

The Biblical Years of Silence

At least four hundred years passed between the prophecies of Malachi (430-420 BC) and Matthew's written account of Jesus' life (50-60 AD). Those years were known as the Biblical Years of Silence. The name itself can be misleading as those years were anything but silent.

So, what happened during the four-hundred-year of silence between Malachi and Matthew (or more specifically, James who wrote his letter in 44-49 AD)?

It is not surprising that Judea and the Jews experienced some peaceful years during this four-hundred-year period, but many years in between were wracked with internal strife and invasions. Let's take a look at Israel's colorful history during the Biblical years of silence.

The Achaemenid Period (450-330 BC)

Most do not realize that those years of silence were anything but silent.

The Old Testament ended with the prophecies of Malachi, which were written between 430 to 420 BC. Malachi lived during the twilight years of Persian Achaemenid dynasty's domination of Judea and other Near East territories. Many years before his birth, the Persians had freed the Jews from exile, allowed them to return to their homeland, and gave them permission to practice Judaism freely.

The Second Temple was later rebuilt under Zerubbabel (with the approval of the Persian king) being finished in 516 BC. This completed the work begun by both Nehemiah and Ezra. In 333 BC, Alexander the Great defeated Darius III of Persia and ended the Achaemenid domination in the Near East.

Alexander the Great and the Hellenistic Period (330-166 BC)

The Greco-Macedonian army under Alexander the Great spent the years between 334 and 323 BC conquering the Near East and even ventured as far as the northwestern frontier of India. Alexander the Great ruled his empire from 330 to 323 BC but his vast territory disintegrated immediately after his death. Various generals, friends, and family members fought for domination in his former territories, but only four leading diadochi (bodyguards) remained in power:

- Seleucus took Mesopotamia as well as Central Asia,
- Attalus ruled Anatolia,
- Antigonus dominated Macedon, and

- Ptolemy ruled Egypt.

Judea under the Ptolemaic and Seleucid dynasties was generally peaceful and stable. The era was also marked with increased Hellenistic influence in Palestine, from art, architecture, politics, and culture. Many Jews adopted Greek names and learned to speak and write Koine Greek. It was also the time when Ptolemy of Egypt commissioned seventy translators to translate the Old Testament from Hebrew to Greek which resulted in the Septuagint.

The peace in Judea only disintegrated during the reign of the Seleucid dynasty king Antiochus IV (214 to 164 BC) who persecuted the Jews and forbade them from practicing Judaism.

Antiochus forced the Jews to worship Greek gods and ordered the destruction of the Scriptures—an act which greatly angered the Jews. Some Jews welcomed the change, but other rigidly adhered to Judaism as a response to the repression.

The Hasmonean Period (166-63 BC)

As the repression of Judaism continued a Jew named Mattathias (along with his sons) rose up and led the rebellion against Antiochus in 167 BC. His son, Judas Maccabeus, also led the Jewish revolt between in 167 BC until his death in a battle against the Greeks in 160 BC. This era saw the rise of the Hasmonean Dynasty starting from Judas Maccabeus and ending with Antigonus II Mattathias (the Hasmonean) who led a fierce rebellion against the Romans.

The Roman Period

The Roman general Pompey invaded Jerusalem in 63 BC which led to the capture of the city and the end of the Hasmonean Dynasty. Roman rule over Palestine began in the same year through Hyrcanus II, but Parthia was also a dominant force in the Near East at that time. Parthians besieged Jerusalem in 40 BC to get rid of the Roman-appointed governor Herod, but he had fled some time earlier to Rome and only the unlucky high priest Hyrcanus II remained as ruler of the city (Hyrcanus was mutilated by the Parthians which made him unfit to hold the position of the high priest). The Roman general Marc Antony brought Herod back to Jerusalem, drove the Parthians out, and installed Herod (an Idumean) as secular ruler of the Roman province of Judea.

In 19 BC, Herod improved the Second Temple first built by Zerubbabel during the Achaemenid period. He was Judea's ruler when Jesus was born between 6 and 4 BC and was responsible for ordering the Massacre of the Innocents in Bethlehem shortly after Jesus' birth.

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