

EXPLORING THE NEW TESTAMENT

Our introductory lecture is divided into two main sections: (1) an introduction based upon Paul's idea of "the fullness of time" in Gal. 4:4 to stimulate curiosity about our historical quest, and (2) a quick review of the Old Testament history that bridges into the time called the "intertestamental period" that becomes foundational to the world of the New Testament.

Introduction

"The Fullness of Times"

Paul says in Galatians, "But in the fullness of time, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law," (Gal. 4:4). Just how was Paul's era the "fullness of time"? This time was "full," or ready, because the time was perfect for the coming of Messiah. The time was perfect in two ways: (1) for the world, and (2) for the Jew. Let's summarize briefly these two ways the time was full.

First, how was the time "full" for the world in general?

(1) For the world:

The time was "full" for the world because of:

- (1) *a universal peace* climaxing two hundred years of Roman civil wars that yielded secure borders for political and economic stability, for the first time in centuries
- (2) *an international highway system* well maintained and well-protected for would be evangelists to travel with speed from place to place
- (3) *a postal system* such as world empires had not known to carry messages back and forth to young congregations
- (4) *a universal common language* for preaching the Gospel to any person anywhere

- (5) *a Jewish nation struggling for identity*, a quest for national renewal and resurgence as in days of old that would determine her destiny forever
- (6) *a universal culture* that blended old and new into a cosmopolitan world order
- (7) *a world in spiritual vacuum* as the old religions evaporated away, the ancient myths no longer meaningful, but with no substantial replacement—into which rushed mystery religions and emperor worship that were just as futile.

Indeed, what an awesome, perfect time for God's Son sent to redeem the world! Paul was eminently correct. The time was just right for Messiah.

Second, how was the time “full” for the Jew in particular?

(2) For the Jew

The time was “full” for the Jew because of:

- (1) *political changes*—from political autonomy to rule by Romans; how to explain that Herod the Great, who isn't even a Jew, sits on the Jewish throne ruling Judea when Jesus is born. The nation was in an extraordinary identity crisis. Who is Israel? And where is Israel going?
- (2) *dispersion of Jews*—from population centered in Palestine to scattered Jewish colonies all over the world
- (3) *urban society*—transformation from a dominantly rural to city life
- (4) *language*—why the New Testament is written in Greek, but the original disciples and Jesus spoke Aramaic, a dialect of Hebrew; the loss of the Hebrew tongue, the use of Aramaic and Greek

- (5) *racial and social exclusiveness*—the extreme emphasis on Jewishness as race and social center
- (6) Torah emphasis—the supreme elevation of Torah over all other parts of the Hebrew scripture
- (7) *scribism*—the growth of a class of scribes and an approach to religion that determines conduct by law and tradition
- (8) *synagogues*—none in the OT, everywhere in the NT: whose institution, from whence its origin?
- (9) *Sanhedrin*—never mentioned in the OT, but the Supreme Court of all Israel in the NT
- (10) *oral tradition*—a body of religious material with equal validity to Torah
- (11) *apocalyptic writings*—the rise of an entirely new genre of literature adopted by Jewish writers; how to explain that Jude 14-15 is a quote of a verse out of the pseudepigraphical book known today as *I Enoch* (1:9), a surprise to many and a crisis of canon for others. Jude also alludes to a story about an argument over the body of Moses between Satan and Michael. The story is preserved in the pseudepigraphical work *Assumption of Moses*. Where are these books? Did New Testament Christians read them? How did they understand them in the context of Christian writings? Do we have them today?
- (12) *idolatry ended*—the chronic plague of the OT now is ended, but at what cost? Ezra's reforms are lauded and accepted as oral law for Israel, but how are we to grapple with the harsh reality that Ezra sets in motion an entire interpretive tradition that suffocates the living voice of God, obfuscates God's will, and rejects Jesus' teachings? A

new idolatry had set in, only much more subtle and much more sinister. How do we explain this new crisis that Jesus confronted?

- (13) *new doctrines and practices*—doctrines only sketchy in the OT, but full-blown in the NT: hierarchy of angelic beings, demons, resurrection, prayer and fasting, almsgiving. Where do these doctrines find their stimulation and growth?
- (14) *new social classes*—distinct and segregated classes: publicans and sinners, am ha aretz
- (15) *Jewish Alexandrian philosophy*—the rise of the Greek methodology of allegory used to salvage the Greek myths of Homer from the skeptical eye of the Greek historian appropriated by Jewish writers to commend the Hebrew writings to Greek audiences. What is the impact of this rich interpretive tradition upon the New Testament?
- (16) *monogamy*—from the acceptance of all of Solomon’s wives to the castigation of Herod Antipas by John the Baptist for marrying his brother Philip’s wife, Herodias
- (17) *Samaritan nation*—non-existent in the OT, but a hated people in the NT, setting up the classic dialogue of Jesus with the woman at the well. Where do these Samaritans come from, and why do Jews and Samaritans hate each other so?

