

THE TIME IN BETWEEN – FOREIGN DOMINATION

The Time In Between - - For roughly 600 years, what would become the Israelite Nation was merely a collection of nomadic people led by Patriarchs that came out of the Fertile Crescent, eventually fled to Egypt in time of famine, and were ultimately enslaved by their Egyptian overlords. For the next roughly 600 years, Israel was ruled by a series of Judges (e.g., Moses, Joshua, and Gideon), Prophets (e.g., Elijah, Elisha, and Samuel), and Monarchs (e.g., Saul, David, and Solomon) as they fled Egypt, conquered the Promised Land, and established the Israelite Nation. The final 600 years prior to the birth of the Messiah are characterized by exile, foreign domination, preservation of their “chosen” identity, attempt to rebuild Jerusalem, and struggle to ward off the influence of Greek and Roman culture. About 400 of these latter years are known as the “Silent Years” because the last Prophet Malachi completes his oracles and we enter a canonical dry period where God is seemingly quiet and does not speak to his people through chosen agents such as the prophets. This last lesson explores these 600 years of exile, foreign domination, and silence prior to God’s message of salvation through his servant John the Baptist and the “advent” of the Messiah.

Scripture - - Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi, and Luke 1

The time between 605 BC and birth of Christ in roughly 6 BC is a turbulent and troubled time. Israel as a nation and the Jews as a people and as a religion change dramatically. From a canonical standpoint, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther are the last books of history covering the period from about 538 BC to 420 BC and Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi are the last prophetic books covering the same time period. It is also likely that as the three great schools or centers of Jewish thought emerged during this time (i.e., Babylon, Jerusalem, and Alexandria), that the books of our Old Testament were compiled and placed in their final form as we know them.

That is not to say that all Jewish writing and literature ceased. During this time, many of the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha books were penned such as the books of Tobit and Sirac in late 3rd Century to early 2nd Century BC, the books of Judith and 1st Maccabees during the Hasmonean Period, and the books of 2nd through 4th Maccabees and Wisdom of Solomon during the Herodian/Roman Period prior to the birth of Christ.

More well known in the Christian world is Septuagint or LXX translation of the Bible from Hebrew to Greek starting with the Torah in early 3rd Century BC (i.e., around 285 BC). The complete Septuagint that existed in Jesus day was probably not completed until early 2nd Century BC. In addition, we have the writings of Josephus, Philo, and others to help shed light on this murky time in Jewish history. It is during this time that political and cultural influences prompted the formation of groups of Jews, some organized around political beliefs and some around religious beliefs. These groups included the Herodians, Zealots, Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and to a lesser extent, the Scribes.

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To muddy the waters even further, dating some events is a challenge. For example, there is confusion in the accounts of Ezra and Nehemiah as to their arrival and stay in Jerusalem. In general, however, these uncertainties do not play a major role in telling the story of the Israelites during these 600 years of foreign domination. Below is a table that provides key dates as we explore this 600 years of Jewish history.

PERIOD	DATE	EVENT	
EXILE	612 BC	Babylonians defeat the Assyrians	
	605 BC	First Jews exiled to Babylon (includes Daniel)	
	597 BC	2 nd Jewish deportation to Babylon (includes Ezekiel)	
	587/586 BC	Destruction of Jerusalem and final wave of exiles to Babylon	
	593 to 573 BC	The Book of Ezekiel	
	586 to 516 BC	The Book of Lamentations	
	539 to 530 BC	The Book of Daniel (although some give it a much later date)	
	RETURN	539 BC	Persia (Cyrus) defeats the Babylonians
		537 BC	First wave of exiles returns under Sheshbazzar and may include Zerubbabel. The altar is rebuilt and sacrifices started.
		536 BC	Work on the Temple is started under Zerubbabel but then stopped for 16 years due to opposition.
520 BC		Work on the Temple Restarted	
516 BC		Temple completed	
520 to 480 BC		Books of Haggai and Zechariah are written urging the completion of the Temple and Zechariah prophecies the advent of the Messianic King	
458 BC		Ezra the Scribe arrives in Jerusalem to teach the Law to the	
445 BC		Nehemiah, the cup bearer to the King Artaxerxes I, receives permission to journey to Jerusalem as Governor and arrives in Jerusalem	
445/444 BC		Nehemiah Completes restoration of the Wall in 52 days	
433 BC		Nehemiah returns to King Artaxerxes I	
430 BC to 407 BC (?)		Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem as Governor	

