

From Malachi to Matthew: The Intertestamental Period

The Prophets: Silence

After Haggai and Malachi prophesied to the remnant of Jews who had returned to rebuild the temple and walls around Jerusalem, **400 years of “prophetic silence”** took place. That is, God did not send any new prophets to His people. But God was not utterly silent during that time because He inspired and preserved His word in writing. Faithful Jews continued to read copies of the **word of God** in local assemblies that eventually came to be known as **synagogues**. This practice had roots in the exiled Jews who gathered for prayer and study in Babylon, and continued with the Jews who returned from exile. While some new religious writings emerged during this silent period (referred to now as apocryphal books), they were not recognized by the apostles as part of the Hebrew Scriptures, and so are generally not considered divinely inspired Scripture by most Christians today.

The People: Remnant & Dispersion

During the 400 years of prophetic silence, some Jews (**a remnant**) lived in the land promised to Abraham’s offspring. Many others were dispersed among other lands due to the exiles. These scattered people are sometimes called “**the Dispersion**” or diaspora e.g., John 7:35, James 1:1, 1 Peter 1:1. Some diaspora blended their Judaism with local religions, such as the **Samaritans** who are prominent in the gospels, e.g., the parable of the good Samaritan, Luke 10:25-27; the woman at the well, John 4:4-42.

The Rulers: Hellenism

Persia, then **Greece**, then **Egypt and Syria**, and **Rome** ruled over the land promised to Abraham as well as much of the Middle East, North Africa, and beyond—virtually everywhere the Jewish diaspora lived during these 400 years. Jews continued to identify as a people, and because they did not have self rule, except for a brief period, Jewish priests added political leadership to their religious roles.

The most culturally influential foreign ruler over the land and people was Alexander the Great of Greece. His reign introduced **Hellenism**, that is, Greek philosophies, language, customs, etc,

which significantly transformed the intellectual and religious mindsets of the people in the region, including the Jews. For example, in the third century BC, Jewish scholars translated their Scriptures from Hebrew to Greek. Because New Testament authors typically wrote in Greek, often (but not always) they used this translated text as their source when quoting Hebrew Scripture. The translated text is known as the **Septuagint**.

When the Syrians occupied the land, the politics of the day caused them to intensify Hellenization by launching **religious persecution**, such as burning the Hebrew Scriptures; prohibiting observance of the Sabbath and outlawing circumcision under penalty of death; plundering the temple treasury; and desecrating the temple with sacrifice of unclean animals (e.g., pigs). Jews violently resisted, taking up arms as guerilla fighters against these rulers and Hellenized Jews who collaborated with them. One of their victories is celebrated by modern Jews in the holiday known as **Hanukkah**.

This movement toward more faithful worship and living shaped **Second Temple Judaism**, with multiple sects that continued under Roman rule. **Pharisees** (which means “separate”) emerged as a strict religious sect of Judaism that held to Mosaic law, added to it as a safeguard against transgression, and maintained efforts to morally and ceremonially keep from defiling themselves and worship. Over time Pharisees became more Hellenized and helped foster the illusion that one could please God through their own efforts. **Zealots** also trace back to this time as violent, armed warriors for their religion.

Eventually, the Jews fought for and gained political self-rule for a short time under the dynasty referred to as **Hasmoneans**. They installed a high priest who was not from the priestly line, and continued to dominate the priesthood as they progressively adopted Greek ways of life. The **Essenes**, who were a strict sect, turned away from this “corrupt” nation, forming a community they considered “true Israel” at Qumran, near the Dead Sea. Copies of Hebrew Scriptures preserved by this sect were discovered in 1947, known as the Dead Sea Scrolls. The Hasmoneans received the support of a sect of Judaism known as **Sadducees**. This sect was composed of aristocratic Jews concerned with political stability. They acknowledge only the five books of Moses as Scripture, thus rejecting the prophetic promises of resurrection to eternal life. The

Romans eventually brought an end to Hasmonean Jewish self-rule.

About one generation before the birth of Jesus, **Roman** military forces occupied Jerusalem. The Roman political body appointed their local “king of the Jews,” a man named **Herod**. He was an **Idumean**, that is, a descendant of Esau (sometimes known as Edom), Jacob/Israel’s twin brother, and thus not an Israelite or Jew. Herod fought for and established his rule in the years before Jesus’ birth. During his 35 year reign, he launched a reconstruction and expansion of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem, and ordered the slaughter of Jewish boys who might rival him as king of the Jews.

End of the Prophetic Silence

As you open your New Testament scriptures with Matthew’s account of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, several individuals have personal encounters with God. God publicly broke the 400 years of silence with John the Baptist, son of Zechariah and Elizabeth, cousin of Jesus of Nazareth. Our culture roughly counts time as before that break as “BC” and after that break as “AD” (the secular terms BCE and CE may be more familiar to some readers today).

Adapted from *The Reformation Study Bible*, Ligonier Ministries for the Grace Women’s Read Through Study, 2026-27