

Search for Truth Lesson Five

A. 400 Silent Years

After the completion of the writing and ministry of the Minor Prophets, God ceased speaking with Israel. During this time of silence, scant historical records reveal the struggle to obey the law while enduring opposition from pagan conquerors.

The interval between the Testaments is termed the “four hundred years of silence,” meaning there were no vocal messages from God. However, there was a deep longing and yearning in every Jewish bosom for the freedom their coming Messiah would bring.

Four hundred “silent” years? To the historian and Bible scholar, these centuries were anything but silent! While God was not vocal, His hands were steadily preparing the way for the coming Messiah. Although the Jews could not comprehend what was happening, all the events now fit together like pieces of a puzzle.

Prophets were no longer ministering, yet the echoes of Daniel’s prophetic voice rang throughout the centuries. Nebuchadnezzar’s image of Gentile kingdoms was now making sense! It was all happening just as Daniel had explained!

At the conclusion of the Old Testament Babylon’s head of gold had been overthrown. The Medes and Persians, represented by silver chest and arms, had been ruling the world about one hundred years. For another one hundred years, Persia continued to reign over Judea – the new name given to Palestine. Persia’s world dominance lasted from 550 B.C. to 330 B.C.

About the middle of the fourth century, a new world power emerged as Daniel had predicted. Philip of Macedon began to weld together Greek city-states into a powerful military force.

Greece had long been a cultural center among the Mediterranean nations with its established language and customs. With the combination of several city-states under powerful Philip, Greece became a terrifying force.

In 336 B.C. Philip’s son, Alexander, took command of the Greek forces when his father died. Though youthful, he displayed skill as a military leader and soon his campaigns made him world-famous.

Swiftly Alexander’s forces swept across Egypt, Syria, Assyria, Babylon, and Persia, making him a world ruler by 331 B.C. Superpower Greece was indicated in Nebuchadnezzar’s image as the brass thighs.

Alexander the Great showed special kindness to the Jews and spared Jerusalem, He even offered

incentives to persuade the Jews to settle in the city of Alexandria, Egypt, which had been built in his honor.

The victorious armies of Alexander the Great established Greek cities wherever they went. The Greek language and culture flourished as these cities became centers of a new civilization known as “Hellenic” culture.

After only a brief reign, Alexander died at age thirty-three, having conquered more territory than any of his predecessors. His vast empire was then carved into four parts: Egypt, Syria, Greece, and an area now known as Turkey.

Palestine was first ruled by Syrians. Then Egyptian kings took control. Jewish life was peaceful during this period. Synagogues were established in many cities, and Alexandria, Egypt, became an influential center of Judaism.

Later, in 198 B.C., Syria again gained control of Palestine. Antiochus the Great determined to force the Jews to accept the Greek culture. Then in 175 B.C. a new king, Antiochus Epiphanes, came to rule Syria. Since the unique Jewish religion conflicted with the Greek Hellenism, he decided to destroy them.

B. Maccabees

The predecessors of the Hasmonean family of Jewish leaders and rulers, made up the sons of Mattathias and their descendants, which reigned in Judea 167 to 37 B.C. This term is especially applied to Judas Maccabeus and his brothers, who defeated the Syrians under Antiochus IV Epiphanes (the Seleucid ruler of Syria, 175 - 164 B.C.) in 164 B.C. and who rededicated the temple of Jerusalem.

In the spirit of the oriental tyrant, Antiochus IV Epiphanes fanatically determined to impose Hellenism - the adoption of ancient Greek language, philosophy, customs, art - on all the subjects of his empire. He prohibited the observance of the Sabbath and the traditional Jewish festivals and feast days. He also outlawed the reading of the Law of Moses and gave orders that all copies should be burned. Temple sacrifices were forbidden, circumcision was outlawed, and other characteristic Jewish practices were declared illegal.

