

GOD WITH US

Part 8: JESUS

Message 1 – The Not-So-Silent Years

Introduction

The roughly 400 years between Malachi and Matthew are often called “the silent years” since there was no message from God through the prophets during these centuries. Yet, God was not silent. He was actively at work in the world, preparing the way for the arrival of the Son of David and Savior of the world. As Paul put it: *“In the fullness of time (when the time was right) God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law...” (Galatians 4:4).* We will survey these 400 years and “meet the cast” of characters and institutions that took shape during these centuries and made major appearances in the story of JESUS.

1. Persian Rule (586 – 356 B.C.)

When the O.T. closed, the Jews were under Persian rule. Cyrus was the first of several Persian rulers that gave the Jews freedom to regain their national identity after the 70-year captivity. Under Zerubbabel, Nehemiah and Ezra, and with the support of prophets like Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi, the Jews struggled to rebuild amidst much opposition from their neighbors. While little Israel tried to rebuild, the Persian empire gradually declined (from 423-331 B.C.) and was eventually overtaken by the Greeks.

SYNAGOGUES: *“Jesus was going through all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness” (Matt.9:35). The term “synagogue” means “gathering place.” In captivity, with no temple to worship at, Jews began to gather in homes and other places to strengthen their common faith. The function of the synagogue was to preserve the Law and to keep the Law alive in the hearts and minds of the people. It became the perfect delivery system for the message of Jesus and the early apostles. Jesus gave important sermons in the synagogues of His day. His major mission-defining sermon was given in the Nazareth synagogue (Luke 4). The synagogues scattered throughout the Roman Empire became the starting point for the apostles as they spread of the gospel concerning Jesus the Messiah. After the destruction of the Jewish Temple (70 A.D.), synagogues became the central gathering place for Jews, even down to the present day.*

Gathering with other believers regularly has always been an important spiritual discipline. At OPC we encourage people to be part of the large group weekend worship times and to find a small group to be a part of. "Let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near" (Hebrews 10:24,25). Are you connected to other believers?

2. Alexander the Great (356 – 323 B.C.)

The kingdom of Greece became one of the most powerful culture-shapers in the history of the world. After centuries of being divided into thousands of separate city-states, Philip of Macedonia united them all into one great empire capable of overcoming the Persians. His son, Alexander "the Great," became the most significant ruler of the world during the not-so-silent years. Beginning at age 13, Alexander was tutored by Aristotle in Greek philosophy, art, literature, culture and religion. *Hellenism* is the term used to describe the overall Greek cultural movement that swept through the ancient world. Alexander proved to be a valiant warrior and by age 20 he conquered the Persians. On his first visit to Jerusalem, he was greeted by Jaddua the High Priest, who showed him the prophecies of Daniel predicting the rise of a great king from Greece (Daniel 8:21). From that time forward, Alexander was friendly toward the Jews.

SON OF GOD: *Alexander was one of many ancient rulers that claimed to be a "son of God." His mother, Olympias, was from a royal family that traced its ancestry to the Olympian gods. She recounted an event that occurred the night before her wedding to Philip of Macedon. She was asleep in her bedchamber when thunder awakened her. A bolt of lightning (supposedly the god Zeus) shot into her room and struck her in the womb, without harming her. Thus, Alexander came to believe that Zeus, not Philip of Macedon, was his real father and he was the divinely appointed son of Zeus, destined to rule the world. He died at the age of 33, having conquered the largest territory of any ruler in history. How fascinating to consider: Two men who claimed to be the Son of God; two birth stories involving divine visitations to the mothers; two attempts to build a kingdom of people united around a common set of ideals; two men who died at the age of 33. But how different the outcomes: Alexander's kingdom began to disintegrate immediately after his death. Jesus' kingdom, on the other hand, continues to grow in hearts and lives around the world even some 2,000 years after He was here.*

What is so unique about Jesus the Son of God? 1) He wasn't from a powerful family. 2) He wasn't a great military leader. 3) He proved He was the Son of God by conquering the forces of sin, sickness, nature, demons and death. 4) He constantly spoke about the kingdom of heaven; not a kingdom on earth. 5) He came not to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45). 6) He chose a cross instead of a throne, to build His kingdom upon. Yes, the gospel writers were making the case that Jesus was a Son of God like no other.

