

The Intertestamental Period

Lesson 6: Wednesday, November 30, 2005

Ralph D. Winter

W1406

The four centuries prior to the birth of Christ has been called the Intertestamental Period. This period gets its name from the absence of content in our present Bibles for these four centuries - that is, it is the period between the Testaments. In all fairness, however, the boundaries of this period are the very artificial creation of the decision in 1812, by the American Bible Society to drop the so-called Apocrypha from their evangelistic printing of the Bible. They did that because they wanted to save money and also because of course the literature in the ancient Greek Bible actually covered much of this period.

But of all periods this is packed with perhaps the most influential events. All of these events, added to all of the previous OT materials is so significant that it is hard to imagine that anyone would feel that the New Testament could possibly stand alone.

When the curtain goes down at the last page of Malachi (prior to the Apocrypha which has been removed from our Bibles) and the curtain goes up in the NT, we do indeed enter into a radically changed world. While Confucius, Buddha, and Socrates all lived just before the period, their greatest influence was no doubt during the period. Alexander the Great, a student of Aristotle who was a student of Socrates looms very large in this period and essentially changes much of the world permanently.

In China the Qin dynasty for the

first time unites China and builds the Great Wall. But Alexander unites an even larger portion of the earth and is more important for our interests because he introduced the Greek language far and wide.

But by far the most significant thing in this period, which of course built on Alexander's extension of the Greek language, was the Greek version of the Old Testament.

This Greek Bible, which was the Bible of the early church, was more likely the Bible of Palestine as well since many scholars believe that Greek had by the time of Christ become the primary language of most people in Palestine. That is to say, when Jesus was reading from the Bible in Luke 4 in his hometown synagogue, He was probably reading from the Greek Bible.

This particular document is often called the Septuagint or LXX which refers to the seventy-two translators who supposedly did the work.

A most important point, however, is that this Greek Bible was not exactly a translation of a previous document but was a selection as well as a translation, that is, our concept of Biblical inspiration must certainly include the remarkable selection that took place drawing upon perhaps 400 other documents. Long stretches of first and second Samuel and first and second Kings are actually commentaries on other documents that are named in the text. The overall selection process produced a single, coherent, composite

document for the first time.

Many people have recognized the unique characteristic of this document. No other religious tradition has a single, most important document of the character and quality of the Old Testament. The impact of this document in all directions is truly remarkable. No other translation has had the same profound impact. When the New Testament refers to Scripture this is the document to which it refers. Without it the thousands of synagogues scattered throughout the empire would have ever been able to attract Gentiles in anywhere near the same number as were called "God fearers" in the New Testament.

More than any other human achievement guided by the Holy Spirit of course, the Septuagint, or the Greek Bible, literally created the early church. 80 % of the quotations in the New Testament from the Old Testament are drawn from the Greek Bible, not from Hebrew documents. This means, of course, that some documents did exist in Hebrew. It was not for a thousand years that rabbinical scholars actually pulled together and published the Hebrew counterpart to the selection of documents found in the Greek Bible. When they did they followed meticulously the same writings. All they changed was the order.

In Luther's day there were two major Biblical traditions that were considered authoritative. The Greek Orthodox tradition understandably stayed with the Greek Bible and of course the Greek New Testament. The Catholic Latin tradition, in Luther's

day had considered Jerome's fourth century translation into Latin as authoritative. Luther didn't want to have to contest the subtle interpretations of either of those two documents and decided creatively that he would go back to the Hebrew which by the time of his birth had been in existence for perhaps 700 years.

The Protestant Reformation, therefore, for the first time established within Christianity the importance of the Hebrew language and culture. Christians and Jews had very early polarized. The Jews in the period of early Christianity, you can easily imagine, tried to distinguish themselves from the Christians who were being persecuted, while the Jews had long before achieved immunity from persecution. This didn't make the Christians happy for it often meant their death. This is only one of the reasons for the divergence of the two traditions. Luther's decision to use the Hebrew began a very slow process of appreciation for the Jewish tradition, but it would still be centuries before anything like friendliness developed. Indeed, Luther himself on one occasion said that the Jews if they did not acknowledge Christ should have their tongues torn out. Meanwhile, regrettably and astonishingly, due to Luther's decision, Protestants have paid almost no attention at all to the Bible of the early church, that is the Septuagint. In our seminaries today, this great achievement of the Intertestamental period, which had such great influence in the entire ancient world and which is the

foundation of the New Testament Greek documents, is almost totally ignored. It's not routinely studied in the curriculum at any point. The Old Testament department focuses exclusively on the Hebrew Old Testament while the New Testament department, employing the Greek language, focuses exclusively on the Greek New Testament not the Greek Old Testament.

Scholars have noticed that the New Testament at any point makes no reference to translators even though Jesus' ministry takes Him into the area of the "Decapolis" which was a cluster of ten Greek speaking cities north of Nazareth. This is one more reason why it is widely understood that Jesus could speak Greek likely even as a primary language.

