



The Era of Silence—An Expanded Summary

Greek (Hellenistic) Period (330—166 BC)

Summary: The Greeks brought unity of language and culture to the Mediterranean world. They were responsible for the “Diaspora” or the Jewish dispersion throughout Egypt, Asia Minor, and Europe. At the time of Jesus’ birth, only about 600,000 of the four million Jews lived in Judea. The dispersed Jews accepted the Gospel message from Jesus’ followers much more readily than the Jews in Judea.

Detail: Alexander the Great conquered Palestine in 330. He believed that the Greek culture would unite the world. Alexander allowed the Jews to continue practicing the Law of God and even exempted Judah from paying taxes during Sabbath years. He encouraged Jewish emigration (the Diaspora), and gave Jews some of the privileges afforded his Greek subjects. When Greek became the common language of the dispersed Jews, the Old Testament was then translated into Greek (the Septuagint, circa 250 BC). Many dispersed Jews adopted the Hellenistic culture in which they lived, but Jews in Judea attempted to keep their culture and religion pure of foreign influence. At Alexander’s death, his empire was split. Ptolemy (a general under Alexander) became king of Egypt and in 320 BC took Jerusalem. In 311, Seleucus conquered Babylon and Syria. Thus began years of fighting over Palestine. The Ptolemy dynasty, though Hellenistic, allowed the Jews to retain some autonomy and religious freedom. When the Seleucid, Antiochus III took over Palestine in 198, Judaism was outlawed. An altar of Zeus replaced the altar of the Lord in the Holy of Holies. Jews were persecuted. Strict Hellenistic religion and culture was forced upon them. In 167, a Jewish priest named Mattathias and his sons rebelled against Antiochus III, and the Maccabean revolt begins.

Syrian (Maccabean or Hasmonean) Period (166—63 BC)

Summary: When Syrian leader Antiochus IV desecrated the Temple by sacrificing a pig on the altar, Jewish resistance efforts were soon galvanized against him. Mattathias and his descendants (known as the Maccabees), took the lead in purifying the Temple and offering proper sacrifices. This brought about religious freedom for the Jews and a great celebration, Hanukkah. Seeking further independence from Syria, the Maccabees enlisted support from Rome.

Detail: Mattathias began a revolt against the Seleucid king, Antiochus IV, but died shortly thereafter. His third son, Judas (Maccabee) and his band of rebels defeated numerically superior Syrian armies. In 165 BC he entered Jerusalem and purified the Temple, restoring Jewish rites. This event is celebrated with the Jewish holiday of Hanukkah. As a result of Judas’ military success, Syria granted Jews religious freedom. Judas then enlisted the help of Rome and worked for political independence. Jonathan, Judas’ brother and successor, continued the insurgence. In 157, the Syrians made peace with him. Jonathan became Judea’s high priest and administrator. However, in 143, Tryphon, attempting to gain the Syrian throne, killed Jonathan. Simon, the second son of Mattathias succeeded Jonathan. In 142, he negotiated a treaty that freed Judea. In 141, Simon was chosen to be high priest and governor, an office then made hereditary in Simon’s family. After six years, his son-in-law assassinated him in a power rivalry. Simon’s own son succeeded him; family leadership continued, riddled with strife. Finally, in 63 BC, during a fight between Hyrcanus II and Aristobulus II over religious and political power, the Roman general Pompey stepped in and took over Judea.

Roman Period (63 BC—AD 70)

Summary: The relative peace that existed in Judea at the time of Jesus' birth was due largely to the strict Roman enforcement of law and political order. The Romans built roads and made other civic improvements, which also aided the spread of the Gospel. By this time, the Jews were tired of the oppression of foreign nations. They fully expected the Messiah's appearance (although they believed He would provide political freedom in addition to spiritual freedom).

Detail: Pompey died in 48 BC. Antipater took over as Roman Governor of Judea. After Antipater's assassination in 43, the Roman Senate made his son, Herod the Great, king of Judah. Herod, known for his cruelty, destroyed all the male babies in Bethlehem in his attempt to kill Jesus. During Christ's life and ministry, the Romans continued to rule Judea with a tight fist and high taxes. This, in part, caused early Christians to disperse from Judea and to find homes elsewhere—taking the Gospel wherever they went. Finally, in AD 70, Roman General Titus crushed a Jewish revolt and his troops captured the Temple in Jerusalem. He prevailed over the last stronghold, Masada, in AD 73.