Alexander the Great made a lasting impact on the world; but his early death at the age of 33 kept him from enjoying the fruit of his conquests. Yet, in many ways God used him to prepare the world for the spread of the message of Jesus. 1) He spread *Hellenistic ideals* everywhere, which served as a sharp, contrasting backdrop for Jesus' message about the Kingdom of heaven. 2) He made *Greek* the common language, resulting in the rapid spread of new ideas and messages. 3) He encouraged the *dispersion* of people groups, resulting in the spread of Jewish communities and synagogues throughout the empire. 4) He tried to *eliminate class distinctions* by having people intermarry across ethnic lines, which paved the way for the gospel in which "*there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord is Lord of all, abounding in riches for all who call upon Him*" (Romans 10:12).

JEWISH RELIGIOUS/POLITICAL SECTS: Alexander the Great has been called "the apostle of Hellenism," since he spread Hellenistic culture far and wide. Throughout the not-so-silent years, Jewish "parties" formed based on differing ideas about how to accept, adapt to, or reject non-Jewish world-views like Hellenism. By the time of Jesus, we see certain defined parties or sects. The **HELLENISTIC JEWS** (Acts 6:1; 9:29) were Jews who had been scattered throughout the empire and had learned to speak and read in Greek. They were also more likely to have adopted other Greek (Hellenistic) ways of life and ideals, making them unclean in the eyes of more conservative Jews. The **SADDUCEES** were on the extreme liberal end of the spectrum. They did not believe in angels, spirits, the resurrection, or the after-life. They only read the first 5 books of Moses. They believed in compromising with worldly powers to keep the peace in Israel. Sadducees rose to control the High Priesthood and the Sanhedrin – the high council or governing body in Israel. The **PHARISEES** were the strict religious conservatives who would not compromise with the world (along with the scribes). They were fierce opponents of Jesus, since He did not obey **THE TRADITIONS OF THE ELDERS** – a body of oral teachings that had been passed down from rabbi to rabbi. The

Pharisees considered these teachings to be of equal value with the Scriptures, while Jesus did not. The **ZEALOTS** were the freedom-fighters, willing to fight and die to throw off the yoke of foreign oppressors. Jesus had Simon “the Zealot” among His 12 disciples. The **ESSENES** were a monastic group that avoided all contact with the world. They lived in caves by the Dead Sea, awaiting the fire of God from heaven that would destroy everyone but them! The Essenes’ library of scrolls was discovered in 1948 – “The Dead Sea Scrolls” – the most important archaeological discovery in centuries.

It is a constant challenge to live out an ancient faith in a modern world; to determine when it is acceptable to strike a compromise and when it is critical to hold the line. How do we navigate such tricky waters in a way that honors Jesus? Someone once put it this way: “In essentials, unity. In non-essentials, liberty. In all things, charity.” This means that we must first determine what the “essential” beliefs and practices are, so that we have an anchor to hold us fast. Then, we can give others the freedom to take a different approach in the non-essential areas. And no matter what our differences, or how we are viewed for our beliefs, we must make sure that we love all people at all times. Jesus said: “Love your enemies and pray for those who mistreat you” (Matt.5:44).

3. The Ptolemies and Seleucids (323 – 165 B.C.)

After Alexander’s death, there was a power struggle amongst 4 of his generals for control of his vast kingdom. Two of these generals - Ptolemy in Egypt and Seleucus in Syria - and their heirs had a direct impact on the life of the Jews. Ptolemy and his successors (“the Ptolemies”) controlled Egypt and Israel from 301-198 B.C. The Jews enjoyed much peace and freedom during this period.

THE SEPTUAGINT: *It was Ptolemy Philadelphus who commissioned the production of the Septuagint (meaning “the 70” because tradition says it was produced by 70 [or 72] Jewish scholars), a Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament (250 B.C.). The idea was to provide a translation of the Jewish Scriptures so that the whole world could read them (Greek being the common language of the empire). The Septuagint was a kind of “Living Bible,” a paraphrase from Hebrew into common Greek so that people could easily understand it. Some of the citations in the N.T. are from the Septuagint rather than from the Hebrew Old Testament. This explains why, when you look up a N.T. citation in the Old Testament, it might read differently. It is interesting to consider how the world was prepared to understand the message of Jesus in light of the wider O.T. story as recorded in the Septuagint.*

Teams of scholars work diligently today to produce modern translations of the Bible. A more literal translation tries to follow the original texts word for word, while smoothing things out for readability (NASB, ESV, NIV). Some modern translations try to smooth out wording more, without changing the original sense of the language (NLT). A paraphrase takes more liberty in altering the wording so that a modern reader can get the overall meaning of a passage (The Message). Internet sites such as Bible Gateway and Bible Hub allow you to quickly compare translations of a passage in parallel columns, which is very helpful for study purposes. Whichever set of translations you use, it is important to be soaking in God's precious words!

