

## *Valley Bible Church - Bible Survey*

### Bible Survey Lesson 59: The Intertestamental Period

#### ***Introduction:***

Two weeks ago, after I handed out the tentative schedule for the next few months survey classes, someone asked me, "Why bother with the period of time between Malachi and Matthew? If the Bible skips it, shouldn't we do the same?" I don't think so for several reasons:

#### **1. I think you will agree that understanding the historical setting of the nations helped us in our understanding of the Old Testament.**

To know the interaction of Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Medo-Persia and other nations with Israel and Judah helped us to understand the events of history in I and II Samuel, I and II Kings, and I and II Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther. It certainly helped us to understand the messages of the prophets.

#### **2. The New Testament was written to speak to people who were a product of their history.**

In order to understand the meaning of the New Testament we need to immerse ourselves in the world that helped form its thinking and culture. Many earth-shattering events happened in Palestine between the time when Alexander the Great came to power in 336 BC. and the destruction of Jerusalem in AD. 135.

#### **3. The writers of the New Testament were first century Jews and Gentiles who experienced the results of these times.**

Many of the problems the early church faced were directly related to the Jewish and Greco-Roman cultural influence in the known world of the first century including gnosticism and pagan worship.

#### **4. Jesus was a first-century Galilean Jew speaking to his peers.**

The destruction of the Jewish nation, God's silence, and the history of the Jewish people during this time effected His message.

Even though these 400 years are called "the silent years" because there was no prophetic word from God, God was not inactive, and his people were not left without information.

The Prophet Daniel had predicted exactly what would happen:

**1. The Medo-Persian Empire** ruled the Promised Land (539-332 BC.)

**2. The Greek Empire** controlled the land next (332-301 BC.)

The Egyptian Ptolemaic Dynasties' rule followed (301-198 BC.)

The Seleucids took over Palestine (198-143 BC.)

The Hasmonian Dynasty was controlling the land (143-63 BC.)

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### **3.The Roman Empire** stepped in to control Palestine (63 BC.)

Of course the Lord's silence ended with his supernatural announcements of the coming Messiah by his New Testament Prophet, John the Baptist.

I could spend weeks on the history of these nations, but my goal is to show how they affected the land of Palestine and the Jewish people, who were now a people without a country, a nation without a King, and sheep without a shepherd.

### **I. MEDO-PERSIAN EMPIRE**

#### **A.200 Years of Benevolent Rule**

Following their style of politics, the Persian rulers sent Jews back

to Jerusalem to rebuild the city, their economy, their religion, their culture, and their country.

The advantage was, they could conduct trade with and collect taxes from a happy and successful people rather than having to control a hostile one.

#### **B. 100 Years after Malachi**

Judea continued in Persian control for about 100 years under control of the governor of Syria, with the High-Priest exercising spiritual and some civil control. The Jews were allowed to observe their forms of worship and style of culture with very little government interference.

### **II.GREEK EMPIRE**

The Persian Empire assimilated their Jewish captives and Aramaic became their common language. Permission and financial support for a return to Jerusalem caused only a remnant to return, but many other Jews moved throughout Palestine, Babylonia, Egypt, and other parts of the Empire. The diaspora or scattering of the Jews throughout the known world had begun.

#### **A.Alexander the Great**

Alexander the Great assumed the Macedonian Throne when his father, Philip II, was assassinated in 336 BC. Although he was only twenty, he was a natural leader and under the guidance of Aristotle he became well educated as well.

Between 334 and 331 BC., Alexander launched a military campaign against the powerful Persian Empire. He defeated Darius III in three major battles, then married his daughter to seal a treaty which gave the Greeks control of all their lands. (This, of course, was predicted in Daniel 8.) Before he was through, his army controlled Asia Minor, Palestine, Egypt, Babylonia and points east--virtually all of the known world. (Anecdote of Alexander weeping) **Refer to map, Lesson 24, II Kings**

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Alexander allowed the conquered soldiers to join his army, and the conquered people to carry on with their local business, culture and religion, leaving governors (often wounded army officers) behind to over see, keep order and collect taxes.

### ***Why is this important to New Testament study?***

The greatest influence Alexander the Great and the Greeks had on the known world was the Hellenization of the New Greek Empire, including Palestine. Alexander's dream was a world empire that was united by Greek culture, philosophy, and language.

Koine Greek, a street version of the classic Greek, became the language of the Empire. The inculturation also included public education in classics and philosophy, physical development and sports, art and sculpture, and politics and business.

