

# The “Silent” Years?

## *A brief guide to understanding the history, situations, and circumstances we find in the New Testament*

Malachi was an Old Testament prophet who provided the last words in our Bible that God would speak to his people for nearly 400 years until the birth of John the Baptist and the Lord Jesus Christ would be announced by the Angel Gabriel. Some refer to these years as the “silent” years.

The purpose of this lesson is:

1. Brief History of these 400 years to help our understanding of the New Testament
2. Find out where the Pharisees and Sadducees came from and they developed through this period of history and what their allegiances were, through comparison and contrast.
3. To find out if these years were truly “silent” (Did God have nothing to say about these years in between the testaments?)

The last verses in the Old Testament are those of Malachi chapter 4:

### Malachi 4: 1-6

**1** For, behold, the day cometh, that shall burn as an oven; and all the proud, yea, and all that do wickedly, shall be stubble: and the day that cometh shall burn them up, saith the LORD of hosts, that it shall leave them neither root nor branch.

**2** But unto you that fear my name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in his wings; and ye shall go forth, and grow up as calves of the stall.

**3** And ye shall tread down the wicked; for they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet in the day that I shall do this, saith the LORD of hosts.

**4** Remember ye the law of Moses my servant, which I commanded unto him in Horeb for all Israel, with the statutes and judgments.

**5** Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD:

**6** And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse.

We learned from our study of John the Baptist that his ministry was in the power and spirit of Elijah the prophet. Jesus also stated that in John the Baptist, Elijah had already come if it could be received by the listeners. By the standard of the Nation of Israel, the heart of the nation was not repentant, and did not receive the Lord Jesus Christ as their Messiah rejecting him as their King crucifying him on Mount Calvary. It is interesting to me that in Jewish writings of their history, they will mention Jesus and state “The Romans Crucify Jesus of Nazareth” (Jewish Virtual Library). Since that rejection, God will do what he promised and bring the great and

dreadful day of the Lord, Daniel's 70<sup>th</sup> week, and the time of Jacob's trouble which will be worse than anything the world has ever seen.

## **Did God have anything to say about the events of these 400 years or were they truly silent?**

Consider what God has to say about himself in the following passages.

### Isaiah 46:9-11

**9 Remember the former things of old: for I am God, and there is none else; I am God, and there is none like me,**

**10 Declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure:**

**11 Calling a ravenous bird from the east, the man that executeth my counsel from a far country: yea, I have spoken it, I will also bring it to pass; I have purposed it, I will also do it.**

### Amos 3:7

**7 Surely the Lord GOD will do nothing, but he revealeth his secret unto his servants the prophets.**

There is no doubt that our God can tell the end of a matter from its very beginning and that he has been declaring to his people throughout history what will happen in the future through his servants the prophets. So the question remains, are these 400 years any different? The answer is categorically NO, these 400 years are no different and they truly are not silent. The careful Bible student will find many things which God told beforehand of the so-called "silent" years. People call them silent because God did not give any additional scripture / revelation during these 400 years, **but that does not mean that God is silent concerning these years!**

God revealed much about these 400 years through the prophet Daniel during the Babylonian captivity of Israel which lasted until the Neo-Babylonian Empire was overthrown by the Persian Cyrus the Great in 539 BC. Daniel was of royal Jewish blood but was taken to Babylon as a youth and trained in the ways, language, and customs of the Chaldeans. He was of such exemplary character that he served very high up in the governments of both the Babylonians and the Persians. Though a government administrator by profession, he was known far and wide for his devout spiritual life to Jehovah, the God of Israel even of course to the Lion's Den for praying to his God when told he couldn't by the government.

In the midst of the trials of servitude and loss of family, Daniel was to become a renowned man and prophet of God. He was a revealer of dreams much like Joseph was in Egypt and God also granted him special revelation to write down for us to study and know today so that today we don't call him Daniel the government administrator, but Daniel the Prophet!

## Nebuchadnezzar's Dream of Empires

In Daniel chapter 2, we find that Daniel had been classified with the “wise men”. The King had had a dream which troubled him and either he couldn't quite remember it, or he feigned to not remember it to test his wise men. The test was not only to interpret the dream, but the TELL the dream to the king before the interpretation! They could not of course, and as a result, all of the wise men were to be put to death including Daniel! However, Daniel asks for a bit of time and God grants Daniel the knowledge to know the King's dream and the proper understanding of it.