Antiochus’ ultimate affront to the Jews occurred on the twenty-fifth day of the month of Kislev, in 167 B.C. He rededicated the temple to the pagan Greek god Zeus, set up a statue of Zeus in the Holy of Holies, and sacrificed pigs upon the altar. These outrages brought on the revolt of the Maccabees.

The home of Mattathias, a Jewish priest, quickly became the center of resistance against Antiochus. With Mattathias were his five sons: “John called Gaddis, Simon called Thassis, Judas called Maccabaeus, Eleazar called Avaran, Jonathan called Apphus” (1 Macc. 2:3-5, NEB)

The title Maccabeus was first given to Judas, the third son of Mattathias, but it was soon

transferred to the entire family. Some scholars believe the term is derived from a Hebrew or Aramaic word meaning “Hammer,” probably an allusion to the crushing blows inflicted by Judas and his successors upon their enemies.

In December 164 B.C. Judas Maccabeus and his zealous force of Jewish rebels recaptured most of Jerusalem. Then he forced the loyal priests, those who had not collaborated with Antiochus, to cleanse the Holy Place and erect a new altar. On the 25th of Kislew, 164 B.C., precisely three years after Antiochus had defiled it, Judas rededicated the temple.

Leadership of the Maccabees eventually passed from Judas to Jonathan and then to Simon. After the death of Simon, the last remaining son of Mattathias, the succession of the Maccabees was maintained by Simon’s son John, known later as John Hyrcanus or Hyrcanus I.

C. Old Testament Canon

Literature from this period reveals what occurred during the four-hundred-year period between the Testaments. The Maccabees wrote books describing the Jews’ struggle for freedom. However, their writings were not considered divinely inspired and therefore were not included in the canon of Holy Scripture. Neither the Jews, the noted Jewish historian Josephus, or Jesus and the early Christians accepted or quoted from any of these fifteen books.

During the era from Malachi to the time of Christ, a most important event was the compiling of sacred writings. The word “canon” means a measuring stick or rod; a standard by which a thing is measured or judged. When applied to the Old Testament, it means that the selection of sacred writings of that period met a particular standard of divine inspiration. Other writings were omitted from the collection.

Ezra is believed to have played a vital role in collecting and preserving these sacred books. The collection accepted by the Jews as the Word of God were never questioned either by ancient Jews or Christ and His Apostles.

D. New Religious groups

1. Pharisees - Separated ones

A religious and political party in Palestine in New Testament times. The Pharisees were known for insisting that the Law of God be observed as the scribes interpreted it and for their special commitment to keeping the laws of tithing and ritual purity.

The Pharisees had their roots in the group of faithful Jews known as the Hasidim (or Chasidim). The Hasidim arose in the second century B.C. when the influence of Hellenism on the Jews was particularly strong and many Jews lived little differently than their Gentile neighbors. But the Hasidim insisted on strict observance of Jewish ritual laws.

When the Syrian King Antiochus IV tried to do away with the Jewish religion, the Hasidim took

part in the revolt of the Maccabees against him. Apparently from this movement of faithful Hasidim came both the Essenes - who later broke off from other Jews and formed their own communities - and the Pharisees, who remained an active part of Jewish life. Indeed, during the period of independence that followed the revolt, some of the Greek rulers who controlled Palestine favored the Pharisaic party.

As a result of this favoritism, Pharisees came to be represented on the Sanhedrin, the supreme court and legislative body of the Jews. At times, the Pharisees even dominated the assembly. In New Testament times, Pharisees, though probably in the minority, were still an effective part of the Sanhedrin.

One distinctive feature of the Pharisees was their strong commitment to observing the law of God as it was interpreted and applied by the scribes. Although the priests had been responsible for teaching and interpreting the Law (Lev 10:8-11; Deut 33:8-10) in Old Testament times, many people had lost all respect for the priests because of the corruption in the Jerusalem priesthood. They looked to the scribes instead to interpret the Law for them. Some scribes were priests; many were not. Still they lived pious, disciplined lives; and they had been trained to become experts in the law. It was natural, then, for people to follow their leading rather than that of the priests.

