

Between the Testaments

Apprentice Track Workshop: Biblical Story

Session 8

[Thomas]

INTRODUCTION

- **Opening Question:** Has there ever been a time in your life when God felt silent or seemed distant? What was that like? What did you learn from that experience? What sustained you through that experience.
- **Lesson Preview:** In our session today we're going to cover a period in biblical history often described as the 400 years of silence, the 400 years between the close of the Old Testament and the start of the New. Of course, God wasn't absent from history during these centuries but we receive no revealed Scripture during this era. But as distant as God may seem during this period, he is still very much at work.
- During this episode first we'll give you a historical overview of the time period in six phases. Then we'll look at what life was like for the Jews in the Greco-Roman World, and then finally we answer the question: what was God doing during the intertestamental period and how does it relate to the big story of the bible?

[Justin]

1. The History of Israel Between the Testaments

a. The Persian Period (539-331 BC)

- i. The Persian Empire was based in the region that is today called Iran.
- ii. Under Emperor Cyrus, 43,000 Jews were allowed to their homeland, rebuild the temple, and re-establish Jerusalem and the surrounding area (See Esther, Nehemiah, Ezra, Haggai, and Zechariah).

b. The Hellenistic (Greek) Period (331-164 BC)

- i. In 331 BC Alexander the Great and his armies swept across the known world.
- ii. While his empire was short lived it brought about a cultural revolution spread Greek culture throughout the Mediterranean and Near Eastern World. This is a process called "Hellenization" from the word Greeks used to identify themselves, Hellenes. This process transported Greek culture into the land of Judea. The Greeks built dozens of cities in Israel. Greek became the dominant language, especially among merchant and political classes. And Greek philosophy penetrated much of the Near Eastern Worldview.
- iii. Hebrew faded and the Old Testament was translated into Greek. This translation, called the Septuagint, was the most common version of the Bible in the 1st century.

[Thomas]

c. Ptolemaic (Egyptian) Period (320 – 198 BC)

- i. After Alexander's early death, the territory he conquered was eventually divided into four regions, each ruled by one of his generals. Two of these are relevant to the story of Judea. Palestine was first dominated by the Ptolemies, whose realm was centered in Egypt. Judah was generally peaceful and well-governed during this period.

- ii. Late in the Ptolemaic period, the Seleucids, based in Syria, began competing for possession of Palestine and Judea. During this time, the Jews suffered greatly. Josephus, an ancient Jewish historian, writes the Jews were “like a ship in a storm which is tossed by the waves on both sides.” (Cf. Daniel 11)

d. The Seleucid (Syrian) Period (198 -164 BC)

- i. This storm of war between Syria and Egypt would eventually turn into a hurricane of oppression when Judea finally passed into Seleucid hands. The Syrians repressively taxed the Jews and aggressively forced them to assimilate to Greek culture. This oppression reached a climax during the reign of Antiochus IV. Epiphanes (175-164 BC). He deposed the High Priest and set up one of his own choosing who actively led the people to abandon worship according to Moses and participate in idolatrous Greek festivities. And circumcision was made illegal and of course, taxes were also raised.
- ii. “... every insult was heaped on the religion of the Jews, and its every trace was to be swept away.” – Edersheim

[Justin]

e. The Hasmonean (Maccabean) Period (164-63 BC)

- i. This increasing political, religious, and economic oppression sparked a revolt outside Jerusalem when an elderly priest named Matthias killed a Seleucid official who required him to sacrifice a pig on the altar.
- ii. Matthias’ son, Judas, mustered up a small army and after successful guerrilla warfare, the Jews were finally able to take Jerusalem and re-purify the Temple on December 14th 164 BC, three years after its desecration (Hannukah).
- iii. The Maccabean line continued. Judas’ nephew John Hyrcanus took over as High Priest and King of Judea. He conquered Samaria and Edom and then officially shook off Syrian rule in 116 BC. Nothing like this had been accomplished since the time of David and Solomon 900 years earlier.
- iv. This kind of military success in Israel’s recent past would greatly affect the world of the 1st century. Many Jews would expect a Messiah just like Judas Maccabees and his relatives to lead an army and throw off Roman oppression.
- v. Yet this prosperity would quickly devolve. Though the Hasmoneans had started their reign by emphasizing strict devotion to Judaism and the Mosaic law, once in power they became heavily influenced by Greek culture. Moreover, John Hyrcanus’ descendants were especially oppressive rulers. Thousands of Jews were executed under their reign and the Hasmonean family gradually disintegrated. Until that is the Roman General Pompey began his sweeping campaign through Asia.

f. The Roman Period (63 BC – 70 AD)

- i. The devolving and corrupt Hasmonean dynasty was a “welcome mat” for the expanding Roman Republic. Pompey laid siege to Jerusalem for three months before entering the city. He entered the temple, killed the priests and entered the Holy of Holies.
- ii. Under Roman rule, Herod the Great became “King of the Jews” in 37 BC.
 1. He was a cruel but effective leader who greatly enhanced the Temple in Jerusalem.
 2. His descendants are some of the rulers of Judea and Galilee who feature in the Gospels and Acts.