From 198-165 B.C. the Seleucid rulers (“the Seleucids”) in Syria overcame the Ptolemies and gained control of Palestine. They made life very difficult for the Jews, especially during the reign of *Antiochus IV “Epiphanes”* (“manifestation” of god; but the Jews nick-named him “Epimanes” = “madman!”). Antiochus Epiphanes wanted to exterminate the Jews. He promoted worship of himself and plundered the Jewish temple in 169 B.C., killing some 40,000 Jews. In 167 B.C. he sent his army to plunder Jerusalem, turning it into a Syrian military garrison for the next 26 years. He imposed strict religious reforms: All were commanded to worship Greek gods; worship of Yahweh was strictly forbidden; all Jewish religious observances were unlawful, with the death penalty being enforced (Jewish mothers who circumcised their babies were crucified with their babies hung around their necks); copies of the Old Testament were destroyed; he desecrated the Jewish temple by offering a pig to Zeus on the altar of burnt offerings; these offerings were to continue monthly with dedication being made to Antiochus himself.

HIGH PRIESTS: *The office of high priest became increasingly corrupt when the Seleucid rulers (and later, the Romans) began to sell the office to the highest bidder. Thus, the high priesthood became the office of rich and influential families, and had nothing to do with actual priestly lineage and/or spirituality. These corrupt high priestly families robbed the temple treasury to continue to pay for the right to maintain their office. The selling and buying of sacrificial animals in the temple was a business established by these high priestly families to help them continue paying the powers that be for their position. To buy a sacrificial animal, a worshipper had to exchange ordinary money for “temple money” at the money-changers table. The*

exorbitant exchange rates were set by the corrupt high priests who were lining their pockets and paying for their office with the profits! No wonder Jesus went into the Temple and angrily overturned the tables of the money-changers! It was an ancient case of campaign-finance corruption, and Jesus sought to reform it!

Ill-motivated, proud people have often (even today) used religious power to gain an upper hand on others while increasing their own position in life. It is no wonder that Jesus so strongly condemned the religious elite of His day. They were corrupt to the core! This is one reason why Jesus is so unique and attractive: He humbled Himself by becoming a servant to meet our needs, even to the point of dying on a cross to save us (Philippians 2:7-9). True followers of Jesus will take the lowest seat at the table, not the highest (Luke 14:7-11). They will care about the needs of others more than their own needs (Philippians 2:3,4). Instead of demanding respectful greetings in the marketplace (Matthew 23:6,7), they will be content to be identified with Jesus as “the servant of all.”

4. The Maccabees (165 – 135 B.C.)

Under the severe oppression of the Syrians, a spirit of heroic nationalism was growing amongst the many conservative Jews. People were willing to fight to protect their freedom. This spirit of heroism found its greatest leaders in the family of the Maccabees. Mattathias, the father of the clan, was a priest in Israel. He refused to offer sacrifices to heathen gods and struck down a Jewish leader who did so, killing also the Syrian officer who had been sent to officiate the sacrifice. Mattathias fled to the hill country and began a campaign of guerilla warfare. His 5 sons joined him (John, Simon, Judas, Eleazar, Jonathan) along with many other freedom fighters, to wage a war for the purification of Israel.

Judas “Maccabeus” (meaning, “the hammerer”) united the guerilla forces into a powerful army engaging in full scale military encounters against the Syrians. In 164 B.C. he restored the temple. The Feast of Hanukkah (“rededication”) took place on Chislev 25, 164 B.C., 3 years after the desecration committed by Antiochus Epiphanes. Jonathan Maccabeus (“the cunning one”) led the movement after Judas’ death. He exercised shrewd diplomacy with the Syrians. He was granted the office of high priest and served as a sort of “king-priest” over Israel. Simon Maccabeus, the last son to survive, led Israel to their goal: In the year 142 B.C. the Jews were granted independence as a nation.

