

THE 400 SILENT YEARS

(420 – ±6 BC)

Where does the Old Testament end? The Old Testament ends with the return of the Lord's people from exile in Babylonia. At that time, Persia was the great world power and ruled over the returned exiles. The Israelites did not have their own king, but they knew who the successor should be: Zerubbabel, the grandson of king Jehoiachin. The Persians appointed him as governor in Jerusalem (Ezra 2: 2 and Haggai 1:1). During his reign, the rebuilding of the Temple was completed in AD 515. The rebuilt Temple was smaller and less ostentatious than the Temple that Solomon had built. The priests, from the line of Aaron, continued to use the system of offerings.

Where does the New Testament start? When we open the New Testament, everything is completely different. Rome is now the world power, and once again a king is on the throne. This king is not from the house of David but is a descendent of Esau. His name is Herod the Great. The priests are also not descendents of Aaron.

The reason for this completely different picture is because 400 years had passed from the time the last book of the Old Testament was written to the start of the New Testament. These years are called the "quiet years" because they are not reflected in the Bible. Fortunately, there are sources that tell us what happened during those years. The 400 years can be compared to a stage scene in which the curtain is drawn and the director (the Lord) gets an opportunity to quickly rearrange the décor of history. When the curtain rises 400 years later, we find ourselves in the time of the New Testament. How did the décor change?

1. Political Shifts

The three great powers during these 400 quiet years were first the Persians, then the Greeks, and finally the Romans. Initially, Persia was the major world power, but the empire had to contend with the emerging power of the Greeks. In 333 BC, Alexander the Great conquered the Persians at the young age of 20 and established Greek rule throughout the land. The center of world power thus shifted from the east to the west.

Alexander was one of the greatest generals of all time. He subjected the whole inhabited world, including Palestine, to his rule during his short life span. He was a

student of the renowned Greek philosopher Aristotle. This exposure enabled Alexander to spread Greek culture to all corners of the world he conquered.

Alexander died before his thirty-third birthday. After his death, his empire was divided among his four generals. They shared Alexander's dream and continued to spread Greek culture, Greek thinking and the Greek language everywhere. This process has been called "Hellenization" ("Hellas" is the Greek name for "Greece") since the time of Alexander to describe this implementation of Greek culture.

The Jews in Palestine did not escape Hellenism. During the reign of Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175-164 BC), Hellenism was forced upon the Jews. Antiochus considered himself to be godly and was one of the cruellest Greek leaders. He plundered the Temple and declared the Jewish religion null and void. No child was allowed to be circumcised, no one was allowed to have a copy of the Torah, and the Jews were forbidden to keep the Sabbath. In 168 BC, Antiochus erected an altar of Zeus over the altar of burnt offerings in the Temple court. He even sacrificed pigs (considered unholy animals by the Jews) on the altar. He then instructed the Jews to eat pork and to bring offerings to Zeus. The king's troops ensured that his decrees were implemented. The Jews considered all this to be the religious equivalent of rape. A Jewish uprising was inevitable.

Resistance by the Jews ignited when a Greek officer forced two Jewish priests to bring offerings to Zeus. The one priest was prepared to do this, but the other one, named Mattathias, became angry and murdered his fellow priest and the Greek officer. Mattathias then hid in the mountains with his five sons. The family of Mattathias became known as the Maccabees (Hebrew for "hammer") because they attacked their enemy with hammer blows. They were generally known as the Hasmonaeans, a reference to their forefather, Hasmon.

The Hasmonaeans formed an army with Judas, Mattathias's eldest son. The Maccabees (167-141 BC) triumphed despite the superior power of Antigonos IV Epiphanes and enforced a peace treaty. The Temple service was reinstated in 164. The Hasmonaean Empire was established, and the Jews had a taste of independence for the first time since the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC. Jews commemorate this event as the Feast of Light, or "Hanukkah," in December.

In Palestine, the Maccabees (Hasmonaeans) gained a century of independence (166-63 BC) for the Jews. Unfortunately, the Hasmonaean reign was plagued by intrigues and bloodshed. In the meantime, Rome was rising up as the new world power. By 338 BC, the

Romans already controlled the western section of the Italian peninsula, and within a few years they ruled over the whole area. After Rome conquered Carthage during the second century BC, the Roman Empire started to spread quickly in all directions.

In 63 BC, Rome brought the end of the Hasmonaean Empire and began its rule over Palestine. The Romans appointed the rulers in Palestine themselves. One of the most unpopular choices among the Jews was probably the appointment of Herod (37-4 BC). Rome appointed him as governor in 37 BC and then as king of all Judea in 40 BC. The Jews saw this as a bitter pill, because Herod was a descendent of Esau (an Edomite) and his mother was of Arabic descent. Rome managed to maintain world peace between 27 BC and AD 180. This period is known as the *Pax Romana* (Latin for “the Roman peace”)

2. Cultural Shifts

The empire of Alexander the Great did not last long politically due to his early death, but it was successful in the cultural sphere. His generals worked very hard to establish Greek thought and the Greek language in the regions they controlled. The next world rulers, the Romans, fully embraced Greek culture.

The Greek dialect used at the time was known as *koine* (general) Greek and flourished in the Roman Empire. Greek architecture dominated, and gymnasiums, theatres and stadiums in the Greek style were soon erected everywhere. Alexandria in Egypt, named after Alexander the Great, was an excellent example of Hellenism. The city had museums and a big library. The mathematician Euclid and the physicist Archimedes lived and studied here. Many Jews also lived in Egypt. The city of Alexandria is also where the Old Testament was translated into Greek during 275 to 100 BC—a translation that became known as the “Septuagint.” The New Testament was written in Greek during the first century AD. The Greek culture also had an impact on the Jews in Palestine.

