

### The 400 years

Often misnamed the four hundred years of silence this is the period between the end of the Old Testament and the birth of Christ and not surprisingly is known as the inter-testamental period. Misnamed because far from being silent what went on during these four hundred years was highly significant in the preparation by God of the culture of the day, the Jewish people and the world itself for the arrival of His promised redemption that is mentioned in Malachi at the end of the Old Testament.

Much was to happen in that 400 year period that would shape the world to God's eternal plan which He had known from the beginning and is still carrying out today. In Galatians 4:4-5 Paul says this, "*When the fullness of time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.*" "When the fullness of time came" We can gather from this that God was getting things ready in that 400 year period for the arrival of the most significant person and event in human history, the coming of His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ into this world.

God is a God of order and nothing happens without a purpose. The arrival of Jesus into the world was not a random act where God thought it would be a good idea to send His Son into the world, it was part of His master plan that He alone controls and as we look at this period of time we will see that many significant things happened that shaped not only the New Testament period but also continues to shape our lives today.

We could spend days looking at the changes which occurred during this period of history but we perhaps need to concentrate this morning briefly on three dominating influences that shaped what was to come where the Jewish nation had come to the end of its own efforts and were looking desperately to God to do something:

the rulers who ruled the land

the readings that were written

and

the religion of that day.

Let's have a look first at those who ruled over the Jewish nation during this period. The Northern kingdom was scattered all over the Assyrian empire and the Southern kingdom of Judah had been captured by and in the main removed to Babylonia. So both kingdoms were under subjection.

The Persians then conquered Babylonia around 536 B.C. and their foreign policy was such that they allowed the people of Judah to return home and to rebuild their cities and to worship again in the temple in Jerusalem. As long as they didn't rebel they were allowed to pretty much govern themselves and this continued for about 100 years after the 400 year period started with the governor of Syria overseeing them and the High Priest exercising a measure of civil authority.

In 334 B.C. Alexander the Great appears on the scene defeating the Persian king Darius the 3RD in three decisive battles. Alexander only lived until he was 33 but is regarded as perhaps the greatest

conqueror of all time conquering Persia, Babylon, Palestine, Syria, Egypt and western India in his short life.

Alexander's great desire was to unify the western world by language, custom and civilization. And through his influence they all started to speak and study the Greek language. This process known as "Hellenization" became so popular that it was encouraged even through to the Roman era and the New Testament times. Although Alexander allowed the Jews to observe the Jewish laws Hellenization brought with it an educated Greek culture that also included multi-god worship thus influencing the religion of the land. Perhaps the greatest influence though was the introduction of the Greek language which was so widespread by 270 B.C. that a Greek translation of the Old Testament known as the "Septuagint" came into being.

Upon Alexander's death in 323 B.C. his kingdom was split between four of his generals and the Ptolemaic dynasty emerged ruling over Palestine and Israel. Whilst the Jewish religion was allowed to co-exist alongside the new Greek influence, some of the Jews found the Greek lifestyle very appealing and this led to a splitting of the Jews into two distinct groups, the Orthodox who continued to follow their traditional God based religion and a new Hellenistic group based on Greek religion.

This continued for over a century until in 198 B.C. war broke out between Egypt and Syria and when Syria defeated the Egyptians Judea was annexed to Syria. This all went much as before until Antiochus Epiphanes (his name translates as "God made manifest" so he thought a lot of himself!) became angry that the High Priest he had appointed was replaced and so angry was he that he set about destroying all the distinctive characteristics of the Jewish faith. All sacrifices were banned as was circumcision. Observance of the Sabbath was cancelled and the observance of feast days. The Jews were forced to eat pork and make sacrifices to idols and practically every copy of the Hebrew Bible were either mutilated or destroyed.

His final act was the desecration of the "Most Holy Place" in the temple where he built an altar to and allowed sacrifices of pigs to the god Zeus. Many Jews who opposed this were killed.

Opposition to Antiochus was led by an elderly priest in a small village northwest of Jerusalem. His name was Mattathias and when a Syrian official tried to enforce heathen sacrifice on the village Mattathias and his five sons revolted, killed the official and fled to the mountains where thousands of loyal Jews joined them and over the next year's Mattathias and his sons after him in what is known as the Maccabean Revolt by 165 B.C. had retaken Jerusalem, cleansed the Temple and restored Biblical worship - this event is celebrated by Jews even to today as the Feast of Dedication [Hanukkah]. They gained independence from Syria in 142 B.C. and enjoyed almost seventy years of independence led by the High Priesthood. It was during this time that the Pharisees and Sadducees emerged.

In 63 B.C. the Roman general Pompey conquered Syria and entered Israel. With Rome came law and peace and organised systems. It also brought slavery [five out of every seven people were thought to be slaves]. Slaves were often far better off than free labourers with Rome passing laws to protect their rights. Rome also brought roads which in due course made it far easier for Christian missionaries to spread the Gospel message around the world. It was into this world that Jesus Christ was born.

Let's look now at the literature that was produced during these four hundred years. Much was written to record the events of what was happening but perhaps the three most significant were the Septuagint, the Apocrypha and the Dead Sea Scrolls.

The Septuagint appeared in around 250 B.C. when around 70 scholars under the sponsorship of Ptolemy Philadelphus came together and produced a Greek translation of the Old Testament. It gained its name from this number [70]. It quickly replaced the Hebrew Bible as very few spoke Hebrew now and it opened up the Bible not only to non Hebrew speaking Jews but also the whole of the Greek speaking world which thanks to Alexander was very widespread. Its influence in spreading the Scriptures cannot be overestimated and it later became the Bible of the early church.