[Thomas]

2. The Jews in the Greco-Roman World

a. A Heavy Burden

- i. The average Jew paid 50% of his income to the Roman state in taxes. This made tax collectors (Jews employed by Rome) especially hated and seen as betrayers.
- ii. Approximately 85% of the wealth was controlled by only 1-2 percent of the population. Most people lived very poorly (including Jesus, most of his disciples, and the vast majority of the people he encounters in the Gospels).

[Justin]

b. The Pax-Romana

- i. Rome's domination led to abundant peace and infrastructure in Palestine.
- ii. Moreover, Jews had more opportunity than ever to interact with the cultures around them. This was made possible through the universalization of the Greek language and by the ease of travel.
- iii. Jews were one of the largest minorities in the Empire. And they were scattered all over the world. This allowed Christianity to spread quickly throughout the Mediterranean.

[Thomas]

c. The Destruction of the Temple

- i. Growing intolerance and disdain of foreign oppression led to a major Jewish revolt from 66-70 AD (approximately 35 years after Jesus' death).
- ii. This led to the brutal sacking of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple.

[Justin]

3. What was God doing "Between the Testaments"???

a. Heightened oppression and poverty increased longing for a messiah.

- i. At the time of Jesus, Judea was a minor Roman province. They had been dominated for centuries.
 - 1. That is why all those who were with Jesus when he fed the 5,000 rushed toward him to make him king (John 6:15). They were poor and desperate and wanted a literal physical political king to bring relief.
 - 2. This also helps us understand the Apostles question to Jesus even after he had died on the cross. "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6). They wanted their beloved nation to put off the shackles of political domination and provincial status and once again be a great nation like was promised to Abraham.
- ii. This anticipation for a messiah was also fueled by the Jewish literature of the time period.
 - 1. *The Apocrypha* - written between 200 BC and 100 AD.
 - 2. *The Pseudepigrapha* - written between 300 BC and 300 AD.
 - 3. Though these books are not inspired they show us a lot about what common Jews imagined the future would be like. They are filled with expectations of God's righteous remnant being vindicated militarily.

[Thomas]

b. The Remnant and the Diaspora

- i. At the time of Jesus, the majority of Jews lived outside the promised land. Only a remnant had returned and formed a people in the land.

- ii. A prime example of life in the Diaspora is found in the book of Esther.
 1. If you remember from last session, Esther takes place in the 480s BC- 40 years *after* the Temple was rebuilt. So, God's people were technically back in the land, the exile was over. Except Esther and the large Jewish community with her were living in the Susa, the capital of the Persian Empire- even further away from Jerusalem than Babylon.
 2. Esther is the story of a Jewish princess risking her life to save her people in the face of evil Haman's plot to wipe out the Jews.
 3. Curiously, God is never mentioned directly in the entire story of Esther. But this absence of his name is almost an intentionally dissonant literary device. Though his name is never mentioned, God is still obviously working and intervening for his people. And so the book of Esther becomes symbolic for the state of God's people during the diaspora. God appears to be absent, but he is still working in Persia and the exile.

[Justin]

- iii. God would use the scattering of the Jews across the Roman Empire as a means for scattering the gospel to the ends of the earth.
 1. In Acts 2:5, when Peter stands up to preach the first gospel sermon since Christ's ascension to heaven Jews from all over the world were present. These Jews would take the gospel back to their towns in Africa, Persia, Arabia, and Turkey.
 2. Without access to the Temple, a new place of worship developed in the Jewish Diaspora: the synagogue.
 - a. These were communities formed by at least 10 Jewish men. At the time of Christ, there were synagogues present in Italy, Greece, Egypt, Turkey, Persia, and beyond (**Acts 15:19-20**).
 - b. These gathering places became nature hubs for gospel preaching and formed the foundation for the new churches that Paul and others would start on their missionary journeys. It was always Paul's custom to go into the synagogue (if one was present) and preach there first (Acts 13ff).

[Thomas]

- c. So, what was God doing???
 - i. "It were a one-sided view to regard the Babylonian exile as only a punishment for Israel's sin... There is always a positive element also of actual progress; a step forward, even though in the taking of it something should have to be crushed. And this step forward was... The idea of the Kingdom of God in its relationship to the whole world. – Edershiem, Life and Times of the Messiah
 - ii. In other words, God was using the darkness of the diaspora to prepare for the shining of the light of the gospel into all corners of the world. This was a crucial step in the progress of God's redemption, he was setting things up for the next chapter in the story of the bible. The kingdom of God was no longer to be confined to ethnic, political, geographic Israel. Instead, his reign and presence would be expanded across the whole of the globe. And the Babylonian exile, Cyrus' decree, Alexander the Great, and Julius Caesar- these were all crucial elements, building blocks in that process.
 - iii. God would use the exile and diaspora to fulfill his covenant with
 1. Adam - be fruitful and multiply, *fill* the earth and subdue it (Genesis 1:26-27)
 2. Abraham - through you all the families of the earth will be blessed (Genesis 12:1-3)

3. Israel – “All the earth will be filled with his glory (Numbers 14:21); “I will make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth” (Isaiah 49).
4. And David (Psalm 2; 72)