Turn to Daniel 2:25 -45



Daniel tells the king that he (Nebuchadnezzar) is the head of gold, that is, his empire Babylon. We are told that the other metals represent other kingdoms which shall come after Babylon. There then would be a kingdom for the silver, a kingdom for the brass, a kingdom for the legs of iron, and a ten part kingdom in the days just before God himself, represented as the stone cut out without hands, smashes the kingdoms of this world (the feet and all of the metals notice) and then the stone grows into a great mountain filling the whole earth. This kingdom of God's doing will never be destroyed or replaced! We still are waiting for this to happen, but be assured that it will! We are not told in this chapter (Daniel 2) the identification of these empires, but history tells us the succession of empires. We can then identify the silver with the Media-Persian Empire, the brass with the Kingdom of Greece, and the

legs of Iron with the Roman Empire (both Western and Eastern). We can confirm this through the Bible by looking at the visions of Daniel in chapters 7 & 8. The empires are identified by name there.

## Daniel Chapter 7

Daniel is given a vision of four beasts which came up out of the sea. The 4th in two parts.

1. Lion with Eagles Wings
2. Bear raised up on one side with three ribs in his mouth
3. Leopard with four heads and four wings
4. Dreadful and Terrible Beast, strong with iron teeth which devoured.
5. # 4 Part 2 – 10 horns (ten kings that shall arise)

Turn to Daniel 7: 17-28

While given much information here about these yet again four kingdoms (five with #4 being in two parts). We see that this vision of Daniel matches the dream that king Nebuchadnezzar dreamed in that it represents five kingdoms. However, we are still not told their identity specifically.

## **Daniel Chapter 8**

Daniel again has a vision in which he sees before the river a Ram with two high horns, but one was higher than the other (sound familiar?) and the higher one came up “last”. This ram is destroyed by a goat which had a notable horn between his eyes. This he goat becomes very great but is broken at the height of its power and four notable horns replace the one.

### **Turn to Daniel 8:16-27**

- Daniel 8:20 we find: The Ram having two horns are Media and Persia
- Daniel 8:21 we find: The rough goat is the king of Grecia and the notable horn is the first King. This can be done other than Alexander the Great
- Daniel 8:22 we find: Four kingdoms shall come out of the broken kingdom of Greece after Alexander the Great

The fall of the Babylonian empire is shown in Daniel chapter 5 (in 539 BC) with the “handwriting on the wall” incident which Daniel also interprets for King Belshazzar as meaning:

- MENE; God hath numbered thy kingdom and finished it (Dan. 5:26)
- TEKEL; Thou art weighed in the balances, and art found wanting (Dan. 5:27)
- PERES; Thy kingdom is divided, and given to the Medes and Persians (Dan. 5:28)

The kingdom of the Medes and Persians is the kingdom that God used to give the Jewish people the opportunity to be released from Babylon to go back to Israel and to rebuild their temple that King Nebuchadnezzar had destroyed. Eventually also, Nehemiah successfully petitioned a Persian king (Artaxerxes) to be allowed to go and lead the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. The Persian Empire eventually was bested by the Greeks and turned into (in part) the Parthian empire (modern day Iran). The Book of Esther in the Bible happens in the 426-425 BC time frame is very close in time with the last book of the Old Testament (Malachi). This Persian Empire lasts until the conquests of Alexander the Great which ended with his death in 323 BC.

## **The Rise of the Rough Goat**

The Persian and Greeks had conflicts which eventually lead to the death of Phillip II of Macedon by assassination who was Alexander the Great’s father. Phillip had unified the Greek city states and raised a professional army which Alexander inherited. Alexander was only 20 years old when he claimed is father’s throne. He executed the assassin and anyone else he thought a threat to him. His mother, Olympias, had raised Alexander to believe that he had been conceived in her by the gods – a virgin birth. Alexander conquered most of the known world in

just a little over a decade and died in Babylon in 323 BC after ten days of fever. When asked who the kingdom should go to he replied “Give it to the strong”.