MESSIANIC HOPES: The Maccabees proved that Israel could overthrow the yoke of foreign oppression and achieve independence. “The successful activities of Simon fostered the fires of nationalism and made its flame burn brightly . . . The hope of Messiah’s coming was keenly aroused in the minds of the faithful Israelites. Simon’s rule was designated as the beginning of a new era . . .” (Raymond Surburg: *Introduction to the Intertestamental Period*). Thus, when Jesus came preaching a message about “the kingdom of God,” it was not surprising that many Israelites saw Him as a new kind of “revolutionary,” a freedom-fighter who would lead them to freedom from Rome. When Jesus rode into Jerusalem at His “triumphal entry” after 3 years of powerful, wonder-working ministry, the people shouted: “Save us now, Son of David!” They were convinced that Jesus would use His powers to overthrow the Romans and lead Israel to independence and glory. It is no wonder that, as they approached Jerusalem, James and John came to Jesus privately asking that they be granted the seats of authority at His right and left hand in the soon-to-be-established new government. Jesus cryptically asked them: “Are you able to drink the cup I am about to drink?” They thought He was speaking about the cup of victory; yet, He was speaking about the cup of suffering and death! Thus, the crucifixion of Jesus was a stunner to His massive following. How shocked they were when their champion died at the hands of the Romans, dashing their hopes for a new era in Israel. And how elated they were when He came to life again on the 3rd day!!!

5. The Hasmoneans (135 – 63 B.C.)

God’s plan for Messiah and His kingdom was very different from the hopes and plans in the peoples’ hearts. They wanted a revolution in their nation. Jesus wanted a revolution in their hearts. He did not come to save them from Rome; but “to bring us to God” (1Peter 3:18). We must constantly check the expectations that we carry around in our hearts as we daily seek to follow Jesus. Are you hoping for a lofty position in this world? Or, are you willing to daily take up your cross (fully surrender) and follow Jesus wherever He leads? His ways are NOT our ways (Isaiah 55:9).

The descendants of the Maccabees, *the Hasmoneans*, ruled Israel from 135-63 B.C. They embarked on many military expeditions to expand the borders of Israel during her period of independence. It was under the Hasmoneans that Israel achieved its greatest level of independence and power during the not-so-silent years. Yet, the glory days would not last. Due to infighting amongst the Hasmonean dynasty, the Roman general Pompey finally stepped in and took control of Palestine. From 63 B.C. forward, the Jews would lose their independence as a nation.

THE SAMARITANS: When Assyria took the northern kingdom captive in 722 B.C. they forced the Jews to intermarry with captives from other nations. This intermixed race was then planted back in Samaria (middle of Palestine). These “half-blooded” Jews developed their own forms of religion and worship. During the Hasmonean era (post-Maccabees) the hatred between Jews and Samaritans intensified when Hasmonean rulers persecuted the Samaritans and tried to force Judaism upon them, destroying their temple on Mt. Gerezim. By the time of Jesus, Jews and Samaritans had no dealings with one another. Jews travelling from Judea (south) to Galilee (north) would take the trans-Jordan road so that their feet would not touch Samaritan soil.

Nothing shows Jesus’ love for ALL people more than His treatment of Samaritans. Jesus walked right through Samaria early in His ministry and interacted with a Samaritan woman (John 4), leading to the conversion of her entire village of Samaritans! One of His most famous parables featured the hero as “the good Samaritan!” (Luke 10:25-37). In the story of the 10 lepers, the only “grateful” one was a Samaritan (Luke 17:11-19). The Samaritans of Jesus’ day must have been completely undone by His unconditional love for them, and His reach toward them. Jesus’ interactions with Samaritans must have stunned both Jew and Samaritan alike. How about you? Are you reaching out to ALL kinds of people, even those who are marginalized by the culture?

6. The Romans (63 B.C. – 135 A.D.)

The Romans took firm control of Israel from 63 B.C. onwards. All territory that had been gained during the Maccabean and Hasmonean eras was forfeited. The Jewish religion was granted an official license by Rome. The Jews were allowed to live their own lives without Roman intervention . . . as long as they remained peaceful and paid taxes.

TAX COLLECTORS: Rome developed a scheme called “tax farming.” They would come to a region and auction off the right to be a tax collector to the highest bidder. In turn, they allowed the tax collectors to keep whatever taxes they raised beyond what they had paid for the office and their quota for the region. Historians tell us that tax-collectors were ingenious in inventing taxes on the spot. There were no rules to constrain them. Now we can see why tax-collectors were despised by the Jews. They were greedy, money-hungry traitors who worked for Rome to collect taxes from their own Jewish countrymen! How shocking, then, that Jesus would have a much-hated tax-collector, Matthew, among his closest disciples! And attend a tax-collector’s party at Matthew’s house!!

