

The Story (18) – Rest of OT and the Intertestamental Period

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I. Introduction

A. Meg and I had a great time last week visiting the grandkids in Colorado Springs. I appreciate Mark filling in for me. It's a blessing to have capable teachers who can step in when they are needed.

B. The assignment today is to "finish the Old Testament." Next week we are scheduled to look at Jesus' birth, so no time is allotted in *The Story* for the intertestamental period, the time between the last historical events of the Old Testament and the first events of the New. This is a period of more than 400 years, and I think it would be a disservice to you not to provide at least an overview of the history of this time as it is part of the context of the New Testament. So I will finish up the Old Testament rather quickly and then say a bit about the intertestamental period.

II. Finish the Old Testament

A. As you know, the first wave of Jews returned to Jerusalem from Babylonian captivity after the decree of the Persian king Cyrus in 538 B.C. The foundation of the temple was laid in 536 B.C. but the building stalled until it was resumed in 520 B.C. at the exhortation of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah. The temple was completed in 516 B.C.

B. Ezra led a group back to Jerusalem in 458 B.C., some 58 years after the dedication of the new temple. Nehemiah led the third wave of exiles back to Jerusalem in 445 B.C. He served as governor there for 12 years and then returned to the Persian king Artaxerxes in 433 B.C. presumably because his leave of absence was up.

C. Nehemiah stayed in Babylon for some time and then returned to Jerusalem again for a governorship of unknown length. This term apparently was over by 407 B.C. because there is a Jewish papyrus from Egypt (Elephantine) which indicates a man named Bagohi (Bigvai) was governor of Judah at that time. Nehemiah's second term is mentioned in Nehemiah 13. He returned to find that sin and corruption continued to infect the Jews in Jerusalem: the tithes were ignored, the Sabbath was broken, the people had married foreigners, and the priesthood had become corrupt. This is the end of the inspired Old Testament history of Israel.

D. The Minor Prophet Malachi may well have prophesied around 430 B.C., after Nehemiah returned to Artaxerxes, though many would date that book several decades earlier. He condemns several of the same sins Nehemiah faced on his return.

E. In this brief walk through the Old Testament, we have looked at the five books of the Law, the Pentateuch, paying the most attention to Genesis and Exodus. We have flown over the twelve historical books (Joshua through Esther), the five books classified as the Major Prophets (Isaiah through Daniel), and at least mentioned the twelve Minor Prophets. That leaves only the five books of poetry and wisdom – Job through Song of Solomon – that in English Bibles come between Esther, the last of the books classified as historical, and Isaiah, the first of the Major Prophets.

F. These five books were composed at different times and cover a wide range of ideas and circumstances.

1. Job reveals that not all human suffering is divine punishment or discipline. Some such suffering is endured by the righteous for a divine purpose that is beyond our ability to grasp. When Job sought to know why he was suffering so horribly when he was no greater sinner than the next man, God did not tell him the reason why. Rather, he spoke to Job in the whirlwind and set before him the greatness of his being, the fact he created the universe and knows all things. The point was that Job needed to trust God's nature without having the explanation why. That is a very difficult thing to do, but it is the way of faith. This is such an important lesson.

2. Psalms is a collection of different kinds of inspired songs composed by David, Asaph, the sons of Korah, and others. They are worshipful, God-centered songs that cover the waterfront of human life and emotions.

3. The Book of Proverbs includes not only the short, pithy statements of popular wisdom that we typically associate with the word proverb but also what we would call parables and even some extended instructional discourses. It is divine instruction for skillful living in God's world. It reveals principles for navigating life, guidance for the conduct of one's affairs, which lead to blessing, to a good life.

4. Ecclesiastes explores the true meaning of life and reveals that life cannot be assessed properly by mere observation, by looking at things apart from the revelation of God. The ambiguity of life can lead one to skepticism if life is not viewed through the word of God.