**Jerusalem Spared:** Jaddua the high priest of Israel during the late reign of the Persian Empire knew that there was another Empire coming because he had the book of Daniel. When Alexander came to Israel after the conquest of Tyre, it is said that Jaddua met him in his white priestly with a company of such like clothed priests. Alexander is reported to have had a dream that he would meet a company of white-robed representatives of God and recognizing this as the fulfillment did not harm them and listened as Jaddua open the scriptures to him regarding his predicted rise to power. Alexander declares that he would never permit Jerusalem to be touched nor its temple polluted! He gave the priests gifts and sent them back to their city.  
Jerusalem

**Division of the Greek Empire:** Alexander had married a Persian lady from Bactria (some didn't like that!) and did have a very young son (not yet born at his death – that's young!). One of Alexander's generals, Cassander, eventually had Alexander's mother, wife, and young son murdered. The kingdom of Alexander then was divided four ways between these four generals – just like the book of Daniel had predicted. These divisions were:

1. Cassander – Macedonia and Greece
2. Lysimachus – Thrace and most of Asia Minor
3. Ptolemy – Egypt, Israel, Cilicia, Petra and Cyprus
4. Seleucus – Rest of Asia, Syria, Babylon, Persia & parts of India

Interestingly enough, there was actually a fifth general, Antigonos, who fought to overthrow the others and reunite the empire but he was eventually killed in battle and just as the Bible states, there were four divisions of the notable horn that was broken.

As you can see, we are now well into these supposed “silent years”. God has told us much and there is much more even than we have covered up to this point! We now will take a brief look at what happens to Israel from the time of these four empires to the time of the birth of Christ.

## **Israel, a Buffer State between the Ptolemaic and Seleucid Empires**

Israel becomes caught between kingdoms three and four above. These two empires seem to be constantly at war with one another and poor Israel is stuck right in the middle of these two warring nations. In fact, between the years of 319-302 BC, Israel changed from being a Ptolemaic vassal state to a Seleucid vassal state seven times! Though we will not reference much of Daniel 11, note that empires three and four are referred to in this chapter as the King of the North (Seleucids) and the King of the South (Ptolemy). Israel became a seeming constant battle ground for their Imperial masters. Daniel 11 details the conflicts between these warring parties for nearly a century and a half BEFORE THEY HAPPEN!

**Hellenistic Period:** Israeli history will general state that this period lasted from 333 – 64 BC. Hellenistic simply is a term which means “of or relating to Greek history, language and culture”. What do you think that the Jews thought of Hellenism? Not much! Though as we learn in the book of Malachi which closes out the Old Testament, God was still pleading with them to turn back to Him. We can conclude that as a nation, Israel was far from God. Even with this in mind, the Greeks were bitterly resented by the Jews. There were more foreign and wildly offensive to the Jews than perhaps any other. The Greek gods, the open homosexuality, and the unashamed exposing of the body seemed abhorrent to the Jews.

**Maccabean Period:** This period of Jewish history begins in 166 BC. Their story is long and filled with battle after battle, trying to gain their independence. These leaders and their followers were very devout spiritual people. Once they were attacked on a Sabbath and refused to fight. One thousand of their people were slain. This changed their mind though, and they decided that if attacked again on the Sabbath, that they should fight! What lead them to such zealous behavior to win their independence? It was none other than the person that some refer to as the antichrist of the old testament, Antiochus IV (Epiphanes). This king came at first as a friend to the Jews (by peace shall destroy many – Daniel 8:25). Remember Daniel 8: 9-14? This describes beforehand, what this king will do and even predicts the 2,300 days the temple would be desecrated.

**Antiochus Epiphanes:** The high priest in Israel at the time had a brother named Joshua. Joshua offers Antiochus a large bribe to set aside his brother (who was a devout man) and give him the high priest’s office. With it, Joshua promised Antiochus to do all in his power to Grecianize the Jews even to the extent of changing the name of the Jews to “Antiochians”. The offer was accepted and Joshua changed his honored Bible name to that of “Jason” a Greek hero. He carries out his plan to embrace Greek culture in the land of Israel. Other bribes for the high priests office were also offered and accepted by Antiochus. The land of Israel continued its trek in general to embrace all things Greek. One of these high priests, who hand changed his name to the Greek name of Menelaus, actually robbed the temple of its golden vessels selling them to meet his tribute money to Antiochus. Onias, the last legitimate high-priest still lived and cried publicly for the outrages of Menelaus. Onias was murdered and Israel started to become outraged at what was going on. The people of Israel began despise Antiochus and were warmed by news that he had apparently died in an invasion of Egypt in 171 BC.

