

Historical and Political Context

Setting, Timing, and Ruling Figures in the New Testament

How Does the New Testament Era Fit into the Big Picture of History?

The chart entitled "Overview of Bible History" would be helpful here (Bible Basics). In the Old Testament, the nation of Israel was established during the Patriarchal Period (2000 BC). The nation was freed from Egypt during the time of Moses and the exodus (1500 BC). Joshua took the people into the Promised Land and assigned portions of land to each tribe (1400 BC).

After a disastrous period of judges, the people wanted a king (1000 BC). That's when the era of the United Kingdom of Israel began under the reigns of Saul, David, and Solomon. But after Solomon, the kingdom was divided into two nations, Israel (north) and Judah (south). Israel had 19 kings, but none were righteous. Thus, Israel was conquered by Assyria in 722 BC.

The nation of Judah had 20 kings; eight of them were righteous. Thus, Judah lasted more than 340 years. Eventually, the nation was consumed by Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians (608 BC). After 70 years in captivity, the Jews were allowed to return home and rebuild (538 BC). The Old Testament closes with the book of *Nehemiah* (around 432 BC).

More than 400 years separate the final events and prophecies of the Old Testament with the opening of the New Testament. Because there was no word from God during that time (*Amos 8:11, 12*), that part of Jewish history is missing from our Bibles. It is as if God wanted us to connect the dots from the final prophecies (i.e., *Malachi*) with the coming of the forerunner and the arrival of the Messiah.

But what happened during the Inter-Testament Period? Not surprisingly, the events that unfolded had been foretold by the prophet Daniel (*2:24, 25; 7:1-28; 8:1-27; 11:1-35*). Even though God was silent, He was still working. He was preparing the way for the coming of the Lord.

What Happened During the Inter-Testament Period?

As the Old Testament closes (about 432 BC), the Persians are in power, with Artaxerxes on the throne. They remained the dominant world force for another 100 years (330 BC).

In 333 BC, the Greek world was stirred to action by a young Macedonian named Alexander, who set out to conquer the waning Persian Empire. He successfully completed his mission three years later, when he took its capital, Susa, from Darius III (330). Alexander went on to conquer the Near and Middle East, including the Jews.

Alexander died in 323 BC, leaving his vast empire to his four generals. The Jews were given to Ptolemy, who ruled Egypt. The Jews experienced peace under Ptolemaic control. During that time, the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) were translated into Greek (called the Septuagint, 250 BC). However, soon after, the Syrians or Seleucid Empire (General Seleucus) began warring with Egypt over control of the Jews. The Syrians won (198 BC).

When the Jews were governed by the Syrians, or Seleucids, there was growing tension in the land, especially under the oppressive rule of Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175-164 BC), who made it his goal to harass the Jews. It was Antiochus who desecrated the Temple with Greek gods and the sacrifice of a pig. While it was believed that the Jewish culture would disappear, as it was tainted severely by their Greek oppressors, the Jews raised up a radical group of righteous zealots called the Hasidim, or "righteous ones," whose sole purpose was to preserve the Jewish heritage and culture. This group eventually became the Pharisees.

The Jewish people could only stand so much of Epiphanes' cruelty before they revolted. Behind the leadership of the Maccabee family (a Jerusalem priest and his sons), the Jews established a militia which stood valiantly

against the Syrian army. Over the years, the Maccabees regained control of Jerusalem, cleansed the desecrated Temple, enlisted the alliance of Rome, and ultimately gained Jewish independence (142-63 BC). It was the eight-day cleansing of the Temple that became known as the Feast of Hanukah.

After nearly a hundred years of independence, the Jews dissolved into civil war, which the Romans had to officiate. As civil wars tend to weaken nations, Pompey, the famous Roman general, saw this as his time to absorb the Jews into the Roman Empire. Thus, Pompey conquered the Jews (63 BC) and added them to Rome's vast territory. After years of unrest in Judea (or the province of Palestine), the Romans appointed Herod (an Edomite, of the tribe of Esau) to rule over the Jews in their interest. He ruled God's people with force and cruelty (37-4 BC). Of course, King Herod and the Romans were the political powers in place as the New Testament began.

Why Was Jesus' Timing Perfect?

Knowing the events of the Inter-Testament Period helps us better understand the setting into which Jesus was born. As Paul wrote, "When the fulness of time came, God sent forth His Son..." meaning the timing was perfect (*Galatians 4:4*). Why?

First, because of Alexander's conquests, the Greek language and culture had spread throughout the known world. In fact, the New Testament books were written in Greek. Second, the Roman legions brought an era of peace to the Mediterranean world, known as the Pax Romana ("Peace of Rome"). The Savior would be born during this time of peace.

Third, the Romans were master builders. Their civilization brought about better roads, bridges, and aqueducts (all made with cement and stone). We can still see their handiwork today. Roman government, Roman currency, and Roman citizenship permeated the known world, including the land of Judea, where the story of Jesus would take place. The time was right for Christ, Christianity, and the Christian Church to make the biggest possible impact on the world.

What Is the Political Context of the New Testament?

Now that we know the setting of the New Testament, let's consider the political figures involved. With the Romans in charge of the world, they assigned puppet kings and military governors to control parts of Palestine. That's why Herod and his sons are in power and become jealous when Jesus is born "king of the Jews." That is also why Roman leaders like Pontius Pilate, Felix, and Festus play a role in the lives of Jesus and Paul.

Of course, sitting atop the Roman world is Caesar himself. During the New Testament, there were several Caesars — Augustus (27 BC-14 AD), Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, and Nero. Only Augustus and Tiberius are mentioned by name. It was Augustus who ordered the census for taxation. Otherwise, Jesus would've been born in Nazareth. Instead, He was born in Bethlehem, the city of David, as it was foretold.

The Jews were allowed to continue their religious practices if they didn't cause trouble for the Romans. Therefore, under Roman supervision, the Jewish ruling class, which was comprised of three groups, had great power when it came to Judaism.

The first group was the Pharisees, who were experts in the Law of Moses. They controlled the teaching in the synagogues and loved to flaunt their piety or self-righteousness. The second group, closely associated with the Pharisees, was the scribes, who also studied and wrote about the law. The third group was the Sadducees, who were the priests. They controlled the Temple and the sacrificial system.

Together, these men comprised a group called the Sanhedrin, the governing Council or court of the Jews. There were 70 members of the Sanhedrin, with the High Priest as its presiding officer. Of course, these groups surface throughout the story of Christ and the early church, as they opposed Jesus' ministry.

With the historical and political context of the New Testament, we can better understand the exciting story of Jesus and His followers.