

What is in your Bible between Mal 4:5-6 & Mt 1:1-2? Most have a blank page. When the OT closed, many Jews had recently returned to Canaan from Babylonian captivity and the promised land was under Medo-Persian rule. The Jews were looking for the Messiah and the messenger who would prepare His way. Mal 3:1. When the NT opens, the political and religious landscape has dramatically changed. Things now exist that were not even mentioned in the OT—Samaritans, the Septuagint, the feast of dedication, Pharisees, Sadducees, Romans, Herods, synagogues, rabbis, etc.

So what happened in the 425 years between the time the last OT scripture was written around 430 BC and the first recorded NT events took place around 5 BC? Sacred and secular sources abound. Let's start with the political changes outlined in Dan 2:28-29, 36-40, 44-45. The kingdoms were the Babylonian, Medo-Persian, Greek, Roman, and Messianic.

The Medo-Persians allowed the Jewish nation to be ruled by their own high priest subject to the oversight of a neighboring Persian governor. This is where the high priesthood and politics first began to mix.

During the time of Medo-Persian rule, tension grew between the Jews recently home from captivity and those who had stayed home and married non-Jews. The latter largely lived north of Judah in Samaria became known as Samaritans. They only followed parts of the OT and had their own place of worship. Jn 4:20. The Jews despised them. John 4:9.

Alexander the Great conquered the Medo-Persians and took control of the promised land. Alexander was welcomed by the high priest outside the walls of Jerusalem, gave the Jews special privileges, and used them as colonists—persuading them to settle in far-flung areas of his empire. It was during this time that the scribes became a distinct class of people.

When Alexander died, his kingdom was divided between his four top generals as prophesied in Daniel 8:8. Because the promised land was situated between the territorial claims of two of these generals, it was passed back and forth between Ptolemy and his descendants who dominated Egypt—Cleopatra was the last of 10 Ptolemy rulers—and Seleucus and his descendants who dominated Syria. The Ptolemies largely ruled over the Jews until 198 BC and the Seleucids thereafter.

Ptolemy 1 captured Jerusalem and took a number of Jews to help colonize the new city he was building in honor of Alexander. He gave them full citizenship. Ptolemy 2 commissioned a Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures for the great library of Alexandria. It was completed around 285 BC. Because it was supposedly produced by 70 Jewish scholars it became known as the “Septuagint” which means “seventy” in Hebrew. English translations often refer to it by “LXX,” the Roman numeral for 70. The OT scriptures were now available in the common language of both the Jews and Gentiles. Many OT quotations by NT speakers and writers were from the Septuagint.

To facilitate their rule of the promised land, the Seleucids divided the promised land into five provinces: 1. Judea. This province was dominated by the Jews. Judeans were proud of their supposed religious orthodoxy. Jesus frequently visited Judea, especially during feast days. 2. Samaria. Jesus sometimes passed through this province on His way north to Galilee or south to Judea. 3. Galilee. This province had a mixture of Jews and Gentiles. It was looked upon as a backward area by the Jews of Judea. Jesus spent most of His life in Galilee. 4. Perea. 5. Trachonitis

The period of Seleucid rule was one of the darkest in the history of Judaism. The principal villain was Antiochus IV aka Epiphanes. He was “one of the cruelest men ever to hold public office.” Daniel prophesied about his tyrannical reign in Daniel 8:9-11. He hated the Jewish people and tried to turn them into Greeks. He erected a temple to Jupiter in Jerusalem and tried to stamp out the Jewish religion by closing the temple, making circumcision illegal, promising death to any who practiced Judaism, selling thousands of Jews into slavery, killing thousands more, taking treasures from the temple, and by desecrating the temple by sacrificing a female pig on the altar and sprinkling its ashes throughout the temple.

The atrocities of Antiochus Epiphanes led to a successful Jewish insurrection. It was instigated by an aged priest named Mattathias and led by his son Judas. The Jews referred to Judas as the “Hammer,” or “Macabee” in the Greek. So he was known as Judas Macabee, the revolt was known as the Maccabean Revolt, and the time of independent Jewish rule that followed from 165-63 BC was known as the Maccabean Period.

Judas Maccabee purified and rededicated the temple to Jehovah. This was the origin of the Feast of Dedication (Hanukkah) mentioned in Jn 10:22. During this period the Pharisees and the Sadducees first emerged and the high priesthood became more political than religious. High priests were appointed by whoever was in power. Moses' decree that the high priest be a descendant of Aaron (Ex 29:9; Num 25:10-13) was either forgotten or ignored. The closing years of this period were filled with civil strife. Descendants of John Hyrcanus, who ruled from 134-104 BC, rivaled one another for the throne. There were plots, counter plots, and political assassinations. Some sought involvement of the newest world power, Rome, which was akin to chickens inviting a fox into their hen house to help them settle their differences.

Not surprisingly, Pompey conquered Jerusalem for Rome in 63 BC. They gave the Jews several concessions. They were exempt from military service, could not be called to court on the Sabbath day, and were allowed to issue copper coins without images. They did not have to handle “accursed coins,” coins with the image of Caesar (Matthew 22:20), except to pay their taxes to Rome. Roman soldiers were not allowed to carry banners with images in the promised land.

The Romans put the promised land under rulers responsible to them. Antipater initially ruled Judea. He was succeeded by his son, Herod the great, who ruled from 37 BC—AD 3. Herod had a genius for governing, but his love of vice impeded his ability to rule. He aroused the hatred of the Jews by introducing Jerusalem to chariot races and other Greek customs. To

regain their favor, he began rebuilding the temple which Antiochus Epiphanes had largely destroyed. This was the Herod who slaughter baby boys in hopes of destroying Jesus. Mt 2:1-18.