Jesus was labeled “the friend of tax collectors and sinners, a glutton and a drunkard” by His enemies. This was because He constantly crossed lines to reach people with His message of forgiveness and restoration. They were open to His love and mercy. Who are the marginalized people in your world? Would you have the grace and courage to befriend such people, and to help them come to know Jesus, the “friend of sinners?” Would you be willing to be misunderstood and even “labeled” as you attempt to show the love of Jesus to everyone?

The first Roman emperor, Caesar “Augustus” (“revered one”, or “most high”) ruled from 27 B.C. – 14 A.D. He was the most successful and powerful of the Roman emperors. It was during Caesar’s strongest years that Jesus Christ was born into the world, in the small, relatively unimportant Roman province of Judea. Luke records the birth of Jesus in the context of a world-wide census decreed by Augustus. The purpose of the census was to determine tax rates for each district of the empire, based on population numbers.

PAX ROMANA 27 B.C. – 180 A.D. *“The Peace of Rome.” Beginning with Caesar Augustus, the strength of Rome ensured that there was no world-wide war and upheaval for nearly two centuries. This “Pax Romana” created an environment where the message of Jesus could spread rapidly and unhindered from city to city across the empire. Had the world been engulfed in conflict, or Israel been in the midst of a major period of rebellion, it would have been difficult for the public ministry of Jesus to unfold as it did, and for the early church to expand as quickly as it did. God ensured that the world was at peace when the true Prince of Peace arrived!*

God often uses unexpected circumstances and people to create an environment for His purposes to unfold. Who would have thought that Jesus would have come when the world was at its strongest (not really in need) rather than at its weakest (beset by difficulties and crying out for help). Maybe you are in a set of circumstances that you cannot understand. Can you look to your heavenly Father with eyes of faith and say: “Father, I don’t know what the future holds; but I know WHO holds the future. Have your way with my life. I believe You are in complete control.”

The Romans allowed the Jews to have their own local governing body to deal with most civil issues. It was this Council, led by the High Priest, that handled the “trial” of Jesus . . . although they needed to cooperate with the Roman authorities to achieve their goal: to get the death penalty enforced against Jesus.

SANHEDRIN: The Sanhedrin (lit. “council”) was the supreme governing body for Israel, being composed of 70 men + 1 high priest/president. The rabbis traced the origin of the Sanhedrin back to the 70 elders chosen to assist Moses in handling the complex affairs of the people (although it actually developed as a formal body during the 400 not-so-silent years. It was controlled by the wealthy, aristocratic Sadducees, since they controlled the office of High Priest. The Romans allowed the Sanhedrin to decide most civil cases in Israel; but cases involving the death penalty required Roman assistance. It was the Sanhedrin that carried out the preliminary trial of Jesus, determining that He was guilty of blasphemy (claiming to be God). They then took His case before Pilate, the Roman governor, to gain his support for the death penalty. To do so, they had to invent a charge of treason: that Jesus called Himself “king” and was instigating a revolt against Caesar. Several prominent members of the Sanhedrin appear in the New Testament including Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus (who buried Jesus) and Gamaliel (who tutored Paul).

It must have been difficult for Nicodemus and Joseph to be secret followers of Jesus while remaining part of the Sanhedrin. Notice Nicodemus’ attempt to stand up for Jesus and how he was immediately shut down and ridiculed by his peers (John 7:50-52). And how much more courage did it take to go to Pilate and ask for the body of Jesus so that they could give Him an honorable burial (Mark 15:43; John 19:38,39)! How about you? Are you willing to be identified as a follower of Jesus today, even if it costs you the approval of your peers?

The Romans appointed *Antipater* (an Idumean or Edomite) to be a sort of puppet-king over Judea. The conservative Jews hated him because he was not a full-blooded Jew. The more liberal Jews favored him because he was pro-Roman. After his death, Herod the Great became the ruler of Judea for 33 years. It was this Herod who was ruling in Judea when Jesus was born (Matthew 2).

HEROD THE GREAT: Herod was a powerful leader in Judea. He was known for his vast building projects, the greatest of which was the magnificent temple he built for the Jews. While the Jews enjoyed relative peace during the first half of Herod’s rule, in his later years he became a sickly, demented ruler, resorting to treachery and cruelty to maintain power. He murdered several of his own wives and sons, suspecting them of treason. This explains Herod’s rage when He heard from the Persian wise men that a new “king” had been born to the Jews (Matt. 2). It is no wonder that he sent his soldiers to kill all the baby boys in Bethlehem. Herod was killing even his own children to prevent them from stealing his throne!

