

# **Bible Lands, Then and Now**

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## Mesopotamia

The early stories in the Bible are set in the region commonly called Mesopotamia, the fertile valley of the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers. According to the biblical accounts, this is the region where the Garden of Eden was located and where civilization developed.<sup>1</sup>

But Mesopotamia was also the location for early human rebellions, and these in turn brought about God's judgment. In the judgment where God destroyed the people in a great flood, he preserved Noah in an ark that eventually came to rest in the mountainous region of the rivers' headwaters. In another judgment, God destroyed a tower that rebels had built in the plains of lower Mesopotamia.<sup>2</sup>

Among the peoples of lower Mesopotamia were the Akkadians, the Sumerians and a smaller group, the Chaldeans. Ur, chief city of the Chaldeans, was the hometown of Abraham, a man God chose to be his channel of blessing to the world.<sup>3</sup> This would take time, because Abraham had to migrate to a land God would show him, then he had to start a family, and only when this family became a nation would God use it to implement his plan of salvation for people everywhere.

The land Abraham came from, ancient Babylonia, is in present-day Iraq. Most Iraqis, being both Muslim and Arab, honour Abraham as a religious figure and as an ancestor. In their religion they follow Islam, a diversion from Christianity started by Muhammad in the seventh century AD; in their ethnicity they hold to a tradition that claims descent from Abraham through Ishmael (in distinction to the Israelite claim of descent from Abraham through Isaac).<sup>4</sup>

Iraq even has a minority who can claim descent from Abraham through Christ. Christians are Abraham's descendants in a spiritual sense, because they are saved on the basis of faith as he was.<sup>5</sup> In Iraq, the Christian minority is larger and has more freedom than in some other Middle Eastern countries.

1. Gen 2:10-14. For maps of Bible lands see pages 38-39
2. Gen 8:4; 10:10; 11:3-9
3. Gen 12:1-3. Abraham lived during the 20th and 19th Centuries BC.
4. Gen 16:15; 17:20-21
5. Gal 3:6-7,28-29



*Mount Ararat*

## ‘Great Babylon, which I have built’

Babel, the site of the tower that early rebels built as a symbol of their advanced civilization, gave its name to the city of Babylon and the kingdom of which it was the capital. The people who built the tower prided themselves that they were socially and technically so advanced that they could achieve anything they wished.<sup>1</sup> Through their collective effort they felt self-sufficient and invincible. They saw themselves as independent of God; indeed, they defied God.

Already, in the earliest times, human beings had shown that as soon as they were aware of new-found abilities, they used those abilities to exalt themselves at the expense of God. Babylon became a symbol of human arrogance and rebellion.

This was demonstrated in a vision given to the king of Babylon in the time of Daniel. In the vision, one nation after another set itself up in what it thought was an unconquerable kingdom, but in the end God smashed the lot.<sup>2</sup> The king did not learn the lesson, and a few years later he was still walking around boasting, ‘Is not this great Babylon which I have built?’ God dealt with him decisively, so that he was reduced from his god-like status to that of an animal.<sup>3</sup>

In the closing book of the New Testament, God gave John a vision of the overthrow of Babylon to picture the destruction of human society. An ungodly world might use its collective power to assert itself, oppose Christians and defy God, but in the end God will overthrow it.<sup>4</sup>

Babylon may not exist on today’s map, but symbolically it is present everywhere. Its spirit dominates the world and distorts every advance in civilized society, whether in the tower-builders of Genesis, the king of Daniel’s day, or the Roman Empire of New Testament times. It challenges Christians to see the reality of their world, to beware of apparent human achievements, and to live according to the values of God’s kingdom.

1. Gen 11:3-9

2. Dan 2:36-45. The king was Nebuchadnezzar, who reigned 605-562 BC.

3. Dan 4:30-32

4. Rev 18:1-24



*Museum reconstruction of Ishtar Gate, Babylon*

## Rise and fall of Assyria

After Abraham left Chaldea, the Bible says little about the ancient territory of present-day Iraq till the ninth century BC, when Assyria emerged as the dominant power of the region. The nation took its name from Asshur, son of Shem, son of Noah.<sup>1</sup> Its capital, Nineveh, was on the Tigris River, hundreds of kilometres upstream from today's capital, Baghdad.

By the time Assyria began to interfere in Palestine, the Israelite nation had divided into two. Ten tribes to the north and east broke away from the Davidic rule and formed their own kingdom. They still called themselves Israel, and eventually made Samaria their capital. The little that was left of the original kingdom was called Judah, after the dominant tribe. Judah maintained the Davidic dynasty, kept Jerusalem as its capital and remained outwardly loyal to the religion of the Jerusalem temple.

The northern kingdom was vulnerable to Assyrian attacks, which explains why the Israelite prophet Jonah did not want to go to Nineveh and preach. He wanted Assyria conquered, not saved. He had to learn that God could be merciful to Assyrians as well as Israelites. And God could use Assyria to punish Israel if he chose.<sup>2</sup>

In the end, Assyria conquered the northern kingdom, destroyed Samaria and took the people into foreign captivity (722 BC). It then repopulated the region around Samaria with people brought in from other lands. These migrants intermarried with the leftovers of Israel, to produce a people of mixed blood and mixed religion called Samaritans. They and the Israelites despised each other.<sup>3</sup>

After the destruction of Israel, Assyria carried its aggression south into Judah. It was unable to destroy Judah, and in due course was itself conquered by Babylon. The just penalty on such a cruel master was welcomed everywhere.<sup>4</sup> God may use people to carry out his purposes, but that does not exempt those people from judgment.

1. Gen 10:1,11-12,22

2. Jonah 3:4-5,10; 4:11; cf. Isa 10:5; Rom 3:29; 9:15

3. 2 Kings 15:29; 17:3-6,24-29,33; John 4:9; 8:48

4. Nahum 1:1; 3:1-7; Zeph 2:13-15



*Syrian Hamah, biblical Hamath, strategic outpost of the Assyrian Empire*

## From favour to hostility

Broadly speaking, lower Mesopotamia lies within present-day Iraq, and the territory to its east within present-day Iran. In biblical times the major peoples of these two countries were of different races, and that is still so today. Iraqis are Arabs, but Iranians are Aryans ('Iran' means 'Aryan'), people of Indo-European stock. In biblical times Iran was commonly known as Persia, and sometimes as Elam, after an ancient kingdom within its borders. Kingdoms to the north of Elam were Media and Parthia.<sup>1</sup>

Persia's period of greatest power was during the reign of the Emperor Cyrus. Among the many kingdoms Cyrus conquered was Media, whose leaders he absorbed into the civil and military leadership of his expanding empire. His greatest victory was in 539 BC, when he conquered Babylon and became undisputed ruler of the region.<sup>2</sup>

The Bible gives a favourable picture of Cyrus, because once he became ruler of Babylon he gave permission for the captive Jews to return to their homeland. He even gave them financial aid to rebuild Jerusalem and its temple.<sup>3</sup> Although the Jews who returned were slow to complete their work, the Persian rulers were, on the whole, patient with them. Subsequent Emperors gave the sort of support Cyrus had given.<sup>4</sup>

Meanwhile, back in Persia, other Jews had risen to prominence in the administration. During the reign of one Emperor, a Jewish woman, Esther, became queen, and her cousin, Mordecai, became the Emperor's chief minister.<sup>5</sup> In Iran today, however, Jews are few in number and so are Christians. Both groups are barely tolerated in what has become an Islamic police state. They live in a climate of fear where they suffer social isolation and official discrimination

1. Gen 14:1; Isa 21:2; Dan 8:20; Acts 2:9

2. Isa 21:2,9; 45:1; Jer 51:11

3. Ezra 1:1-4; Isa 44:28

4. Ezra 5:3-6:12; 7:11-24; Neh 2:1-10

5. Esther 1:1-3; 2:17



*Watering sheep*

## God's sovereign control

As a result of the conquests by Assyria and Babylon, Israelite people were dispersed through many countries. Those of the former northern kingdom, Israel, were scattered widely and became largely absorbed into the peoples among whom they lived. Those of the former southern kingdom, Judah, were largely located in one region, Babylon, and retained a greater sense of national identity.