The way in which the Pharisees spelled out the meaning of the Mosaic Law, the ways in which they adapted that Law to suit the needs of their day, the time honored customs they endorsed - all these became a part of the "tradition of the elders" (Mark 7:3). Although these traditions were not put into writing, they were passed on from one Scribe to another and from the Scribes to the people. From the tradition, they claimed, the Jewish people could know the way God's Law should be observed. The Pharisees agreed, and they were known for supporting and keeping the "tradition of the elders."

The Pharisees also believed it was important to observe all the laws of God, which they taught were 613 in all. But they were especially known for their commitment to keep the laws of tithing and ritual purity.

According to the New Testament, the Pharisees were concerned about strictly interpreting and keeping the law on all matters (Acts 26:5), including the Sabbath (Mark 2:24), divorce (Mark 10:2), oaths (Matt 23:16-22), the wearing of phylacteries and fringes (Matt 23:5), and so on. But they showed special zeal in insisting that laws of tithing and ritual purity be kept. (Matt 23:23-26; Mark 7:1-13; Luke 11:37-42; 18:12)

Since Pharisees found that other Jews were not careful enough about keeping those laws, they felt it was necessary to place limits on their contacts with other Jews as well as with Gentiles. For example they could not eat in the home of a non-Pharisee, since they could not be sure that the food had been properly tithed and ritually pure.

Unlike the Sadducees, the Pharisees did believe in the resurrection of the dead. On this point, they were on common ground with the early Christians (Acts 23:6-9). The scribe in Mark 12:28

who thought that Jesus had answered the Sadducees well concerning the resurrection was probably a Pharisee.

In the New Testament, the Pharisees appear frequently in the accounts of Jesus' ministry and the history of the early Church. In these passages a number of the typical failings of the Pharisees are evident. Pharisees observed the Law carefully as far as appearances went, but their hearts were far from God. Their motives were wrong because they wanted human praise. (Matt 6:2, 5, 16; 23:5-7). They also had evil desires that were hidden by their pious show. (Matt 23:25-28). That is why Pharisees are often called hypocrites; their hearts did not match their outward appearance.

2. Sadducees

Members of Jewish faction that opposed Jesus during his ministry. Known for their denial of the bodily resurrection, the Sadducees came from the leading families of the nation - the priests, merchants, and aristocrats. The High Priest and the most powerful members of the priesthood were mainly Sadducees (Acts 5:17).

The Sadducees rejected "the tradition of the elders," that body of oral and written commentary that interpreted the Law of Moses. This placed them in direct conflict with another Jewish group, the Pharisees, who had made the traditions surrounding the Law almost as important as the Law itself. The Sadducees insisted that only the Laws that were written in the Law of Moses (the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament) were really binding. The Sadducees thought this way because of religious practices that had taken place for several centuries.

The Sadducees rejected this approach to authority in favor of the written Law of Moses. They felt the original Law alone could be trusted. Naturally, they felt Sadducean priests should be the ones to serve as the Law's interpreters.

The Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection of the dead or the immortality of the soul, since these doctrines are not mentioned in the Law of Moses. Neither did they believe in rewards or punishments handed out after death, as in the doctrines of Heaven and Hell. Acts 23:8 indicates that they did not believe in Angels or spirits, either. They believed in free will - that people are responsible for their own prosperity or misfortune. They interpreted the Law literally and tended to support strict justice as opposed to mercy toward the offender.

Only a few references are made to the Sadducees in the New Testament. They opposed the early Church (Acts 4:1-3; 5:17-18), much more so than even the Pharisees (Acts 5:34-39; 15:5; 23:6-9). Since the chief priests usually came from among the Sadducees, it is clear that they played a major role in the arrest of Jesus and the preliminary hearing against Him (Mark 14:60-64), and that they urged Pilot to crucify Him (Mark 15:1, 3, 10-11). Jesus warned His disciples about the "leaven" - the "doctrine" or teaching - of the Sadducees (Matt 16:1-12). John the Baptist was suspicious of their "repentance" (Matt 3:7-12).

