

Part Two

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BETWEEN THE TESTAMENTS

History of the Interval

Although no Old Testament books record the history of this period, there were Jewish writings during the time. Some of these are the "Apocrypha," about fourteen books, or portions, to be added to the Old Testament books, which have been "canonized" as a part of the Old Testament by the Roman Catholic church. Of these, the first Book of Maccabees is the most valuable as history. Josephus, a Jewish historian who was born in the decade after Jesus' crucifixion, wrote two important works—*The Antiquities of the Jews* and *The Jewish Wars*—which give an account of the Jews from 170 B.C., through the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus, in A.D. 70. The history of the empires of the world during this period between the Old and New Testaments is well covered by Greek and Roman historians. Moreover, this period is pictured with amazing accuracy, prophetically, in the Book of Daniel (Dan. 2:36-45; 7:3-8, 17; 8:3-22; 11:2-45). This history of the Jews in these times may be divided into six periods:

1. *The Persian Period* (538-332 B.C.). The return from Babylon took place under Persian rule (Ezra 1). Under the Persians, the Jews were usually governed by their own high priest, subject to the Syrian satrap, or governor. Persian rule was usually mild, and often very favorable toward the Jews (e.g., the stories of Zerubbabel, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Daniel). The Samaritans and renegade Jews caused the most trouble in this period. The Samaritan temple on Mt. Gerizim was built about 432 B.C., a seat of degenerated Judaism that continues until today.

2. *The Greek or Macedonian Period* (332-323 B.C.). The Persian rule was broken by the world-sweeping conquests of Alexander the Great, out of Macedonia. Alexander showed consideration for the Jews, and did not destroy or plunder Jerusalem. His short but brilliant career had far-reaching results in the introduction of Greek language over Palestine and all the Mediterranean area.

3. *The Egyptian Period* (323-198 B.C.). On the death of Alexander,

his empire was divided among four of his generals. Seleucus ruled Syria, and Ptolemy ruled Egypt. Palestine, between them, was claimed by both of them. The Ptolemies early attached Palestine to Egypt. They extended privileges to Jewish settlers on the Nile. Alexandria became the center of a large Jewish population and a seat of Jewish learning. It was, for the most part, a century of prosperity for the Jews. The most important event was the translation of the Old Testament into Greek at Alexandria. The Greek version is known as the Septuagint (meaning "seventy"), from the traditional number of translators.

4. *The Syrian Period* (198-167 B.C.). The Seleucidae (Greek kings of Syria) finally recovered Palestine from Egypt.

The period of Syrian rule was the darkest yet most glorious in the whole four hundred years. The Seleucidae were dissolute tyrants. Antiochus Epiphanes (175-164 B.C.) was the most notorious of them all. Returning on one occasion from defeat in Egypt, he vented his vengeance on Jerusalem. He massacred forty thousand of its population, stripped the temple of its treasures and outraged the religious sense of the Jews by sacrificing a sow on the altar and sprinkling the interior of the temple with the liquor in which a portion of the unclean beast had been boiled. He sought by every means to stamp out the Hebrew religion and spirit and transform the nation into Greeks. He shut up the temple and, on pain of death, prohibited the Jewish religion. Multitudes heroically sacrificed their lives rather than their faith.¹

5. *The Maccabean Period* (167-63 B.C.). A heroic revolt against such violence and sacrilege was led by a family of priest-patriots known as the Maccabees. An old priest, named Mattathias, and his five sons, in turn, led the Jews in a war for independence, which was finally gained after thirty years of struggle. Judas Maccabeus (166-161 B.C.) led in a remarkable series of victories and re-opened, cleansed and rededicated the temple in honor of which the feast of dedication continued to be kept (John 10:22). Judas fell in battle; but his brothers (first Jonathan, then Simon) fought on, and, taking advantage of political deals with rivals for the Syrian throne, obtained, in turn, the dual office of governor and high priest, recognized

¹ B. S. Dean, *An Outline of Bible History*, Rev. ed. (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing Co., 1912), p. 105.

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by Syria. Simon lived his last days in peace and made a league with Rome. He was succeeded by his son, John Hyrcanus, who was subdued by the Syrian ruler for a time, but found opportunity to throw off the yoke and went on to conquer much additional territory. His change from the Pharisee party to the Sadducees caused much bitter strife at home. His son was ambitious and murderous, took the title of king, ended the glory of a great family, started it on its decline, a period of 60 years filled with intrigue and barbarous civil war.

