

THE LOST 500 YEARS: FROM MALACHI TO JOHN THE BAPTIST

The 500 years between the Old and New Testaments can teach us about the conditions in ancient Palestine before the coming of Jesus Christ and help us renew our commitment to follow the Savior.



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When the prophet Malachi stepped off the earthly stage around 450 B.C., no genuine prophetic voice was heard again for about 500 years. We know this period as the intertestamental period—the gap between

dispensations in the Old and New Testaments. Without a prophet, people in the land began to divide into parties and groups, each claiming the right to interpret the scriptures and lead the people. The true understanding of Jehovah diminished among these groups. A long night of confusion followed, which ended when God sent a new prophet, John the Baptist, to begin a new dispensation. But even with John the Baptist and the Savior teaching the people, many were unable to



539 B.C.



THE GREEKS 332 B.C.

overcome the traditions and beliefs that had developed and intensified during the intertestamental period. As we understand these 500 years and the confusion that accompanied them, we can understand more about the Savior's ministry and renew our commitment to follow Him.

Exile and Bondage: The Price of Disobedience

Prophets such as Isaiah and Jeremiah warned Jerusalem's citizens that if they continued breaking their covenants with the Lord, the city and their temple would be destroyed. This prophecy proved true when Babylon initially invaded Judah around 600 B.C., destroying its villages, towns, cities, and religious life.

Jerusalem finally fell in 587 B.C., and the exiled Jews were forced out of their destroyed homeland (see Psalm 137:1). A few people remained in and around Jerusalem—including the Samaritans, who eventually intermarried with non-Israelites (see Jeremiah 40:7, 11–12).

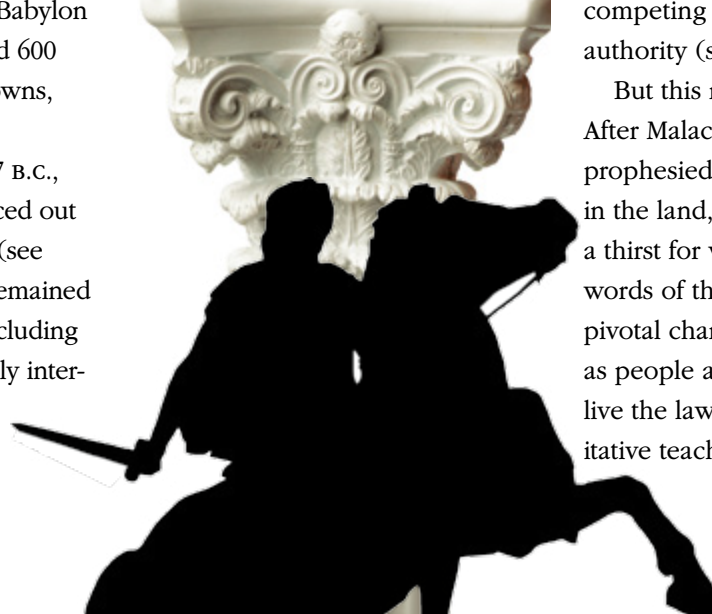
THE PROPHETS ISAIAH AND JEREMIAH WARNED THE PEOPLE OF JUDAH THAT THEY WOULD BE RULED BY FOREIGN NATIONS. THEIR PROPHECIES PROVED TRUE WHEN THE REGION WAS CONQUERED BY A SERIES OF KINGS FROM VARIOUS NATIONS: KING NEBUCHADNEZZAR OF BABYLON, CYRUS THE GREAT OF PERSIA, KING DARIUS OF PERSIA, AND ALEXANDER THE GREAT OF GREECE. WHEN ALEXANDER DIED, HIS TERRITORY WAS DIVIDED AMONG HIS GENERALS; PTOLEMY I TOOK CONTROL OF PALESTINE.

Later the exiles began to return to Palestine and to rebuild their homes and religious life (see Ezra 3). The temple in Jerusalem, finally rebuilt by 515 B.C., once again became the center of Jewish worship.

Because the Jews rejected the Samaritans' offer to help reconstruct the temple, the Samaritans built an alternate temple in the late fourth century on Mount Gerizim, some 40 miles (64 km) north of Jerusalem. Thus, the worship of and belief in Jehovah fragmented between the new temple at Mount Gerizim and the Jerusalem temple because they offered competing claims of priesthood authority (see John 4:20).