5. The Song of Solomon celebrates the joy of love in a romantic love poem.

III. Intertestamental Period

A. The time from the events of Nehemiah 13, which we can probably put in the 420s B.C., to 333 B.C., during which the Jews continued to live under the Persian Empire, is a period of almost total obscurity. In 334 or 333 B.C., however, Alexander the Great began to engage the Persians militarily, and by 331 B.C. he had gained control of the Persian Empire. This led to the widespread adoption of Greek culture throughout the Empire.

- This had been revealed by God in a vision to the prophet Daniel several hundred years earlier. In Daniel 8 Daniel was given a vision about a decade before the fall of the Babylonian empire. He was shown the rise of the Medo-Persian Empire and was shown its swift defeat by a great Greek king.

B. Following Alexander's death at a young age in 323 B.C., his kingdom was divided among his four generals. Ptolemy I gained Egypt, and Seleucus I gained Syria and Mesopotamia, but for some years they contended for control of Palestine. The Ptolemies succeeded in controlling Palestine until 198 B.C., at which time it fell into the hands of the Seleucid rulers.

1. This also had been shown to Daniel in the vision of chapter 8. While the goat in the vision was in its prime its great horn was broken and four large horns arose in its place. The angel Gabriel explains in vv. 21-22 that the goat represents the kingdom of Greece (as embodied in its king) and that the great horn represents its first king. The four horns that arise in place of that great king represent four kingdoms that arise from the first king's empire.

2. Daniel 11:5-35 contains such an amazingly detailed depiction of the Ptolemaic and Seleucid kingdoms and the conflicts between them during this period. Skeptics claim they must have been recorded after the fact, but God revealed this history to Daniel centuries before it happened.

C. Skipping over much history of the Ptolemies and Seleucids that was revealed in advance in Daniel 11, from 198-165 B.C., Palestine was under Seleucid control. In 175 B.C. Antiochus IV Epiphanes began to rule. In response to bribes, he appointed as high priest men who were favorable to the Hellenization of Palestine. In 169 B.C., while escorted by the second of these appointments, Menelaus (Menahem), Antiochus IV plundered the temple taking "the golden altar, the lampstand . . . the table for the bread of the Presence, the cups for drink offerings, the bowls, the golden censers, the curtain" (1 Macc. 1:21-22).

D. In 168 B.C. Roman power thwarted his designs on Egypt and forced him to withdraw in humiliation. On his return, he took harsh vengeance against Jerusalem for an attempt to unseat Menelaus.

1. According to 1 Maccabees 1:29-33, a Jewish work dating from the late second century B.C.:

Two years [after plundering the temple] the king sent to the cities of Judah a chief collector of tribute, and he came to Jerusalem with a large force. Deceitfully he spoke peaceable words to them, and they believed him; but he suddenly fell upon the city, dealt it a severe blow, and destroyed many people of Israel. He plundered the city, burned it with fire, and tore down its houses and its surrounding walls. And they took captive the women and children, and seized the cattle. Then they fortified the city of David with a great strong wall and strong towers, and it became their citadel.

- As a footnote, much literature was produced by the Jews during this intertestamental period which, though not part of Scripture, is part of the cultural background of the first century. For example, Hebrews 11:32-40 alludes to certain martyrs during the period of the Maccabean Revolt, specifically Eleazar and the seven brothers and their mother whose stories are recounted in 2 Maccabees 6-7 and 4 Maccabees 5-12, writings dating from the early second century B.C. to the early first century.

2. Everett Ferguson writes in *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 406:

The walls of Jerusalem were broken down, a new citadel (the Acra) was erected to dominate the temple area, and a garrison was stationed there converting the city into a military settlement. Menelaus and the Jewish Hellenizers collaborated with the military settlers in modifying the temple service into the worship of the Semitic "Lord of Heaven" (*Baal Shamayim*), who was identified with Zeus.

According to Jewish sources Antiochus IV in 168 or 167 B.C. issued decrees prohibiting the practice of the Jewish religion: the Scriptures were to be destroyed, the Sabbath and festivals were no longer to be observed, the food laws were to be abolished, and circumcision was no longer to be practiced (1 Macc. 1:41-64). Moreover, at the end of 168/167 a smaller altar was erected on the top of the great altar of burnt offering, and as the supreme insult to Judaism swine were sacrificed on it.

