

Was Christ's Birth Preceded by 400 Years of Divine Silence?



Russian Icon, *The Prophet Simeon*, (17th c.)

Here's an anti-Biblical myth that many Protestants hold to, without knowing it: a belief in a so-called "intertestamental period" or "400 years of silence," in which God allegedly (and inexplicably) ceased communicating with His People between roughly 400 or 450 B.C. and the Incarnation of Christ. [GotQuestions? describes the mainstream Protestant view:](#)

The time between the last writings of the Old Testament and the appearance of Christ is known as the "intertestamental" (or "between

the testaments”) period. Because there was no prophetic word from God during this period, some refer to it as the “400 silent years.”

There are several things wrong with this belief.

First, this belief in an “intertestamental period” or “400 silent years” has absolutely no Scriptural support. You won’t find any Scriptural references supporting this, because they don’t exist. The Protestant sources I’ve found explaining the doctrine don’t bother *defending* it Scripturally; rather, they just *assume* it.

That’s because the doctrine of intertestamental silence doesn’t originate from Scripture. Rather, it is a perversion of a (post-Christian) Jewish teaching that God *permanently ceased* prophetic revelation in 450 B.C. [The Babylonian Talmud teaches](#) that “When Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi died, the Holy Spirit departed from Israel.” But that’s an argument against *Christianity*, not just against *the Deuterocanon*. In any case, it’s contradicted elsewhere in the Talmud, since [the Talmud quotes the Book of Sirach as Scripture](#). For more on this, see the section entitled “[Bad Theology: The Holy Spirit Stopped Prophecy in 450 B.C.?](#)” in [this post](#). Needless to say, the Talmudic teaching serves as an extremely weak foundation, particularly for Christians.

Second, even as an assumption, the “intertestamental period” is contrary to the whole logic of Scripture. A belief in “400 silent years” is an awfully peculiar position to simply assume. Both Catholics and Protestants tend to agree that the Old Testament exists for the sake of Christ (see, e.g., Hebrews 1:1-2; Luke 24:27; Matthew 5:17). As [Erich Sauer said](#),

“The Old Testament exists for the New Testament. Christ Himself is the goal and soul of the pre-Christian historical revelation. He is the Goal of Old Testament history; the meaning of Old Testament

worship to God; the fulfillment of Old Testament Messianic prophecy.”

The whole of the Old Testament slowly unfurls with increasingly-clear prophecies about Jesus Christ. But if that's the case, if the Old Testament exists primarily to prepare the world for Christ, it's exceedingly odd to assume that for the roughly 450 years prior to the Incarnation, God simply stopped preparing them. If Sauer and the innumerable Catholic and Protestants who agree with him on this point are right, this is precisely when we would expect there to be Christological Scriptures.

Third, Jesus refutes this 400 years of silence theory. As I've mentioned before, this notion of an [“intertestamental period”](#) is at odds with Jesus' [own account of salvation history](#), that **“all the prophets and the law prophesied until John”** (Matthew 11:23). Without a doubt, this is the most important point.

Where Protestants posit a gradual unfurling over centuries, abruptly and inexplicably stopped for nearly half a millenium, Christ suggests the opposite: that this gradual unfurling continued until John the Baptist, who stands as the clearest and most direct witness of Jesus.

Fourth, other places in the New Testament also dispel the myth of intertestamental silence. For example, Luke 2 mentions the aged prophet Simeon and the prophetess Anna in the Temple, showing that prophets (and prophetesses) were active in Judaism prior to the birth of Christ. Simeon received a prophesy of Christ's immanent birth (Luke 2:26). Zechariah additionally receives a pre-Christian revelation tied to Jesus, with the birth of John the Baptist (Luke 1:13-17).

A Biblical Alternative



Aert de Gelder, *Simeon's Song of Praise* (c. 1710)

How should we understand the relationship between the Old and New Covenant, then? As one of continuity and fulfillment. It's significant that in Luke 1-2 Zechariah, Simeon, and Anna are all old. Zechariah describes himself as old in Luke 1:18, Simeon is awaiting death (Luke 2:26, 29), and Anna is of "great age" at 84 (Luke 2:36-37). Christ, in contrast, is an infant, a mere forty days old (Luke 2:22). So the Old and New Covenant are reflected in the ages of those present.

As St. Bede the Venerable (673-735) explained, this [signified Israel's long wait](#) for a Messiah, and its fresh fulfillment in Christ:

Simeon and Anna, a man and a woman of advanced age, greeted the Lord with the devoted services of their professions of faith. As they saw him, he was small in body, but they understood him to be great in his divinity. Figuratively speaking, this denotes the synagogue, the Jewish people, who, wearied by the long waiting of the incarnation, were ready with both their arms (their pious actions) and their voices (their unfeigned faith) to exalt and magnify him as soon as he came.

And St. Ephraim the Syrian [described the encounter in this way](#):

The Son came to the servant not to be presented by the servant, but so that, through the Son, the servant might present to his Lord the priesthood and prophecy that had been entrusted to his keeping. Prophecy and priesthood, which had been given through Moses, were both passed down, and came to rest on Simeon.

In this view, the elderly priest and prophets represent the Old Covenant, while Christ embodies the New. This captures both the continuity of the New with the Old , as well as the radical newness. Something exciting and new was happening in Israel, but it wasn't a repudiation of what had come before. There is, rather, a sort of passing of the torch between old and new.

We see the same thing in the respective ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus, of course. In John 3:25-30, John the Baptist praises those leaving him to follow Christ:

*Now a discussion arose between John's disciples and a Jew over purifying. And they came to John, and said to him, "Rabbi, he who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you bore witness, here he is, baptizing, and all are going to him." John answered, "No one can receive anything except what is given him from heaven. You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him. He who has the bride is the bridegroom; the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice; therefore this joy of mine is now full. **He must increase, but I must decrease.**"*

Yet Christ nevertheless appears to wait until John's public ministry had come to an end before beginning His own in earnest (Matthew 4:12-17):

*Now when he heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew into Galilee; and leaving Nazareth he went and dwelt in Caper'na-um by the sea, in the territory of Zeb'ulun and Naph'tali, 14 that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: "The land of Zeb'ulun and the land of Naph'tali, toward the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles— the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned." **From that time Jesus began to preach**, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."*

But this view leaves no room for the break that the "400 years of silence" imagines. There's a continual witnesses with Old Covenant prophets up to, and including, John the Baptist.

This turns out to be an important issue, because it impacts how we view the Deuterocanon, the set of disputed Books (which Catholics and Orthodox believe are canonical, but which Protestants reject). If you view the four centuries (or so) prior to Christ as a time when God went silent, of course you're going to reject the canonicity of these Books. But if you believe that God was still revealing His plan of salvation during this time, the case for the Deuterocanon is rather strong.