But this revival did not last long. After Malachi, as the prophet Amos had prophesied, the Lord sent a "famine in the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord" (Amos 8:11). This pivotal change had major consequences as people attempted to understand and live the law without a prophet's authoritative teachings and interpretations.

LEFT: THE PROPHET ISAIAH FORETELLS CHRIST'S BIRTH. BY HARRY ANDERSON; RIGHT: JEWS IN EXILE—NEBUCHADNEZZAR'S PALACE. BABYLON © BALAGE BALOUGH/ARTRESOURCE/ENY; IMAGE OF FLAMES BY WAVEFREAK/MEDIA LTD./THINKSTOCK; IMAGE OF CYRUS THE GREAT BY DORLING KINDERSLEY/THINKSTOCK; DARIUS I, BAS-RELIEF ON APADANA, PERSEPOLIS, BY GIANNI DAGLI ORTI/THE ART ARCHIVE AT ART RESOURCE, NY; IMAGE OF GREEK COLUMN BY OLMARVAR/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM; IMAGE OF COIN WITH PORTRAIT OF SOTER PTOLEMAIOS I COURTESY OF BP&K, BERLIN/UAENZKABINETT, STAATLICHE MUSEEN, BERLIN/REINHARD SACZEWSKI/ART RESOURCE, NY



THE SELEUCIDS 198 B.C.

REVOLT 164 B.C.

INDEPENDENT JEWISH NATION 142 B.C.



The Conditions of Apostasy

As an effect of this apostasy, the people divided into groups with varied political, religious, and social agendas. They also differed in their beliefs and traditions about the Messiah. The religious groups tried to live the law of Moses as they understood it, but each group interpreted the scriptures from such varied perspectives that Jewish society became more and more divided. As a result, the true understanding of who the Savior would be became confused.

Once the voices of prophets fell silent, the priests and their fellow temple workers, the Levites, became the most important officials among the Jews and claimed for themselves the right to interpret scripture. However, the office of high priest became corrupted as it was bought and sold during this time.

Many Jews felt that the priests and Levites did not fulfill their responsibility to teach the law correctly (see Deuteronomy 33:10), so a new group evolved who sought to teach the law. Known as scribes, they modeled themselves on Ezra, who had helped his people feel an urgency to learn and to obey the law (see Ezra 7:25; Nehemiah 8:1–8).

PALESTINE CAME UNDER THE RULE OF THE SELEUCID EMPERORS, ONE OF WHOM WAS ANTIOCHUS IV EPIPHANES. ANTIOCHUS FORCIBLY HELLENIZED JEWISH SOCIETY, SOMETIMES EXECUTING LARGE NUMBERS OF JEWS, FORBIDDING JEWISH RELIGIOUS RITES, AND DESECRATING THE TEMPLE. JUDAS MACCABEUS, LEADER OF THE ANTI-GREEK JEWS, LED A REVOLT AND REDEDICATED THE TEMPLE. THE PEOPLE CELEBRATED THE FIRST HANUKKAH.



Alexander the Great conquered the region in 332 B.C. When he died, his kingdom was divided among his generals. In time, Palestine came under the influence of the Greek-speaking Seleucid emperors. In 167 B.C., the Seleucid rulers outlawed the Jewish faith, forbidding circumcision and desecrating the temple by offering swine on the altar. Many Jews resisted, led by a family known as the Maccabees or Hasmoneans. The revolt—called the Maccabean War—eventually brought freedom to the Jews and created a Jewish nation for the first time since the fall of Jerusalem. At the same time, another religious group formed known as the Hasideans, “the pious.” They showed their devotion to God by trying to live every aspect of the law of Moses as they understood it.

Other religious groups also emerged during the intertestamental period, each claiming the exclusive right to interpret the scriptures. The Pharisees were an independent religious group that came into being soon after the Maccabean War. They became very influential in Jewish society by introducing a narrow focus on food laws and on ritual purity, aspects that were rooted primarily in their

THE ROMANS 63 B.C.

oral traditions, not scripture. In their homes, they tried to behave as if they were living in the temple.

The Sadducees, on the other hand, whose origins remain unknown, rejected any appeal to oral tradition and held strictly to the five books of Moses, turning their backs on the writings of other prophets. This group consisted mostly of the elite in Jerusalem society. By the time Jesus was born, they had expanded their power by asserting control over the Jerusalem temple.