### **B.Divided Greek Empire**

Alexander died suddenly in 323 BC. (perhaps from syphilis) but even with all his natural ability and training, he would have had trouble controlling his vast empire. There were constant, small uprisings and much infighting among his junior officers.

#### **Ptolemies (301 B.C.-198 BC.)**

After twenty years of wars, the kingdom was split between his four generals, as predicted in Daniel 8. Ptolemy I Sater took control of Israel in 301 BC. and the Ptolemies ruled until 198 BC.

Under the Ptolemies Palestine experienced a political economic and social re-birth. The Jews had a fair amount of religious freedom but were economically oppressed. The policies formed here carried over into the New Testament period.

The Parables of Jesus--with landowners, tenants, stewards, money lenders, day laborers, tax collectors, grain speculation and land leasing--all come from the systems developed at this time.

The land was the king's land, a portion of all its produce went to the king. Jerusalem became a temple state governed by a high priestly aristocracy with all the power, rights and privileges accorded a king.

#### **Seleucids (198 B.C.-143 BC.)**

In 198 the Seleucids, who controlled Syria and Persia, took control of Palestine under Antiochus III the Great at the Battle of Panium (later Caesaria Philippi).

Early Seleucid tolerance of Jewish religious and cultural practices were probably due to Antiochus' need of the Jews because Rome was moving threatening everyone in their path. In fact, he signed a treaty with Rome in 188 BC. which virtually reduced him to a tax collector for Rome, even though they had not physically invaded Palestine. To seal the deal he sent his son, Epiphanes, to Rome as a hostage.

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This tolerance came to an end when that hostage, Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175-164 BC.) was released from Rome to Athens and soon raised an army and reconquered his fathers land.

**He became one of the most infamous characters in all of Jewish history.**

He ordered the Hellenization of Palestine, forbidding the Jews from keeping their laws or observing their religion. He desecrated the temple, offering a pig on the altar. He plundered the temple treasury and took the objects of worship. He stopped the observance of the Sabbath, festivals, sacrificing, and the circumcision of Jewish children. Antiochus Epiphanes was the first pagan king to order the death of masses of Jews for their faith.

### **Maccabean Revolt (166 B.C.-142 BC.)**

The Maccabean Revolt is one of the most interesting historical events and a high point for Jewish nationalists. It came as a result of a hatred for Epiphanes, but was also rooted in a struggle for power as opposing factions vied to see who could make the best offer to "buy" the high priest office in Jerusalem.

This brought additional unrest in Jerusalem that caused Antiochus to super Hellenize Jerusalem. Everything he did just exacerbated his problems with the Jews:

He built a fortress proclaiming that God was Zues Olympius, erecting altars to him and ordering all, Jews included, to offer sacrifices of swine to Zeus. When his soldiers tried to enforce his orders, an aged priest, Mattathias killed his fellow Jew who was obeying the order and the officer, then tore down the Altar.

Mattathias led his five sons into the wilderness, collecting a group of *Hasidim*, or "pious ones," and began a guerrilla style war against Epiphanes and his successors and any Jews who obeyed them. When the old priest died, his oldest son, Judas Maccabeus (the Hammer), became the leader of the revolt, which became known by his name.

After a 24-year war the Jews won a truce with Syria, mainly because of growing Roman pressure, and received their independence. The descendents of Mattathias founded the Hasmonean dynasty, a name derived from Hasmon, an ancestor. This was a time when much of the Promised land was recaptured. A time of Jewish victory and peace.

### **Hasmoneans**

The Hasmoneans took over the office of High Priest, even though they did not belong to the priestly line. Even though they used

the re-dedicated temple, they quickly began to follow Hellenistic practices their fathers had fought so hard against. The Greek influence in Palestine lasted until 63 BC. largely because of their leadership.

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### **The effects of the Maccabees on New Testament Jewish history was tremendous:**

1. The Hasidim (pious ones), with their zeal for the tradition of their ancestors and obedience to Torah probably began the organization of the Pharisees.
2. The revolt brought religious freedom and a spirit of nationalism which carried on as they negotiated deals with the Roman emperors to "rule themselves" in exchange for tributes and keeping their people under control.
3. A sensitivity to any threat which might abominate the temple or disgrace the law. Jesus was accused of violating the Sabbath law and speaking blasphemy "against the temple." (Mk. 14) Stephen was martyred for "speaking against the holy place and against the law." (Acts 6) Paul was charged for defiling the temple by bringing a gentile. (Acts 21)
4. Hellenization continued as the office of High Priest was politicized to the point where Jonathan accepted a post from the Seleucid Emperor.
5. Concentration on the law and its interpretations caused the Pharisees to martyr many righteous people who opposed their non-Biblical views Just as the Maccabees had.
6. Apocalyptic literature flourished causing a rise of the belief that the Messiah would come in power and glory to overthrow the yoke of Roman tyranny.

