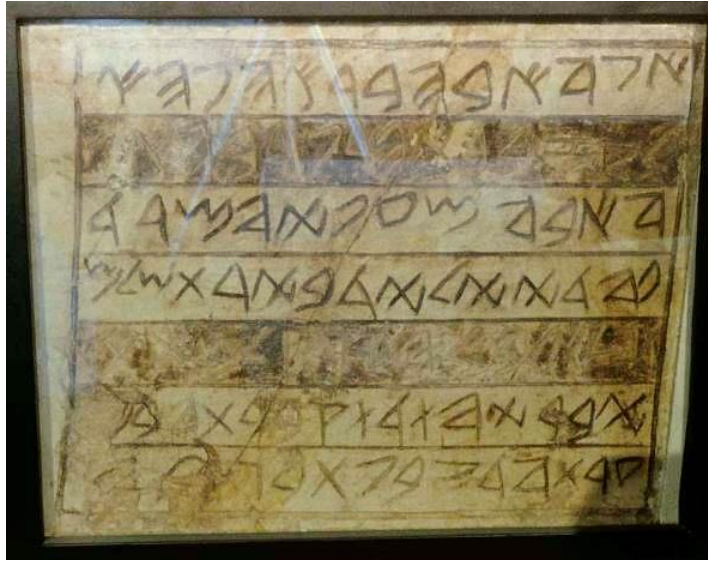


THE SILENT YEARS BEGIN

The Intertestamental Period comprises the approximately four centuries between Malachi, the last of the writing prophets, and the appearance of John the Baptist in the New Testament. It



Aramaic inscription from the early 2nd Temple period employing Paleo-Hebrew script. It reads: "...I, Abba, the oppressed and persecuted, who was born in Jerusalem, and went into exile in Babylonia and brought back Mattathiah, son of Judah, and I buried him in the cave, which I acquired by the writ."

became known to Protestants as "The Silent Years," a designation derived from the belief that no new canonical prophets arose during that span, though that designation needs to be qualified, since both Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic Christians accept a number of writings during this period as deuterocanonical. The idea of "silence" derives from the Jewish belief that the prophetic Spirit had been quenched. Jewish theologians considered Malachi to the last authentic prophetic voice (1 Macc. 4:46; 9:27; 14:41). With this final voice, the prophets were now silent (2 Baruch 85:3). The 1st Century Jewish historian Josephus explains that Jewish writings since the time of Artaxerxes "...have not been esteemed of the like authority with the former by our

forefathers, because there has not been an exact succession of prophets since that time".¹

