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Between the silence of Malachi and the voice of John the Baptist there is a period of some 400 years. This period has sometimes been called the Silent Years. But that can be misleading because there was much going on during this time. The Silence was with God's inspired writers, not with God's work.

With the Edict of Cyrus granting the Jews permission to return there was a good number who remained in Babylon. Still others had fled to Egypt years earlier and so there was a scattering of the Jewish people. This is called the 'Diaspora', or dispersion. But among these scattered Jews there was a remnant who had not abandoned their hope of the Messiah.

The Persian Empire fell to the conquest of Alexander the Great in 334-323 B.C. Alexander had a significant impact on the life and culture of the day. He was impressed with Greek culture and wanted to make one great nation of all the peoples in the world and Hellenise them. The word Hellenism comes from a Greek word which means to speak or make Greek. This was Alexander's mission. Leading a group of Greek and Macedonian mercenaries, he swept over Asia Minor, Syria, Palestine, Egypt and in 331 B.C. the Persian Empire. As he went throughout the land he would establish Greek city states bearing his name 'Alexandria' and impose Greek government, language and culture on them.

**Ptolemies** - Alexander died at the early age of thirty before he saw his dreams come true. But his empire was broken down into three major areas, each governed by one of his generals. Ptolemy reigned in Egypt, Selucid in Asia and

## The Silent Years

*"By the time the Gospel came ... the early Apostles were able to travel along Roman roads, speaking the Greek language which was the lingua franca of the day, and visiting the Jewish synagogues of the diaspora teaching from the Hebrew Scriptures about Jesus. The Great Director was putting everything in place". From a Bible Overview by Desi Maxwell, Belfast Bible College*

Antigonid in Macedonia. It is under these men that Hellenism really began to flourish and have an impact in the Alexandrian Empire.

Palestine found itself in the centre of a struggle between Ptolemy and Selucid rulers for domination for almost a century. Palestine first came under the control of Ptolemy who also controlled Egypt. He was tolerant of Jewish religion and allowed the High Priest to hold sway over religious matters. However because Israel did not have a king the High Priest took more and more power until he was seen as the ruler in Israel. Greek culture was also making strong inroads in Palestine during this time.

In Egypt, Greek philosophy was mixed with Jewish tradition to produce a strong Greek influence on Jewish thought which is strongly seen in the allegorical method of understanding scripture popular with such men as Philo of Alexandria.

The first five books of the Old Testament were translated into Greek during this time and later would be completed and called the Septuagint. This placed the Old Testament in the hands of the people who now spoke Greek which was made the language of the people by Alexander the Great. Jesus used the Septuagint when he quoted Scripture.

### Seleucids

The same kindness which was shown to the Jews by the Ptolemies in Egypt was also extended to the Jews by the Seleucids of Syria. Seleucus Nicator granted to many Jews privileges of citizenship equal to those enjoyed by the rest of the empire. The capital of the Seleucids was Antioch in Syria. From here Antiochus III waged war against the Ptolemies and took Palestine in 198 B.C. This began the most difficult period in Jewish History.

In 175 B.C. Antiochus IV Epiphanes came to the throne and imposed a radical Hellenism on the Jews in hopes of strengthening his empire against the encroaching Romans. The term Epiphanes means 'God is manifest', and stirred up the Jews against this self appointed Deity. There was great resistance against the advancement of Greek culture. Antiochus' final resolve was to eradicate Judaism, by making it a crime of death to observe the Sabbath, observe circumcision and by burning their holy Scriptures. Offerings were to be made to the Greek God Zeus whose image had been erected in the temple and in a further action of desecration of the Holy place, pigs were sacrificed in the temple in Jerusalem. 167 B.C.

## **Maccabean Revolt**

The Maccabean Revolt erupted shortly after the desecration of the Temple and lasted for 24 years. 166-142 B.C. Led by Mattathias and his five sons, Judas (Maccabeus), Jonathan, Simon, John and Eleazar, a form of guerrilla warfare was successfully carried out against large Seleucid armies. This led to the recapture of Jerusalem and dedication of the temple in 164 B.C. This resulted in Judah's independence which lasted until the Romans took over in 63 B.C. The victory is still celebrated today in the Festival of Lights or Hanukkah. These events are recorded in the first four chapters of the Apocryphal book 1 Maccabees.

During this period the Jews were split between the Hellenistic camp and the Maccabean camp. Civil war and fighting between the two parties ended with the death of Mattathias's son Simon. Finally under Simon there was political independence which led to the Hasmonean dynasty named after one of the Maccabee's ancestors.

## **Hasmoneans**

The successors to the Maccabees are usually called the Hasmonean rulers after one of the Maccabee's ancestors. Prior to this period Jonathan Maccabeus appointed himself the High priest even though he was not from the priestly line of Zadok. This upset some of the orthodox Jews who broke away from the nation and formed the monastic community of the Essenes in the Dead Sea area.

## **Sadducees**

Under Simon's son John Hyrcanus, the orthodox Jews no longer supported the Maccabean revolt due to political compromise. Judah was not happy with just religious rule, they wanted political control which was not

supported by the orthodox Jews. This gave rise to the party of the Sadducees. They were made up of the rich and although their numbers were small they held a great deal of political and religious power especially in the priesthood. They only accepted the Pentateuch and thus rejected the doctrine of the resurrection. Matthew 22:23-33; Acts 23:6-8. The Sadducees and the Pharisees are first mentioned by Josephus during this period.

## **Pharisees**

The Pharisees were the religious conservatives, who resisted the inroads of Hellenism into Judaism. They reinterpreted the law to make it possible for the Jew of the day to coexist with the Greeks. They lowered the standards of holiness and placed an emphasis on salvation by works, which is not found in the Law of God. Their views made them popular with the people. Hasmonean rule ended in 63 B.C. when Pompey occupied Jerusalem and Judea was again under foreign control.

## **Romans**

The Romans invaded Palestine in 63 B.C. under the Roman general Pompey. Jerusalem was captured after a three month siege, and all of the priests were slaughtered and the Most Holy Place desecrated. Rome appointed Herod the Great who was a Jewish convert himself. He ruled from 37 to 4 B.C.

Herod ruled well and was obedient to the Roman Empire. He was an aggressive builder and built an artificial harbour in Caesarea which amazes even modern engineers. He rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem which was not complete at the time of his death earning him the name Herod the Great.

However his greatness was also marred by a jealous insanity

which caused him to be cruel and distrusting. Jesus is born into a time when the Jews were subject to Roman power but were looking for a deliverer who had been promised.

## Summary of the Silent Years as given by Desi Maxwell, Belfast Bible College:

"First Alexander swept across the known world as far as India with an ecumenical vision of one world with one language and one culture. He failed." Desi likens Alexander to the goat of Daniel 8v5-8.

"Then Judas and the Maccabeans led a human attempt at revolution, a declaration of independence where for about a century the Jews enjoyed independence. A human attempt riddled with sibling rivalries, with assassinations, with tensions, with infidelities, with power struggles. They failed."

"Rome came replacing the Greeks with all their engineering skills. By the time the gospel came the early apostles were able to travel along Roman roads, speaking Greek which was the lingua franca of the day, and visiting the Jewish synagogues of the diaspora teaching from the Hebrew Scriptures about Jesus."

"The Great Director was putting everything in place, because in the Great Director's plan the ultimate truth was to focus on the Lamb. The Lamb who would introduce a Kingdom that would never fall."