When Persia gave permission for the captives to return home, most who returned were from Babylon. Being from the former kingdom of Judah, they were known as Judeans, a name that was later shortened to 'Jew'. This name was freely applied to all who now lived back in the ancient homeland, without any reference to their tribe of origin. In time it was used of Israelites in general.

In spite of Persia's generosity in helping the captive Jews rebuild their homeland, many decided to remain in the foreign lands where they had grown up. Also, there were other migrations, some forced and some voluntary, with the result that Jews became scattered throughout the lands of West Asia and North Africa.

When the first Christians proclaimed the gospel in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost, Jews from many countries were present. Among the regions represented were Mesopotamia, Parthia, Media and Elam.<sup>1</sup>

Persia, by this time, had long since ceased to be a leading power. It had fallen to the Greek conqueror, Alexander the Great, in 331 BC. Kingdoms come and kingdoms go, all according to the sovereign will of God. God had raised up Cyrus for the purpose of overthrowing Babylon and releasing the captive Jews,<sup>3</sup> but that was no guarantee of unbroken divine favour, whether for the Jews or for Persia. God still controls the destinies of nations, which is both an encouragement to those who are afflicted and a warning to those who take God's favour for granted.



1. Acts 2:9

2. Isa 44:28; 45:1-5

*'Beyond the Euphrates' – vast Persian province that encompassed Judea*

## From 'Canaan' to 'Palestine'

When Abraham left Chaldea for the land God had promised him, he set out along what is known as the Fertile Crescent. This is the rich farming land that stretches from the Persian Gulf north-west along the Mesopotamian valley to northern Syria (Aram), and then curves south to follow the Mediterranean coast to Canaan.<sup>1</sup>

Abraham eventually arrived in Canaan, his first recorded camping place being Shechem, a settlement among the central hills. Much of his time, however, was lived in the southern inland. Sometimes he moved around the good pasturelands of Bethel and Hebron, other times around the oasis settlements of Beersheba and Kadesh-barnea in the drier regions further south.<sup>2</sup> But he also came in contact with the Philistines, who occupied the fertile coastal plain.

The native peoples of Canaan belonged to many tribal groups, though in common language they were often called Amorites.<sup>3</sup> The Philistines, however, were different. They were not natives of the region, but had migrated from the Mediterranean island of Crete, earlier known as Caphtor.<sup>4</sup> Further migrations followed, and by the time of the Judges they were a problem for Israel. Their region became known as 'the land of the Philistines', from which came the name 'Palestine', a designation later used for the region that the Bible calls Canaan.

Philistia's main population centres – Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Gath and Ekron – became known as 'the five cities of the Philistines' and were the scene of many conflicts with ancient Israel.<sup>5</sup> Some are still identifiable and are the scenes of conflicts with present-day Israel. A partly autonomous Palestinian region has been marked off within national Israel, with Gaza on the Palestinian side, and Ashkelon and Ashdod on the Israeli side. There are Christians on both sides of the border, but in each case they are a disadvantaged minority.

1. Gen 11:31

2. Gen 12:5-8; 13:3,18; 18:1; 20:1; 21:33; 22:19

3. Gen 15:16; Josh 24:15,18.

4. Amos 9:7; cf. Gen 21:32-34; Deut 2:23

5. Josh 13:2-3; Judg 3:3; 1 Sam 6:4; see also Acts 8:26,40



*Beth-shemesh, on the edge of the Philistine plain*



## Ancestral homeland

Hundreds of years after the time of Abraham, his descendants saw the fulfilment of God's promise that Canaan would be their homeland. By this time they were numerous enough to be called a nation, but were held captive in Egypt. Moses, however, led them out of Egypt, and forty years later Joshua led them into Canaan.<sup>1</sup>

The territory Joshua conquered spread beyond Canaan. Canaan was the area between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River, and this was occupied by nine and a half Israelite tribes. A large region east of Jordan was occupied by the other two and a half tribes. The people of Israel lived in their land for several hundred years, till they were conquered and taken into foreign captivity.<sup>2</sup> After Persia released the captives, many returned home and rebuilt the nation. In due course the Persian Empire gave way to the Greek, and the Greek to the Roman. In New Testament times Judea was under Roman rule, but when it rebelled, Rome responded by destroying Jerusalem and bringing Israel's national life to an end.<sup>3</sup>

Jews were scattered once more but, as usual, they maintained a distinct identity through their devotion to religious traditions, family relationships and synagogue services. Rome's rule over Palestine changed with the emergence of an Eastern Roman Empire based in Byzantium (Constantinople), but this changed again with the birth of Islam and the subsequent conquest of Jerusalem by Muslim Arabs.<sup>4</sup> Apart from a period of control by Christian Crusaders in the twelfth century, Islamic people, mostly Turkish, ruled Palestine till 1917. This was the year of the Balfour Declaration, which called for the re-establishment of a Jewish national homeland in Palestine.

As Jews migrated to their ancestral homeland, conflict arose with the local people, who considered Palestine to be *their* ancestral homeland. Hostility and violence intensified with the declaration of the modern state of Israel in 1948. The dispute is still unresolved.

1. 1240 BC
2. Israel into Assyria (722 BC), Judah into Babylon (605-587 BC)
3. Destruction of Jerusalem: AD 70; abolition of the nation: AD 135.
4. Islam's official starting point is AD 622.



*Mosque over Abraham's traditional burial place, Hebron*

## ‘O Jerusalem, Jerusalem’

The land that modern Israel received for its re-established homeland was not equal to what it once had. It received no land east of the Jordan River, and only part of the land west of the Jordan. Parts it did not receive were still under the control of neighbouring nations, though Israel captured these in subsequent wars. Through various negotiations and peace deals, some of this territory has been returned or given part autonomy.

The largest of these captured territories stretches from the Jordan River to the central mountains and is commonly referred to as the West Bank. Originally, the boundary of this territory cut through Jerusalem, but the once-divided city is now wholly under Israeli rule. It is an important city for Jews, Christians and Muslims, and consequently is the scene of much tension.

During the thousands of years of Jerusalem’s existence, its shape has changed – valleys filled in, hills taken away, boundaries altered, areas destroyed and rebuilt. But the overall picture of an elevated city built on an uneven plateau remains as in biblical times.

One cause of tension between Jews and Muslims is the existence of the Dome of the Rock<sup>1</sup> and its associated mosque on the traditional site of Israel’s temple.<sup>2</sup> The site overlooks the Kidron Valley and the Mount of Olives, where, in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus agonized in prayer shortly before his crucifixion.

Jesus met his greatest opposition in Jerusalem. He wept over the city as he reflected on its refusal to accept him and the judgment it was about to bring upon itself.<sup>3</sup> One can imagine him weeping over it today. The modern counterparts of the scribes and Pharisees still promote the sorts of practices he condemned. And the religious descendants of Muhammad sell ‘Christian’ souvenirs to foreign tourists, only a minority of whom can truly say of Jesus, ‘He bore my sins in his body on the cross’.<sup>4</sup>



*Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem*

1. A seventh century structure and Islam’s most sacred site outside Arabia.

2. Mt Moriah; 2 Chron 3:1; cf. Gen 22:2

3. Luke 19:41-44; Matt 23:37-39

4. 1 Peter 2:24

## Regal ambitions

Jerusalem was the city David established as Israel's capital, but it was not his first capital. For seven years he had reigned in Hebron, a leading city of Judah thirty kilometres south. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob all lived in Hebron at some time and were all buried in a piece of ground Abraham bought for a family burial place.<sup>1</sup> Hebron today, like David's own ancestral town of Bethlehem, is largely populated by Palestinian Arabs.

David saw that if he took the apparently invincible Jerusalem from its enemy occupants, he would unite all Israel behind him and have a capital that gave no cause for tribal jealousies. The commanding hill of the city, Zion, was the enemy's stronghold, but once David's men overthrew it, they soon controlled all Jerusalem. Zion, the city of David, gave its name to the entire city and even to the temple that David planned to build there.<sup>2</sup>

Solomon, David's son and successor, built the temple, but almost four hundred years later the Babylonians destroyed it, along with the rest of Jerusalem (587 BC). Seventy years later the Jews rebuilt the temple, though in more modest style, and it lasted five hundred years. Herod the Great rebuilt it again, this time on a grand scale, and it was still not finished in the time of Jesus.<sup>3</sup>

Two other impressive buildings of Herod were a palace for himself and a governor's headquarters, or praetorium, which he named the fortress of Antonia.<sup>4</sup> The remains of these and other buildings, or the structures later built over them, are still evident today.