One incident when Jesus clashed with the Sadducees is recorded in all three of the synoptic

Gospels (Matt 22:23-33; Mark 12:18-27; Luke 20:27-40). Apparently one of the favorite sports of the Sadducees was to make fun of their opponents by showing how their beliefs led to ridiculous conclusions. They approached Jesus with a “what if” question, designed to show the absurd consequences that can arise from believing in the resurrection of the dead. “Suppose,” they asked, “a woman had seven husbands in this life, and each of them died without leaving children? Who’s wife would she be in the world to come?”

Jesus replied with a two - part answer. First, He said they were wrong to suggest that earthly relationships, such as marriage, will continue after the resurrection. Second, Jesus pointed out that they were wrong in not believing in the resurrection at all: “Have you not read what was spoken to you by God, saying, ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? God is not the God of the dead, but of the living” (Matt 22:31-32; also Exodus 3:6, 15-16).

Jesus’ argument was that God told Moses that He was the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Of course, these three men had died long before the time of Moses. Yet, if they were not “alive” at the time of Moses (that is, if they did not live on after their deaths), then God would not have called Himself their God, for “God is not the God of the dead, but of the living.” Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob must live on if God is still their God; therefore, it is wrong to deny life after death and the resurrection of the dead.

After posing His reasons, Jesus stated that the Sadducees were “greatly mistaken” in their beliefs (Mark 12:27). The multitude that heard Jesus’ argument were “astonished at His teaching” (Matt 22:33) and the Sadducees were “silenced” (Matt 22:34).

3. Sanhedrin - A council or assembly

The highest ruling body and court of justice among the Jewish people in the time of Jesus. Headed by the high priest of Israel, the Sanhedrin was granted limited authority over certain religious, civil, and criminal matters by the foreign nations that dominated the land of Israel at various times in its history. The Sanhedrin was exercising this limited power when it charged Jesus with the crime of blasphemy and then sent him to Pilate, the Roman official, for a formal trial and sentencing.

The word Sanhedrin is not found in the NKJV; instead the word council is used. Usually the assembly itself is meant, although the word may also refer to the assembly leading (John 11:47) or to the place where the assembly met (Luke 22:66; Acts 4:15). The same word is also used for smaller, local courts of justice (Matt 10:17; Mark 13:9). The Sanhedrin is also implied in Bible passages that mention a meeting of the various groups that made up the council. The chief priests, the elders, and the scribes (Mark 14:53-55). Sometimes some of the members of the Sanhedrin are simply called rulers (Luke 24:20; Acts 4:5).

The Sanhedrin had 71 members. The New Testament mentions some of them by name: Joseph of Arimathea (Mark 15:43), Gamaliel (Acts 5:34), Nicodemus (John 3:1; 7:50), the high priest Annas and Caiaphas (Luke 3:2), and Ananias (Acts 23:2). The high priest was always president

of the Sanhedrin. Some scholars suggest that the Apostle Paul was a member of the Sanhedrin before his conversion to Christianity, but this is not known for sure.

The Sanhedrin grew out of the council of advisors for the high priest when the Jewish people lived under the domination of the Persian and Greek empires. In the beginning, the council was made up of the leading priests and the most distinguished aristocrats among the lay people. Later, however, as the influence of the scribes grew they were also given some positions on the Sandhedrin.

In this way, the Sanhedrin came to include both Sadducees - or “chief priests” and “elders” - and Pharisees or scribes. These were the two main groups within Judaism, and the Sanhedrin usually tried to maintain a balance of power between them.