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	440 to 420 BC	The Book of Malachi is written rebuking Israel for their waning hope because they have not been restored to their former glory and reassures them that day of the Lord is coming
GREEK	332 BC	<i>Greece</i> under Alexander the Great defeats <i>Persia</i> and assumes control over the Land of Palestine
	323 BC	Alexander the Great dies and four generals divide up his empire: Ptolemy took Egypt, Palestine, and Arabia; Cassander took Macedonia and Greece; Lysimachus took Thrace and Bithaynia; and Seleucid took Syria (or former Assyria)
	198 BC	Seleucid descendent Antiochus III takes control of Palestine away from the Ptolemy descendents with their tolerant rule and proceeds to desecrate the Temple
REVOLT	167 BC	Seleucid ruler desecrates the Temple by sacrificing a pig
	164 BC	Mattathias of the Hasmonean family wins back religious freedom and cleanses and rededicates the Temple
	163 BC	Mattathias' son Judas (known as the "Hammer" or Maccabee) leads a revolt against the Seleucid rule
	141 BC	Greek (Seleucid) taxes and garrison withdrawn from Jerusalem
	134 BC	John Hyrcanus negotiates autonomy for himself and the Jews
ROMAN	63 BC	Rome conquers Palestine and Jerusalem
	6 to 4 BC	Birth of John the Baptist

1. EXILE^{1,2} - - The first captives from the tribes of Judah and Benjamin were deported in 605 BC, with a second wave in 597 BC, and the final deportation in 586 BC with the destruction of Jerusalem. Not all Jews were deported to Babylon. As Jeremiah records, many of the poorer folks were left behind and we meet these remnants as the exiles return to rebuild the Temple and the walls of Jerusalem.

Our primary sources during this time of exile (i.e., 605 BC to 537 BC) are few. They consist of 2 Kings 24 & 25, a few chapters in the books of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, a few of the Psalms, the book of Lamentation relative to the fate of those left behind in Jerusalem, and two Babylonian texts. Furthermore, exile didn't end for all Jews in the various waves of returning Jews in 537 BC (Zerubbabel), 458 BC (Ezra), and 445 BC (Nehemiah). Many elected to remain in captivity.

The Babylonians and Assyrians before them, used deportation to punish rebellious nations. However, unlike the Assyrians, the Babylonians apparently treated

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deported peoples more compassionately because in Jeremiah 29:4-11, Jeremiah instructs the exiles to, “Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters ... increase in number ... seek peace and prosperity.” The Jews rose to places of importance as evidenced by Ezekiel, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther and Mordecai. Socially and culturally, the exiled Jews were allowed to prosper and grow.

The big changes were of course in the loss of the Temple, their sacrificial system, the land promised to them by Yahweh, and termination of the royal line of David and God’s covenant with David. The Priesthood morphed during captivity from a sharing of leadership between God’s anointed prophets and kings to a temple-state arrangement. The priesthood and High Priests continued through the line of Zadok (2 Samuel 15:24) but were now accountable to the King of Persia. And in fact, the Zadok High Priestly line would continue until 174 BC when someone outside the Zadok line purchased the position. This degradation of the High Priest position ultimately led to the Hasmonean (Maccabee) revolt and transfer of the High Priestly line to the Hasmonean family. This “pollution” of the High Priestly line was one of the motivations for the rise of the Pharisees. Herod the Great (37 BC to 4 BC) ended the Hasmonean High Priests and they were appointed from that time forward until the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. The most famous High Priest of this appointed era was of course Joseph Caiaphas (18 to 36 AD) during the time of Jesus.