Also evident today are some of the channels and pools used to carry and store Jerusalem's water.<sup>5</sup> Not so evident are the sites of Jesus' crucifixion and burial. The important issue, however, is not the identification of the sites, but the acceptance of the facts. Jesus died, was buried, was raised again and is alive for evermore.



*View of Jerusalem towards the Citadel*

1. Gen 23:17-20; 25:9; 50:13

2. 1 Kings 8:1; Ps 2:6; 9:11; 48:12

3. John 2:20. It was finished in AD 64, but destroyed by Rome in AD 70.

4. Matt 27:27; Luke 23:7

5. 2 Kings 20:20; John 5:2; 9:7

## Towards a wider world

Ancient Israel was not a maritime nation, so the lack of a sea port near Jerusalem was of no concern. The nation's leaders seem not to have considered making a port in the shelter of the prominent headland at Mount Carmel, a site chiefly remembered for Elijah's contest with the prophets of Baal.<sup>1</sup> Today, however, Israel's port of Haifa lies along the slopes and at the base of the headland.

South of Mount Carmel, Israel's shores were sandy and shallow, but a small headland at Joppa enabled the building of a modest harbour. Joppa was the port where building materials from Lebanon were unloaded and taken to Jerusalem, and where the fleeing Jonah once boarded a ship.<sup>2</sup> In the early days of the church, it was the place where God gave Peter a vision of the wider world that lay beyond his narrow Jewish world. As a result of the vision, Peter was directed along the coast to Caesarea, where Herod the Great had equipped his newly built city with an artificial harbour.<sup>3</sup>

Joppa today is known as Jaffa, or Yafo, and is a southern suburb of Tel Aviv, which was Israel's largest city till supplanted by an expanded Jerusalem. Unlike Jerusalem, Tel Aviv is mostly Jewish, though minority religions are also represented. Christians are from both Jewish and Arab backgrounds.

Most Jewish Christians in Israel call themselves Messianic Jews. (*Messiah* comes from a Hebrew word, *Christ* from its Greek equivalent.) Although Messianic Jews are free to worship within their own communities, they suffer from official discrimination. They are denied legal standing as a religious body and suffer from the strictly orthodox Jews.

Many modern Jews, however, are irreligious and even atheistic, their religion being more a matter of culture and nationalism than faith. But many immigrant Jews, especially from Russia, have believed in the Messiah Jesus and joined the Messianic Jews.

1. 1 Kings 18:19

2. 2 Chron 2:16; Ezra 3:7; Jonah 1:3

3. Acts 10:23-24; 18:22; 21:8



*Joppa, part of modern Tel Aviv*

## Side by side

The main physical features of the land of Israel run in roughly north-south parallel strips between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River. Bordering the Mediterranean is a long narrow coastal plain that rises into an area of low foothills. These foothills then rise into the broad central mountains, which is where most of Israel's population lived in biblical times. The other side of these mountains falls away into a deep valley called the Arabah, through which the Jordan River flows. East of Jordan the land rises sharply to open on to an uneven tableland.

To the south, the central mountain range becomes gradually flatter till it becomes the broad dry region known as the Negeb. This entire southern part of ancient Canaan, where Abraham once roamed with his flocks and where David once fled from Saul, became the tribal area of Judah, later the southern part of the divided kingdom, and in New Testament times the Roman province of Judea. In the south of Judea was Idumea, an area peopled by ancient Edomites who inter-married with Arabs and Jews. The Herods were Idumeans.

To the north the broad central mountains become higher, more fertile and more thickly populated till they open on to the region known as Galilee. Between Galilee in the north and Judah in the south is the central region known as Samaria. In Old Testament times the city of Samaria was capital of the northern kingdom.<sup>1</sup> In New Testament times the province of Samaria was, with Judea, administered by Rome from Caesarea.<sup>2</sup>

Samaria today is a ruin, and Shechem has been replaced by the bustling town of Nablus. In the time of Jesus the local people were Samaritans, but they and the Jews had difficulty getting on with each other.<sup>3</sup> Today the local people are Palestinians, and they and the Jews still have difficulty getting on with each other. Living with ethnic and religious difference requires tolerance, no matter where people live.

1. 1 Kings 16:23-24,29; 20:1,43

2. Acts 12:19; 23:33; 25:1

3. Luke 9:51-55; John 4:4-9



*Ruins of biblical Samaria*

## Hope out of Galilee

After Israel's original settlement of Canaan, the extent of the land from north to south was designated 'from Dan to Beersheba'. Dan was chief city of Israel's northernmost tribe, which, along with the tribes of Naphtali, Issachar, Zebulun and Asher, constituted the region known as Galilee. The Old Testament rarely uses the name Galilee, preferring to refer to places and events according to the tribes or towns concerned.<sup>1</sup>

Much of this northern region was fertile and hilly, though it was separated from the mountains to the south by the Plain of Esdraelon and its associated Valley of Jezreel. Guarding this strategic area was the town of Megiddo, which stood at the point where the main north-south and east-west highways crossed. King Solomon made the town into an administrative centre and fortified it as a military stronghold. It was the scene of many battles, and in the symbolism of Revelation becomes the scene of the last great battle.<sup>2</sup>

Galilee is chiefly remembered as the place where Jesus grew up and carried out much of his public ministry. His hometown of Nazareth, which was ridiculed by other Jews of his time,<sup>3</sup> is today the largest town of the Galilean hills. And the Galilean Jews, who were despised by other Jews of Jesus' time because of Galilee's mixed population,<sup>4</sup> are today better off than some other Jews; for Galilee is entirely within Israel proper, whereas the Palestinian areas are only 'occupied' by Israel. Neither shame nor privilege lasts indefinitely.

Though brought up in Nazareth, Jesus conducted much of his ministry in the area around the Sea of Galilee. Capernaum, the north-shore fishing village that became his Galilean base, now has little to show except some ruins. The chief lakeside town today is Tiberias, on the western shore, a region that features only occasionally in the Gospel narratives.<sup>5</sup>



*Solomon's stables, Megiddo*

1. 1 Sam 3:20; Josh 20:7; Isa 9:1

2. 1 Kings 4:12; 9:15; 2 Kings 9:27; 23:29;  
Rev 16:16. 'Armageddon means 'hill of  
Megiddo'

3. John 1:46; cf. Acts 24:5

4. Matt 4:15; John 7:52

5. Matt 4:13; John 6:1,17,23

## Small river, deep valley

If Dan marked Israel's far north in former times, Caesarea Philippi was its northernmost town in the time of Jesus. Nearby was Mount Hermon, the probable location of Jesus' transfiguration.<sup>1</sup> In this region lies the source of the Jordan River, which flows south through the Sea of Galilee and ends in the Dead Sea.

The Sea of Galilee, also known as the Sea (or Lake) of Chinnereth, Gennesaret, or Tiberias, is about 200 metres below sea level. The Jordan River, after flowing out of the lake, continues to drop as it winds its way south through a deep valley. At the point where it enters the Dead Sea, it is 400 metres below sea level. Although much of the valley near the Sea of Galilee is good for farming, it gradually becomes less fertile towards the south, till it is almost useless at the point where the Jordan enters the Dead Sea. This southern region is probably the place where John preached and where Jesus entered his time of temptation in the wilderness.<sup>2</sup>

In biblical times the Jordan, though only a small river, was a good barrier against invasion. Thick jungle grew along its edge, from where steep banks rose up to the floor of the main valley. The river could be crossed only at places where natural fords existed. One of these was near the valley town of Jericho, from where a road climbed steeply to Jerusalem and the central mountains.<sup>3</sup> Along this road, near Jerusalem, were the villages of Bethany and Bethphage.<sup>4</sup>

The Dead Sea, also known as the Salt Sea, contains such large amounts of salt and other chemicals that no fish can live in it. No vegetation grows around its shores, except at places where fresh water streams enter on the eastern side or freshwater springs exist on the western side. It is believed that Sodom and Gomorrah were located near the southern end of the Dead Sea.<sup>5</sup> The sea now covers whatever may have remained of the ancient cities.

