



Conducted by
Alf Marsden

“I have always wondered about the division of the Bible into Old and New Testaments. Do they just follow on from each other in time, or if not, did anything of importance happen in the time between them?”

I firmly believe that there is one very important fact which we must understand relative to the Bible as a whole. That fact is the central theme of the Bible and tells us that a loving God is constantly showing His love to His people. This love is a constant message from Genesis to Revelation, and as such it is indivisible; even though events are different historically, the God of the book of Malachi is the same God as the One recorded in the Gospels. He is unchanging, and the message of love permeates both Old and New Testaments. The last book in the O.T. bears this out when God says to His people, **“Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in my house, and prove me now herewith, saith the Lord of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it”** (Mal. 3:10). The same message is stated at the beginning of the Gospels, for John says, **“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life”** (John 3:16). The love of God is central to the whole revelation of God. The foregoing needs to be understood or else we shall look at the Bible in a piecemeal way, as many do.

From Old to New

Our questioner asks, “do the Old and New Testaments follow on from each other in time”. The answer is no, they do not. From the time that King Artaxerxes allowed Ezra and Nehemiah to leave Babylon in order to see to the law and the rebuilding of Jerusalem respectively, a period of 400 years was to elapse before the coming of the Messiah; this period of time is known as ‘the inter-testamental period’. The voice of prophesy seems to have been silent because no further books were added to the Canon of Scripture after Malachi and until the Gospel records. However, the Bible student should not suppose that this period is of no significance, on the contrary, I would say that the Book of Daniel would be difficult to understand if the events of this period were not taken into account when studying it. Furthermore, a proper understanding of the N.T. would be difficult as well.

The books comprising the ‘Apocrypha’ shed some light on the historical events of the period under consideration. Books which are ‘Apocryphal’ are books of doubtful authenticity, not accepted by Jews and not included in the Canon of Scripture. Nevertheless they do, as I say, give us some insight into a very interesting period of time. The author of the First Book of Maccabees describes a time of great affliction for Israel. We shall return to this later.

The Book of Daniel — Its Importance

Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon was no fool. After the Lord had given Jehoiakim and Jerusalem into his hand, he removed some of the holy vessels from the house of God and put them into the house of his god. He was also very selective in the personnel that he took; the record says that they should bring, **“Children in whom was no blemish, but well favoured, and skilful in all wisdom, and cunning in knowledge, and understanding science, and such as had ability in them to stand in the king’s palace, and whom they might teach the learning and the tongue of the Chaldeans.”** In other words, he took the cream. Of these were Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego; they went to the pagan palace, but they would not endorse pagan practices. The Book of Daniel has many dreams and visions, and it was Daniel himself who was skilled in the interpretation of them. It also tells of the rise and fall of great empires. The best known dream and its interpretation is the dream of Nebuchadnezzar as recorded in chapter 2, because the interpretation has a direct bearing for New Testament Christians, i.e., the prophesy concerning the Kingdom, the Church.

In the dream the king saw a great image. The image’s head was of fine gold, his breast and his arms of silver, his belly and his thighs of brass, his legs of iron, his feet part iron and part clay. The king then saw a stone which was cut out without hands. This stone then smote the great image, and the iron, the clay, the brass, the silver and the gold were broken to pieces together, and they were carried away by the wind like chaff.

Daniel then interpreted the dream. He recited the greatness of Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian empire, and said to the king, **“Thou art this head of gold”**. The Babylonian empire lasted from 605 – 539 B.C. The Book of Daniel then describes the events at the feast of Belshazzar and the subsequent writing on the wall, and Daniel concludes his interpretation by saying, **“Thy kingdom is divided, and given to the Medes and Persians”**. That same night Belshazzar was slain, and Darius the Median took the kingdom. This Medo – Persian empire was to last from 539 – 331 B.C., and is generally acknowledged to be the breast and arms of silver of the great image.

The next great empire to rise was the Greek empire under Philip of Macedon. Philip’s son, Alexander the Great, continued this empire, and after a series of great victories defeated the Persian army in 331 B.C. This is the third kingdom of brass which **“shall bear rule over all the earth”**. This kingdom was to last from 331 - 63 B.C. However, Alexander died in 323 B.C. in Babylon. According to historical records this was the signal for his empire to be broken up into four parts under his generals. The two parts which were to play the most important roles in the history of Israel were Syria and Babylonia, and Egypt. The vision given to Daniel, as recorded in Daniel chapter 8 is most explicit regarding the history of the great empires we have mentioned.

In 63 B.C., the Roman general Pompey reached and conquered Jerusalem, and Judea became a Roman Protectorate. Some 23 years later Herod was made ‘King of the Jews’ by the Roman Senate. The Roman empire of course, continued into the Christian era, and had a profound effect on the fortunes of the Jewish people. This empire was the fourth kingdom in the vision of the great image, the kingdom which was **‘as strong as iron’**. The feet and toes, made of potter’s clay and iron, signified a ‘divided kingdom’, partly strong and partly fragile; strong in law, discipline, and organisation, but weak because of the armies which had to be deployed over a very wide area, and constantly had to subdue warring factions in the countries which formed the empire.