Satan always has his human agents that he works through as he seeks to thwart God's program and purposes. Revelation 12:1-6 tells us that it was Satan who sought to devour the male child/Savior brought forth from the womb of the woman. The gospel of Matthew shows that it was the sick, demented ruler Herod the Great who sent his soldiers to kill the infants of Bethlehem. Satan is a defeated foe. How comforting it is to know: "Greater is He Who is in you than he who is in the world" (1Jn 4:4).

After Herod the Great's death, his 3 sons ruled parts of his kingdom: Herod Archelaus, Herod Antipas and Herod Philip. Archelaus ruled Judea for 9 years. He was hated by the Jews and, in turn, treated them with cruelty. At one Passover he slaughtered 3,000 Jews! After Archelaus was banished to Rome for mismanagement of the Jews, Herod Antipas took over. Antipas was the ruler that John the Baptist confronted over the marriage of his brother's wife (Antipas had married Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip). Herod Antipas executed John the Baptist at the request of Herodias. This is the same Herod before whom Jesus briefly appeared on the day of His crucifixion (Luke 23:6-12). Was this why Jesus said nothing to Herod Antipas, although he questioned Jesus repeatedly? Antipas had executed John the Baptist who, according to Jesus was *"the greatest man ever born of a woman."* Herod Philip was by far the best ruler of the 3 sons of Herod the Great. He does not figure into the N.T. narrative much, except that it was his territory into which Jesus retreated when He was being persecuted by the Pharisees of Judea.

Rome eventually appointed a series of governors to manage affairs in Judea (6 – 40 A.D.) They would collect taxes, command the military forces in the area and sit as judge for the major legal cases.

PONTIUS PILATE: *From 26 – 36 A.D. Pilate was governor over Judea. He played the key role, from the Roman side, in the trial and execution of Jesus. Pilate was eventually banished from his office for mismanagement of the Jews (36 A.D.). He returned to Rome where, according to tradition, he killed himself upon orders from Caligula.*

When Pilate and Jesus spoke face to face, they discussed "truth" (John 18:33-38). Jesus said that He had come into the world to bear witness to the truth. Pilate replied cynically: "What is truth?" Our friend Abdu Murray spoke on this question at OPC on August 19, 2018. His message is on our website if you missed it. His new book, Saving Truth, covers this issue thoroughly and clearly.

APOCRYPHA: The term “apocrypha” (“hidden”) is often used to refer to 14 writings of varying length and subject matter that were written between 300 B.C. – 100 A.D. Jews in the time of Jesus regarded these books as good reading; but not as “inspired Scripture.” Among these writings are 1 & 2 Maccabees, where we find our history of the Maccabean revolution. Today, none of these writings are considered canonical (inspired words of God) by orthodox Jews or Protestant Christians. However, these books were granted “deutero-canonical” status by Roman Catholics (second canon). Some of these books were included in the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Old Testament (250 B.C.). Later, they were included in the Latin Vulgate produced by Jerome (400 A.D.). The Catholic Bible of 1610 (the King James, Douay version), incorporated these extra books since the translators used the Latin Vulgate as a key source for their translation. The view one takes on the canonicity of the apocrypha IS important, for there are certain key doctrinal issues that arise from these books. Most significantly, the idea that sins might be purged away after death (Purgatory) or that the actions of living people might alter the fate of souls in the afterlife is derived from a passage in 2 Maccabees: “Next, the valiant Judas urged the people to keep themselves free from all sin, having seen with their own eyes the effects of the sin of those who had fallen (in battle); after this he took a collection from them individually, amounting to nearly 2,000 drachmae, and sent it to Jerusalem to have a sacrifice for sin offered, an altogether fine and noble action, in which he took full account of the resurrection. For if he had not expected the fallen to rise again, it would have been superfluous and foolish to pray for the dead, whereas if he had in view the splendid recompense reserved for those who make a pious end, the thought was holy and devout. This was why he had this atonement sacrifice offered for the dead, so that they might be released from their sin” (2Macc.12:42-45). To sum up the value of these books, we quote from R.K. Harrison: “Many of these documents are valuable because they mirror with considerable accuracy the religious, political and social conditions in Judea following the close of the Old Testament period proper.” (Intro to the O.T., p.1175).

Discussion Questions

1. Which aspect (person, group, institution) of the not-so-silent years intrigues you the most? Why? Did anything in this survey give you a different perspective on the story of Jesus?
2. God is always at work, even when it seems like He is “silent.” How might God be orchestrating the cast of characters and/or circumstances in your life to advance His purposes for you.
3. What are you most hoping to gain from our study of JESUS?