1. Matt 16:13; 17:1-2

2. Mark 1:4-13

3. Josh 2:1,7; Judg 3:28; 7:24; 12:5; Jer 12:5; 49:19; Luke 10:30

4. Matt 26:6-13; Mark 11:1-11; John 11:1; 12:1

5. Gen 19:24-28



*Salty shores of the Dead Sea*

## Balm in Gilead?

When the people of Israel first entered Canaan, two and a half tribes appealed to Moses, and later Joshua, to allow them to settle in the good pasturelands east of Jordan rather than in Canaan itself. Israel had already conquered the Amorite kings who previously occupied this area, so the two and a half tribes were allowed to leave their families there while the men went across the river to help conquer Canaan. They then returned and settled down to build a homeland.<sup>1</sup>

This eastern territory was a broad tableland, broken by deep valleys through which streams flowed into the Jordan River and the Dead Sea. It stretched from Bashan in the north to the Arnon River in the south, but was a source of repeated conflict with the original owners, Ammon (to the north) and Moab (to the south).<sup>2</sup>

Just beyond the area occupied by Israel was Ammon's chief city, Rabbah, also called Rabbath-Ammon. It is today known as Amman and is capital of the present-day nation of Jordan.<sup>3</sup> Though Jordan is an Islamic nation, it pursues a policy of religious freedom for all. The law forbids discrimination, but also forbids proselytism.

One region within the eastern part of Old Testament Israel was known as Gilead, a name that was sometimes used of an entire tribe or even of Israel's entire eastern territory. The name also became associated with healing. Middle Eastern people have always been well known for their skill in producing oils, perfumes and medicines from plants, and Gilead became famous for a balm believed to have healing properties.<sup>4</sup>

Though Gilead was a good place to live, it was exposed to attack. It had no natural boundaries to the north and east and was often attacked by hostile neighbours. Its tribes were among the first to go into foreign captivity.<sup>5</sup>



*Amman, capital of Jordan*

1. Num 21:13,21-26,31-35; 32:1-5; 8-12
2. These nations, descendants of Lot, were related to Israel; Gen 19:36-38
3. Deut 3:11; 2 Sam 11:1; 12:26-31
4. Jer 8:22; 46:11
5. 2 Kings 15:29



## Views across Jordan

Under the Roman administration of New Testament times, much of Israel's former eastern territory fell within the districts of Decapolis and Perea. The inhabitants were mainly non-Jewish, which is reflected in an incident that occurred at Gadara, a place where the tableland drops suddenly into the Sea of Galilee. Jesus' healing of two demon-possessed men brought him into conflict with local farmers when their pigs became possessed by the exorcized demons, rushed down the embankment, fell into the water and drowned.<sup>1</sup>

Perea, further south, was a mainly Jewish area, and for this reason Jews travelling from Judea to Galilee often preferred to detour across the Jordan and through Perea rather than travel through Samaria. They commonly referred to Perea as 'beyond Jordan'. John the Baptist preached there, and Jesus visited both Perea and Decapolis on several occasions. People from both regions became his followers.<sup>2</sup>

Bordering ancient Ammon to the south was its brother nation Moab, whose capital was Heshbon. The boundary between the two shifted from time to time, as did the boundary between Moab and Edom, the nation to its south. The reason for the shifting of these national boundaries was conquest by enemies, such as the Amorites and, subsequently, the Israelites. One natural boundary that featured in these conflicts was the Arnon River, which flows through a deep gorge into the Dead Sea.<sup>3</sup> The territory of Moab, like that of Ammon to its north and Edom to its south, is now part of the nation of Jordan.

The tableland of Moab was the final camping place of the migrating Israelites in the time of Moses. Here, from the top of Mount Nebo, in the hilly region of Abarim, Moses looked across the Dead Sea and the Jordan River to the land of Canaan. He died before the Israelites crossed the river and he was buried nearby.<sup>4</sup>

1. Matt 8:28-34. Jews do not keep pigs.

2. Matt 4:25; 19:1-2; Mark 7:31; John 1:28; 3:26; 10:40

3. Num 21:13,24 Deut 3:12,16

4. Deut 32:49-50; 34:1-6



*Descent into Wadi el Mujib, the biblical Arnon River*

## The cost of pride

Edom was descended from Esau, Israel from Jacob, which means that Edom and Israel were brother nations. Edom occupied the land between the southern tip of the Dead Sea and the northern tip of the Gulf of Aqaba, the north-eastern arm of the Red Sea. In the west the land spread towards the dry southern part of Israel known as the Arabah, and in the east towards the desert of Arabia. In between was a mountainous region where most people lived. The chief cities were Sela, Bozrah and Teman, and the chief mountain Mt Seir.

An important road known as the King's Highway ran north from the Red Sea through Edom, Moab and Ammon to Syria. The Israelites under Moses asked Edom for permission to use this road on their journey to Canaan, but Edom refused, forcing the Israelites to make a long detour.<sup>1</sup> Edom developed a reputation for arrogance, in particular towards Israel, and ill-feeling between the two countries expressed itself repeatedly over the following centuries.

There were two main reasons for Edom's arrogance. One was the wisdom teachers for which it was famous, the other the strong defence system it had built throughout its rugged mountains. It believed no one could outwit or overthrow it; but defiance of God finally brought about its overthrow.<sup>2</sup>

Among the conquerors of Edom were the Arab tribal people, the Nabateans, who, in the third century BC, built the amazing rock city of Petra to replace the Edomites' Sela.<sup>3</sup> In New Testament times the Nabatean kingdom extended over the western part of Arabia and north to Damascus, the capital of Syria. It was during this time of Nabatean rule that the newly converted Paul escaped from Damascus in a basket. The 'Arabia' where he spent some of his earliest days as a Christian is more likely to refer to the Nabatean kingdom than to present-day Saudi Arabia.



*The mountains of Edom near Petra, Jordan*

1. Num 20:14-21

2. Jer 49:7,20,22; Amos 1:11-12; Obad 1-4,8-9; cf. 2 Chron 25:11-12

3. *Petra* is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew *Sela* and means 'rock'.

4. Acts 9:22-25; 2 Cor 11:32-33; Gal 1:17

## Upheaval in Arabia

Only rarely does the Bible mention Arabia by name. It usually refers to the peoples of the region by the family or tribal groups to which they belonged, such as Dedan, Kedar, Sheba and the like.<sup>1</sup> Many of the peoples were descended from Noah, Abraham and Esau.<sup>2</sup>

The present-day country that encompasses these ancient tribal lands, Saudi Arabia, is home to Islam's two most sacred locations, Mecca and Medina. Mecca was the home of Muhammad, the founder of Islam.<sup>3</sup> Muhammad grew up with a strong interest in religion, but was disillusioned with the corrupt idolatry around him. When almost forty, he began to have visions which he interpreted as divine revelations. Some early ideas came from Judaism and Christianity, but later he added Buddhist, Zoroastrian, Arab and Hindu elements. He was swept along by the belief that there was only one God, and that he, Muhammad, was God's last and greatest prophet.

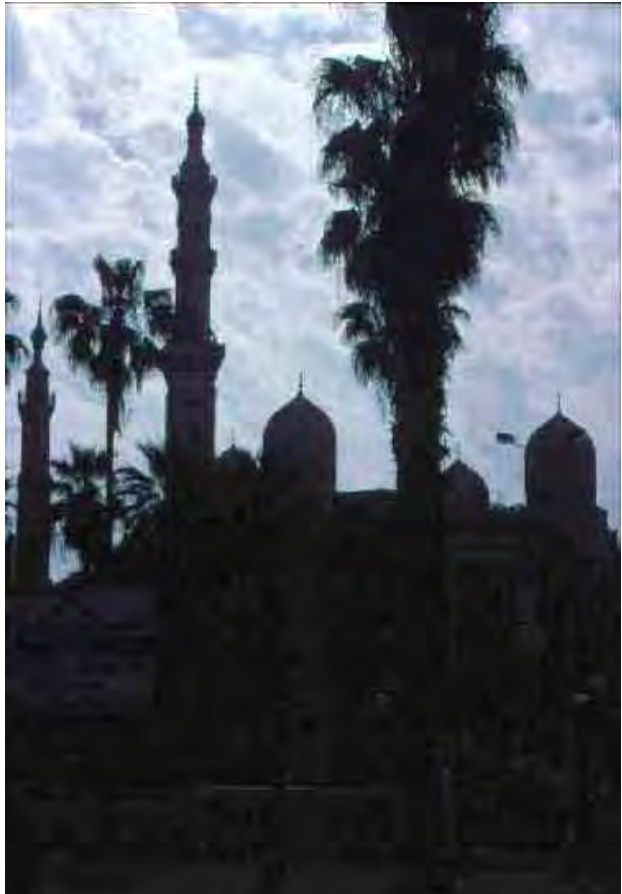
When the citizens of Mecca showed no great enthusiasm for his ideas, Muhammad tried to win them by preaching care for the family, love for children and peace to people everywhere. He had little success. After twelve years, he could tolerate the ridicule and opposition no longer, and fled to Medina (AD 622). This flight, known as the Hijrah, is the starting point for the Islamic calendar.