Now if the events we have catalogued can be accepted as true and history records that they are – then the stone which was cut with out hands is a Messianic prophesy concerning the establishment of the Kingdom of God, the Church. This, according to

the prophecy, should take place ‘in the days of those kings’, i.e., the days of the fourth kingdom, the days of the Roman Empire. So the Kingdom was established after three kingdoms had fallen, and during the reign of the fourth kingdom. It was small at first, but destined to be world-wide in scope and operation (see Matt. 28:19,20). Daniel said that The Kingdom should never be destroyed (2.44), and the Writer to the Hebrews says, “Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear” (Heb. 12:28). According to Daniel “it shall stand for ever”.

There is much more in the Inter-Testamental period that we cannot go into just now. There is the rise of Antiochus Epiphanes (175 – 163 B.C.) who claimed to be an incarnation of Zeus, ‘the lord of heaven’ He suspended the Temple sacrifices, ordered the destruction of the scriptures, discontinued circumcision and Sabbath laws. Many welcomed death rather than defilement, and this may have been the period referred to in Heb. 11 (Read 1 Maccabees in the Apocrypha). There were also a number of battles fought under the leadership of Judas Maccabaeus which resulted in many victories against the Selucid and Egyptian forces. It was the Zealots who tried to continue these political wars of independence in later days, but as we know the Kingdom of God was of a spiritual nature and not political. Yes, this was a very interesting period in history, impinging as it does on events in the Christian era. I wish we had space to say more about it.

THE GOSPEL AND THE NEW COVENANT

The gospel is that message which was preached by the apostles on, and subsequent to, the day of Pentecost. It has been faithfully recorded in their sermons in Acts. People obeying the gospel preached then were saved just as they are today. Anything added to those gospel messages would constitute a different gospel.

The days in which those gospel sermons were preached were the days foretold by Jeremiah (Jer. 31:31-34). People obeying the gospel preached in those days entered into a new covenant relationship with God having their sins forgiven as foretold by Jeremiah. People obeying the same gospel today also enter into covenant relationship with God having forgiveness of sins. The so-called New Testament was not even penned when the new covenant foretold by Jeremiah had its fulfilment in the hearts of faithful converts as they obeyed the gospel. Do we know anything other than obedience to the apostles’ gospel which is required in order to bring about the new covenant (that arrangement whereby God forgives sins) in the hearts of people today?

Whilst on earth Jesus mentioned some truisms surrounding the new covenant to come. It was to be a new kingdom which we see in the church at large. Its subjects would have reformed hearts. They would have fresh covenant responsibilities.

- 1. The new kingdom.** Jesus dealt with this mainly in parable form. It was to be a rule over the hearts of God’s people, not an overt external kingdom with the trapping of such. It would have emphasis on the value of each soul and of God’s love for each one. Motivations would come from within and this God would see and reward. Its propagation would be, not with ostentation but with faithful sowing of its seed – the simple truth of the gospel.
- 2. The state of the heart.** Jesus stressed that this was of paramount importance. In His sayings and stories Jesus is asking us all to face the following. What proceeds from you and me? What is our disposition before God – is it humility, contrition, thankfulness, or the opposite? What do we think and plan with regard to our fellow man – is it loving or the opposite?
- 3. Covenant responsibilities.** Jesus referred to prospective new covenant responsibilities when He spoke about rebirth through water and the Spirit and when He

requested remembrance of His sacrifice through the Lord's supper. In empowering the apostles to bind and loose he laid on them authority to release the Jews from the laws and ordinances of the former covenant and to bind certain matters under the new. Their binding is seen in such things as church oversight, worship, discipline, gospel teaching and preaching, stewardship, sanctified marriages, etc. It is to the apostolic letters therefore that we need to go for our instruction about the new birth and the Lord's supper. If we could go beyond the apostle's doctrine for such things then there would be no reason why, for example, foot washing should not be considered a covenant responsibility today.

In brief, the good news which brings salvation is the covenant of the saved. It is found in apostolic preaching to sinners subsequent to the cross. The responsibilities peculiar to God's covenant people today (not laid on unbelieving aliens to perform) are found in apostolic teaching to saints subsequent to the cross.

Logic demands that if the foregoing is true then the gospel cannot be understood as comprising all of the new covenant scriptures. This conclusion is reinforced when we realise that matters which were unknown by the apostles (at the time they began preaching the gospel) could not possibly have formed components of the gospel. The book of Revelation for example was not revealed by God to John until years after the gospel was first preached. Our plea must be to return to apostolic preaching to sinners if we are truly to discern the gospel.

John Grimditch,