6. *The Roman Period* (63 B.C., through the New Testament period). Pompey captured Jerusalem in 63 B.C. The plots and murders of the different members of the Maccabee family continued to curse the land. Antipater, of Idumea (Edom), and his infamous son, Herod, took part in the rivalries and the deals with Rome until Herod finally conquered Judea, amidst shocking atrocities, in 37 B.C. He destroyed the rest of the Maccabee family, including his wife, Mariamne. This Herod rebuilt the temple (larger than Solomon's and much richer than Zerubbabel's), and slaughtered the babies of Bethlehem in an attempt to murder the Messiah (Matthew 21). He gave to the kingdom the greatest external splendor it ever knew, save in the reigns of David and Solomon. Yet the moral and religious quality of his reign was deplorable. Despite the outward splendor, Israel chafed under the yoke of subjection to Rome and under the crimes of Herod's regime. "The tabernacle of David was, indeed, fallen, and the elect spirits of the nation, the 'Israel within Israel,' looked and longed for him who should raise it up again and build it as in the days of old (Amos 9:12)."²

There arose a party of *Herodians* who favored the rulers of the Herod family and their collaboration with Rome. An opposite party of *Zealots* worked "underground" to bring violent action against all such. The *Sadducees*, a small but influential party mostly of priests, became political opportunists, conniving at wrongs and losing faith in the scriptures. The *Pharisees*, who began as faithful upholders of the law against all Gentile influences, became self-righteous and hypocritical formalists, seeking public acclaim and political influence. Even devout believers among the common folk became political-minded and materialistic, and found it hard to accept the spiritual nature of the kingdom of Christ as the fulfillment of Israel's hopes.

² Dean, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

Preparations for the Coming of Christ

Throughout this dark period God was working His own plan for Israel. Several developments in these centuries helped to bring about the "fulness of time" for the Messiah to come.

1. *The Dispersion of the Jews.* Many more were scattered abroad throughout the empire than lived in the homeland, yet everywhere they remained Jews. Thus they became world-wide missionaries of the knowledge of the true God and of a message of hope in a hopeless world.

2. *The Synagogue,* which probably arose to meet the needs of the exiles in Babylon, became the center of worship for many of them who were too far separated from the temple and the place of instruction for all. The reading in the synagogue every Sabbath fixed the eyes of Israel more firmly on their Scriptures and the promised Messiah. Thus the synagogue everywhere became the great missionary institute, imparting to the world Israel's exalted Messianic hopes. Then after the gospel of Christ was given, synagogues became key places to begin its proclamation, and they furnished prepared persons for leadership and oversight in the new church.

3. *The Spread of Greek* prepared the world for the Word of God.

4. *The Septuagint Translation of the Old Testament,* spread throughout the world by the Jews and their synagogues, prepared the world for the gift of God, in His Son. "The Septuagint thus is a distinct forward movement in the fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise (Gen. 12:3; 18:18)."

5. *Rome made of the world one empire,* and Roman roads made all parts of it accessible, while Roman stress on law and order made a comparatively high degree of peace and safety, which encouraged travel and communication.

6. *The Jewish Messianic Expectation.* H. E. Dosker summarized this hope:

The Jews themselves, embittered by long-continued martyrdoms and suffering, utterly carnalized this Messianic expectation in an increasing ratio as the yoke of the oppressor grew heavier and the hope of deliverance grew fainter. And thus when their Messiah came, Israel recognized Him not, while the heart-hungry heathen humbly received Him (John 1:9-14). The eyes of Israel were blinded for a season, 'till the fulness of the Gentiles shall be gathered in' (Rom. 9:32; 11:25).³

³ H. E. Dosker, "Between the Testaments" in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* ed. by James Orr, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1939), Vol. I, p. 458.

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7. *The Silence of Prophecy for Four Hundred Years*, immediately preceded by the clear prediction of the coming of a great messenger like Elijah (Mal. 3:1; 4:5, 6), put dramatic emphasis upon the message of John the Baptist. It strongly accented every inspired utterance that announced the coming of the Christ.

For Further Study:

Bruce, F. F. *New Testament History*. Garden City: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1969. Pp. 1-204. Surveys the Intertestament period and sets the life of Christ in its political, religious and social background.

Ferguson, Everett. "A History of Palestine From the Fifth Century B.C. to the Second Century A.D." in *The World of the New Testament* ed. by A. J. Malherbe. Austin, Texas: R. B. Sweet, 1967. Pp. 37-67. Readable, reliable essay. Other essays in this book illustrate the religious and social background.

Tenney, Merrill C. *New Testament Times*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1965. Pp. 3-178. Useful presentation of the Roman, Greek and Jewish contribution to the world to which Christ came.

Wartick, Wallace and Wilbur Fields. *New Testament History: The Christ and the Inter-Testament Period*. Joplin: College Press, 1972. Wilbur Fields' revision of William Smith's *New Testament History*, (Book one).