E. This conduct sparked a successful Jewish revolt, which began in 166 B.C., known as the Maccabean Revolt (named for one of its prime figures, Judas Maccabeus). The retaking and cleansing of the temple from Antiochus's defilement is what the Jews celebrate on Hanukkah.

- Antiochus's rise to power and pride and his hostility toward God and his people is also shown in Daniel's vision in Daniel 8.

F. Beginning in 142 B.C., Simon completed the work of his brothers Judas Maccabeus and Jonathan in securing for Israel autonomy and freedom from paying tribute (even if not independence from Syrian influence and authority). This relative autonomy endured until the Roman intervention in 63 B.C. This period of relative autonomy is generally referred to as the Hasmonean Kingdom or Hasmonean Rule.

G. In 63 B.C. the Roman commander Pompey took control of Jerusalem. Julius Caesar defeated Pompey in 48 B.C. and was then murdered in 44 B.C. In 42 B.C. Antony defeated Cassius and appointed Herod (an Idumean) tetrarch of Judea. Around 40 B.C., during another political uprising in Israel, Herod went to Rome where he was designated king of Judea. The

revolt was put down and Herod's rule firmly established in 37 B.C. He continued to reign until he died in 4 B.C., shortly after the birth of Jesus Christ.

- The oddity of Jesus being born around 5 B.C. ("B.C." stands for "before Christ") is the result of a mistake by Dionysius Exiguus, the Roman monk who in A.D. 525 instituted the practice of dating events from the birth of Jesus. He figured that Jesus was born 753 years after the founding of the city of Rome. This translates to 1 B.C. because there was no year 0 in the calendar. But Jesus was born before Herod the Great died, and since most scholars now believe that Herod died around 750 years after the founding of Rome (which translates to 4 B.C.), Jesus' birth must be moved to around 749 years after the founding of Rome (which translates to 5 B.C.).

IV. General Observation on Close of the Old Testament

A. The OT ends on a note of unfulfilled hope. It was clear that in one sense God always had ruled the world from the time of creation. He was on his heavenly throne (e.g., Ps. 11:4; Isa. 6:1) and reigned over all (e.g., 1 Chron. 16:31; Ps. 93:1, 96:10). But there was some sense in which his kingly rule was not being fully expressed. He was allowing creation to go on out of step with his ultimate intention for it, to continue in a state of brokenness, a state of sin and suffering that was contrary to his ultimate purpose and vision.

B. But the prophets saw that a day was coming in which God would express his rulership of creation in such a way that all things would be brought into harmony and conformity with his ultimate will and purpose.

1. His creation would be redeemed from the dreadful consequences of sin that had invaded it. This world of rebellion, sin, hostility, and fragmentation would be rescued by God, transformed by him into a true utopia, a perfect reality of love, joy, and fellowship with God and one another.

2. On that day God would express his authority over creation in a way he was not doing at present; he would in his sovereign power bring his creation to its ultimate fulfillment. At that time, he *will be* king over all the earth (Zech. 14:9) in a manner unlike the present.

C. The OT uses different imagery to refer to this blessed state that God is going to create. The imagery varies in how sharply it distinguishes the blessed state from this present existence, but all of it says, in forms relevant to ancient Jews, that a time of divine blessing is coming. It says that the failures and sufferings of the present age would be put to rights by the coming of the new age.

D. Israel's return to the land after 70 years of exile in Babylonia was great, but it was still a pale shadow of the kind of glory predicted by the prophets. Israel was small, struggling, and under the oppression of foreign powers, and Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi

document the low spiritual state of the nation. And this continued into the first century, where Israel was weak, poor, and under the rule of pagans (the Romans).

E. The people longed and prayed for the coming of God, for his final intervention when he would set all things right and rule in the fullest sense to the blessing of his people. In Mk. 15:43 Joseph of Arimathea is described as one who was "waiting for the kingdom of God" (TNIV). It is at that time that the Lord Jesus came into this world. That is where we will pick up next week.