### **III. ROMAN EMPIRE**

Overshadowing the sibling rivalries of the Hasmonean Dynasty was advance of Pompey and the power of Rome as it conquered the known world.

#### **A. Pompey and Herod the Great**

The Hasmonean Dynasty ended in 63 BC. when Roman General Pompey was invited in to settle a dispute between two men who claimed the High-Priesthood. He settled the problem by taking the stronger of the two, Aristobulus II, to Rome as a prisoner, and placing the weaker, Hyrcanus II as a vassal high priest in Jerusalem.

Without a struggle, Judea passed into the control of Rome. Unrest in the area caused Rome to appoint Herod the Great king of Judah.

He was Idumean by birth, a Jewish proselyte, but a Greco-Roman in philosophy. He ruled Palestine from 37 BC. to 4 BC. and was "king of the Jews" when Jesus was born (Matt. 2).

Herod was an effective ruler who forcefully put down any rebellion and won favor with the Roman Emperors. Put these two facts together and you know why the Jews hated him. His rule was tragic. He did everything in his power to win the favor of the Jews, including attacking a Roman garrison, but he was still an outsider and agent of Rome.

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He even went so far as to begin the building of a grand new temple in Jerusalem. He began it in 20 BC. and it was finished after his death in AD. 64. The Jews disdain was so great they never called it Herod's temple, but simply, the second temple.

These problems led to paranoia, as witnessed in his attempts to kill the child Messiah, who he viewed as a future rival for his throne. by the time of his death he had ordered the deaths of everyone suspected of any intrigue against him, including close family.

The years following the death of Heron, the Great were years of unrest and revolt in Judea. It became a period of Tetrarchs, Procurators, and Kings, as Rome tried desperately to deal with the "Judean problem." Many of their names pop up in the New Testament in various roles relating to the control of the Roman Jewish dilemma. The fate of the Jews hinged on the style and personality of the current ruler.

### **B. Agrippa I and Titus**

In AD 37 Agrippa, grandson of Herod the Great was in jail. He had befriended a young man named Gaius who, through circumstance and intrigue became the perverted and cruel Emperor Caligula. He was released from prison, given a gold medallion and made king of the territory once ruled by his grandfather.

Agrippa may or may not have been a pious man, but he was sensitive to the Jews and was appreciated by most of them (see Acts 12). At his death the Jews mourned and with great reason. The following rulers were cruel, insensitive, harsh, and ruthless.

Matters again came to a head in AD. 66. A war, the result of anti-Roman hatred and fueled by incompetent, greedy, and ruthless procurators, was waged by anarchistic Jews.

The plundering of the temple treasury, again, this time by Forius, brought out the Zealots who drove the Romans out of Jerusalem and then ran to Masada while anarchists, both Jews and Gentiles, massacred each other in the streets.

In AD. 68 Vespasian was ready to attack and re-capture Jerusalem, but Nero committed suicide and he was appointed Emperor. He returned to Rome but named his son Titus as his general and charged him with solving the Jewish problem.

In AD. 70 Titus brutally sacked Jerusalem, burned the temple, then followed the escapees to Masada where he built a siege ramp to scale the walls. He found only two women and five children alive, as all others had chosen suicide over capture.

All deferences to Judaism ceased. Temple worship was terminated and Jerusalem became a pagan city. Worship moved into Synagogs under the leadership of Hillel and Gamaliel II and Judaism flourished again. The separation of Christians from Jews was final and complete.

Jews and Christians were dispersed throughout the Roman world; surviving without a temple, without power, and without a land. And until now they have survived, as a people, held together only by their faith, their Scriptures, and their places of worship.

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**As we go into the New Testament, I hope this background will be of value.**

**Fortunately for the Children of Israel and for the adopted Children of God, the Lord still desire us to have a personal relationship with Him.**

### ***Homework:***

*Read:* Begin reading of the Gospel of Matthew

*Think:* Do I appreciate what God has done to call me to Himself.

*Apply:* Thank God for the freedom we have to obey and worship Him, then do it this week.