

## **THE PERIOD IN GENERAL BETWEEN MALACHI AND MATTHEW**

- I. The period between Malachi and Matthew covers some four hundred years, if we accept the usual date assigned to Malachi. We see the Old Testament canon closing with Malachi at about 397 B.C.
  - A. This four-hundred-year interval has been called “the dark period” of Israel’s history in pre-Christian times, because throughout it there was neither prophet nor inspired writer. With Malachi ends prophecy for four centuries. As Psalm 74:9 says, “We see not our signs; there is no more any prophet; neither is there among us any that knoweth how long.”
  - B. We should have a clear understanding of the condition of the Jews as a nation and race at the beginning of this four-hundred-year period.
    1. Two hundred years earlier Jerusalem had been overthrown and the Jewish people carried into the Babylonian exile (587 B.C.). Fifty years after that, while the Jews were still in captivity, the Babylonian empire itself had been overthrown and succeeded by that of Media-Persia, second of the world-empires predicted in Daniel; and Cyrus, the Persian emperor, had issued his famous decree (536 B.C.) for the return of the Jewish “Remnant” to Jerusalem and Judaea, under Zerubbabel, about fifty thousand in all.
    2. Twenty-one years later, after many setbacks, the building of the new temple had been completed in 515 B.C. Then after fifty-seven years passed, Ezra the scribe had joined the “Remnant” at Jerusalem in 458 B.C., and restored the Law and the ritual. Still another twelve years later, in 446 B.C., Nehemiah came to Jerusalem and rebuilt the walls and

functioned as governor. So there was now once again a Jewish state in Judaea, though of course under Persian overlordship.

3. Such, then, is the picture of the Jewish people at the beginning of the four-hundred-year period between Malachi and Matthew..

II. Our attention naturally fixes upon the regathered Jewish community in Judaea for it is they who are now the Jewish nation. We need to trace its course in two ways: **first**, as to external developments (the political aspect); and, **second**, as to internal developments (the religious aspect). First then, let us review the external and political history of this little Jewish nation in light of the history of the different world-empires. 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.**

A. So we will begin with **the Persian Period** which runs from **536-333 B.C.**

1. The Persian rule over Palestine, which began with Cyrus' decree in 536 B.C. for the Jews to return to their land and continued until 333 B.C., when Palestine fell under the power of Alexander the Great foretold by Daniel. This means that at the end of Malachi the Jews were still under Persian rule, and remained so for about the first sixty years of the inter-Testament era.
2. We should not one other point about this Persian period. In 2 Kings 17:24-41, we learn that in 721 B.C., after destroying the ten-tribes of the northern kingdom of Israel and dispersing the Israelites through "the cities of the Medes," the Assyrian emperor repopled the cities of Israel with a mongrel people who became known as the Samaritans. Later with the establishment of a Samaritan temple of worship, a total separation

occurred between the Jews and Samaritans.

B. Second, we have the **Greek Period** which ran from 333 to 323 B.C.

1. Alexander the Great was such military genius that no one knows what his total impact on the world would have been had he not suddenly died at the premature age of thirty-two. Alexander was vaulted to power as a young man of twenty by the death of his father. He then completely transformed the face of the world, politically, in little more than a decade. He is the “notable horn” in the “he-goat” vision of Daniel (see Daniel viii. 1-7).
2. In his Syrian campaign he marched southward on Jerusalem. Josephus tells how the high priest Jaddua, in his priestly garments, and heading a procession of white-robed priests, issued forth to invoke the conqueror’s clemency. Alexander, who is said to have recognized in Jaddua the fulfilment of a dream, not only spared Jerusalem and offered sacrifice to Jehovah but also had the prophecies of Daniel read to him concerning the overthrow of the Persian empire by a king of Grecia ; and thereafter he treated the Jews with full rights of citizenship with the Greeks in his new city, Alexandria, and in other cities. This, in its turn, created decidedly pro-Greek sympathies among the Jews, and, along with Alexander’s spreading of the Greek language and civilization, had its far-reaching repercussions in the Hellenistic spirit which developed among the Jews and greatly affected their mental outlook afterward.

C. **Third**, we see the **Egyptian Period** which ran from approximately 323-204 B.C.

1. This is the longest of the six periods of the inter-Testament era. Alexander’s untimely death resulted in a fourfold break-up of his empire

under four generals : Ptolemy, Lysimachus, Cassander and Selenus. These are the four “notable ones” which take the place of the “great horn,” as predicted in Daniel 8: 21, 22.

2. During the kindly treatment of the first three Ptolemies the Jews in Judaea grew in numbers and wealth, developing their commerce, which the fall of Tyre had increased; but during the later part of the Egyptian period they were increasingly becoming a battle-ground between Egypt and the now very powerful Seleucidae (i.e. the line of Syrian kings from Seleucus I). Lying there, between Syria and Egypt, Palestine was once again “between the hammer and the anvil.”
3. When Ptolemy Philopater died, his successor, Ptolemy Epiphanes, was only five years old. Antiochus the Great seized his opportunity and in 204 B.C. invaded Egypt. Judaea, with other territories, soon after became annexed to Syria and passed under her rule.

D. Fourth we have **the Syrian Period** which went from 204-165 B.C. There are two points of special note about this period.