There is much speculation as to the compiling, editing, and writing of many of our Old Testament books and while probably true, cannot be substantiated. What can be determined is that the Jewish faith went through a significant “purification.” Where prior to deportation the worship of Yahweh became more and more diluted with the worship of other gods, captivity refocused their attention on Yahweh. Cowan states, “where the cult of Yahweh had become elaborately syncretistic with the uncritical adoption of Canaanite and perhaps also foreign practices, the cult of the rebuilt temple after 520 [BC] was carefully regulated by laws which insisted that everything done, no matter what its origin ... was in keeping with the nature of the Yahwistic faith. Whereas the prophets had accused their people of caring little for the high moral standards which already existed in pre-exilic Yahwism, post-exilic Judaism had an ethic which would be unparalleled by any religion for centuries, adherence to which was expected of every Jew.”²

In summary, the time of captivity was characterized by the writing of the books of Lamentations, Ezekiel, and parts of Daniel; was a time when the High Priestly role changes; and a time in which the exiles returned zealously to a more uncluttered worship of Yahweh.

2. RETURN^{1,2,3} - - In 539 BC after a series of battles going back to the mid-550’s when Cyrus the Persian rebelled against his overlord, defeats the Medes, and wins

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several decisive battles against the Babylonians fought along the Tigris River ... he walks into Babylon without a fight. Gowan tells us that, “Cyrus’ own inscriptions produced for Babylonian benefit describe him as a devotee of Marduk, chosen by the deity to restore his cult ... and Cyrus did exactly that for Marduk as well as for numerous other Mesopotamian deities. These attitudes and activities were the results of a totally different approach to conquered peoples from that used previously by the Assyrians and Babylonians. Cyrus aimed to control his empire not by terror and wholesale deportations but rather by appearing as liberator, restorer and protector. He was so tolerant of other’s religions that we cannot even tell from his inscriptions what his own religion was.”²

The immediate impact for the Jewish exiles was the organized return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple in 537 BC. Under a little known figure named Sheshbazzar, the first returning exiles are organized to make the 750-mile journey back to Jerusalem. Zerubbabel was apparently included in this first return along with some 46,360 people as recorded in Ezra 2. There is some debate as to whether Zerubbabel and the 46,000 were part of the first wave of returnees in 537 BC or a second wave a few years later. Other than historical accuracy, it makes little difference to the telling of events.

Immediately upon return, the people rebuild the altar and sacrificed burnt offerings to Yahweh. Shortly thereafter under the leadership of Zerubbabel (he is serving as governor of Judah), they lay the foundation of the Temple and a great celebration ensues (Ezra 3:10-13). But then trouble strikes in the form of delays. Apparently some of the Jews that remained in Judah after the deportation offer to help rebuild the Temple. In the eyes of the returning exiles, these are apparently “corrupted” Jews who have intermingled and intermarried with other peoples and are therefore not “worthy” to be a part of the reconstruction. Zerubbabel refuses the help of these “enemies of Judah and Benjamin” and they proceed to frustrate any attempts to proceed with the construction throughout the reigns of Cyrus and Darius (Ezra 4:5).

At this point the Book of Ezra (Ezra 4:6-23) becomes confusing as it refers to the delaying events during the reigns of Xerxes (486 to 464 BC) and Artaxerxes I (464 to 424 BC) in which a formal accusation is lodged with the King of Persia claiming that the Jews are a rebellious people, that is why the city was destroyed, and they are proceeding without authorization. Artaxerxes issues a “stop-work-order” and construction is official shut down. (NOTE: it is possible that the delays described are associated with the rebuilding of the wall during the time of Nehemiah and not the Temple but the compiler of Ezra placed them in the incorrect spot).

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Then in Ezra 4: 24, we flow back to the reign of Darius I (522 to 486 BC) who receives a letter from Tattenai, governor of Trans-Euphrates questioning the authorization of Cyrus to rebuild the Temple. Darius has the files searched and finds a scroll in the citadel of Ecbatana documenting Cyrus' authorization. Darius I issues a decree to Tattenai confirming the Temple's construction and work restarts in 520 BC and is completed by Zerubbabel and his people and the Temple dedicated in 516 BC. It is during this time that Haggai and Zechariah receive their prophecies and pen their books urging the Jews to continue construction on the Temple. Their books contain dates that along with the Book of Ezra confirm the dates of the Temple construction.

