

The Time between the Testaments (432-5 BC)

During the years between the end of the events of the Old Testament and the beginning of the New Testament, God was preparing the world, and His people in particular, for the coming of the Savior. And then, "when the time had fully come, God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons (**Galatians 4:4**).

What political forces bridged the testaments as God set the world's stage for the coming of Jesus?

- *The Diaspora* (Dispersion) Jewish people scattered throughout the world as the result of the Babylonian captivity. The Jews that assembled in Jerusalem to hear Peter's Pentecost sermon had come there from all over the world. Early Christians began their mission efforts among these transplanted Jews who were familiar with the Greek translation of the Old Testament.
- *Persian Period* (430-332 BC) Beginning with King Cyrus's decree in 538 BC, many of God's people began returning to the Promised Land. But their homeland remained a minor entity held under the control of a number of significant political powers, beginning with Persians. Life under the Persians was for the most part tolerant. (Esther had been a queen of Persia.)
- *Greek Period* (332-167 BC) The conquest of Palestine by young Alexander the Great in 332 BC began a period of Greek cultural influence. Greek could be heard spoken throughout the world. During this period the Old Testament was translated into Greek (called the Septuagint). Following Alexander's death, the empire was divided among his generals. Palestine was passed back and forth from the governance of the Seleucids and the Ptolemies. The Jews enjoyed good treatment under the Ptolemies, but things were different under Seleucid Antiochus Epiphanes who ruled from 175-164 BC. He hated the Jews and sought to wipe out them and their religion. He attacked Jerusalem, defiled the temple, placed a sow on the Jewish altar, erected a statue of Jupiter, prohibited worship and circumcision, sold Jewish families into slavery, and destroyed every copy of Scripture he could find.
- *Hasmonean Period* (167-63 BC) In opposition to the atrocities of Antiochus, the head of a priestly family, Mattathias, and his five sons led a successful revolt and founded a dynasty that, unfortunately, all too soon resembled that of the Seleucids.
- *Roman Period* (63 BC to the time of Christ) In 63 BC, Romans conquered Jerusalem. They killed the priest serving at the temple and defiled the Most Holy Place. Antipater (a descendent of Esau) was appointed the ruler of Judea. His son, Herod the Great, rebuilt the temple in an attempt to earn favor with the Jews. But Herod was cruel and insecure. He was the ruler when Jesus was born, and he ordered the killing of the children of Bethlehem.

What Holy Scriptures and other writings were God's people reading during this period?

- The Septuagint - according to tradition, this translation of the books of the Old Testament from Hebrew into Greek was made in Alexandria, Egypt, at the request of Ptolemy Philadelphus (285-247 BC). *Septuagint* comes from the Latin word for seventy. According to Jewish tradition, seventy-two scholars did the work in seventy-two days, translating the entirety of the Old Testament canon. The Septuagint was commonly used during the time of Christ and in the Early Christian Church as it was written in Greek, a language understood by Jews and Gentiles alike. The Septuagint is frequently quoted in the New Testament by Jesus and the apostles.
- The Apocrypha - identifies fourteen books positioned between the Old and New Testaments of some Bibles. Written between the first and third centuries BC, these books are not found in the Hebrew Old Testament and were never quoted by Jesus. The Apocrypha, a name derived from a Greek word meaning "hidden," includes 1 Esdras, 2 Esdras, Tobit, Judith, Rest of Esther, Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus, Baruch, Song of the Three Holy Children, History of Susanna, Bel and the Dragon, Prayer of Manasses, 1 Maccabees, and 2 Maccabees.

What language did people speak in the Holy Land when Jesus was born?

After the return of God's people from Babylonian Captivity, Aramaic gradually replaced Hebrew as the language commonly spoken by the people of Palestine. Aramaic was the ancient language of Syria and it is similar to Hebrew. Jesus spoke and taught in Aramaic, but He was undoubtedly also familiar with Hebrew, Greek, and perhaps Latin.

Who were the religious groups that figure prominently in the New Testament?

- Sanhedrin - thought to have originated in the third century BC, this group of seventy members led the Jewish people in the days of Christ. Among the seventy members were priests, Sadducees, Pharisees, scribes, and elders. The high priest presided over the group.
- Pharisees - a sect that rose as a reaction to those among God's people desiring to adopt Greek culture with its pagan religions. The Pharisees interpreted God's Law so the people could live righteously before God according to it. They wielded powerful influence among the people and were the only Jewish religious group to survive the destruction of the temple in AD 70. Modern Judaism can be traced to them.
- Sadducees - an aristocratic sect heavily influenced by secular thought and Greek customs, they were liberals and freethinkers. Though they controlled the Sanhedrin, they were appropriately characterized as irreligious in nature. Unlike the Pharisees, the Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection (**Mark 12:18**).

- Scribes - copied, studied, and interpreted Scripture. Because of their vast knowledge they were considered experts in the Law and sometimes served as lawyers. The role of scribes was especially important before the days of printing.

Where did the people worship in the New Testament world?

- The temple - the physical structure built as God's dwelling place among His people. Located in Jerusalem, the temple remained the center of Jewish worship. Here people came to offer blood sacrifices for the sins of the people and to pray. Jesus, the ultimate indwelling of God among His people, referred to Himself as a temple (**John 2:19-21**). He came to take away the sins of all people once and for all (**Hebrews 9:24-26**).
- Synagogues - houses for religious teaching and worship, synagogues were begun during the days of exile when the people were cut off from the temple. Early Christians modeled their church life and elements of worship after that of the synagogue.
- Homes - the Passover meal was a family event from the time of its first observance (**Exodus 12**). In Jewish tradition, the head of the household was responsible for the faith nurture and devotional life of the family. Similarly, this responsibility exists among Christian families (**Ephesians 6:4**). Luther noted this frequently in the catechism, summarizing Christian doctrine "as the head of the family should teach it in a simple way to his household." Early Christians, especially during times of persecution, met in small groups in people's homes to worship, support, and encourage one another, and to enjoy a time of fellowship.

What features made the world in which Christ was born ready to receive the world's Savior?

- Greek language gave the world a common voice. The Old Testament and eventually the New Testament languages were available in the universal language of the day.
- Roman transportation and communication facilitated the efficient spreading of the Gospel.
- The dispersion of God's people throughout the world provided strategic mission contacts so the message of salvation might be transmitted first to the Jews and then to the Gentiles.
- The promises of the Old Testament were ripe for fulfillment so that at just the right time and place Jesus, the stone the builders rejected, might give His life to save all people and in so doing construct a new religion of the old, "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus Himself as the chief cornerstone" (Ephesians 2:20).