So, our job is to arm ourselves with the historical knowledge that will equip us to explain this brave new world into which the Messiah came. In part, our *Exploring the New Testament* class is a studied effort to understand more fully exactly what Paul meant when he said that Jesus came in the “fullness of time.” We are setting the background and context for understanding the New Testament, then summarizing each book in theme, outline, and content with this background in mind.

A Time Called the “Intertestamental Period”

How shall we proceed to study this time period? First, we set out the time frame we are talking about, and then we enumerate the primary historical sources we can tap to garnish the information we need.

(1) The time frame

The jump from Malachi to Matthew is a historical period referred to as the Intertestamental Period. What is the time frame of this period? The period spans four centuries, and the ways of life for Judaism, both OT and Hellenism. Judaism includes the OT, but more—we have in view the history of the Jews and the Jewish community, their culture and religion from time of the Babylonian exile through the last Jewish War, AD 133-35. This history sets the context for the study of the New Testament.

What are our primary historical sources for this research? These sources come from many areas.

(2) The sources for study

A. Biblical

I, II Chronicles

Ezra

Nehemiah

Esther

Haggai

Zachariah

Malachi

B. Hebrew literature outside the Bible

Apocrypha - “hidden away”

Pseudepigrapha - writing with a false name for author

Dead Sea Scrolls

C. Historians

Josephus (AD 7-AD 95)

- a) *Jewish Wars*
- b) *Antiquities of Jews*
- c) *Life of Josephus*
- d) *Against Apion*

Greek and Roman historians

Polybius

Tacitus

Suetonius

Livy

D. Rabbinic writings

Mishnah

Talmud

E. Other Jewish, Greek, and Roman writers

Philo

Pliny the Younger

Strabo

Greek and Roman philosophers

Greek and Roman dramatists

Now that we have our appetites wet for understanding this particular time period, we move to provide a quick review of the Old Testament history that bridges into this time. Finally, at the end of our historical journey we will be able better to appreciate the world of the New Testament into which Jesus was born.

Old Testament Review

We start with a quick review of Old Testament history to set the stage for moving into the Intertestamental Period. Three periods are prominent for this purpose: (1) the Assyrian, (2) the Babylonian, and (3) the Persian. Each period can be characterized as raising particular issues in Jewish life that provide the context for similar issues met in the New Testament.

(1) Assyrian Period (722)

The period of racial issues. We lose the northern kingdom of Israel to the Assyrians in 722. This establishes the roots of the racial controversy between Jews of the southern kingdom of Judah and Jews of the northern kingdom of Israel. The northern kingdom of Israel began as a result of the splitting of the Jewish throne after Solomon but came to an end as a result of the Assyrian invasion. This northern kingdom of Israel never existed again as a national entity. The great majority of the people of Israel were taken away as captives. While some elements of the Jewish population were left, Assyria mostly repopulated the land with other people. The new inhabitants were of non-Jewish nationalities and ethnic backgrounds. Some northern Jews claimed they maintained their racial purity in spite of the mixed population. Jews of the rival southern kingdom of Judah disputed this claim of racial purity by these northern Jews, saying all the Jews of northern Israel were mixed into the population resettled there by Assyria. So Jews of the southern kingdom of Judah asserted that Jews of the northern kingdom of Israel became racially mixed and were not, therefore, true Jews anymore. However, the racial mixing itself was not the root problem. The root problem socially was that intermarriage meant accepting the foreign deities of other cultures. The social issue must be framed as a religious issue. Only

Jews of Judah were *true* Jews, the southern Jews claimed, because only they preserved the true worship of Yahweh by not intermarrying with foreign cultures. These Jews of the northern kingdom of Israel rejected by southern Jews of Judah eventually flow into the Samaritans of the New Testament.

(2) Babylonian Period (605-539)

The period of captivity issues. One hundred and thirty six years later, we loose the southern kingdom of Judah in 586 BC to Bablylon. Southern kingdom Jews were taken off into captivity. In Babylon, the Jews were exposed to other cultures and religions that impacted their own. Three series of Babylonian invasions brought Jewish captives to Babylon. All three invasions were triggered by Judah's attempts to throw off Babylonian vassal status under three Jewish kings: (1) Jehoahaz (605 BC), (2) Jehoiachim (597 BC), and (3) Zedekiah (587 BC).

Zedekiah's revolt triggered Babylon's third and final invasion of Judah. This invasion had terrible consequences. A great number of the Jewish population was exiled. Zedekiah was blinded. The Jewish nation ceased to exist for 50 years. One problem that suddenly was thrust upon the Jews in this time was their temple worship. With the temple's destruction, Jews had to ignore the ritual system of sacrifices. In exile with no temple, the only thing to do was keep the law expressed in Torah. The synagogue institution develops within this matrix, "a gathering together" to study the law. In the New Testament, "synagogue" referred to the building used as a place for gathering together. Captivity issues, then, include the evolution of Jewish religious thought, a new emphasis on the law, and the growth of new institutions such as the synagogue.