This flight to Medina marked a radical change in Muhammad's views. He turned from pacifism to violence, plundering the camel caravans and gaining support from Arab tribes by sharing the profits with them. He strengthened the alliances by marrying prominent tribal women. In 630, he returned in triumph to Mecca, purified the city, banished idols, and rededicated the city's ancient Arab shrine, the Kabah. By the time he died, all Arabia belonged to Islam. It was now more than merely a religion. Islam had become, and remains, a religious ideology with social and political objectives. Today Saudi Arabia is the world's most dangerous country for Christians.

1. Isa 21:13-17; 60:6; Jer 25:23-24; Ezek 27:20-22

2. Gen 10:1-32; 25:1-6; 36:1-43

3. Islam takes its name from an Arabic word meaning 'submission'; that is, submission to God (Allah). 'Muslim' comes from the same root.



*Mosque, sign of Islam's presence*

## Power, control and self-interest

At the western end of the deserts of Arabia is the Red Sea, the north of which separates into two arms that semi-enclose the Sinai Peninsula. The easterly of these two arms, the Gulf of Aqaba, is bounded by Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Israel and Egypt. The shore controlled by Jordan and Israel is only a small area around the top of the gulf, but it gives both countries access to the Red Sea. The boundary cuts between two ports, Aqaba on the Jordanian side and Elat on the Israeli side.

In biblical times Elat (Elath, or Eloth) was linked with Ezion-geber, the two names often being used interchangeably. It was of strategic importance because of the trade routes that passed through it – sea routes that went south and east, and land routes that went north and west.<sup>1</sup>

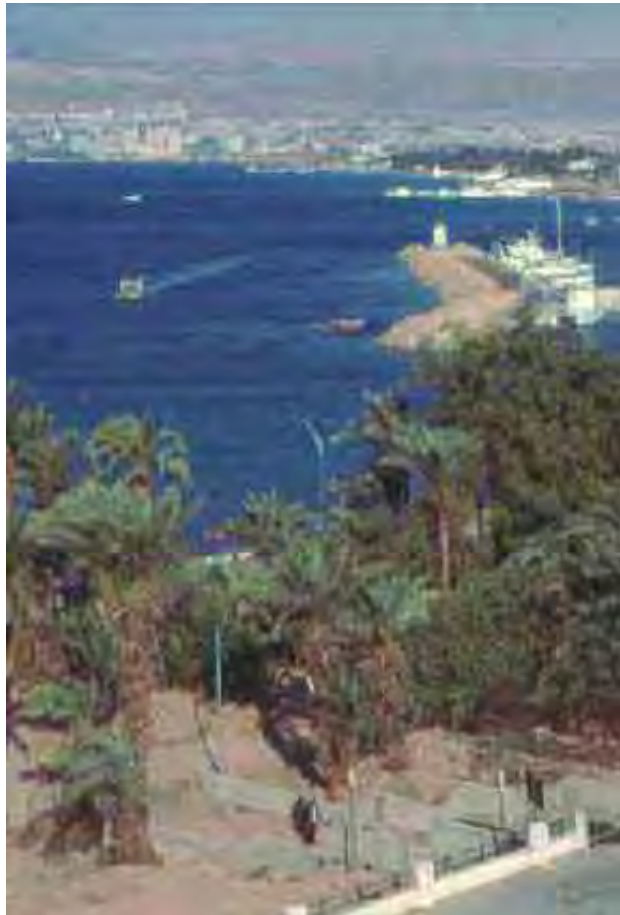
Solomon of Israel formed a commercial alliance with Hiram of Lebanon, so that goods from the Mediterranean were received at Hiram's port of Tyre, taken overland to Solomon's port of Ezion-geber, and shipped east on a fleet of ships that Hiram helped Solomon establish. The ships went as far east as Ophir, believed to be in the region of India, and enriched both kings by bringing back large quantities of valuable and exotic goods.<sup>2</sup>

This short-cut from the Mediterranean Sea to the Indian Ocean anticipated the short-cut provided 2800 years later when the Suez Canal was built, though it used the other arm of the Red Sea, the Gulf of Suez, to connect with the Mediterranean. Because of its strategic importance, the canal became the subject of international conflicts, in much the same way as Ezion-geber was a cause of conflicts between Judah and Edom. Being a prize of war, Ezion-geber changed backwards and forwards between Judah and Edom, depending on which nation was stronger.<sup>3</sup>

1. Deut 2:8; 1 Kings 9:26

2. 1 Kings 9:26-28; 10:11,22; cf. 22:48

3. 2 Kings 14:22; 16:6



*Aqaba on the Red Sea*

## Land of bondage

Egypt features in the story of Israel from the time of the nation's original ancestor, Abraham. Later, his descendants migrated there, and over several hundred years they increased from a large family to a small nation. The Egyptians, fearful of the Israelites, forced them into slavery, till God raised up Moses to lead them to freedom<sup>1</sup> and set them on their way to a new homeland in Canaan. Israelites, by means of the Passover festival, have from Bible times remembered Egypt as a place of bondage out of which God redeemed them.<sup>2</sup>

The life of Egypt has always been dependent on the Nile River, which flows 5,600 kilometres from inland Africa and enters the Mediterranean Sea through a large delta. Apart from the land either side of the river and in the delta, Egypt is largely desert. Delta cities such as Memphis and Rameses served as capitals of Egypt at different times. Memphis was on roughly the same site as modern Cairo. Rameses was built by the Israelites, whose allotted region of Goshen was within the delta. But the most magnificent of Egypt's capitals was Thebes, about 500 kilometres upstream.<sup>3</sup>

Ruling from these cities were god-like kings who carried the title 'Pharaoh'. Believing that when they died they passed from the world of humans to the world of the gods, they prepared for such a future by building themselves elaborate tombs. Among these were the pyramids, some of which already existed in the time of Moses. That was an era when Egypt enjoyed five hundred years of power and magnificence.

By the time Israel was settled in Canaan with a strong monarchy, Egypt was no longer the power it once was. During the time of Israel's divided kingdom, both north and south were at times tempted to rely upon Egypt for help, but they were always disappointed. God's prophets had one message: trust in God, not in political deals or military power.<sup>4</sup>

1. 1280 BC

2. Exod 12:1-32; Deut 16:1-3; Luke 22:1,15

3. Gen 47:27; Exod 1:11; 8:22; Isa 19:13; Jer 46:25; Nahum 3:8

4. 2 Kings 17:4-6; 18:21,24; Isa 30:1-3,15-16; 31:1-5



*Pyramid of Cheops close-up*

## Out of Africa

The bridge between Africa and Asia is the barren Sinai Peninsula. This is where God gave Israel his law to prepare the people for life in Canaan. But they paid little attention, and as a result spent forty wasted years in the Sinai wilderness – the price of self-will.