Just in general the amazingly different world we encounter in the pages of the New Testament is mostly the result of events of the intertestamental period. Many Jews had been transported to Babylon early in the period. The Jewish commentaries on the Bible, called the Talmud, give credence to the thought that most of the Jews never got back to Palestine even by Jesus' day. The Babylonian Talmud is a huge shelf of books compared to the Palestinian Talmud which is very much shorter. In addition there were perhaps a million Jews in northern Egypt as well as perhaps another 9 million in the rest of the Roman Empire. For the most part they kept the faith. And as Peter remarked in the book of Acts, Moses is preached in every city.

Thus the setting of the New Testament is by no means a start from scratch situation. It is more like a tinderbox. By understanding the situation, the phrase grows on us, that Jesus was born "in due time." When His first sermon in Luke referred to Old Testament events in which Gentiles were blessed of God we can see the basic continuity between Jesus and Paul despite the fact that some scholars make Paul out to be the promoter of a substantially different religion.

Due to events in the intertestamental period, the Jews had already achieved a special dispensation from the Roman Empire to worship their own gods in their own way. In all the empire the Jews were the only group that had achieved that kind of recognition. They had fought desperately for their autonomy in the intertestamental period and while they had finally pretty much accepted the Greek language, they had never forgotten the desecration of their temple by Antiochus Epiphanies. Their reaction was so strong that they were able to gain a begrudging recognition by the Roman Empire.

It may be difficult for Christians to acknowledge, but the Jewish families which had fanned out across the Roman Empire, due no doubt to commercial activity, were nevertheless respectable people. That's why their synagogues were able to attract the God-fearers already mentioned. Hugh Schoenfeld, a prominent Jewish scholar in England, who actually translated the New Testament for

Jewish use, insists that the Jews were sending missionaries out across the empire a hundred years before Christ was born.

This is no doubt the phenomenon to which Jesus referred when He mentioned that the Pharisees were “traversing land and sea to make a single proselyte.” This of course may have meant that they were more interested in Gentiles adopting their Jewish culture than to turn their lives over to the the living God. Thus, Jesus went on to say that these missionaries were making *hypocrites*. That is actually a bad translation because in Greek the word “hypocrite” was simply the common word for an actor in a play who is pretending to be somebody else. It wasn’t a bad word as it is in English. But it is clear right there, to Jesus, that a shift in culture was not by any means the main thing about which they should have been concerned.

Before we leave this Intertestamental Period we need to note once more the great significance of the captivity of the Southern tribes by the incredibly ruthless Assyrians. The Northern tribes had already been dispersed, never to return as a movement, and leaving a vacuum in northern Palestine into which various races would flow, creating the later much resented Samaritan population.

While it was a series of deportations across years, the deportation of the Southern Kingdom is usually referred to as 586 BC. What is very important is the fact that the Babylonians took over, and soon after that the Persians

became rulers. The Persians with their Zoroastrian religious views were much better to the Jews, and it is likely that there was borrowing in both directions. The Persians even allowed some of the Jews to return to their land and reconstruct the temple.

In all of this commotion there is little doubt, as mentioned in Lesson Four, that the Jewish scholars gained a more specific understanding of a *Satan* that was a specific person. Most of the earlier documents in the OT, as we pointed out then, use the word simply to refer to any *adversary*. On one occasion where God opposes a bad prophet, God is called a *satan*.

This gives highly important insight into one of the most profound differences between most of the OT and the NT, and at the same time underscores the fact that the Jewish people were not the only ones with whom God was dealing and revealing Himself.

The relatively benevolent rule of the Persians extended for about 200 years, from 532 to 332 BC, at which time Alexander the Great took over Palestine. Under the Greeks, while the Jews still were allowed religious freedom, Greek culture was pressed upon them.

Greek domination continued for more than 200 years, until the Roman Empire overran Palestine in 63 BC, during which time the Greek language and culture gained a strong hold on at least the remnant of Jews who had reoccupied their land.

Thus during this period we see a

succession of outside rulers over the Jews. The Babylonians were better than the incredibly cruel Assyrians who were experts in skinning people alive and piling up pyramids of heads. The Persians were better than the Babylonians. The Greeks in some ways were even better. As empires go the final rule of Roman law offered still greater advantages. The Roman's Latin language did not replace the Greek, due in great part to the fact that the Romans looked up to the Greeks as superior in language and literature. Many of the household "slaves" in the Roman empire were actually respected teachers of Greek language and literature.

It could just be that some of the "God-Fearers" across the empire, who attended Jewish synagogues, did so because they wanted to hear the Greek since in many cases it was no doubt the Greek OT that was read out in the Synagogues.

It was the Roman legal system, however, which protected Paul and granted him the right to be tried by Caesar, when it became clear that he had no chance if tried in Jerusalem.

This is the scene, then, in which we enter the NT period in our next lesson, a scene in which the Bible of the early church is widely known and read over a considerable portion of the earth. Its influence was greatly enhanced by the fact that the Jewish people were the carrier mechanism of that Word, their lives and conduct being the most visible meaning of those scriptures. Then, as now, it is the actual presence of transformed lives which gives the

best introduction to the word written.