

Understanding the Old Testament 10 Between the Covenants (The period of silence)

We don't really know a lot about the Jews during the 400 years between the Old and New Testaments. What we do know comes from Josephus, secular writings, and some of the books of the Apocrypha. The world political situation was tumultuous.

Egypt was in the twilight of its glory years. They would end with Cleopatra and Rome's final annexation of Egypt. Greece, too, was seeing the height of its glory pass. Aristotle and Plato lived in this era, but Greek liberty was steadily on the decline as it became more and more a military state. The election of Philip of Macedon was the death knell of liberty. For a brief time, Alexander the Great led the Greek military machine in world conquest, but they could not consolidate their gains. In contrast, Rome was on the rise. The intermittent wars trained her armies in war tactics. Rome was able to secure their gains. They conquered the surrounding nations and even as far north as England. After these conquests they began road building for trade and quick movement from nation to nation. Rome's domination of the world, including Israel, set the stage for the coming of Christ.

As regards Jewish history, the period between the Testaments may be divided as follows: (1) the Persian period; (2) the Alexandrian period; (3) the Egyptian period; (4) the Syrian period; (5) the Maccabean period; (6) the Roman period. - International Standard Bible Encyclopedia

In the Persian period, (400-335) the High Priests ruled through the satraps of Persia. So much control was held by the High Priest that it became a grab for power. The General over the area favored a man named Jesus. To try to get into the office, Jesus' brother, John, killed Jesus in front of the altar. This began a period of persecution of the Jews by Persia. The city of Jerusalem was partially destroyed and the temple was defiled.

The Alexandrian period (334-323) was brief. The Thebes had conquered the Greeks, but Philip of Macedon soon threw off their yoke. When he was murdered, his son, Alexander, took vengeance on Persia, defeating Darius and forever changing the world. There was an amazing interaction between Alexander and the Jews. He reduced Tyre, but when he advanced on Jerusalem, the High Priest Jaddua and a group of priests dressed in their priestly attire went out to meet him and plead for mercy. He had previously seen this in dream. They read the prophecies of Daniel about him. He was very moved, and sacrificed to YAWEH. The Jews became his favorites. He granted them equal status with Greeks, highest status in some of the cities he founded, including Alexandria, and employed them in his army.

The Egyptian Period was 324 to 264BC. When Alexander died, one of his four generals, Ptolemy, took over the rule of Egypt, Soter, and Judea. At first he was very harsh toward the Jews, but later became their patron. When his son ruled, the Septuagint was translated (200BC), a Greek version of the Old Testament. This played a very important role as many Jews could no longer read Hebrew. Greek was the language of the world. Many quotes in the New Testament come from this

translation. The Seleucids fought with the Ptolemy dynasty and eventually defeated them.

This began the Syrian period (204-165BC). Though they were harsh toward the Jews, they still allowed the High Priest to reign. When Antiochus Epiphanes came to the throne, there was a dark and foreboding change. Two priests were fighting over power when one of them went to Egypt and set up an alternative temple. The one who remained in power, Jason, was bribed out of office, and the man who replaced him was really a hater of everything Jewish. The Hellenists and Jews were fighting over influence in the society. Epiphanes took this opportunity to ransack Jerusalem. He sacrificed a pig on the altar and erected a statue of Jupiter there. He killed thousands of Jews and sold many into slavery. The wall of Jerusalem was destroyed. During this time the Samaritans fully cooperated with Epiphanes. This was part of the reason for the deep lying hatred the Jews had for them. A priestly family from Modin, the father and his five sons of the family Hasmonean, raised a revolt and eventually defeated Epiphanes.

Their victory began the Maccabean period (165 to 63BC). After the father died, Judas Maccabeus led the revolt. It began with the execution of an idol worshipping Jew in front of the altar. Judas used guerilla tactics to defeat Syria's three attempts to squelch the revolt. When Antiochus died of a horrible disease, Syria sought terms of peace. Judas first act as governor was to sanctify the temple. This is the origin of the Feast of Purification or Hannukah. There are various versions of the story, but one version has the priests unable to find enough sacred oil to light the menorah. Only enough for one day was found. That one-day supply burned miraculously for seven days until more could be made according to the law. Hannukah is a feast that celebrates that miracle and the purification of the temple.

The Syrians invaded again and Judas died in battle. His brother Jonathon reigned for only 3 months and was assassinated. Simon succeeded him and was acknowledged by Rome as the hereditary ruler of Judea. John Hyrcanus succeeded him. Partisan controversies erupted into civil war. The grandsons of John Hyrcanus, Hyrcanus and Aristobulus were vying for power. General Pompey of Rome came to Hyrcanus support. Upon victory, he went into the Holy of Holies. This forever set the heart of Jewish people against Rome. This was in 63BC, the same year Julius Caesar was assassinated.

This began the Roman period, 63 –4 BC. Hyrcanus was no longer hereditary ruler, but only High Priest. Judea was considered a Roman province, taxed and kept in place by Roman legions. Herod the Great was appointed to oversee the region in 37BC. He succeeded in completely wiping out any remaining Hasmoneans. He began rebuilding the Temple in 20BC and died in 4BC.

The Apocrypha are books written between 200 –100BC, most of which were written in Greek. They were a part of the Septuagint. The Roman Catholic church and the Eastern Orthodox church retain these works as inspired, but the Protestants and Jews do not. There are also New Testament Apocrypha, which have been excluded from the Christian canon.

At the end of this period, this region of the world had an expectation of the coming of a great Jewish leader. We have indication of this in a number of secular writings.

See the summary of the Apocryphal books in Ryrie's Study Bible.

How did the stability of the Roman Empire prepare the world for the coming of Jesus?