Although Sinai today is part of Egypt, in biblical times it was occupied by various tribal groups. One of these was the Amalekites, a tribe of wild desert nomads who were infamous for their practice of raiding the defenceless. Israel's attempts to destroy them, while not completely successful, at least helped towards their eventual disappearance as a distinct group.<sup>1</sup>

Another group outside the borders of Egypt were the people of Cush. The name refers to the people of countries along the Nile to Egypt's south, namely, the northern parts of the countries that we today know as Sudan and Ethiopia. Sometimes the name is used as a general term for all the dark-skinned peoples of Africa.<sup>2</sup> Cush represented the southernmost region that people in Palestine knew about – the end of the earth, so to speak.<sup>3</sup>

West of Egypt was the African tribal people referred to in the Bible as Put. They occupied the land today called Libya, possibly along with another group, the Lubim.<sup>4</sup>

During the six centuries from the period of Babylonian rule to the time of the New Testament, Egypt and these surrounding peoples fell under foreign domination – Persian, Greek and Roman. But also during that time, Jewish communities in those countries established synagogues, where they and local non-Jewish people worshipped. Simon, the North African who carried Jesus' cross, was from a town in present-day Libya. The official that Philip evangelized was from Ethiopia. These, like many others, believed in God, but they only became Christians when they believed in Christ.<sup>5</sup>

1. Exod 17:8-14; Judg 6:3,33; 1 Sam 15:18-19; 30:1

2. Isa 18:1-2; Jer 13:23; Ezek 29:10

3. Isa 11:11; Zeph 3:10

4. 2 Chron 12:3; 16:8; Jer 46:9; Ezek 30:5; Nahum 3:9

5. Mark 15:21; Acts 8:27-39; 11:20; 13:1



*Khan al-Khalili, Cairo's oldest bazaar*

## New directions

After its defeat by Babylon at the Battle of Carchemish in 605 BC, Egypt never regained its former power.<sup>1</sup> Subsequently, it was defeated by Persia but, not wanting to be subservient, repeatedly rebelled. Finally, its last native ruler was removed.

With Alexander the Great's conquest in 332 BC, Egypt came under Greek rule. Alexander built a grand city as a Mediterranean port for Egypt and named it after himself, Alexandria. It was the greatest Greek city of the time, the capital of Egypt during the Greek and Roman periods, and a busy centre of commercial and manufacturing activity.

The population of Alexandria was a mixture of Greek, Egyptian, Jewish and Roman. The city became a centre of learning, not just for Greek philosophers but also for Jewish Bible scholars, seventy of whom prepared the first Greek translation of the Old Testament. This is known as the Septuagint and was widely used in New Testament times along with the Hebrew Scriptures. A feature of the Alexandrian scholars was that they were eloquent speakers whose interpretations were detailed, earnest, and well stocked with Old Testament references to the Messiah.<sup>2</sup>

Most Jewish scholars, however, did not know that the Messiah was Jesus, and that as a baby he had lived for a time with his parents in Egypt.<sup>3</sup> The Jewish scholars in Palestine, among whom were some from Alexandria,<sup>4</sup> were even less enlightened. In the end they killed Jesus and, soon after, his outspoken follower, Stephen.

When the Emperor Constantine christianized the empire in AD 313, Egypt became a nominally Christian country. But in AD 641, after the rise of Muhammad, it fell under Muslim rule. It has remained Muslim ever since.

1. 2 Kings 24:7; Jer 46:2

2. Acts 18:24-28

3. Matt 2:13-15,19-21

4. Acts 6:9



*Alexandria*

## Israel's northern neighbours

Immediately to the north of Israel was a territory consisting of a flat fertile coastal region that rose into well-timbered mountains. The coastal region was known as Phoenicia and the mountain range as Lebanon, the latter being the name for the present-day nation that covers most of both areas. The cedar tree, for which Lebanon has always been famous, has become a national symbol.<sup>1</sup>

In biblical times, the coastal boundary between Israel and Phoenicia was not clearly defined. Apart from occasional conflicts, Israelite tribes lived peaceably with their northern neighbours. On Israel's side of the border, just north of the headland at Mt Carmel, was the port of Acco, later renamed Ptolemais.<sup>2</sup> Further north, in Phoenicia, were the important ports of Tyre and Sidon, between which was the town of Zarephath.<sup>3</sup> Further north again, past Lebanon's present-day capital of Beirut, was the town of Gebal, later renamed Byblos.<sup>4</sup>

During the ninth century BC, Phoenicia was the source of a serious threat to Israel's religious survival. Jezebel, a Phoenician princess, married the Israelite king and tried to make Phoenician Baalism the national religion of Israel. The ministry of the prophets Elijah and Elisha was specifically concerned with preserving the faithful and judging the guilty during this time.<sup>5</sup>

The mixture of religion and politics created troubles not only in biblical times but also through the eras that followed. Lebanon was christianized by the Romans, islamized by the Arabs, invaded by the Crusaders, and trampled on by any who sought supremacy in the region. Repeated destruction and rebuilding give it the appearance of being chaotic and fragmented, but it is determined to survive. It is the only Arab country not officially Muslim. About one third of the population calls itself Christian.



*Sea wall at Acco*

1. 1 Kings 4:33; 5:6; 2 Kings 19:23; Acts 11:19

2. Judg 1:31; Acts 21:7

3. 1 Kings 5:1,6; 17:9; Ezra 3:7

4. Josh 13:5; Ezek 27:9

5. 1 Kings 16:30-33; 19:15-18



## Cities by the sea

Phoenicia was one of the great maritime nations of the ancient world. Its merchant ships, beautifully made and sailed by skilled seamen, carried a great variety of goods and brought it much wealth.<sup>1</sup>

Wealth brought with it two main problems. One was that Phoenicia became arrogant. It saw itself as all-powerful, a god among the nations who could use its economic strength to do whatever it wished.<sup>2</sup> Its oppression of weaker neighbours was not through military might but through commercial power.

The second problem was that Phoenicia's wealth made it a target for other greedy nations, who wanted to break through its defences and capture its wealth for themselves. As often happens, God used the fruits of wrongdoing to punish wrongdoing. He used the greed of other nations, first the Babylonians and then the Greeks, to punish the arrogance of Phoenicia.<sup>3</sup>

As the years passed, the Phoenician cities recovered from the devastation and by New Testament times were well populated again. They were, however, now part of the Roman Empire and under the rule of Rome-appointed governors. Jesus visited the region on at least one occasion, and people from the region visited Galilee to hear him preach and seek his healing.<sup>4</sup>

A few years later, when fierce persecution drove the early Christians from Jerusalem, many of them fled to Tyre, Sidon and other cities of Phoenicia and planted churches there. They supported Paul's international mission, and Paul visited them whenever possible.<sup>5</sup>

1. Ezek 27:1-9,12-25

2. Isa 23:1-18; Ezek 28:1-23

3. Jer 27:3-6; Ezek 26:2-14. The Babylonian attack, under Nebuchadnezzar, was in 587 BC; the Greek attack, under Alexander the Great, in 333 BC.

4. Mark 7:24-26; Luke 6:17; Acts 12:20

5. Acts 11:19; 15:3; 21:2-6; 27:3



*Mediterranean coast at Tyre*

## The power of language

The modern nation known as the Syrian Arab Republic covers much the same region as ancient Syria, though its boundaries have shifted over the years. The present capital, Damascus, is one of the world's oldest cities and has existed since the dawn of history.

In early biblical times the land was known as Aram and its people as Arameans. Abraham spent some time there, mainly in Haran, on his way to Canaan, and many of his clan settled there. His son Isaac and grandson Jacob both married women from this clan, and Jacob lived in Aram long enough to become known as an Aramean.<sup>1</sup>

Aram does not feature again in the biblical story till the time of the divided Israelite kingdom, when the Bible usually calls it Syria (though some versions retain Aram). By this time the Aramaic language had spread so widely that it was the most commonly used language of south-west Asia. Ancient Syria had many conflicts with Israel, but its lasting influence was not through its military power but through its language.

Written Aramaic used letters that were similar to Hebrew letters, and isolated sections of the Old Testament are written in Aramaic instead of the usual Hebrew.<sup>2</sup> In the Persian Empire, Aramaic was the official language.<sup>3</sup>

When Alexander the Great conquered Persia, the Greek language spread throughout his empire and became the official language. But in south-west Asia, Aramaic was still widely used, in spite of the increasing use of Greek. Aramaic was the language Jesus and his disciples usually spoke, though they also used Greek, the language in which the New Testament is written. In some cases the actual words Jesus spoke, 'talitha cumi', 'ephphatha', and 'eloi, eloi, lama, sabachthani',<sup>4</sup> are transliterated as well as translated. The hearers apparently felt that no translation could fully capture the feeling with which they were spoken.

