



Introduction:

The four hundred years between Malachi and Mathew is often called the period of silence. A study of the historical and religious occurrences of the day sheds light on our study of the Bible.

I. THE HISTORICAL/POLITICAL SITUATION

1. The Babylonian Period (586-538 BC)

The Babylonians exiled many of the Jews to the outskirts of Babylon, but ended up allowing them to keep their religion. The end effect was that they saved the Jews from idolatry.

2. The Persian Period (539-331 BC)

At the close of the Old Testament, Judea was a Persian Province. Persian rule was, for the most part, mild and unobtrusive.

3. The Greek Period (331-167 BC)

- a. Alexander the Great (331-323 BC) Alexander was a great general who conquered the world before he was thirty. He spared Jerusalem and was kind to the Jews. His legacy was establishing many Greek styled cities and introducing Greek culture and language to the entire world, even the Jews.
- b. Ptolmies (312-198 BC) When Alexander died, the empire was split by his four generals. General Ptolmey was the first to inherit the Jews. Ptolemy was based in Egypt and was kind to the Jews, in many ways keeping Alexander's policies towards them.
- c. Seleucids (198-167 BC) The Selucids were based in Syria and had a longstanding hatred of the Jews. In 198 BC they seized Jerusalem from the Ptolmies and governed the Jews. They hated the Jews and mistreated them. Antichus IV Epiphanes was the cruelest leader of the Seleucids.

4. The Jewish Independence Period (167-63 BC)

The Maccabeans were a right wing guerrilla/terrorist group of Jews. Their small, dedicated army overthrew the better equipped Selucid army in spite of the Idumean's greater numbers. The Maccabeans liberated Jerusalem and rededicated the Temple on December 14, 165 BC (Hanukkah).

5. The Roman Period (63 BC-138 AD)

In the year 63 BC Palestine was conquered by the Roman Pompey. He placed Antipater, an Idumean, as governor of Judea. Antipater's successor was Herod the Great, who reigned as King of Judea (37 BC to 4 AD). Roman rule provided law and order—much needed stability for the church which was soon to be born.

Summary of the Political Atmosphere

- Think of the Gospel as the seed, Luke 8:11
- The Romans provided the fence around the field and the pathway to the field (protection and easy access to travel).
- The Greeks provided the tools for the field (universal language and education).
- The Jews provided the fertile soil for the field (knowledge of God and family lineage of Jesus).



II. THE RELIGIOUS SITUATION

1. The Pharisees

A. Identity of the Pharisees

They were the largest party by New Testament times, about 6,000 in number who were closely aligned with the Scribes. They arose in opposition to those who showed a lack of concern or lack of respect for the Old Law. They claimed to follow Mosaic tradition, but really followed oral traditions as well.

B. The Beliefs of the Pharisees

They tended to exert the most influence in the synagogues. They believed in the bodily resurrection of the dead, in rewards and punishments after death, in angels and spirits. They paid undue importance in the letter of the Law.

Socially the Pharisees showed much respect for one another but not much for anyone else.



2. Sadducees



A. The Identity of the Sadducees

They were second in terms of number and importance. They reacted favorably with Greek culture and tended to be among the wealthy and socially elite of the population. They exerted influence in the Temple and were generally well liked by the Romans and those in rule.

B. Beliefs of the Sadducees.

Lived by the motto, "Live and let live." They denied the bodily resurrection, angels and spirits. They believed in a God that was far removed from everyday life. They claimed to follow only the written Law but really just followed the Pentateuch. They did not have much respect for one another much less anyone else. Usually they were worldly, even the priests many times would leave their duties at the Temple to watch the Greek games.

3. Essenes

A. Identity of the Essenes

They numbered around 4000 at the time of Christ and were an extreme group, being even more legalistic than the Pharisees. They were so disgusted by the moral situation of the people they lived in communes away from the cities (example of Qumran community and the Dead Sea Scrolls). They avoided Jerusalem at all costs because of its perceived corruption

B. Beliefs of the Essenes

They lived much like John the Baptizer in eating habits, dress and preaching. They lived an ascetic lifestyle, emphasizing hard work, abstinence, meditation. They are never mentioned in the New Testament. They are mentioned by Pliny the Historian, Philo of Alexandria and the Dead Sea Scrolls



4. Zealots



A. Identity of the Zealots

They were an extremist, Jewish terrorist group against Rome who contributed greatly to the 66-70 AD war against Rome that destroyed Jewish society forever. Each swore that he would die killing Romans. Simon the Zealot (an Apostle) belonged to this group at least at one time.

B. Beliefs of the Zealots

They believed if they lived righteously enough and had enough faith in God, they could eventually overthrow Rome. They considered anyone who accepted Roman rule as a traitor.