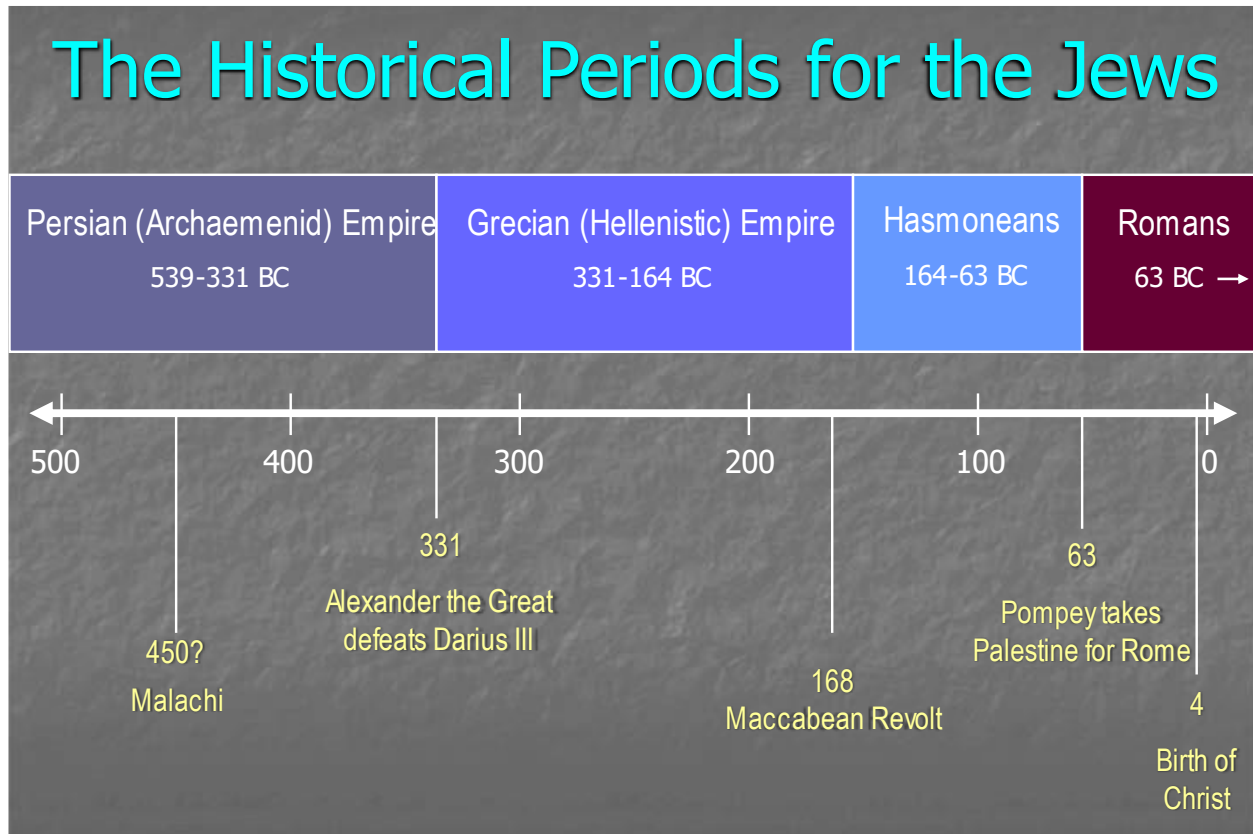
While the term "The Silent Years" is appropriate, at least in the above theological sense, it can be misleading as well, since it might suggest that nothing of importance happened during this period. It is likely enough to be the reason why most Christians have only a vague knowledge of what happened during this time. However, quite a number of important events should be recognized, including:

- *Beginnings of the Jewish Diaspora*
- *Origins of Hellenistic Judaism*
- *Development of the synagogue*
- *Shift in language from biblical Hebrew to Aramaic*
- *The translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek*
- *The writing and collection of the Apocrypha*

¹ *Against Apion* 1:8.

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- *The Maccabean revolt*
- *The writing and collection of the Pseudepigrapha*
- *The reign of the Hasmonean family*
- *Origins of theological sects, like Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes.*
- *The rise of the Herods and the transition to Roman rule*
- *The composition of the Dead Seas Scrolls*



The history of the Jews during the Intertestamental Period can be divided into four large blocks. At the end of the Old Testament, they were part of the Trans-Euphrates Province of Persia (539-331 BC), and this lasted until the conquests of Alexander the Great. After Alexander defeated the Persians, the Hellenistic (Grecian) control of the Jews lasted nearly a century and a half until the Maccabean Revolt (331-164 BC). Following the Maccabean war of independence, the Hasmonean family (descendants of the Maccabees) ruled the Jews for about a century (164-63 BC), but in 63 BC, the Romans took control of Palestine, and the Jews both in Palestine and elsewhere now passed into Roman hegemony.

THE PERSIAN PERIOD

Our knowledge of the Jews during the latter stages of the Persian Empire is somewhat limited, but at least one Old Testament book, the Book of Esther, offers a glimpse into a concerted threat to the Jews.

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A column supporting the roof of the Apadana at Susa, where Esther married the Persian king (Oriental Institute, Chicago)

account of a Passover celebration outside the Bible, would occur at a location other than the specified “place the LORD your God shall choose,” i.e., Jerusalem (cf. Dt. 12:4-7), and it may well be the beginning of Jewish festival celebrations by communities of the Diaspora.