1. Gen 12:1-5; 25:20; 28:1-5; 29:4-5; 31:20;  
Deut 26:5

2. Ezra 4:8-6:18; 7:12-26; Jer 10:11; Dan 2:4-7:28

3. Ezra 4:7. The period of Persian rule over Israel was 539-333 BC.

4. Mark 5:41; 7:34; 15:34



*Hebrew scroll*

## One empire after another

During the period when Old Testament Israel was divided, Syria was a bitter enemy of the northern kingdom. It attacked often, seized conquered territory and treated its victims so cruelly that God's prophets assured it of a terrible punishment.<sup>1</sup> The judgment fell when Assyria conquered it in 732 BC.

Syria had no independent national existence for the next four hundred years, being merely a land within the successive empires of Assyria, Babylon, Persia and Greece. But during the Greek period it regained status when, after Alexander's death, the empire split into a number of sectors, one of which was centred on Syria and ruled by a Greek dynasty called the Seleucids. About 300 BC, the founder of this dynasty built the city of Antioch as his administrative capital and Seleucia as its Mediterranean port.

A dynasty of thirteen kings, most of them with the name Antiochus or Seleucus, reigned over Syria for more than two hundred years. The most notorious of them was Antiochus IV Epiphanes, whose hatred of Israel overflowed when he invaded Jerusalem, slaughtered the Jews, abolished their law, burnt their Scriptures, and offered unclean animals on a Greek altar in their temple. To Jews, this was the supreme atrocity, 'the abomination of desolation'.<sup>2</sup> The Jewish resistance, led by a group known as the Maccabees, fought for more than three years till, in 165 BC, they overthrew the enemy and re-dedicated the temple.<sup>3</sup>

The Jews continued the war till they won full political independence in 143 BC. But the Jews soon became hopelessly divided, while the Seleucids to the north consistently lost more of the extensive territory they once ruled. In 64 BC the Seleucids were conquered by Rome, and Syria became a province of the emerging Roman Empire. The next year Israel lost its independence when it also fell to Rome.

1. 1 Kings 20:1; 2 Kings 6:24; 10:32; 13:22;  
Amos 1:3-4

2. Dan 11:31

3. Jews celebrate the event annually in the Feast of Dedication; John 10:22



*Antioch's city wall at Seleucia, where it extended to enclose the port*

## Syrian Christians

Christianity came to Syria through the efforts of Greek-speaking Jewish Christians who were driven out of Jerusalem after the killing of Stephen.<sup>1</sup> Paul was converted in Syria, and although he had to flee when Jewish extremists tried to kill him, he later returned for a period and then moved north to his hometown region of Cilicia.<sup>2</sup>

Years later Paul returned to Syria and played an important part in the growth of the newly planted church in Antioch. This church, started through the work of Christian migrants from Cyprus and North Africa, had a vision to spread the gospel to other countries. It became the base for Paul's international missionary travels.<sup>3</sup>

Over the following centuries, Antioch became an important centre in the development of church organization and theological beliefs. In the fifth century an Antioch church leader named Nestorius rose to prominence when, having moved to Constantinople, he became involved in a serious doctrinal dispute. Some considered him a heretic, but others saw him as a victim of church politics. Loyal followers formed what became known as the Nestorian church. It was based in Persia and had much evangelistic zeal.

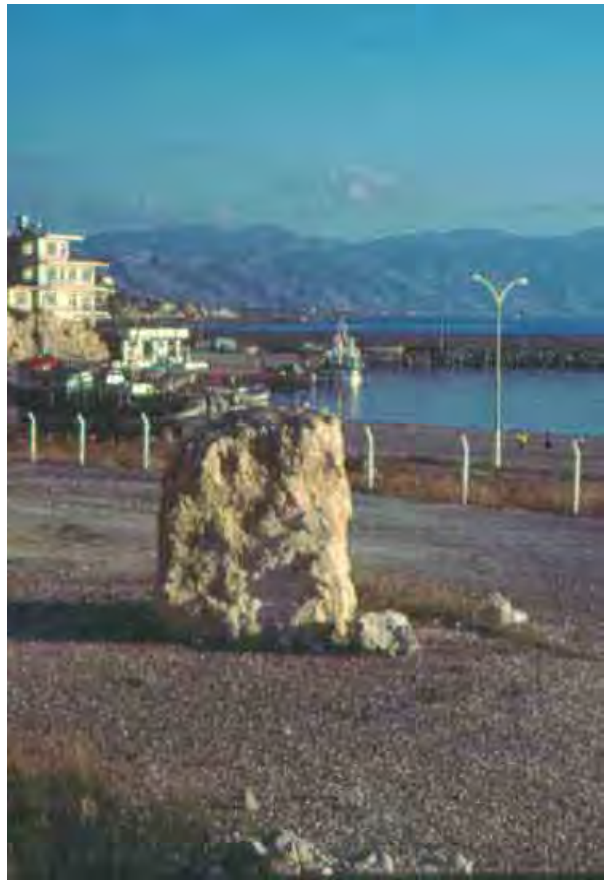
Nestorian missionaries spread through the regions of present-day Iran, Iraq and Syria, and some went as far as India. There they linked up with a well-established church that traced its origins back to the arrival of the apostle Thomas in South India in AD 52. Other factors strengthened Syrian influence and to this day there is a prominent Syrian Church in South India. It takes different forms in Catholic, Orthodox and other traditions.

Syrian influence survives in other places also. Across the Middle East there are descendants of early Nestorian churches who call themselves Assyrian Christians. In Syria itself Christians amount to five percent of the population and are well respected. Although it is a secular state that recognizes Islam as the religion of the majority, Syria upholds religious freedom for minorities.

1. Acts 8:1; 9:1-2,10; 11:19-21

2. Acts 9:1-30; Gal 1:13-21

3. Acts 11:19-26; 13:1-4; 14:26; 15:30-41; 18:18-22



*Waterfront at Seleucia*

## Across the mountains

Turkey is a large country that stretches west across Asia Minor into Europe, and east almost to the Caucasus Mountains. Besides being the native land of the Turks, it is home to about half the world's Kurds, the largest ethnic group anywhere that does not have its own homeland. The other half of the Kurds live mainly in the countries that border Turkey to the south – Syria, Iraq and Iran. This rugged mountainous region, where the Kurds have lived for more than four thousand years, is loosely referred to as Kurdistan.

Kurds, who are thought to be related to the Medes,<sup>1</sup> have retained their identity in spite of being absorbed into the many empires that spread across their territory. The same is true of Armenians, who now have their own independent nation on Turkey's eastern border. Whereas Kurds are mostly Muslim, Armenians are mostly Christian, with a tradition that traces their church back to apostolic times. The mountains of Ararat, resting place of Noah's ark, are in Armenia.<sup>2</sup>

About half way across Turkey, where the rugged eastern mountains give way to a high uneven plateau, are the Taurus Mountains. In ancient times the only way through these mountains to Syria was through a pass known as the Cilician Gates. This was the route followed by Alexander the Great on his way to Issus in northern Syria,<sup>3</sup> where his victory over Persia in 333 BC marked the end of the Persian Empire.

Paul the apostle also used this route, though in the opposite direction. At the beginning of both his second and third missionary journeys, he came from Antioch through the regions of Syria and Cilicia and then moved up to the central plateau. His hometown of Tarsus, on the Mediterranean coastal plain, was the chief city of Cilicia and a famed centre of learning.<sup>4</sup>

1. Isa 13:17; Dan 5:30-31; 6:8

2. Gen 8:4; 2 Kings 19:37

3. At that time Issus, like Antioch and Seleucia, was part of Syria. Today they are all part of Turkey.

4. Acts 15:41; 18:22-23; 21:39



*Taurus Mountains, Turkey*

## Evangelism in Turkey

The early missionary activity of Paul, Barnabas, Silas and Timothy in Turkey was in the southern part of the region known in Roman times as Galatia. Paul usually travelled along the highways that the Romans built to connect the main cities, his aim being to plant churches in the chief population centres. With strong churches in these centres, the gospel soon spread to the surrounding countryside. The main cities of Galatia where Paul began churches were Antioch, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe.<sup>1</sup>

Another region where Paul did some of his early evangelism in Turkey was along the Mediterranean coast to the south, around the towns of Perga and Attalia.<sup>2</sup> These towns gave access to important shipping routes.