But Acts 23:1-10 shows that the Sanhedrin would sometimes divide along party lines. As he stood before the Sanhedrin, the Apostle Paul was shrewd enough to pit the Pharisees against the Sadducees to his own advantage.

After A.D. 6 the official authority of the Sanhedrin extended only to the province of Judea in southern Palestine. Still, Jews living elsewhere respected the Sanhedrin highly and would often be guided by its decisions. Within the province of Judea, which included the city of Jerusalem, the Romans left most of the business of governing the Jews to the Sandhedrin. The Sanhedrin even had its own police force, or temple police, so it could make arrests on its own. This is the force that arrested Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:43; Acts 4:1-3).

The Sanhedrin also served as the supreme court of the Jews. This does not mean that people who were dissatisfied with the verdict of the lower court could appeal to the Sanhedrin for a different decision. But matters of special importance and other matters that lower courts were unable to resolve were brought to the Sanhedrin. The Roman rulers did, however, reserve the right to interfere with what the Sanhedrin was doing, as happened in the case of Paul (Acts 23:10; 24:7), but this probably happened very seldom. The Romans denied the power of capital punishment to the Sanhedrin. This is why the Jews said to Pilot after they had tried Jesus, “it is not lawful for us to put anyone to death” (John 18:31).

In the New Testament, the Sanhedrin was involved in hearings against Jesus (Matt 26:59; Mark 14:55), Peter and John and the other Apostles (Acts 4:1-23; 5:17-41), Steven (Acts 6-7), and Paul (Acts 22-24). Jesus probably was not officially tried by the Sanhedrin. It is more likely that He was given a preliminary hearing to establish the charges against Him and then taken to Pilot. It is also not clear whether Steven was officially condemned and executed by the Sanhedrin or simply was stoned by an angry mob without due process of law (Acts 7:54-60).

4. Scribes

Members of a learned class in ancient Israel through New Testament times who studied the scriptures and served as copyists, editors, and teachers. After the Jews returned from the captivity in Babylon, the era of the scribes began. The reading of the Law before the nation of

Israel by Ezra (Neh 8:10) signaled the nations return to exact observance of all the laws and rites that had been given. Following the Law and the traditions that had grown up around it became the measure of devotion and spirituality.

At first the priests were responsible for the scientific study and the professional communication of this legal code. But this function eventually passed to the scribes. Their official interpretation of the meaning of the law eventually became more important than the law itself. This position of strength allowed these early scribes to enforce their rules and practices with a binding authority. To speak of the Scribes as interpreters of scripture means that they provided rules for human conduct out of their study.

By the time of Jesus the Scribes were a new upper class among the Jewish people. Large numbers of priests in Jerusalem before A.D. 70 served as Scribes. One of these was Josephus, the Jewish historian. Some Scribes came from among the Sadducees. Others came from the ordinary priestly ranks. But the largest group of Scribes came from among every other class of people, including merchants, carpenters, flax combers, tentmakers, and even day laborers, like Hillel, who became a famous Jewish teacher.

The young Israelite who devoted his life to become a Scribe went through a set course of study for several years. Josephus began his preparation when he was 14. Students were in continual contact with the teacher, listening to his instruction. The disciple-scribe first had to master all the traditional material and the unique method of interpretation of the Jewish Halakah. The aim was to give the apprentice competence in making decisions on questions of religious legislation and penal justice.

According to the tradition of the Scribes, there were “secrets” of interpretation, forbidden degrees of knowledge, that were not to be expounded before three or more persons. Some chapters in the Bible were to be explained only to sages (2 Esdras 14:1-5).

Sometimes the Gospels refer to the Scribes as lawyers (Matt 22:35; Luke 7:30) - a title that identifies them as experts in the Mosaic Law. This Law was regarded as the civil and religious authority governing Jewish life. In Jesus’ day, the Scribes were usually associated with the Pharisees (Matt 12:38; Mark 7:5; Luke 6:7; teachers of the Law in NIV). In the Gospels, they are sometimes called “the Scribes of the Pharisees” (Mark 2:16, NRSV, NASB; the teachers of the Law who were Pharisees, NIV). This phrase identifies Scribes who were members of the Pharisaic party.