3. Geographical Shifts

Many of the Jews never returned to their country of birth after the period of exile. Many of them settled in Egypt. In fact, during the time of the New Testament, there were probably more Jews in Alexandria than in Jerusalem. The Roman Empire’s extended transport system, the *Pax Romana* (and the fact that *koine* Greek was widely spoken made it very easy for the Jews to travel. Consequently, Jewish settlements with synagogues

developed across the known world of that time. The Jews who spread from Palestine came to be known as the Jews of the Diaspora (dispersion). They spoke Greek and prayed in synagogues.

During Roman domination, Palestine (formerly known as Canaan) was divided into three areas, namely, Galilee, Samaria and Judea. Previously, Palestine was divided into two areas: Samaria in the north and Judea in the south.

Galilee formed the northern part of Palestine and was the largest of the three areas. Although Jesus was born in Bethlehem in the south, He spent most of His life in Galilee.

Samaria was somewhat smaller than Galilee and was situated in the middle of Palestine. The Jews despised the Samaritans and used their name as a swear word, because they did not regard the Samaritans as “true” Jews. The Samaritans came into existence when Assyria invaded Samaria in 722 BC and took the prominent Israelites (Northern Empire) into exile. In order to establish stability in the region, foreigners were deported to Samaria. The Samaritans were the offspring of the foreigners and the Israelites who stayed behind. Today, it is known as the so-called West Bank area, where today much of the conflict in the Middle East occurs. It is currently ruled by Israel and Palestine.

Judea formed the southern part of Palestine, and Jerusalem was its most important city. Before the Babylonian exile, the region was known as the kingdom of Judah, but after the Israelites returned from exile, it became known as Judea. During Roman rule, Judea was ruled by governors, of whom Pontius Pilate was the most well known.

4. Religious Shifts

Alexander the Great’s attempts to Hellenize the world led to resistance, and new religious parties were formed among the Jews during the 400 quiet years in reaction to the pressure to adopt Greek language and culture. These parties all acknowledged the authority of the Torah (Law of Moses) and the importance of the Temple. These different groups, however, had different ideas about the practical application of the religion in their daily lives.

The Pharisees were known for their rigid adherence to religious prescriptions and traditions of the forefathers. They saw themselves as the official interpreters and defenders of the Law. They believed in the resurrection and in angels. They tried not to mix with sinners. They asked Jesus trick questions about issues such as keeping the Sabbath, eating with sinners and fasting. There were about 6,000 Pharisees during the time of Jesus.

The Sadducees, a smaller group than the Pharisees, were politically more active. They tolerated Roman rule, as it brought about stability. Theologically, they were conservative. For instance, they only accepted the first five books of the Old Testament (the Pentateuch) as Scripture. They did not believe in the resurrection or in angels (they asked Jesus about this). They prosecuted the Early Church and questioned the apostles.

Strictly speaking, the scribes were not a party but a group of laymen who studied the Law of Moses. They originate as far back as the period of exile when the Torah was the center of Jewish religion because the Temple lay in ruins. Since the time of Ezra (Neh. 8:9), who by that time was already known as a priest and scribe, they were seen as experts of the Law. By the time of the New Testament, they were considered to be the upholders of the Torah and taught it to groups of pupils. They were versed in the Law and judges in the Jewish Sanhedrin. They acted on behalf of the Romans to maintain law and order. They considered Jesus, who many saw as a political liberator, to be a threat to the Roman law and order.

The Zealots were followers of the Pharisees' faith but were firmly set against domination by the Romans. They tried to get rid of Roman rule.

5. Language Shifts

The language of the inhabitants of Palestine changed from Hebrew to Aramaic (a language related to Hebrew) after the period of exile in Babylonia. Hebrew was mainly the language of the Old Testament. During the time of Jesus, Hebrew was only used for religious matters by the priests and rabbis. Latin was spoken in Rome, but *koine* Greek was spoken in the rest of the Roman Empire. The New Testament was also written in Greek. The Jewish Bible was translated into Greek (the Septuagint) because many Jews were fluent in both Greek and Aramaic. Jesus and His disciples spoke Aramaic.

When God raised the curtain after the 400 quiet years, the world was prepared for the rapid spread of the gospel. There was now a world language, it was easy to travel because of the peace brought about by the Roman Empire, and Jewish settlements and synagogues were present everywhere.

The quiet years ended with the birth of Christ 6 BC. There is now more certainty about the year Christ was born—and scholars are convinced that it did not take place in the year 0. The Roman monk Dionysius Exiguus, who rejected our calendar, made a calculation error, which meant that there were six years too many. Three years before and

after the year 0 were taken away, and for this reason, the year of Christ's birth is given as approximately 6 BC. Herod the Great—the Herod at the time of Christ's birth and the one responsible for the murdering of children in Bethlehem (Matt. 2:1)—ruled between 37 and 34 BC.

The 27 books that make up the New Testament were nearly all written before the end of AD 100. The 27 books can be grouped the following way:

- The four Gospels, which describe the life of Jesus from different perspectives (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John)
- The Acts of the Apostles, which describes the first years of the Christian Church
- The letters of Paul (Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus and Philemon)
- The general letters (Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1–3 John and Jude)
- John's visions (Revelation)

In remaining sections of this book, we will now turn to the period of events after the 400 quiet years had ended, beginning in Matthew with the birth of Christ.