

Lesson 10
The Intertestamental Period
(A Narrative)

The Intertestamental Period refers to the roughly 400 years between the events recorded in the Old Testament (approximately 400 BC) and the events in the New Testament (beginning around 4-6 BC with the birth of Jesus). This period, sometimes called the "Silent Years," is marked by significant historical, political, religious, and cultural changes that laid the foundation for the context of the New Testament and the world into which Jesus and the early church were born.

NOTE: Malachi, the last book in the Old Testament, called the people to repentance with respect to: the priesthood, which had become corrupt; worship, which had become routine; divorce, which was widespread; social justice, which was being ignored; and tithing, which was neglected.

What did the final message of Malachi prophecy?

Malachi 4:5-6 *"Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction."*

With that final word there was 400 years of silence.

Overview of the Intertestamental Period:

Timeframe: Roughly 400 years (from the end of the Old Testament to the New Testament).

Significance: Though there are no canonical books written during this time, this period is crucial in understanding the environment and expectations that led to the coming of Christ and the early Christian church. This is the historical period that prepared the world for the person and work of Christ.

1. Political Background and Control

The Intertestamental Period is marked by the shifting domination of various empires over Judea, the land of the Israelites:

a) Persian Rule (539–332 BC)

Cyrus the Great of Persia conquered Babylon in 539 BC, allowing the Israelites (who had been exiled) to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple (this is described in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah).

The Persian Empire maintained control over Judea, and it was during this time that many Jews began to re-establish themselves as a distinct community. The temple was rebuilt (Second Temple), and the Jewish community began to practice a form of worship that emphasized the Torah and rituals around the Temple.

b) Hellenistic Influence (332–167 BC)

—Alexander the Great conquered the Persian Empire, including Judea, in 332 BC. After his death in 323 BC, his empire was divided among his generals, and Judea came under the control of the Ptolemaic Kingdom (Egypt) and later the Seleucid Empire (Syria).

—Hellenization (the spread of Greek culture and language) became a significant influence during this period. Many Jews began adopting Greek ways of life, language, and culture, while others resisted these changes. This tension between Hellenized Jews and those who resisted would play a key role in later conflicts.

—It was during this time period that perhaps the most significant work of the "Silent Years" was produced: The Septuagint [LXX]. Developed by 72 Jewish scholars, they translated the Hebrew Old Testament into Koine or common Greek, a language which served as the business language for dozens of people groups.

New Testament writers often quoted the Septuagint. Jesus may have quoted the Septuagint when He quoted Gen 2:24 in Matthew 19:5.

What do you think the significance of LXX is?

c) Maccabean Revolt and Hasmonean Dynasty (167–63 BC)

—The Seleucid king Antiochus IV Epiphanes attempted to force Hellenistic practices on the Jews, including banning key aspects of Jewish worship (such as circumcision and temple sacrifices), leading to the Maccabean Revolt in 167 BC.

—The revolt was led by the Hasmonean family, who successfully expelled the Seleucids and re-established Jewish independence in Judea. The Hasmoneans ruled as both kings and priests, effectively establishing a Hasmonean dynasty.

—This period saw a brief resurgence of Jewish political and religious independence, though the Hasmoneans were often criticized for their Hellenistic tendencies and their failure to unify the Jewish people. Their rule also led to internal political strife, which would contribute to Rome's later intervention. This is pursuant of the *Pax Romana*.

d) Roman Rule (63 BC–AD 70)

—In 63 BC, the Roman general Pompey conquered Jerusalem, making Judea a client kingdom of Rome. Eventually, in 6 AD, it was made a Roman province.

—The Romans imposed heavy taxation and maintained control through puppet kings like Herod the Great, who was appointed King of Judea in 37 BC. Herod sought to gain favor with both the Romans and the Jews, rebuilding the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem and undertaking large-scale building projects. However, his reign was marked by cruelty and a legacy of political turmoil.

—By the time of Jesus, Judea was under Roman occupation, and many Jews were longing for a Messiah who would liberate them from Roman rule.

