



The Story Of Salvation NCTM Tuesday Night Studies 2010 Andrew Klynsmith and Hendrik Schoemaker

The Return from Exile and the Time between the Testaments

The Inter-Testament Period

was a time of upheaval and change—a time of the realignment of traditional power blocs and the passing of a Near Eastern cultural tradition that had been dominant for almost 3000 years. In Biblical history the time of Nehemiah until the birth of Jesus (some 400 years) is known as the Inter-Testament period—sometimes called the “silent years” but they were anything but silent. The events, literature and social forces of these years would shape the world of the N.T.¹

The Period in general

Israel ceased to be an independent nation when the Babylonians captured and destroyed Jerusalem and carried the Jewish people into captivity. From then on Israel became a minor player politically amidst successive larger empires. The Babylonian Empire was overthrown and succeeded by the Persian Empire. After about 70 years in captivity Cyrus, the Persian emperor issued a decree permitting the return of the Jews to Israel (Ezra 1:1–4). Under the leadership of Zerubbabel some fifty thousands Jews returned. He is believed to be a prince of the former royal family.² Together with local Jews who had remained, the returning Jews built an altar and a foundation but did not proceed with the rebuilding of the temple. It was the ministry of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah which encouraged the people to continue the rebuilding (Ezra 4:25–5:2). Protests against the building of the temple were sent to the Persian king, but the right of the Jews to rebuild was upheld (Ezra 5:3–6:15) and after about 20 years with many setbacks the building was completed. Then after another 58 years had passed a passionate theologian or scribe by the name of Ezra returned with another small group and restored the Law and the Temple worship. Still another 13 years later Nehemiah came to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls and became governor (Neh 1:1–2:8). Israel was then a satellite state of the Persian Empire.

Ian Pennicook writes:

Both the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah tell the stories of these events, but it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that their primary aim is to describe the way the Jews now came to take their obligations under Law seriously. Ezra 9–10 and Nehemiah 8–12 describe the way the people had lost their purity through intermarriage (Ezra 9:2) and the way Ezra the scribe called on the population to return to their covenant obligations (Ezra 10:9–17; Neh. 8:1–8). The great confession of the nation’s sin, in Nehemiah 9, and the effect of that attitude on the life and worship of the people in Nehemiah 13 show the new rigid understanding of the Law which now directed the Jewish people.³

¹ The NIV Study Bible, p. 1430.

² Pennicook, Ian D., *The Story of the Acts of God*, (Blackwood: New Creation Publication Inc., 1994), p. 102.

³ Pennicook, p. 103.

The political development

Jewish history during those four centuries between the Testaments runs in six periods: the Persian, the Greek, the Egyptian, the Syrian, the Maccabean and the Roman.

1. The Persian Period

For about 200 years after Nehemiah's time Judah was under tolerant Persian rule. The Jews were allowed to carry on their religious observances and were not interfered with. During this time Judah was ruled by high priests who were responsible to the Jewish government.

2. The Greek Period

Alexander the Great is a phenomenon in history. Catapulted into leadership through the assassination of his father when Alexander was but twenty years of age, he transformed the political world in little more than a decade. "With Alexander the Great's acquisition of Palestine (332 B.C.), a new and more insidious threat to Israel emerged. Alexander was committed to the creation of a world united by Greek language and culture, a policy followed by his successors".⁴ This policy developed a Hellenistic spirit among the Jews which greatly affected their mental outlook afterward.

3. The Egyptian Period

The death of Alexander resulted in a period of time of confusion which was resolved by a four-fold break-up of Alexander's empire under four generals. Two of them founded dynasties—the Ptolemies in Egypt and the Seleucids in Syria. The rule of the Ptolemies was considerate of Jewish religious sensitivities. During this time the famous Septuagint translation of the Old Testament Scriptures was made from Hebrew into the Greek. We see the importance of this when we realize that the Greek language had now become the language of the civilized world. The Jews were so numerous in Egypt and North Africa that such a translation had become a necessity as they no longer spoke their ancestral language. The Septuagint came into general use well before the birth of Jesus. Later it became the Bible of the early church.

