

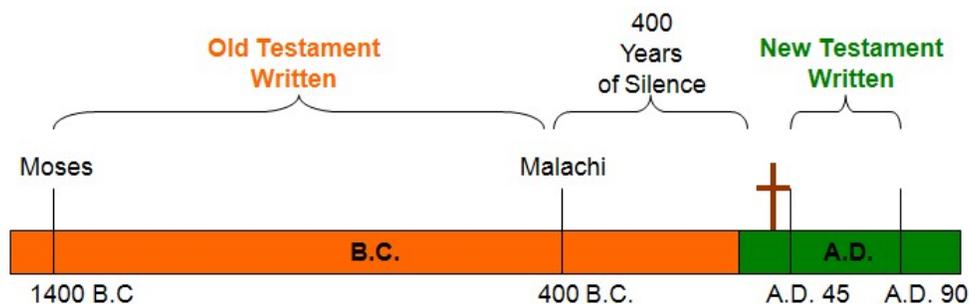
Lesson 01 & 02

Introduction

Matthew is the first gospel and holds a unique place in the Bible as the first book in the New Testament. As an introduction, please come prepared to discuss some of the basic facts of the book of Matthew.

1. Who was the author? What qualified him to write such a book?
2. In your own words, what is the theme of Matthew?
3. We often think of Matthew as a book written to the Jews. Why is that?
4. Other than a history book, why is Matthew such a valuable book for us today?

As the book of Matthew opens, the scene could not be more different than when the scene closed at the end of the book of Malachi. Because of this, we would like to look at the history leading up to the book of Matthew.



Despite the lack of Scripture detailing this period, a great deal happened. Malachi set the stage: many Jews had returned from the Medo-Persian Empire and rebuilt the temple, experiencing a moderate level of revival under the influence of Ezra. But they still did not live as God had instructed them. Israelite men mistreated their wives, married women who did not follow the Lord, and refused to honor God with their giving. Meanwhile, the priests neglected the temple and their responsibility to teach God's laws (Malachi 1-2).

The Jewish homeland was taken over from the Persians by the Greek Empire (Alexander The Great) in 332 BC followed by the Egyptian occupation in 312 BC. The Greek language came into common usage during this time, inspiring the translation of the Old Testament into Greek, known as the Septuagint.

The Jews continued to practice the Law of Moses and the temple rituals until Syria overtook Jerusalem in 204 BC. In 171 BC, Antiochus Epiphanes desecrated the Holy of Holies (the most sacred part of the temple). Antiochus Epiphanes, or Antiochus The Magnificent imposed the following laws in Palestine:

- Jews could not assemble for prayer
- Observance of the Sabbath forbidden
- Possession of the Scriptures is illegal
- Circumcision is illegal
- Dietary laws is illegal (He sacrifices a pig in the Holy of Holies in the Temple)
- Pagan sacrifices are mandated (Statue of Zeus erected in Temple)

The Jews, led by the Maccabee brothers, revolted and retook control of Jerusalem in 165 BC. The temple was cleansed and restored. This cleansing is still observed today as The Festival of Lights or The Feast of Hanukkah.

The Roman Empire conquered Palestine in 63 BC, and continued to reign throughout the events of the New Testament. Judah now becomes known as Judea. The Roman Empire also began building roadways beginning around 300 BC allowing for easier transportation and communication throughout the known area.

Interestingly, many of the events during the 400 silent years fulfilled Old Testament prophecy. Of great significance were the prophecies of Daniel that spoke of coming empires that closely resembled those of the Greek and Roman Empires that took over the land of Israel (Daniel 7, 9). Several apocryphal books were written during this time. Some, like 1 and 2 Maccabees, can be read as more-or-less accurate historical accounts, while others are false teachings or fairy tales. None of them were worthy of being called Scripture by Jewish scholars.

While these 400 years of silence revealed no new biblical revelation, they clearly included many significant historical events. These included many changes in the rule of the land of Israel as well as the necessary preparations for the coming of Jesus Christ as the Messiah. As Galatians 4:4-5 says, "But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons."

Questions:

1. Who was Matthew primarily writing to in his book (see Mt. 10:5-6)? Why is it important to understand the history leading up to the book of Matthew?

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2. Read Malachi 3. As a Jew trying to worship God faithfully, how would the restrictions of Antiochus Epiphanes have impacted you?
3. Galatians 4:4-5 references "the fullness of time" coming before God sent Jesus. What are 3-4 key developments during these 400 years of silence that prepared the way for Jesus?
4. Does this mean that the stage set for Jesus was perfect in every way? Explain what you mean.

Though we are living in the days that might be termed "the silence of God," when for 2,000 years there has been no inspired voice from God, we must look back -- even as they did during those 400 silent years -- upon the inspired record and realize that God has already said all that needs to be said, through the Old and New Testaments. God's purpose has not ended. He is working them out as fully now as he did in those days. Just as the world had come to a place of hopelessness then, and the One who would fulfill all their hopes came into their midst, so the world again is facing a time when despair is spreading widely across the earth. And Jesus is just as available today as it was in the days of the book of Matthew.

I want to challenge us to look at Matthew as more than a history book for the Jews. More than a recording of conversations between Jesus, his Disciples & Jewish leaders during the first century. I want us to put ourselves into the shoes of each person Jesus talks to throughout the book...and ask ourselves:

**How am I the Disciples today?
How am I the Pharisees today?
How am I the Sadducees today?**

And more importantly...what am I going to do about it?