FEAST DAYS OF THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL

The word translated "feasts" means appointed times, and includes the Day of Atonement which was observed by fasting, as well as those appointed times which were actually feasts. "These are the set feasts of Jehovah, which ye shall proclaim to be holy convocations" (Lev. 23:37). They include even the Sabbath of every week (Lev. 23:2, 3).

Three great annual feasts required the presence of every able male Israelite at the tabernacle or temple "before the Lord" (see Exod. 23:14-17; 34:22, 23). These were the feasts of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles.

Passover was in the last of March or in April, and occupied eight days, including the feast of unleavened bread and the offering of first-fruits of the barley harvest.

Pentecost was fifty days, or seven full weeks, after the Sabbath of passover week, and occupied, according to the original commandment, one day. It is also called the feast of weeks (e.g. II Chron. 8:13). The name "pentecost" comes from the Greek word for fifty.

Tabernacles came in October (six months after passover) and occupied eight days. It is also called the feast of ingathering.

The first and last days of unleavened bread, the Day of Pentecost, and the first and last days of the feast of Tabernacles are particularly called "holy convocations."

Other occasions called holy convocations, but not requiring the pilgrimage to the national center of worship, are the Day of Atonement, the Feast of Trumpets, and the Sabbath. The Day of Atonement was five days before the Feast of Tabernacles. The Feast of Trumpets was ten days before the Day of Atonement, on the first day of the seventh month of the religious calendar, and the first day of the new civil year. The Jewish months always began with each new moon and hence did not correspond to our months. Each new moon, or the first day of each month, was to be observed with special sacrifices and the blowing of trumpets (Num. 28:11-15 and 10:10). Although the new moons are not specifically mentioned in the law as holy convocations or as times of ceasing from labor, Amos 8:5 indicates that trade and craftwork were stopped on them.

In the New Testament *The Feast of Dedication* is mentioned (John 10:22), but it was not commanded in the law. It was added to com-

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memorate the purification of the temple by Judas Maccabaeus about 165 B.C., after it had been robbed and desecrated by Antiochus Epiphanes. Another feast, called "Purim," was added to commemorate the deliverance of the Jews from the plot of Haman in the days of Esther.

How They Were Kept

The term "holy convocation" would indicate an *assembly* of people "called together," but the law does not command the people to come to the central sanctuary for the Sabbath, the Day of Atonement, or the Feast of Trumpets. On every day of holy convocation "servile work" was forbidden: that is, all *ordinary labor such as belonged to one's worldly calling must stop*. The preparation of food was allowed (Exod. 12:16). But on the Sabbath of each week and on the Day of Atonement it was not lawful to do work of any sort, not even to kindle a fire (Exod. 35:3; Lev. 23:28, 30).

Each special day had its *special offerings and sacrifices*. Many of them were marked by the *blowing of trumpets*. They were times of special reverence and realization of God. They emphasized the remembrance of His great works. They furnished impressive forms of worship. They led the worshipper to seek God's mercy through the appointed sacrifices. Some of the feasts were times of special rejoicing. The Day of Atonement was a day on which everyone was to "afflict your souls." This means *fasting* (abstaining from all food throughout the day) together with the contrite spirit and attitude of soul that should befit men seeking pardon for sin.

In the case of the Passover Feast, *special foods* marked its observance. The roasted yearling lamb of the Passover meal was eaten in the night with many particulars of ceremony. The unleavened bread was eaten at all meals, and no leaven allowed in their houses for seven more days.

The Feast of Tabernacles is so named because it was to be observed by *living for seven days in booths or tabernacles* made of boughs of trees. This is considered to be a dramatic remembrance of the hardships of the wilderness, to stimulate thanksgiving for the land which God had given them (Lev. 23:42, 43).

In connection with the Passover the very first sheaf of barley harvest was to be cut and waved as an offering before Jehovah, and meal offerings of fine flour mingled with oil to be presented. At Pentecost a portion of the wheat harvest was to be baked into cakes with leaven and salt and offered. At Tabernacles the fruit of goodly trees with branches of trees were to be used or displayed, in rejoicing over the

ingathering of all the fruits of the earth.

Significance And Value Of The Feasts

God originated and established the nation of Israel. It was God who designed all their institutions and dictated their laws. He prescribed these feasts for their good and as part of the mission of Israel in preparing a blessing for all the families of the earth. When they failed to keep them faithfully they were charged with disobedience to Jehovah. The Old Testament is not an accumulation of pious frauds and misrepresentations; hence these feasts must be taken as it represents them, as the provisions of the all-wise God for His people, and not as the natural development of national ceremonies. Jehovah commanded these feasts, imposed them upon a people who seemed never too willing to keep them all properly, but His commandments are "for our good always" (Deut. 6:24).