4. The Syrian Period

In 198 B.C. the Seleucids took control and paved the way for one of the most heroic periods in Jewish history. During the Syrian period Palestine was divided into the five sections we find in the N.T.: Judea, Samaria, Galilee, Perea, and Trachonitis. But this period was also the most tragic of the Inter-Testament era for the Jews of Judea. The Seleucids were harsh toward the Jews. Yet they were still permitted to live under their own laws, administered by the high priest and his council. But with the accession of Antiochus Epiphanes (175–164 B.C.) a "reign of terror" began. Antiochus' atrocities were aimed at the eradication of the Jewish's religion. He attempted to destroy all copies of the Torah and required offerings to the Greek god Zeus. His crowning outrage was the erection of a statue of Zeus and the sacrificing of a pig in the temple precinct. People were subjected to monstrous cruelties.

5. The Maccabean Period

Opposition to Antiochus was led by Mattathias, an elderly villager from a priestly family, and his five sons. Mattathias destroyed a Greek altar established in his village, and killed Antiochus' envoy. This triggered the Maccabean revolt, a 24-year war (166–142 B.C.) that resulted in the independence of Judah until the Romans took control in 63 B.C. During this revolt one of the sons of Mattathias named Judas Maccabeus captured Jerusalem. The temple

⁴ The NIV Study Bible, p. 1430.

was refurbished, and on the 25th of December, the anniversaries of its being polluted three years earlier, the orthodox sacrifices were reinstated (this date the Jews still observed as the Feast of the Dedication: see John 10:22).

6. The Roman Period

In the year 63 B.C. Jerusalem was captured by the Roman general Pompey after a siege lasting three months. Pompey displayed disregard for the Temple and walked into the Holy of Holies. This action at once estranged all loyal Jewish hearts toward the Roman. The provinces of Palestine became subject to Rome. The high priest was completely deprived of any royal status, and retained priestly function only. The local government was entrusted part of the time to princes and the rest of the time to procurators who were appointed by the emperors. Herod the Great was ruler of all Palestine at the time of Jesus' birth.⁵

The Religious and Social Developments

The Judaism of Jesus' day is, to a large extent, the result of changes that came about in response to the pressures of the Inter-Testament period. There are the dispersed Jews. There are new sects or parties: Pharisees, Sadducees, Herodians and Essenes. There are new institutions: Synagogue, Scribes, and Sanhedrin.

Diaspora

The Diaspora (dispersion of Israel) begun in the exile accelerated during these years until a writer of the day could say that Jews filled "every land and sea." Jews outside Palestine, cut off from the temple, concentrated their religious life in the study of the Torah and the life of the synagogue. The missionaries of the early church began their Gentile ministries among the Diaspora using their Greek translation of the O.T.⁶

Synagogue

During the exile Israel's faith was threatened with extinction. The exiles turned their religious focus from what they had lost to what they retained—the Torah and the belief that they were God's people. There was a new zeal for the Law and the Messianic hope of the coming Messiah who should permanently regather and exalt the chosen people, and under whose glorious reign all the promised blessings of the covenant made with Abraham would burst forth into fulfillment. They concentrated on the Law rather than nationhood, on personal piety rather than sacramental rectitude, and on prayer as an acceptable replacement for the sacrifices denied them. When they returned from the exile, they brought with them this new form of religious expression, as well as the synagogue (its centre), and Judaism became a faith that could be practised wherever the Torah could be carried. The emphases on personal piety and a relationship with God, which characterised synagogue worship, not only helped preserve Judaism but also prepared the way for the Christian gospel.⁷ That such synagogue discourses were common in our Lord's time is seen in such references as Matthew 4:23, 9:35; Luke 4:15, 44; Acts 5:15, 14:1, 17:10, 18:19.

⁵ The NIV Study Bible, p. 1429.

⁶ The NIV Study Bible, p. 1432.

⁷ The NIV Study Bible, p. 1433.

The Pharisees

As the party of the synagogue, the Pharisees strove to reinterpret the law. They built a “hedge” around it to enable Jews to live righteously before God in a world that had changed drastically since the days of Moses. Although they were comparatively few in numbers (about 6000 according to the Jewish historian Josephus), the Pharisees enjoyed the support of the people and influenced popular opinion if not national policy.⁸ We need only read the Gospels to see what influence they had in bringing about Jesus’ crucifixion. Many times they are mentioned in conjunction with the scribes.

We already see the spirit of Phariseeism in the aim of Ezra and leaders of the Jewish remnant as expressed in Nehemiah 10:28–29. It is a spirit of “separatism” from all others to Yahweh through a strict observance of His Law. Separatism based on the Law (Written and Oral) was the ideology of the Pharisees.