Each of these religious groups preserved traditions and doctrines that they believed were essential to lives of devotion. But because they lacked the guidance of a true prophet, they were left to their own interpretations.

Awaiting a New Dispensation

Regardless of their religious persuasion, righteous men and women still looked forward to the coming of the Messiah during the intertestamental period. Poets sang psalms, and the common people prayed, talked, and dreamed of His arrival—a Davidic King who was destined to save His people.

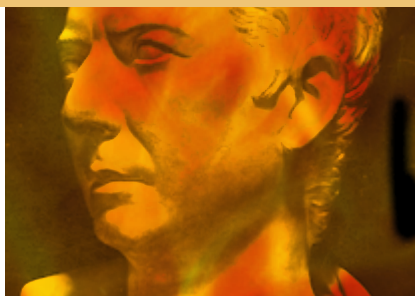
One group waiting for the Messiah was the Essenes, which formed during the Maccabean conflict. The

AFTER A SHORT PERIOD OF INDEPENDENCE, JERUSALEM FELL UNDER ROMAN RULE WHEN POMPEY THE GREAT INVADED THE CITY. THE ROMANS INSTALLED HEROD THE GREAT, A DESCENDANT OF ESAU, AS A CLIENT KING OVER JUDEA. HE REBUILT JERUSALEM AND EXPANDED THE TEMPLE AREA. CAESAR AUGUSTUS ENDED REPUBLICAN RULE IN ROME AND BECAME THE SECOND ROMAN EMPEROR AFTER JULIUS CAESAR.

Essenes believed that the temple priests in Jerusalem were corrupt and the temple was in need of serious reform. In their view, the coming of the Messiah was near. They believed He would join with them to throw off the oppressive yoke of Rome, whose rulers had conquered Palestine some 60 years before the birth of Jesus.

Like the Reformation that preceded the Restoration, the intertestamental period also witnessed events that prepared the world for the coming of Jesus Christ. This time had a remarkable production of religious literature, including the translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek and the beginning of the creation of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Apocrypha. During this time the ideas about angels, resurrection, and the concepts of heaven and hell became developed and refined.

However, without a prophet to guide them, the Jews debated the meaning of the scriptures and about who the Messiah would be. While most people waited for a Davidic Messiah (one descended from King David), others championed a Messiah who was the son of Aaron—a priestly Messiah. Still others did not expect the Messiah to come.





DURING THE RULE OF CAESAR AUGUSTUS AND HEROD THE GREAT, THE SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST WAS BORN IN BETHLEHEM. HE WAS BORN KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS (SEE ISAIAH 44:6).

So many expectations had built up among the different groups during the intertestamental period that the groups did not know how to recognize the true Messiah when He came to them. None of the groups—scribes, Pharisees, Essenes, or Sadducees—accepted John the Baptist as a prophet or Jesus as the Messiah. Some members of these groups became the primary adversaries of John and Jesus during their ministries (see Matthew 21:23–46).

The debates and arguments among the differing groups about the Messiah continued. The first prophet of the new dispensation, John the Baptist, announced the coming of the true Messiah and clarified the type of salvation He would provide. Indicating Jesus Christ, John said, “Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). Many Jews accepted John as he prepared the people for the coming of Christ.

When Jesus Christ began His ministry, He taught the people “as one having authority, and not as the scribes” (Matthew 7:29). He had many discussions with the religious leaders, clarifying the doctrines of marriage, resurrection, the Godhead, and His

role as the Savior. Since many of the religious leaders rejected Him (see Matthew 26:4), Jesus told them: “Ye neither know me, nor my Father: if ye had known me, ye should have known my Father also.” He added, “If God were your father, ye would love me” (John 8:19, 42).

Because they expected a Messiah so different from Jesus, they rejected Him. Thankfully, we live in an age when the truths of the gospel are built on the foundational teachings of prophets and apostles (see Ephesians 2:20). We do not have to choose among the spiritual crosswinds that arise without the guidance of prophets and apostles. As we follow our latter-day prophets and apostles, we will come to understand the true doctrine of the Savior Jesus Christ, as was revealed to the Prophet Joseph Smith:

“For [I] saw him, even on the right hand of God; and [I] heard the voice bearing record that he is the Only Begotten of the Father—

“That by him, and through him, and of him, the worlds are and were created, and the inhabitants thereof are begotten sons and daughters unto God” (D&C 76:23–24). ■