After the construction of the Temple, we have little insight into the struggles of the returning exiles until the time of Ezra (458 BC) and Nehemiah (445 BC). As noted above, there is controversy over who came first; Ezra or Nehemiah. However, the uncertainty in date has only a secondary impact on the two great reasons for their return; the Law and the fortification of Jerusalem.

Ezra was a Scribe, a “teacher well versed in the Law of Moses” and person who had “devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the Lord and to teaching its decrees...” He requested to return to Jerusalem so that he might instruct the Jews in God's Law. As a Scribe, he was not only a professional in reading and writing but also a scholar trained in the lore of his people and Jewish Law. Ezra led back a group of exiles and was permitted to collect an offering from the remaining exiles to be taken to Jerusalem. However, his first obligation was to impose the Law on the residents of Judea. This event is recorded in Nehemiah 8 and 9 in a covenant-making ceremony.

Nehemiah was the Cupbearer to Artaxerxes I. His brother reports back from the exiles in Jerusalem in Nehemiah 1:3 that, “Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire.” As a result, Nehemiah requests a release from his duties to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the city. Artaxerxes agrees and sends Nehemiah off with a letter of authorization and safe-conduct, the title of Governor, and an armed escort. Nehemiah surveys the city without revealing his purpose and then calls together the Jews and divides up the building of the wall by families. They built the wall to half of its height, “for the people worked with all their heart.” They encountered opposition and threats and to finish the wall, Nehemiah divided up his people so that half were armed and protecting and half were rebuilding. They completed the wall in 52 days. Nehemiah continued to serve as Governor for 12 years including the re-dedication to the Law under Ezra, before returning to Artaxerxes I in about 433 BC. He later returns as Governor and enacts a number of reforms.

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It is during this time that the last of the canonical books was written: Malachi (440 to 420 BC). The exact time is not known but thought to overlap the time of Nehemiah. The people have logged about 100 years or so since they returned to Jerusalem, re-built the Altar and restarted the practice of offering sacrifices, rebuilt the Temple, and refortified the city. Despite all of this, they have not seen the return to the former splendor of the days of David and Solomon. As a result, they once again begin to fall away from their commitment and Malachi addresses many of the same sins as does Ezra and Nehemiah. However, Malachi ends in hope that if they return, the People of Israel will be flooded with blessings and they will once again see the "...distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not (Malachi 3:18)." Malachi ends with the promise in 4:5-6 that, "I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse."

There were a number of issues that plagued the re-emerging Jerusalem during the time of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Malachi including:

- ***Political opposition*** to refortifying Jerusalem from Samaria, Ammon, Edom, and Arabia (who eventually absorbed Edom),
- ***Internal strife*** and attitude on the part of the returning Jews of superiority (Nehemiah 5:1),
- ***Feeding the poor*** (Nehemiah 5:2),
- ***Remitting debts*** from borrowing against their land and crops (Nehemiah 5:3),
- ***Forced Servitude*** of sons and daughters to borrow money from fellow Jews (Nehemiah 5:4-5),
- ***Defiling the Temple*** via admitting non-Jews to the Assembly of God (Nehemiah 13:1-9),
- ***Tithing*** (Nehemiah 13:10-13),
- ***Observing the Sabbath*** (Nehemiah 13:15-22), and
- ***Intermarriage*** (Ezra 10:1-44 and Nehemiah 13:23-27).

Once again, God's chosen people have demonstrated their inability to keep God's law and covenant and fall into disobedience and despair. Also, with the conclusion of Malachi, we enter the period of "Biblical silence" and only pick up the storyline with the advent of the birth of John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth in approximately 6 BC.