When Herod the great died, the promised land was placed in the hands of a tetrarchy ("rule of four"). Archelaus, a son of Herod, was put over Judea and Samaria. Mt 2:22. Antipas, a second son of Herod, was put over Galilee and Perea. Lk 3:1. The NT sometimes simply refers to him as "Herod" and sometimes as "Herod the Tetrarch." He is the best known Herod. He was the Herod who ruled Galilee during the ministry of Jesus, beheaded John the Baptist, and interviewed Jesus prior to his crucifixion. Philip, a third son of Herod, was put over Ituraea and Trachonitis. Lysanias, not a son of Herod, was put over Abilene, an area not ruled by Herod the Great.

Let's now examine the religious changes during the inter-testamentary period. They were as striking as the political ones.

Synagogues. Synagogues are not even mentioned in the OT, but by the time of Jesus they were the heart of religious life among the Jews. Matt 12:9; 13:54; etc. The synagogue probably originated when the Jews were in captivity and could not go to Jerusalem on prescribed feast days. It took ten Jewish men to organize a synagogue. The word "synagogue" technically referred to the people who made it up but was often used to refer to the building where they met. Luke 7:5. By the first century there were hundreds of synagogues around the world, with some 280 synagogues in Jerusalem alone.

The Sabbath services in the synagogue were simple. 1. The "Shema" was recited. This is Deut 6:4 which the Jews repeated several times daily. "Hear, O Israel! The Lord is Our God. The Lord is one!" 2. Certain prayers were spoken. 3. The Law was read (Gen through Deut). 4. The prophets were read to illustrate the Law. 5. There was a sermon. The ruler of synagogue decided who led the service and gave the sermon. It was customary to invite visiting rabbis to speak. Paul usually had an open door to preach whenever he went to a synagogue. But as soon as he spoke about Jesus as the Messiah, the door was usually slammed shut. He was rarely invited back and sometimes was even thrown out of town. Schools were attached to most synagogues which area Jewish boys were required to attend.

Rabbis. Rabbis were teachers in the synagogues and in the synagogue schools. "Rabbi" is a transliterated word meaning "my master." It can also mean "my teacher." "Rabboni" is a variation of "rabbi" (Jn 20:16). Jesus was called "rabbi" by His disciples as a sign of respect (Mt 26:25; Mk 9:5; Jn 3:2). By the time of the NT the rabbis had largely replaced the priests as the religious authorities. For some, rabbinic interpretations of the law had the same weight as the law itself. These interpretations were eventually gathered into a volume known as the Talmud.

Scribes. The Greek word translated "scribe" ("grammateus") literally means "writers." Scribes were originally responsible for recording events. In 2 Sa 8:17 the word translated "secretary" in the NASB is the word for "scribe." However, by NT times the scribes were responsible for making copies of the OT. They were also known as authorities on religious law and were sometimes called "lawyers" (Lk 7:30; 1:45-46, 52). Many of the scribes were Pharisees.

Pharisees. "Pharisee" is from a Hebrew verb meaning "to separate." Some believe the Pharisees originated in response to Seleucid's attempt to pressure the Jews into adopting Greek culture. Originally, Pharisees blended patriotism with religious devotion. But by the time of Jesus, they had deteriorated into a sect of self-righteousness and formalism. Mt 23:1-36. The Pharisee's were small in number, but popular with the people and very influential. For all practical purposes, they considered the "traditions of the elders" (Mk 7:3) as binding as the Law itself. When Jesus disregarded these traditions (Mt 15:1-14), the Pharisees became His bitterest enemies.

Sadducees. Some have suggested that the name "Sadducee" may have been derived from Zadok, the first of the high-priestly line under Solomon (1 Kg 1:32-45; Ezk 40:45; 44:15). Sadducees were a wealthy aristocratic group, many of whom were priests. Some believe that the Sadducees originated about the same time as the Pharisees, but unlike the Pharisees they accepted Greek ways. Because of their willingness to cooperate with whoever was in power, they became a political force. Because of their acceptance of Greek philosophy, they rejected the concepts of a resurrection and life after death. Mk 12:18; Acts 23:6-8. They came to hate Jesus because He threatened their authority and power.

Herodians. They were a politically active group dedicated to placing a Herod on the throne over all Palestine.

Zealots. They were a band of Jews dedicated to the violent end of Roman rule. Simon the apostle had been a Zealot.

APPLICATIONS:

1. **Study history!** Read especially sacred but also secular sources. First, it is fascinating. It is anything but dull. Truth is stranger than fiction. Please do not allow poor history teachers or people with bad attitudes about studying history sour you against it. Second, it helps us understand and believe the word of God. Third, if we learn what it teaches us over and over again we will be blessed. If we don't, we are doomed to repeat its mistakes.
2. **God provides!** Consider all God did to create the fullness of the time for Him to send forth His Son into the world. Gal 4:4. There was ... a common language that quickly fell into disuse after the days of the NT ... ease of movement throughout the world ... worldwide interest in the Messiah (colonization, LXX) ... a means to quickly disseminate the gospel throughout the world (Acts 2, synagogues, Col 1:23) ... the means of proving the gospel was the word of God (fulfilled prophecy, reliable and ample eye witnesses, archeology, etc.) ... the means of preserving the gospel without corruption, etc. God will likewise provide all that we truly need. Trust Him! Mt 6:25-33.
3. **Have an open-minded spiritual view of life!** (Discuss in reverse order).
4. **Jesus is still King of kings!**