The Apocrypha is a collection of around 15 books which with the exception of 2 Esdras were all written during this 400 year period. There is much debate about these writings with the Protestant church rejecting them as not "God-breathed" Scripture whilst the Catholic and Eastern Christian church give them much more credence. The reasons for this are far too complex to go into today but make good research if you wanted to study them further. They are, however, recognised generally as an excellent source of the historical facts of the time.

In 1947 an Arab shepherd chanced upon a cave near the shores of the Dead Sea and found there what has been described as "the greatest manuscript discovery of modern times". They consist of documents and fragments of documents. Approximately a third of them are Biblical with Psalms, Deuteronomy and Isaiah occurring most frequently. Perhaps the most remarkable is a complete 24 foot long scroll of Isaiah.

They confirm many of the later documents of the Scriptures but of themselves are 1,000 years closer to the originals than was previously known. They have added much to the authenticity of the writings of the Scriptures.

Finally let's take a look at what happened to the "religion" of the Jews and those around them during this period of 400 years.

Temple worship was re-established during this 400 year period but struggled. The priests became politically connected and swayed in the wind of change brought by the ruling parties. As a consequence the synagogue, a local teaching institution was established where the people were taught by local teachers or rabbis. The temple was mainly ceremonial and for the higher members of society, whereas the synagogue was much more instructive, ethical and moral and spoke to the ordinary people.

A number of people groups also emerged during this period. Some of them I've mentioned already but let's have a look at some;

The Sadducees - these were connected to the Temple and the High Priest and most of the priests came from this group. They were very connected to the rulers of the land and therefore prominent in the Jewish community. When Rome appeared on the scene they naturally connected closely with them because they wanted to retain their power, wealth, prestige and authority.

The Pharisees were the local teachers of the synagogues and spoke to the "ordinary" people without any personal agendas from Scripture.

The Sanhedrin was a ruling counsel of Jews who had been allowed to continue in power from the time of Alexander and administered civil law to the people saving the ruling powers much tedious administration. They answered to the rulers and Jesus was as we know brought before the Sanhedrin.

There were also the Scribes. They were established following the return from Babylonian exile and were teachers who were highly involved in preserving the Hebrew Scriptures. they developed the general precepts of the law but unfortunately where there was no direct provision in written law they created compensating laws based on precedents or inference. None of this was written down and was propagated by oral tradition. As such the law became an extensive and complicated science where the "rabbinical scribes" ultimately judged what valid law was. This inevitably led to conflict which came to a head during New Testament times.

I have only managed to scratch the surface of this 400 year period this morning and I have to admit that when John asked me to speak on it I was a little concerned as I don't normally do historical backgrounds which this basically is but rather preach, some say that like Peter I only have one message, which is Christ crucified and risen again for our sin, but as I have spent time researching it, and much of the above comes from many different sources because I have to confess it is a subject I have not considered in any great depth before, thankfully others have!, as I've researched it , it has opened up an understanding as to the period and culture that Jesus was being born into with a greater depth than previously.

It has also made me realise that God's plans and timing are perfect, I knew that already but this has re-emphasised it. God didn't just decide now is a good time to send Jesus, He prepared the ground and more importantly the people to receive Him. as we heard earlier in Galatians 4: 4

*"But when the set time had fully come, God sent His Son" NIV*

*"But when[in God's plan] the proper time had fully come, God sent His Son" Amp*

*"When the time came to completion, God sent His Son" Holman's*

*"But when the time arrived that was set by God the Father, God sent His Son" Message*

*"But when the right time came, God sent His Son." New Living Translation*

God had spent those four hundred years, not in silence, but in a time of preparation, in order that prophecy in the Old Testament might be fulfilled, that the people could see that God keeps His promises and fulfils them. He knew that in sending Jesus He was condemning Him to the most horrendous torture and death because prophecy had to be fulfilled as God had foretold through the prophets, but it had to be as Gal.4:4 tells us at "the right time".

My understanding of the historical background to Jesus coming has certainly grown through researching this and also my understanding of some of the groups and culture of the time has deepened as well. Perhaps you already knew it, if not I can commend spending some time looking

at it to deepen your understanding of the time and culture of Jesus arrival on earth there is so much more to read and understand than I've been able to cover today.

Some are saying that we are in similar times today, that they are looking for the return of Christ soon to redeem us all, that God has abandoned us to our mess and will only speak again through a prophet when we as Christians and as nations, fully repent and turn again to Him.

I don't know what if any truth is in any of those statements but what I have learnt from his study is that God is in control whatever the circumstances and whatever situation we find ourselves in.

That as believing Christians we can trust Him to know what is best for each and every one of us even when we cannot see it or understand it and that when the time is right He will act in Sovereign power and the plans which He has for us, plans to prosper and not to harm will be fulfilled.

If you don't have that certainty of hope this morning then you need to get to know God and Jesus better. John or I or Nik will be delighted to spend time with you talking it through or you can turn to a trusted Christian friend if that's more comfortable.

What I do know is that a relationship with the living God who loved you and me so much that He sent His one and only Son to die the most heinous death on a cross for our sins and to rise again to sit at the right hand of the Father and intercede for you and for me is the most important relationship we can ever have, and accepting that relationship is the most important decision you can ever make in your life.

When you've made it He has promised HE will never leave you nor forsake you and will hold you firmly in His hand through to eternal life, and God doesn't break His promises, ever!

There we are Peter's sermon again!

AMEN.