What happened between the Old and New Testament?
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Galatians 4:4-5
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At the closing words of Malachi, the Jews were back in Judah, they had rebuilt the temple, and they had all the information they needed to wait for the coming Messiah.

So, let’s go through what happened between Malachi to Matthew.
The Persians continued to rule over the Israelites after Jerusalem was rebuilt. When Alexander the Great defeated the Persians, he controlled Israel.

According to the Jewish historian, Josephus, when Alexander came to Jerusalem, he was met by the high priest. The high priest gave him great honor, and showed the passage in Daniel that explained Persia would be conquered by the Greeks. So Alexander left the Temple and Jerusalem untouched.

Alexander did something very important in every country he conquered. He brought Hellenization.
Hellenization is a fancy word meaning, he taught them how to be Greeks. Alexander loved the Greek culture and language so much he brought it everywhere. So, he expected the Israelites to learn Greek as part of being in the Empire.

Alexander went on to defeat much of the Middle Eastern world, but died at the age of 33.

His kingdom was split into 4 parts by his generals. The Seleucids took Syria, including Israel and Judea, and ruled for the next two hundred years. But it was not a peaceful rule. The Israelites have always been a stiff-necked people, and they were so much more so during this time.
At one point the ruler of the dynasty, Antiochus Epiphanes went into the Temple and sacrificed a pig. Then he declared Zeus to be the supreme god and all must worship Zeus.

Of course the Jews did not take too kindly to this, and they rebelled. This rebellion was led by the Maccabees. Eventually they retook the Temple and went through all of the purification ceremonies to make it clean again.

After they had done all the cleaning, they lit the great menorah, but they only had enough oil for it to remain lit for one day. It would take 7 days for the oil to be brought. The menorah stayed lit for 8 days from that little oil.
That is where the Jews got the holiday of Hanukah, which Jesus might have celebrated as a young boy.

Of course the Jews were eventually defeated again, and the Seleucids ruled again.

At this point the Jews started to disagree over how they were to worship God and how they were to react to the people in charge of them. They split into four groups.
The first group of people were the Pharisees. They reacted to God’s silence and their defeat by becoming more Jewish. They said, “We can make God speak, we can make Him come back by keeping The Law perfectly.”

To make sure they kept the Law perfectly they added extra laws around God’s Law. They said, “We are more holy than anyone else, so God has to come back and rescue us. This will make all those prophecies come true.”

They were looking for a Messiah, but they weren’t looking for Jesus. They were looking for a conquering king like King David.
The next group is the Sadducees. They were the wealthy, and powerful. They believed in this world alone.

They worked with the people in charge to keep things calm and peaceful.

The Sadducees technically kept all of the right laws, but they didn’t believe in God. They weren’t looking for a Messiah. They were happy with the way things were.
The third group was the Zealots. This group really came into being right around when Jesus was born, but groups like them existed for most of the time between Malachi and Matthew.

We do not hear them referred to much in the Gospels, but they are the hidden reason behind much of what happens in the Gospels.

They wanted Israel for the Israelites. They were constantly on the lookout for the new Messiah to come in and kick out whoever was in charge. They constantly started rebellions trying to point the nation to God.
The final group is a rather small group we don’t hear about in the New Testament. This group is called the Essenes. They looked at the Pharisees and the Sadducees and the Zealots and thought they were all wrong.

The Essenes didn’t think you could engage the world and change it. They thought you should retreat from it so that it didn’t corrupt you.

And that’s what they did. They retreated from the rest of Israel and formed what we would call monasteries, and studied God’s Word. The Essenes were the ones who wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls that were found in the 1940s.
After about 200 years the Seleucids were defeated by Pompey the Great, a Roman general, and the Romans were in charge of Israel.

This happened about 40 years before Jesus was born. The Jews saw the Romans replace the Greeks and thought of them as just more of the same.
And this gets us almost ready for Jesus to come. The Roman Empire brought many important changes.

The Romans like order and peace. Order allows their empire to prosper, it lets them become rich.

Peace lets the Romans trade without worrying. It is needed for the city of Rome to dominate this enormous empire.
The Romans brought roads wherever they went. Big wide roads that let armies travel quickly across their empire to keep the peace.

These same roads can also let other travelers move quickly across vast distances. Previously if you wanted to travel it was very difficult because each country spoke its own language, they had their own money, but with the Roman Empire everyone used the same money, and everyone spoke the same language.
While the Romans ruled there was peace as long as you obeyed or paid your taxes. The Pax Romana, the Roman peace, lasted over 200 years. That means there was over 200 years of relative peace for God’s word to spread when it came.

So, what was God’s fullness of time? The fullness of time was the time for Jesus to come. A time when His good news, the Gospel, to be able to spread far and wide quickly. A time when traders passing through Jerusalem would spread the news to Rome, Spain, and England.