jew, the Greek, the Roman, the barbarian, the bound and the free.

The people of Palestine were representative of the world God loved. They were a cosmopolitan lot: Greek colonists, Roman occupation forces, Egyptians, Syrians, Jews and Samaritans. They were members of various religious and political parties and worked at many trades and crafts.

As we come to our study of the four gospels we'll see the effects of events which took place between the Testaments, and find that the Holy Spirit led Matthew to write about the life of Christ in a way that appealed especially to Jews. Mark was inspired to write more for the Romans, Luke for the Greeks. Yet all the Gospels – like that of John – are for all men everywhere.

In Acts we'll see the Church of Christ in action. Missionary work began at Jerusalem and reached to the far corners of the Roman Empire when Christians caught the vision that the gospel was for all men.

From a Roman prison the Apostle Paul wrote some of his epistles. Through his life history and in his writings we can trace the effects of Jewish religion (for Paul himself was a Pharisee), of Greek culture, and of Roman political power.

Our study of the Jewish, Greek and Roman influences in Palestine during the 400 silent years throws light on the New Testament, the time when God sent forth His Son, the Promised Messiah, to be the Savior of the world.

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