2. Religious Developments

While the Old Testament canon was mostly closed by the time of the Persian period, the religious life of the Jewish people continued to evolve, especially with regard to the following aspects:

a) The Rise of Jewish Sects

—Pharisees: A group that emerged during the Hasmonean period. They emphasized the oral tradition and a strict interpretation of the Law. They believed in the resurrection of the dead, the existence of angels, and the coming of a Messiah. (*Gamaliel, mentioned in the book of Acts 5:33, was of this group. Considered among the greatest of teachers, Saul (Paul) sat at his feet; Acts 22:3.*)

—Sadducees: The Sadducees were primarily a priestly and aristocratic group, and they were associated with the Temple. They rejected the oral tradition, believed only in the written Torah (the first five books of the Bible), and did not believe in resurrection.

—Essenes: A more separatist group, believed to be the authors of the Dead Sea Scrolls. They withdrew from society, seeking purity and anticipating the coming of God's kingdom. The Essenes had a strong influence on early Christian thought in certain areas, such as asceticism and eschatology. (*John the Baptist is considered by some to have been in this group.*)

—Zealots: A group that sought the violent overthrow of Roman rule. They were dedicated to Jewish independence and opposed both Roman occupation and any form of Jewish collaboration with Roman authorities. (*Barrabas was identified as a Zealot. Mt 27:15ff; Mk 15:6ff; Lk 23:18; Jn 18:40.*)

b) Development of the Synagogue

—The synagogue system began to take shape during the Exile and continued to evolve during the intertestamental period. By the time of the New Testament, synagogues were widespread, and they became centers of worship, teaching, and community life, particularly in the Diaspora (Jews living outside Judea).

c) The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha

—The Apocrypha refers to a collection of Jewish writings that were not included in the Hebrew Bible but were found in some Christian versions of the Old Testament (particularly the Septuagint and later the Catholic and Orthodox canons). Books like 1 and 2 Maccabees, Tobit, Judith, and others offer insights into the religious and political climate of the time.

Books [of the Apocrypha are] not held equal to the Scripture but are useful and good to read.

—Martin Luther *Prefaces to the Apocrypha*

—The Pseudepigrapha consists of writings falsely attributed to ancient biblical figures, such as the Book of Enoch and the Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs. These writings reflect the deep eschatological and messianic hopes that were prevalent in Jewish thought during this period.

3. Messianic Expectations

—During the intertestamental period, there was a growing expectation among the Jewish people for the coming of a Messiah, a figure who would deliver Israel from oppression and establish God's kingdom on Earth.

—The prophecies of Daniel (particularly Daniel 7-12) fueled hopes for a coming divine ruler. Many Jews interpreted these prophecies in light of their current situation under Roman rule, looking for a military leader or political Messiah who would restore the Davidic kingdom.

—Other Jewish writings, such as those found in the Dead Sea Scrolls, also show a heightened sense of expectation for a savior figure. The Qumran community (most associated with the Essenes) in particular emphasized the coming of a Priest-King who would bring judgment upon the wicked and vindicate the righteous.

4. Cultural and Social Life

—Hellenization: Greek influence continued to shape the cultural and intellectual life of the Jewish world. Many Jews adopted Greek language and thought, particularly in the Diaspora (e.g., in Alexandria, Egypt, where the Septuagint was produced). This created a division between those who embraced Hellenistic culture and those who resisted it. (Note: Acts 6:1ff)

—The rise of Greek philosophy also had an impact on Jewish thought, as seen in figures like Philo of Alexandria, who attempted to harmonize Greek philosophy (especially Platonism) with Jewish theology.

5. Theological Themes in the Intertestamental Period

—Eschatology: One of the dominant themes during this period was eschatology, or the belief in the end of the age and the establishment of God's eternal kingdom. This is reflected in the apocalyptic literature, such as the Book of Enoch and parts of the Book of Daniel.

—Angels and Demons: During this time, there was a growing interest in the supernatural, with an increased belief in angels, demons, and spiritual warfare.

—Divine Sovereignty: Despite the domination of foreign empires, many Jews believed that God remained sovereign and would ultimately bring deliverance to His people.

Conclusion:

The Intertestamental Period was a time of political turmoil, religious development, and cultural exchange. Though this period is not directly covered in the canonical scriptures, it profoundly shaped the context in which the New Testament emerged. The tensions between Greek influence and traditional Jewish identity, the internal divisions within Jewish society, and the expectations for a coming Messiah all set the stage for the birth, the life, the ministry, the death and resurrection of Jesus and the subsequent spread of Christianity.