There are similar feasts and ceremonies in other-religions. In our Bible the feasts tie in with historical facts, great ideas, and educational objectives to a degree not known in other faiths. In other religions they are rather isolated and miscellaneous and are largely an accumulation, while in the Jewish economy the feasts are integrated and organized into an effective process. . . . These colorful feasts and appointed seasons found in Leviticus constituted Jehovah's great program of visual education.¹

In these feasts, indeed, are combined several different advantages to the people. *They served to unify the nation.* Drawing the separate tribes from their separate homes, they brought them together in the celebration of the things which made them one nation and which looked forward to their common destiny. The people were given occasion and leisure for developing mutual acquaintance, and were made to have an interest beyond themselves which would produce loyalty to one another and to the nation. Here was opportunity for interchange of ideas and experiences which must have stimulated improvement of their arts and crafts. These things would be incidental. More important than these were the religious values of the feasts.

They gave instruction to the people; for they were connected both with the law which commanded them and with significant items of

¹ W. R. White, *Broadman Comments* (Nashville: Broadman Press).

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history which they commemorated. The scriptures were read and knowledge of great works of God were renewed at the feasts. The Passover, especially, was to keep alive the memory of the deliverance from Egypt. Such observances perpetuated the knowledge of their unique origin, their special relationship to God, and their high destiny.

They furnished worthy and definite forms for the worship of God, which *aided the real spirit of worship*. They were expressions of joy and gratitude to God for the produce of the land. At each of the three major feasts—Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles—much attention and ceremony was given to recognition that the fruit of the land was from God and the first and best of it was to be offered back to Him. A sense of dependence upon God was promoted, and would naturally be connected with desires to be faithful and pleasing unto Him. Men always need reverence for God and realization of His superintending Providence.

All the feasts promoted love and respect for God, but *deepest reverence and repentance were especially kindled by the Day of Atonement* with its most solemn and awe-inspiring ministrations by the high priest in the Holy of Holies, while all Israel, whether gathered at the sanctuary or in their dwellings, afflicted their souls. It taught the lesson of the need of reconciliation, and pointed out the prospects of complete redemption through acceptable sacrifice. Thus it proclaimed both the wrath and the mercy of God.

Very probably Israel did not always realize any typical significance in the feasts, but certainly *one of the greatest purposes for them was that they should be prophetic patterns and promises of "good things to come"* (Col. 2:16, 17; Heb. 10:1). All the plan of the nation of Israel was made to look to the future with expectancy and preparation for the great manifestations of God to come. Therefore the Old Testament scriptures are "able to make thee wise unto salvation, through faith which is in Christ Jesus" (II Tim. 3:15).

The new moon, or the first day of each month, was to dedicate each month to God. The feast of trumpets was one of these. It was also New Year's Day. It had more ceremonies attached to it than the first days of the other months, and served to sanctify also the whole year.

Special Days In The New Testament

Only one set feast of reverence, love and devotion is prescribed in the New Testament. That is the Lord's Supper every first day of

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the week. It combines most of the best features of all the old feasts. Let us keep it faithfully and worthily and we will not forget God, or His great works in bringing us to our inheritance, or our special relationship to Him and our high destiny.

None of these Old Testament feasts or special days are binding upon Christians. No new set fasts or annual celebrations are instituted. No calendar dates or suggestions are given to encourage us to sanctify Christmas or Easter. But if a man esteems one day above another, and does it devoutly unto the Lord, it is his privilege (see Rom. 14:5, 6). However, set days legalistically regarded are dangerous (see Gal. 4:10, 11; Col. 2:16-20). They cannot be kept as forms of obedience, for they are not commanded. They are of absolutely no merit formally observed. Their only value will be in the true spirit of reverent and loving devotion with which they are kept.

Special seasons of thanksgiving, of rejoicing and praise, of commemoration, of fasting and repentance, of faith-filled conventions with multitudes of like precious faith giving intensive attention to the things of God, are good for all of us to lift us up out of the hum-drum life of too much attention to petty and selfish things. But let them be kept unto God in the spirit; and let them make ordinary days not less holy, but more holy.

For Further Study:

Alexander, David and Patricia Alexander, eds. *Eerdman's Handbook of the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1973. Pp. 110-115; 180-181. Chart on the Jewish calendar. Notes on the feasts.

Edersheim, Alfred. *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, 2 vols. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1956 (reprint of 1886 ed.). See index on specific feasts. This converted Jew gives valuable information on the Jewish background of the life of Christ.

Lewis, J. P. "Feasts," the Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, Vol. II, pp. 521-526. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House; 1975.

Tenney, Merrill C. *New Testament Survey*, rev. ed. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1961. Pp. 95-99. Brief explanation of each of the Jewish feasts.