The Sadducees

Numerically they were a much smaller body than the Pharisees, but they wielded disproportionate political power and controlled the high priesthood. For the most part they belonged to the wealthy and influential priestly families who were the aristocrats of the Jewish nation. They rejected totally the Oral Law accumulated by the scribes and held to by the Pharisees, and professed to stand by the Written Law alone. Matthew 22:23 and Acts 23:8 show how sceptical was their attitude even to the Written Law, for we are told that they denied the bodily resurrection, and did not believe either in angels or spirits. They were the liberals of the day. The teaching of Jesus and his Messianic claims were anathema to them. Their hatred is measured by their readiness to consort even with the detested Pharisees in order to kill Him. It was they, in fact, who were directly responsible for His crucifixion (compare Luke 3:2; John 11:49, 18:13,14,24, 19:15; Mark 15:11).

The Scribes

were the theologians of the day, a class of professional experts in the interpretation and application of the Law and the other Old Testament Scriptures. Sometimes they are called lawyers (Lk 7:30) and teachers of the Law. The chief activities of the scribes were the undistracted study of the Torah. It is with Ezra that the office of the scribe reaches a new dignity. In Nehemiah 8:1–8 we see Ezra elevated in a pulpit, reading and expounding and applying the Law and with Levite assistants, “causing the people to understand the Law.” It is not difficult to see how, when once this new order of scribes came in, it rapidly gained great power. The very nature of this new Judaism was to make every Jew personally responsible for the keeping of the whole Law. Therefore, “a definite rule” had somehow to be extracted from the Law to cover practically every activity of daily life. They determined that the Torah contained 613 commandments, 248 positive, and 365 negative. There were 39 prohibited acts on the Sabbath alone. By their efforts religion was liable to be reduced to heartless formalism.

It is at times difficult to distinguish between the Scribes and Pharisees. There were Scribes who were Pharisees and the other way around. “Beyond an absolute insistence on the unity and holiness of God, the election of Israel and the absolute authority of the Torah for him, all the stress in the Pharisee’s religion was ethical not theological.” We could say that the

⁸ The NIV Study Bible, p. 1433.

Pharisees were the evangelical of the day.

The Sanhedrin

is a Jewish institution which had its beginning during the Inter-Testament period. It plays a big role in the Gospels. The Sanhedrin or “council” was the supreme civil and religious tribunal of the Jewish nation. It consisted of 71 members: The high priest; 24 chief priests; 24 elders (rulers), and 22 scribes. When in the Gospels “chief priests and elders and scribes” are mentioned together it is referring to the Sanhedrin.

(Jesus chose 70 co-workers in Luke 10. Why 70? Is Jesus trying to tell us that the authority of that old-time Jewish court was indeed now passing away in favour of a new “seventy” under His own rule?)

The Herodians

are mentioned in the gospels.⁹ They are a political group and the leading aim of its members was to further the cause of the Herod government.

The Essenes

are not mentioned in the Gospels. They were an almost forgotten Jewish sect until the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. They were a small separatist group that grew out of the conflicts of the Maccabean period.¹⁰

The Expectation

Ian Pennicook again:

It would be an over-simplification to say that the Jews were looking for their Messiah, but certainly there were many who, knowing the prophetic writings, looked forward to the great action of God to redeem Jerusalem and console Israel (Luke 2:38, 25). Certainly, anyone who seemed to be a prospective leader was closely questioned: are you the Christ, are you Elijah, or the prophet? (cf. John 1:21; cf. Matt. 16:13–14). We do know, from other sources, that there were many who came claiming to be able to save Israel from Roman domination. Although the evidence points to most of these people coming during the apostolic period (that is, 30–70 A.D.), some did rise as early as 6 A.D., and because of the ferocity of the Roman reaction many Jewish leaders were fearful of anyone who attracted crowds (although their reasons could stand further examination, cf. John 11:47–57; 12:9–11). At the same time, there was a deep resentment of Roman domination. Initially, this was not easily expressed, since Rome’s hand was heavy. For example, the Emperor Tiberius at one stage left major control of the empire to others, especially to the anti-Semitic Sejanus, but later, when Sejanus fell from favour, the Jewish leaders felt able to flex their muscles against the Roman representative (John 19:12–16).¹¹

Another source used is: <http://www.bibleinst.com>

⁹ Matthew 22:16, Mark 3:6 and 12:13

¹⁰ The NIV Study Bible, p. 1433.

¹¹ Pennicook, pp. 107–108.