3. **GREEK INFLUENCE AND REVOLT**^{1,2,3} - - Palestine and Judah remained under Persian control until approximately 332 BC when Alexander the Great defeated the Persians and took control of their empire including Syria, Palestine, and Egypt. In 323 BC, Alexander died and his empire was divided between four of

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his generals. Relative to Jewish history the two of importance are Ptolemy who assumed control of Egypt and by 301 BC, Judea as well, and Seleucus and his successors called the Seleucids that ruled Syria. The Ptolemies ruled Judea until 198 BC and apparently the Jews existed peacefully with their Greek overlords. It was during this time and more specifically Philadelphus from 308 to 246 BC, that the translation of the Old Testament into Greek called the Septuagint or LXX was completed in Alexandria, Egypt. Greek culture and language spread steadily throughout the region and was known as “Hellenism” after “Hellene” that is the Greek word for Greece.

In 198 BC, the Seleucids under Antiochus III (223 to 187 BC) wrested control of Judea from the Ptolemies. They were not as tolerant as the Ptolemies and were zealous in imposing Greek culture and religion on the Jews. They built a gymnasium and racetrack in Jerusalem and insisted that the races begin by calling on the names of heathen Greek gods. Greek theaters were built; Greek styles of dress were adopted; operations to remove the traces of circumcision were even performed on the Jews. At the Temple itself, a statue of the Greek god Zeus was set up. However the crowning blow occurred when Antiochus IV proclaimed that pigs were to be sacrificed on the altar in the Temple.

Mattathias (of the house of Hasmon) was an aging priest who moved to the village of Modein near the border of Judea northwest of Jerusalem with his five sons John, Simon, Judas, Eleazar and Jonathan. Eventually, the efforts of the Seleucids to eliminate Judaism reached Modein and Mattathias was directed to offer a pagan sacrifice ... he refused. Another citizen tried to comply and the old priest killed not only the citizen but also the king's officer. Mattathias and his family fled to the hills and served as a rallying point for other rebels. Their actions started the Maccabee rebellion and the Hasmonean Dynasty. Mattathias died in about 165 BC and the leadership of the revolt passed to Judas whose nickname was Maccabeus or “the hammer.” He organized some 3,000 men and conducted guerilla style warfare that eventually resulted in concessions by the Seleucids. In return for an end to the revolt, the practice of Judaism would be allowed and in 164 BC, the first sacrifice to Yahweh in three years was offered on the altar. Judas proclaimed that this event would be celebrated annually as the feast of Hanukkah. Judas was killed in 161 BC and succeeded by his brother Jonathan. After another 30 years of rebellion and war, John Hyrcanus, the last remaining son of Mattathias' son Simon, negotiated a truce that confirmed his autonomy and that of the Jews and founded the Hasmonean Dynasty. This dynasty lasted until the time of Roman occupation in 63 BC and even longer (i.e., 40 BC) in the position of High Priest.

Under Hasmonean leadership, Judea actually expanded its territory by conquering Samaria to the north and Idumea to the south. They forced the Idumeans (i.e., the Greek name for Edomites) to accept circumcision and become Jews. Herod the

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Great, who was to rule the Jews during the latter half of the first century BC, was an Idumean, hence Jewish by faith thanks to the policies of the Hasmoneans. One of the most interesting Hasmonean rulers was Alexandra, wife of Jannaeus Alexander. She ruled from 76 to 67 BC, appointed her son Hyrcanus as the High Priest since she could not assume that role, and permitted the Pharisaic party to dominate the government.

During the Greek and Hasmonean dynasties, the Hellenists emerged and were Jews dedicated to the promotion and adoption of Greek culture. The Hellenists eventually formed the roots of the Sadducees. The Sadducees were liberal Jews and a political group that turned away from the strict interpretation of the Law and became the rationalists of their day, ceasing to believe in the supernatural and the resurrection. Conversely, the Hebrew nationalists wanted to preserve everything according to the Mosaic Order. They resisted all the foreign influences that disrupted the old Jewish ways. They became known as the Pharisees, which means, “to separate.” They were separatists who insisted on preserving traditions and were initially a political organization. They later withdrew from politics and focused solely on preserving, observing, and furthering the Law as a means of salvation. Other more radical groups such as the Zealots and Essenes emerged and went even further in either advocating the overthrow of foreign domination or withdrawing from society.