Antiochus had not died however and he invaded Israel in a fit of rage. He slew 40,000 people in three days, tore away as many from their homes as captives. Guided by the wretched Menelaus, Antiochus desecrated the temple:

- Carried off the golden Candlestick, the table, alter of incense, and other vessels
- Destroys all copies of the Books of the Law that he can find
- Erects an idol in the Most Holy Place

- Sacrifices a sow on the alter
- Makes a broth of the pig and sprinkles it all over the temple.

These acts are depicted in Daniel 11:31. The Maccabean revolt was in response to all of this and is predicted in Daniel 11:32 - 35. Antiochus would have women thrown from the wall at this time who would try to have their newborn sons circumcised (along with the child) just to name one atrocity. We simply can't spend the time to go through this history in detail as it would take weeks and weeks. However, it is hopefully helpful to get the idea of what was going on. Eventually, one of the Maccabean leaders make an alliance with Rome to protect them. There is a brief period of autonomy both in the Maccabean era and then a bit later (142 – 129 BC) under the Hasmoneans. Shortly though, a new imperial master rises, and in 63 BC, Rome annexes the land of Israel.

## **Where did the Pharisees and Sadducees come from?**

Knowing a bit of the history of the four hundred years that are often called “silent” we see that they were anything but silent. God had much to say about them. In the Old Testament we do not ever see the names Pharisee or Sadducee. So, where did they come from? What were their differences? Why did John the Baptist call them a “Brood of Vipers”? Why did Jesus tell them they were of their father the devil? Why did Jesus chastise them for rejecting the commandments of God to embrace the tradition of men?

**Oral Tradition:** For years the Jews had developed something they called their oral tradition. This was to compliment and to supplement the written law. They believed that the written law was insufficient to practically live by. For example, how is one to be sure that they keeping the Sabbath day holy, or honoring their father and mother? That is what the teaching of the Oral Law or Tradition was for they believed. In the period we are discussing, there developed two main groups of religious leaders, the Pharisees and the Sadducees. The Pharisees were ardent keepers of the oral law, while the Sadducees were not. The Sadducees welcomed Hellenism and rejected the idea of having to keep the oral law. There was also a third group, the Essenes, which emerged out of disgust for the other two parties.

From the Jewish Virtual Library:

**Disputes Among the Three Parties**

	Sadducees	Pharisees	Essenes
<b>Social Class</b>	Priests, aristocrats	Common people	[Unknown]
<b>Authority</b>	Priests	"Disciples of the Wise"	"Teacher of Righteousness"
<b>Practices</b>	Emphasis on priestly obligations	Application of priestly laws to non-priests	"Inspired Exegesis"
<b>Calendar</b>	Luni-solar	Luni-solar	Solar
<b>Attitude Toward:</b>			
<b>Hellenism</b>	For	Selective	Against
<b>Hasmoneans</b>	Opposed usurpation of priesthood by non-Zadokites	Opposed usurpation of monarchy	Personally opposed to Jonathan
<b>Free will</b>	Yes	Mostly	No
<b>Afterlife</b>	None	Resurrection	Spiritual Survival
<b>Bible</b>	Literalist	Sophisticated scholarly interpretations	"Inspired Exegesis"
<b>Oral Torah</b>	No such thing	Equal to Written Torah	"Inspired Exegesis"

The Pharisees came to contend that their oral law was equal in authority to the written law of Moses as you can see from the chart above. At times, the spiritual parties were even involved in war one against the other during this period of time and their hatred of one another was well known.

Today, the oral law has been written down and is known as the Talmud. This is a collection of the oral law with written commentary from main Jewish scholars throughout time. The Mishnah is the first collection of writings you will find in the Talmud which was compiled around the year 200 AD. Over time, other commentary has been added so that today, the Talmud in printed form would take about 3 ½ feet of book shelf space, and if you read one page per day, it would take you approximately 7 years to read. This is in contrast to the 10 commandments and the 613 other life instructions given to Israel in the books of the law (Torah – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy).

Jewish students today of the Talmud join together in large places of learning in small groups to literally join in argumentative debate over the Talmud and its meaning. The legacy of the Pharisees is alive and well today. It will take the time of Jacob’s trouble to awaken them out of their debate and cast out their oral now written tradition for the commands of God.

**Read and Discuss Mark Chapter 7:1-16**

Maybe it’s just me, but having some understanding of the history of these years leading up to the time of Christ and the Apostles helps me to understand what the situations and conditions were in Israel and why. Remember what God said in Malachi? Remember the Law of Moses. Do you think God had any idea that Israel had an oral tradition?