

## The silent years

John Houghton ©

### A. Introduction

1. This period marks the last stage in the long and persecuted pregnancy of heavenly Jerusalem. First noted in Genesis 3:15, this reaches its prophetic climax in Revelation 12:1-4, which speaks of the incarnation of Christ the firstborn. History is moving towards its crux. The anticipated birth of the Messiah will mark the end of an era, and the beginning of a new age.
2. The period is also the first fulfilment of Daniel's prophecy about seventy weeks – running from the decree of Cyrus in 538 BC to the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70 (Daniel 9:24-27).
3. God is sovereign over the politics of men and is outworking his redemptive purposes on a global scale far beyond the confines of Palestine.

### B. The broken image and the four beasts

1. Although Daniel lived during the period of the exile, going into exile as a young man in 605 BC and probably alive until c.530 BC, he prophesied well into the future and some of his words still await their fulfilment.
2. King Nebuchadnezzar dreamed of a composite image (head pure gold, upper body silver, lower body bronze, legs iron, feet iron and clay) which was broken by a divinely-cut stone. Daniel brought the interpretation: the image, he said, represented the rise and fall of four great empires, during which period God would set up his own everlasting kingdom that would begin as a stone but grow to fill the earth as a mountain (Daniel 2:31-45).
3. Daniel also had a vision of four beasts, culminating in a revelation of the last judgement and the triumph of God's kingdom (Daniel 7:1-28).
4. Daniel's vision was truly messianic. He encoded the time of Christ and his death (Daniel 9:25-26). If Nehemiah 2:1-8 and Daniel 9:25 date 4 March 444BC then Daniel's prophecy dates Palm Sunday to 29 March 33 AD, precisely 173,880 days. It is probable that he saw a vision of Christ (Daniel 10:5-9).
5. These visions refer prophetically to the empires of Neo-Babylonian, Medo-Persia, Greece and Rome, and to the birth of the church through Christ. They reveal the sovereignty of God over world history (Acts 17:26-27).
6. The three-fold foundation of all Western, and much Eastern civilisation results from this vision – Greek culture, Roman rule and Judaeo-Christian religion.

### C. Final persecutions and preparations

1. The Feast of Purim (13-15 Feb).

- a. As we noted during Act 11, Esther (Myrtle) exercised great courage to preserve the Messianic people. 'For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?' (Esther 4:14)
2. The Walls of Jerusalem
    - a. In 460, Malachi challenged a cynical and compromising people to consider their ways and put God's will first in their lives, especially in the areas of worship, marriage and giving. Two years later, Ezra (Ezra 7ff) came to Jerusalem with 1,754 people and much wealth. He re-established repentance and reformation among the people, especially leading to the divorcing of pagan wives.
    - b. In 445, Nehemiah, grieving over the state of Jerusalem, obtained permission to return and rebuild its walls. A true spiritual administrator, by prayer and action, he succeeded in spite of considerable opposition. Ezra then led a spiritual revival centred around the Word, and the people renewed the Covenant. Sadly, a few years later they again needed reform.
    - c. Walls give a city identity, protection and boundaries. Jerusalem was chosen to be the focus of world history. It could not afford to disintegrate.
3. The Feast of Hanukkah
    - a. Alexander the Great conquered the known world in little more than a decade, and Hellenized it.
    - b. Alexander was a pupil of Aristotle. He set up Greek colonies wherever he conquered in a bid to unite East and West. Greek became the universal language. Brilliant minds flourished at Alexandria – Zeno, Epicurus, Eratosthenes, Archimedes – laying the foundations for the modern world.
    - c. Hellenistic culture included the worship of Zeus and the entire Greek pantheon. Sport mattered; the gymnasium (to exercise naked) with its adulation of the body led many Jews to attempt masking their circumcision. 'Worldliness' suddenly became a serious option.
    - d. Upon his death, the kingdom divided into four, but Greek culture persisted. Judea came under the rule of a Hellenized Egypt (the Ptolemies from Alexandria), and then Syria (the Seleucids from Antioch). These two powers regularly disputed the territory between them.
    - e. In 175 BC, Antiochus IV Epiphanes, a rabid Hellenist, came to the Seleucid throne, which included control over Judea. In 168 BC, he sold the high priesthood to Menelaus. The people rejected him. Antiochus then attacked Jerusalem, banned the Sabbath and circumcision, forced the eating of pig's flesh, and tortured dissidents. He set up a pagan altar in the Temple – 'the abomination of desolation' – and turned it into a religious brothel.

- f. The Hasidim, forerunners of the Pharisees, resisted bravely (Hebrews 11:35-36). In the town of Modein, a Hasmonean named Mattathias killed a reprobate priest and his Syrian guardian, and then called for the faithful to arise. The Maccabean revolt had begun.
- g. His son, Judas 'the Hammer' Maccabaeus, became the anointed leader and won stunning victories which soon led to a peace treaty. The Temple was cleansed in 165 BC – an event celebrated by the Feast of Hanukkah. Antiochus died a year later.
- h. The Maccabees ruled over a land almost as large as in Solomon's time until 63 BC. It then became a Roman protectorate. The last of the Maccabees died in 37 BC and Herod the Great commenced a new line of rulers.
- i. Well in advance of the time, Daniel wrote this entire episode in prophetic code. The apocryphal books, 1 & 2 Maccabees, record the actual events.
- j. If it were not for the resistance of the faithful, the pure Jewish faith and life would have been swallowed up by Greek syncretism, and its distinctiveness lost for ever.

#### D. The stage is set

1. The emergence of Roman government produced a world without boundaries, where law and order prevailed, currency was stabilised, and good roads ran everywhere.
2. Greek culture provided for the free exchange of ideas in a common language. The Old Testament was translated into Greek – the Septuagint Version – and Isaiah's prophecies of universal faith in Yahweh began to be fulfilled.
3. Judaism itself provided a monotheistic society in which the Law of God was faithfully upheld by the Pharisees. The Essene community (of Dead Sea Scrolls fame) supplied the eschatological expectation. Jerusalem and the Temple were ready for the Coming One. The Babylonian/Persian captivity had already ensured the existence of respected communities of Jews across the empire. Their synagogues were to prove the prototype for local New Testament churches.
4. The stage was set for the fulfilment of the fifty or more great messianic prophecies. Thus, Paul could later write, 'When the fulness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, to redeem...' (Gal 4:4).