(3) Persian Period (539-332 B. C.)

The period of return issues. This is a period of dependent status. Ancient Iranian empires began to dominate the Mesopotamian world about the 6th Century B. C. The Babylonian empire disintegrated. Three Iranian tribes dominated history: (1) Medes, (2) Persians, and (3) Parthians. These new Iranian tribes were of great significance to the Mesopotamian world in general and to Jews in particular. Cultural enlargement took place. The world of Palestine was greatly extended. Previous dominance had been Egypt or Mesopotamia. Now even further to the east, the Iranians expanded society with their rich and deep culture. Such an expansion led to a cosmopolitan character to the world. The melting pot of peoples grew even more in the near east: Egypt, Mesopotamia, Iran, Asia Minor, and Greeks. Such a melting pot aided expansion of Judaism, and became the basis later for Hellenism, which had a great impact upon Judaism.

In the midst of the volatile world changes related to the rise and dominance of the Iranian tribes, the Jews returned to Palestine—clearly signaling the survival of the nation. This return started with Cyrus of Persia, a pagan king heralded even by the prophet Isaiah as one of God’s “anointed” (Isa. 44:28; 45:1). Politically, the liberal domestic policies of Cyrus contributed to the preservation of the Jewish nation. The Jewish return was not one mass exodus, but probably happened in stages, that is, Sheshbazzar (538 BC), Zerubbabel (535 BC), Ezra (459 BC), and Nehemiah (446 BC).

This dramatic event, while preserving the Jewish nation, raised return issues for the Jews. Jews who returned were asking hard questions about the traumatic experience of the exile. Why did God’s nation fall? Why did God’s people rebel? Answering such pressing questions, as well as the evolving life of Jews who had experienced exile and struggled to return, led

to new realities in Jewish thinking and experience. These new realities included a law emphasis, a new social class structure, a cross-cultural exposure, and fervent messianic aspirations. We summarize these new post-return realities briefly.

(1) *Law emphasis.* A law emphasis naturally arose. The fundamental answer to the curse of exile was *the problem of idolatry*. Therefore, Jews swore off idolatry for good—at least, so they thought. They came to a related conclusion: *all the people's ills were the result of the neglect of the law*. Thus, they vowed to keep law like never before. To do this, however, they had to study law. To avoid scrupulously the breaking of one commandment, a legal “hedge” had to be built around the law that would keep the law inviolate. That “hedge” around the law became the oral tradition of the Pharisees. The intent was commendable.

(2) *New social class structure.* Jewish society became much more stratified after the exile. Of importance to the New Testament are two classes in particular:

- a) *Scribes class* grew because the law needed to be copied. A new class in Jewish society arose committed to copying the law. At first the priests were scribes of the law, since they had no temple. These priests who also were these scribes naturally became the teachers of the law. Later the priests lost interest in this scribal activity, becoming more involved with the temple and its activity after the temple was rebuilt.
- b) *Laymen class* arose to carry on the teaching and preservation of the law from the priests. These laymen, not formally priests, still wanted to expand priestly obligations in the law to the people as a whole. If the people kept ritually clean like the priests, the curse of exile would never happen again. So, the laymen wanted the unlearned Jew to

know the law and keep even the priestly regulations. They taught the law to the people in their meeting houses, the synagogues. These laymen teachers of the law eventually became experts in the law. Some of them concentrated on teaching the people. Others concentrated on the actual copying of the law. These expert laymen eventually became the scribes and Pharisees of the New Testament.

(3) *Cross-cultural exposure*. Exposure to Babylonian and Persian societies especially catalyzed Jewish development. Renewed reading of the Jewish literature took place stimulated by these other religions and cultures. For example, pagan religions of Babylon and Persia had clear doctrines of resurrection. Without doubt, the Old Testament was vague on such a doctrine. However, the seeds of such an idea seemed inherently present in certain texts. Even Jesus capitalized on this subtlety in responding to the Sadducees from parts of the scripture that even they regarded as authoritative (Mk. 12:26; cf. Mt. 22:32; Lk. 20:37). Being in daily contact in other cultures caused the Jews to restudy their own prophets anew, with dramatic results.

(4) *Messianic aspirations*. Messianic fever grew after the exile. Hardships of captivity made the Jews long for a messiah more than ever before. They could not agree on exactly who he was or what his role would be in Israel's future, but almost all Jews longed for a messiah of some type.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Assyrian period raised racial issues. The Babylonian period raised captivity issues. The Persian period raised return issues. These issues formed the fertile ground from which the

intertestamental period developments took root and grew into the world of Jesus and the “fullness of time.” Paul never could have been more right about the timing of the coming of Messiah—God’s perfect timing for the Jews and for the whole world.¹

¹For the student who wishes to pursue the ideas in this lecture in more detail, the lecture was derived from the material in Bo Reicke, *The New Testament Era: The World of the Bible from 500 B.C. to A.D. 100* (Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1975).