1. **First**, Palestine became divided into the five provinces which we find there in New Testament times, namely: Judaea, Samaria, Galilee, Peraea, Trachonitis. (Sometimes the first three of these are collectively called Judaea.)
2. **Second**, this Syrian period was the most tragic part of the inter-Testament era for the Jews of the homeland.
3. Antiochus the Great was harsh towards the Jews but they were still

permitted to live under their own laws, administered by the high priest. But with the accession of Antiochus Epiphanes (175-164 B.C.) a “reign of terror” came upon Israel.

4. By this time there had developed in Judaea a Greek-minded or Hellenizing party, advocating un-Jewish innovations. They wanted to relax the orthodox observance of Judaism with the national exclusiveness in favor of Greek liberty of thought and manners and forms of religion. The dissension between Nationalists and Hellenists for the control of affairs caused much bitter contention and even murders.
5. Antiochus Epiphanes now used this Jewish factiousness as a provocation to wreak terrible havoc on the Jews in **170 B.C.** Jerusalem was plundered, the wall torn down, the temple coarsely desecrated, and the population subjected to monstrous cruelties. Thousands were massacred. The women and children were sold into slavery. The temple sacrifices were abolished. The Holy of Holies was rifled and its costly furniture carried away. Jewish religion was banned. Circumcision was prohibited on penalty of death. A foreign governor was appointed, a traitor made high priest, and paganism forcibly imposed on the people. A commissioner was appointed to pollute both the temple at Jerusalem and that at Samaria, and to rededicate them, respectively, to Jupiter Olympius and Jupiter Xenius. All copies of the Law which could be found were either burned or defaced with idolatrous pictures, and the owners executed. The first book of Maccabees says that many Jews apostatized, and that some even joined in the persecution. In 168 B.C. Antiochus caused a sow to be offered on the altar of sacrifice, and then, on the very altar, had a statue erected to Jupiter Olympius.

E. **Fifth**, we have **the Maccabean Period** which ran from 165-63 B.C.

1. It is one of the most heroic passages in all history. The revolt and resistance movement was provoked by the sheer excesses of Antiochus. It was started by an aged priest, Mattathias, and developed by his son Judas, known subsequently as Judas Maccabeus, from the Hebrew word for **hammer**.
2. The Maccabees developed a powerful guerilla warfare, the land being well suited to such tactics. His army grew bigger. They now assumed the offensive. Jerusalem was captured, the temple refurnished, and on 25th December, the anniversary of its profanation three years earlier, the orthodox sacrifices were reinstituted (which date the Jews still observe as the Feast of the Dedication: see John x. 22). Judas also captured the chief posts up and down the land.
3. The rivalry between the orthodox Maccabeans and the heterodox Hellenizing party continued to weaken the Maccabbean war effort. All of the sons of Matthias were killed until Simon's remaining son, the able John Hyrcanus, now became high priest.
4. After the death of John Hyrcanus was dead, his son, Aristobulus, made the leadership into a kingship for himself, imprisoning and starving his mother to death in the process, incarcerating three of his four brothers, and negotiating the murder of the other. But this Aristobulus lived only about a year after these evil deeds..
5. So when the Maccabeans family (Asmonean line of high priests) were all gone, the Herod family (Herodians) appears on the scene. Antipater, father of the Herod who reigned at the time of our Lord's birth, managed to

secure the support of the Roman general Pompey for the brother named Hyrcanus. The other brother, Aristobulus, defied Rome. The result was a siege of Jerusalem. After a siege of three months Pompey took the city.

6. At that time, with callous disregard, Pompey strode into the Holy of Holies-an action which at once estranged all loyal Jewish hearts toward the Romans. That was in 63 B.C.

### III. *The Roman Period (63 B.C. onwards)*

- A. The Roman general, Pompey, conquered Jerusalem which ended Judaea's regained independence making her a province of the Roman empire. The high priest was completely deprived of any royal status, retaining only the priestly function. Julius Caesar in 47 B.C appoints Antipater the Idumean, as procurator of Judaea.
- B. Antipater then appointed Herod (his own son by marriage with Cypros, an Arabian woman) as governor of Galilee, when Herod was only fifteen years of age according to the Jewish historian, Josephus.
- C. War broke out between Pompey and Caesar. Caesar was murdered. Herod fled from the resulting disorder in Palestine, and appealed to the triumvirate at Rome to confirm him as ruler over Judaea which they did about 40 B.C.
- D. On returning to Judaea he sought to ingratiate himself with the Jews by three things:
  1. He married Mariamne, the beautiful granddaughter of the Asmonean, John Hyrcanus.

2. Second, he made her brother Aristobulus high priest.
  3. And third, He greatly increased the splendour of Jerusalem, building the elaborate temple which was the centre of Jewish worship in the time of our Lord.
- E. But he was as cruel and sinister as he was able and ambitious. He had an almost Satanic determination to obliterate the Asmonean family. He slew all three of his wife's brothers and murdered even his wife Mariamne. Later, he murdered his mother-in-law Alexandra. A short time later, he murdered his own sons by Mariamne - Aristobulus and Alexander.
- F. Herod the Great dies in 4 B.C. and one of his sons, Herod Antipas, becomes king in his place. It was Herod Antipas who was the king when our Lord was born and most referred to in the early church.

Such, then, in brief, is the political overview Jewish history in Palestine during the four centuries between Malachi and Matthew.