Further, the Elephantine papyri, a large number of documents and fragments written in Aramaic in the 5th century BC, demonstrate that the Jews living there (who subsisted as soldiers in a military garrison of the Persians) had built a temple for offering sacrifices and wanted financial assistance in repairing it. The temple had been attacked by local Egyptians. Letters appealing for support were addressed to both Jews and Samaritans. The presence of an alternative temple other than in Jerusalem was decidedly outside the Deuteronomic norm! By the beginning of the 4th century BC, the Jews at Elephantine were relocated and their alternative temple abandoned.

Book of Esther

The story of Esther is set in Susa among those Jews who did not return to Jerusalem to rebuild but elected to remain in various eastern parts of the empire, such as, Babylon, Elam, Parthia, Media, and Armenia. Looming large for this book is the question of historicity, which is to ask, should it be read as a straightforward historical account (in spite of some historical challenges) or should it be read as an edifying fiction. In either case, it describes the first pogrom against the Jews eventually leading to an additional annual festival celebrated by the Jewish communities ever after, the Feast of Purim. The book is striking, also, in that it makes no mention of God, though surely it implies divine providence behind the scenes.

The Jews at Elephantine

Dated to the fifth year of Darius II (419 BC), the so-called Passover Letter was sent from Jerusalem to the Jewish community at Elephantine, Egypt, ordering the Jews there to observe the Feast of Unleavened Bread from the 15th to the 21st of Nisan. This, the earliest



The Passover Letter: Dated to 419 BC (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin)

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The Samaritans

Yet another group of Yahweh worshippers originated at about the same time, the Samaritans. The word “Samaritans” occurs only in the Hebrew Bible in 2 Kg. 17:29, where it refers to the inhabitants of Samaria, the capital of the northern kingdom that had been destroyed by the Assyrians. Whether or not this term is directly to be linked with the group called “the Samaritans” in the New Testament Gospels is a moot question. The typical interpretation of 2 Kings 17 is that the Samaritans evolved from intermarriage between surviving Israelites and foreign colonists whom the Assyrians brought into northern Israel to repopulate it (2 Kg. 17:24). Josephus follows this line as well.² However, the Samaritans themselves claim to be legitimate descendants of Ephraim and Manasseh, and further, that they alone have preserved the original Mosaic religion.

A controversial marriage between the daughter of Sanballat (a Samaritan leader) and one of the sons of the Jewish high priest in Jerusalem may have generated a rift between the Jews and Samaritans, since Nehemiah banished the offending couple (Neh. 13:28). The earliest external evidence of a distinction between Jews and Samaritans comes in the Persian Period, when in the Elephantine papyri they are specifically mentioned as distinct from the Jews.

The Samaritan religion recognizes only the Samaritan Pentateuch as canonical. It differs most dramatically in that one of the commandments in the decalogue names Mt. Gerizim as the place for the temple (Ex. 20:17), and it lists Mt. Gerizim rather than Mt. Ebal as the mountain where Joshua was to build an altar (Dt. 27:4). Josephus claims that a Samaritan temple was indeed built on Mt. Gerizim in about the 5th century BC, but a second temple built in the 2nd century, would be razed by the Jewish leader John Hyrcanus in 111-110 BC.



Mt. Gerizim in central Israel

Five central affirmations define the Samaritan faith: belief in one God (Yahweh), Moses as the mediator of the law, the Samaritan Pentateuch as the Holy Scripture, Mt. Gerizim as the site for the temple, and a coming judgment brought by the Taheb (Samaritan title for “the prophet like Moses”). Samaritans celebrate the Sabbath, Passover, Unleavened Bread, Weeks, the Seventh Month, Yom Kippur, Booths, and 80 days of solemn assembly.

² *Antiquities* 9:288-291; 10:183-184; 11.