Many of the Scribes were members of the Sanhedrin, the highest legal and administrative body in the Jewish state in Roman times. Gamaliel was one of these (Acts 5:34), as was Nicodemus (John 3:1). They sat as administrators of the Law “in Moses’ seat” (Matt 23:2). This administration intensified after the destruction of Jerusalem.

Since a Scribe was not paid for his services, he had to earn a livelihood in another way. This rule may have been enforced to keep down the problem of bribery among the Scribes in their application of the Law. The Scribes often developed attitudes based on their professional

privileges, and this often resulted in pride (Matt 23:5-7). Jesus warned against these excesses, and He boldly attacked the religious hypocrisy of the Scribes (Matt 23).

E. Greek Translation of Scriptures

Another significant event of this period was the translation of Old Testament Hebrew Scriptures into Greek. This task was performed in Alexandria, Egypt, by a group of Hebrew and Greek scholars.

First the Pentateuch, then the entire Old Testament was translated. Greek had become the common language and the Septuagint (referring to the “seventy” translators) became the Bible of the common people.

Both Christ and His Apostles used the Septuagint, thus approving it as an authentic version.

Translating the Scriptures into the language of the people was a most important stepping-stone for Christ and His Gospel.

F. Quest for Knowledge

Wherever the Greek military marched, their culture was scattered. Grecians taught the world the importance of learning and education.

Accelerated learning no doubt produced its share of atheists, yet a desire also blossomed in others to discover the meaning of life. Why are we here? Where did we come from?

The Septuagint Version provided the answers! Grecian influence created a quest for knowledge that ripened thousands for the coming message of Christ.

G. Universal Greek Language

Another vital aid in spreading the Gospel message was the development of a language of the people. While the world was under Grecian influence, everyone learned to speak Greek – in addition to his own native tongue.

This gave Christ and His disciples the tremendous advantage of preaching and writing the gospel in a language all could understand.

H. Religious Dissatisfaction

The two major religious sects had little to offer. The cold, hypocritical Pharisees were disgusting. The worldliness of the Sadducees was sickening. Having to choose between legalism and ritualism left a spiritual void.

Consequently, the formal religious groups prompted a longing for Messiah to come.

I. Persecution and Dispersion

The Jewish captivity had scattered them to all parts of the world. Many Jews remained in the land of their captivity – Assyria, Babylon, and Persia. Others traveled to distant lands. Settlements of Jews could be found in every major city.

Each locality had synagogues and Old Testament Scriptures. Soon Gentile nations would accept the message rejected by the Jews. Therefore, their presence in foreign lands paved the way for greater acceptance of Christ's Gospel.

A less desirable feature was the persecution endured under Antiochus Epiphanes. His rule prompted a deep longing in the heart of every devout Jew for deliverance.

While the Roman government was not murdering Jews as Antiochus had done, their taxation system terribly irritated the Jews.

J. Roman Roads

With the rise of the Roman Empire, an era of road building flourished. Rome was responsible for building roads and developing world waterways. The most remote areas were discovered by her great ships in the quest for international trade and commerce. Rome had approximately one hundred years to build roads and establish trade routes before those routes would be used to spread the gospel. The disciples' mission would have been impossible unless Rome had literally paved the way for Christ and His Gospel.

K. Paving the Way for Christ and His Gospel

Christ did not come until the time was precisely right! Scripture indicates there was indeed a specific time for his birth.

Galatians 4:4

4 But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law,

Just before Jesus ascended, He gave signs that would precede His return to earth. Preparation for his first coming spanned several hundred years. But Jesus declared that the signs pointing to His second appearing would occur within the lifetime of one generation (Matt 24:34)

Matthew 24:34

34 Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled.