

Introduction to the New Testament STORY

Participants who missed the last three Sundays of December may prepare by reading Chapter 22 in *THE STORY*.

So far THE STORY of God and humanity has gone something like this:
Creation, Corruption, Correction, Covenant 1 (God's promise never again to destroy the world by flood)
Corruption, Call (of Abraham), *Covenant 2* (promise of land, descendants, blessing and mission to Abraham and Sarah's family)
Corruption, Captivity (in Egypt), *Call* (of Moses and deliverance of God's people) *Covenant 3* (gift of Torah to guide the people of God)
Corruption, Coronation (of Saul, David, Solomon), *Covenant 4* (promise of a perpetuation of the Davidic monarchy), *Correction* (division into two competing kingdoms)
Corruption, Crisis (exile despite warnings from prophets) and *Covenant promise 5* (Jeremiah's promise of a new covenant) *Covenant faithfulness* of God (restoration to the land of promise).

There is a gap of a little more than a century between the completion of the last document in what became the Protestant Old Testament (Daniel, about 166 B. C.) and the writing of the first document in what became the New Testament (Paul's first letter to the Christians in Thessalonica, about 50 A. D.). Here's a summary of what happened [remember that B.C. time – "Before Christ" - runs backward. The smaller the number the more recent the time]).

- 586 B. C. – Babylonians destroy Jerusalem and the temple. People taken into exile.
- 539 B. C. - Babylon conquered by Persians (Cyrus the Great). Cyrus allows God's people to return, which they do in several groups over time. They rebuild the temple and the city walls.
- 333 B. C. – Alexander the Great conquers Persia (and its provinces, including Judea) with the result that Greek becomes the universal language of the Mediterranean world.
- 323 B. C. – Alexander dies without an adult heir and his generals take over the conquered territories. Judea goes to the Egyptian dynasty of the Ptolemies.

- 198 B. C. – The Ptolemies lose Judea to the Syrian dynasty of the Seleucids (most of whose rulers are named Antiochus).
- 168 B. C. – Antiochus IV tries to force the Judeans (Jews) to give up their devotion to God and adopt Greek culture and religion. This provokes a guerilla uprising led by the Hasmon family. Under the leadership of Judas Maccabeus (Thus, the “Maccabean Revolt”).
- 165 B. C. – The Hasmoneans recapture Jerusalem (celebrated at Hannukah). Antiochus eventually gives up and leaves Judea alone.
- 165 – 63 B. C. Judea is ruled by descendants of Judas and his brothers. This is called the Hasmonean Dynasty. Rival parties within Judaism begin to develop (Pharisees and Sadducees).
- 63 B. C. – Pompey the Great conquers Judea for Rome.
- 31 B. C. – Octavian (later Augustus) conquers his last rival and becomes sole ruler of Rome, confirming Herod the Great as “King of the Jews.”
- Between 6 and 4 B.C. – Jesus is born shortly before the death of Herod.
- 4 B. C. - Herod dies, leaving his sons Herod Antipas in charge in Galilee (old Northern Kingdom), Archelaus in Judea, and Philip in the regions east of the Sea of Galilee and the Jordan River (the “Decapolis” or area of 10 cities).
- 14 A. D. – Augustus dies
- 14 A. D. – Tiberias becomes emperor
- 26 A. D. – Pontius Pilate becomes governor of Judea (under Rome)

Thus, except for a brief period from 165 – 63 B. C. the Jews are subjects of various pagan empires. When Jesus is born Rome rules the entire Mediterranean world with puppet rulers in Galilee and Judea. Greek is still the common language. Jews speak Aramaic, the language of Babylon. Those who do business with non-Jews also speak some Greek. Jerusalem has a beautiful temple (remodeled by Herod the Great) where priests of the Sadducean party preside over the worship of God. The Pharisees are active in Galilee, advocating faithfulness to God’s commands in Torah. The peasants and small villagers are oppressed by the Romans through their (Jewish) tax collectors, who make their own living by charging more than is due and skimming their profit off the top. The provisions of Jubilee (a Torah provision for the cancellation of debts and the return of land to its original owners) have been ignored for centuries, leaving most peasants landless and often in debt.

As a carpenter, Joseph is not desperately poor. He can work not only in Nazareth but also in the large city of Sepphoris, within walking distance of Nazareth. However, by the time Jesus becomes an adult, we hear no more of Joseph, leading some scholars to suggest that he has died, leaving Mary a widow under the care of her sons.

As the story of Jesus opens, Mary's cousin John has become a prophet on the banks of the Jordan River somewhere north of the Dead Sea not too far from Jerusalem. John warns people of their need to own up to their sins and change their ways (signified by a ritual washing in the Jordan) in preparation for the coming of "one stronger than" John, who will "baptize with the Holy Spirit."

Even though Paul's letters were written down before any of the Gospels, the New Covenant ("testament" means "covenant") begins with Jesus, whose story is God's solution to the discouraging repetition of the Corruption/Correction cycle of THE STORY so far.