4. ROMAN DOMINATION^{1,2,3} - - When Alexandra died in 67 BC, war erupted between her two sons Aristobulus and Hyrcanus the High Priest. The anti-Pharisee movement backed Aristobulus and for a time he displaced Hyrcanus and held both the positions of King and High Priest. Two other factors were critical to the unfolding of events. The Seleucid King Antiochus XIII who took the throne in 69 BC was weak and ineffective and our friends the Romans were lurking nearby having successfully conquered Syria in 64 BC. In one of the interesting twists of fate, Hyrcanus turns to the Nabateans (Arabians in the Negev Desert) for military assistance with the aide of Antipater the Idumean (Herod the Great’s father). Alexandra’s other son Aristobulus turns to the Romans and Pompey for help. Rome wins and Antipater the Idumean does one of the great turnarounds in history, appealing to Pompey convincing the Romans that the defeated Hyrcanus should be the High Priest. The result is that Judah comes under the supervision of Rome in 63 BC, the deposed Hasmonean High Priest Hyrcanus is once again the High Priest, and Antipater the Idumean chooses to support Julius Caesar when Roman civil war breaks out and is eventually rewarded by becoming Procurator of Judea. Antipater eventually gets his 25-year-old son appointed governor of Galilee and in 37 BC Herod is appointed King of Judah and rules until his death in 4 BC.

The four hundred years from the rebuilding of the Temple and the Jerusalem walls to the birth of John the Baptist and Jesus is a tumultuous and confusing time.

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There is great scholarship in the completion and compilation of the Hebrew Scriptures, the translations of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek, and the founding of the Pharisee Oral tradition. However, it is also a time of:

- Foreign domination,
- Alternating periods of acceptance and the suppression of Jewish culture and religion,
- The termination of the High Priestly line of Zadok and degradation of the position to that of a political appointee,
- The formation of Jewish political and special interest groups,
- The amplification of the law and the subsequent disenfranchising of groups impacted by the proliferation of new decrees such as women and shepherds,
- Dismay over the silence of God, and
- The growing hopes that the promised Messiah would come and restore Israel to its former glory.

5. GOD ENDS HIS SILENCE (A FINAL THOUGHT) - - But Yahweh is not through with his people and has not forgotten his covenant. He appears to an aging priest of the line of Aaron by the name of Zechariah in roughly 6 BC during the reign of Herod the Great with these words (Luke 1:11-17), "...your prayer has been heard ... Your wife Elizabeth will bear a son and you are to give him the name John ... He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous - - to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

God legitimizes those that have remained true by appearing to a priest and a descendent of Aaron. He puts one foot on the last words of Malachi and his other foot on the preparation of his people "for their Lord." Through Zechariah and his song in Luke 1:67-79, God sweeps in his covenants to Abraham, David, and Jeremiah by declaring the, "God of Israel...has come and has redeemed his people. He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David." Zechariah declares that his son John is Yahweh's prophet, the embodiment of Elijah's spirit. And as God's prophet, his son "will go before the Lord to prepare the way for him."

John the Baptist bridges the Old and New Covenants. He is a beacon to lead his people to repentance but also a forerunner for the "anointed one." He is the sound of the trumpet signaling the end of God's silence and the declaration that God is about to do miraculous things for his people and for all peoples. John and the people have no concept of just how radical God's son Jesus will be and that the

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Messiah will look nothing like they imaged. But as we close our study of the Old Testament, we do so on a clear note of hope and anticipation.

God has once again heard his people and is about to correct the chasm between humanity and God caused by man's rebellion against Creation and disobedience of God's Covenants. John the Baptist is empowered by the spirit of Elijah and God's Holy Spirit to prepare the way for his savior, Jesus, the Anointed One, the Messiah, the Christ.

Sources

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