Perhaps the most strategic city Paul wanted to reach was Ephesus, on the west coast, but before he was able to do this, God directed him north to Troas, from where he sailed to Greece. On his way back he called briefly at Ephesus, and later spent three years there.<sup>3</sup>

For much of Paul's three years in Ephesus, he taught a group of enthusiastic Christians in a lecture hall borrowed from a local school teacher. These Christians then took the gospel to surrounding areas so that the whole province was evangelized.<sup>4</sup> In his writings, Paul talks about churches in Colossae, Laodicea and Hierapolis,<sup>5</sup> places he himself seems not to have visited. Most likely, these churches were planted during this time of outreach from Ephesus.

The coast on which Ephesus was located bordered the Aegean Sea and marked the western extremity of the vast continent of Asia. This was where Asia ended, but to the Greeks, coming across the Aegean from the other side, it was where Asia began. They called the area Asia, and the Romans used the same name when they made the area a province within Asia Minor.

1. Acts 13:14,49; 14:1,6,21-23; Gal 1:2; 4:13-15
2. Acts 13:13; 14:25-26
3. Acts 16:6-10; 18:19-21; 19:1; 20:31
4. Acts 19:8-10
5. Col 2:1; 4:13,16



*Ephesus*

## People of influence

Although biblical references to Asia Minor are usually associated with Paul's missionary journeys, there are occasional references in the Old Testament. The names mentioned often belonged originally to individuals and were used later of peoples descended from them or the places where they lived. Among such places were Gomer, Magog, Tubal, Meshech and Togarmah.<sup>1</sup> Asia Minor was also the original land of the West Asian people known as the Hittites.<sup>2</sup>

Jews from Asia Minor were in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost, and may have been among the first Christian converts.<sup>3</sup> There is a tradition that Peter and Mark preached in some parts of Asia Minor while Paul preached in others. The Bible preserves a letter Peter wrote to Christians in certain provinces, among them Bithynia and Pontus beside the Black Sea and Cappadocia in the central plateau.<sup>4</sup>

Towards the end of the first century, John sent letters to churches in seven towns of another province, Asia. John was a prisoner on an island off the west coast, but the messenger who carried the letters, after landing at Ephesus, probably delivered the letters one by one as he moved from that church around the other six – Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea.<sup>5</sup>

Some of the seven towns are now only ruins, but some are alive with activity. Laodicea, for example, is a hill of scattered rubble, but Smyrna, present-day Izmir, is Turkey's third largest city. Ephesus, with extensive ruins, is the place whose associations with the New Testament can be most readily identified.

Ephesus remained an important centre through the early centuries of the church, and in AD 431 was the location for one of the four great church councils of that period. The other three<sup>6</sup> were also held in Turkey, either in Constantinople or nearby.

1. Gen 10:2-5; Ezek 27:13-14; 38:2,6

2. Gen 26:34

3. Acts 2:9-10

4. 1 Peter 1:1

5. Rev 1:4,9-11

6. Nicaea (325), Constantinople (381), and Chalcedon (451)



*Thyatira, modern Akhisar, Turkey*

## The great divide

Turkey's west coast has many ports that provide access to the Aegean islands and the European mainland. Paul sailed to or from many of these, among them Miletus and Ephesus in the south, Assos and Troas in the north. The sea route from Troas to Macedonia seems to have been his preferred crossing-place into Europe.<sup>1</sup>

For overland travel, however, the preferred route for most people was across the Bosphorus. This is a narrow passage of water at the top of the Aegean Sea through which all shipping from the Mediterranean to the Black Sea must pass. To its west is Europe and to its east is Asia.

Some years after Constantine declared the Roman Empire Christian,<sup>2</sup> he built a new capital beside the Bosphorus so that he could better control his eastern territories. This city, built on the site of old Byzantium, was his 'New Rome', but it was better known as Constantinople. Today it is called Istanbul, and is part of the small but strategic part of Europe that belongs to Turkey.

Until the time of Constantine, the bishop of Rome had been the most powerful church figure, but now he had to compete with the bishop of Constantinople. In time a clear division emerged, one church known as Roman Catholic and based in the west, the other known as Eastern Orthodox and based in Constantinople. Their differences were reinforced by the division of the empire into Roman and Byzantine.<sup>3</sup>

The Byzantine rulers survived the Islamic aggression of the seventh century, but conflict continued for many centuries. Then, in 1453, the Muslims conquered Constantinople and made it the capital of a new Turkish Empire. Among the notable church buildings turned into mosques was the magnificent Saint Sophia. It is now a non-religious national monument. Turkey today is still Islamic, though officially it is a secular state that tolerates minority religions.

1. Acts 16:11; 20:6,13-15

2. In AD 313

3. The Roman Empire fell in AD 476, but the Roman Church survived.



*Istanbul on the Bosphorus*



## Civilization and the cross

Jesus has always been a long way ahead of his followers in having a breadth of vision that is wider than the narrow views of nationalism. This was demonstrated when, not long before his crucifixion, some Greeks came to see him.<sup>1</sup> Jesus welcomed them as a sign that his current mission was about to be fulfilled (in his death and resurrection) and a new mission was about to begin (in the evangelization of the Gentiles).

Among the early Christians, the person who came closest to sharing Jesus' expansive view of the world was Paul. Yet even he needed divine intervention to convince him to take the radical step of leaving Asia and going into Europe. God directed him to Greece and, without hesitation, Paul went.<sup>2</sup>

Greece was not always the political entity we know today. In Old Testament times part of it was the land of Javan; in New Testament times it covered several states, the most important of which were Macedonia in the north and Achaia in the south.<sup>3</sup>

Macedonia was the home of Alexander the Great, who in the fourth century BC established an empire that changed the world. People had never before enjoyed a life where education, entertainment, sport and social welfare were so widely available.

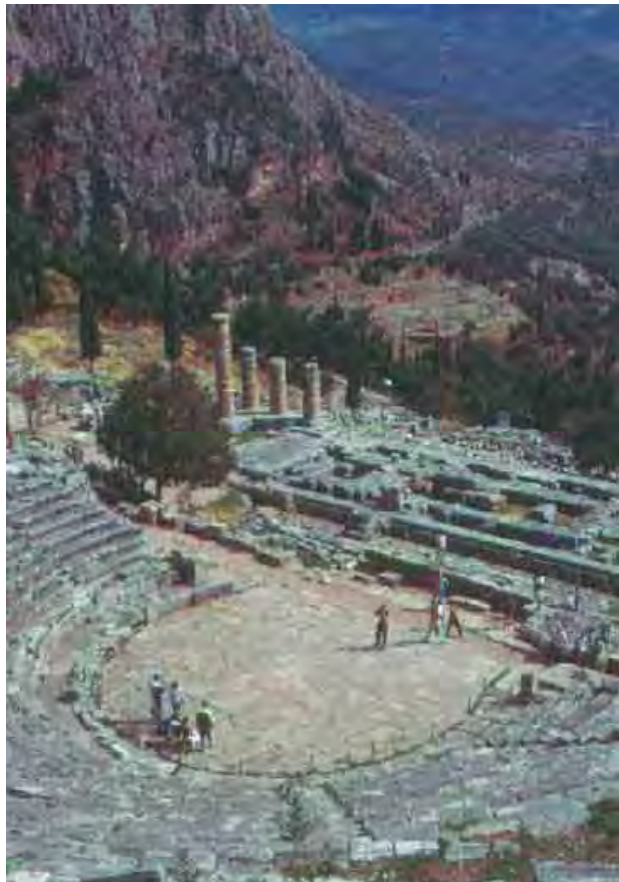
By New Testament times, Rome was the imperial ruler, but Greek culture and language were still dominant. Greek was spoken everywhere, which made international evangelism easier and provided a language for the New Testament that most people understood. But the human tendency to self-interest can distort or misuse even the most helpful things. Many who accepted the Greek culture regarded themselves as civilized and all others as barbarians. Even Christians were guilty of this, and had to be reminded of what the gospel is and what it demands. At the heart of Christianity is a cross.<sup>4</sup>

1. John 12:20-26

2. Acts 16:6-10

3. Isa 66:19; Ezek 27:13; Acts 16:12; 19:21.  
Biblical Macedonia is not the same as present-day Macedonia, a nation whose major race is Slavic.

4. 1 Cor 1:17-25; cf. Rom 1:14



*Ruins from 4th Century BC at Delphi, Greece*

## From vibrant outreach to dead orthodoxy

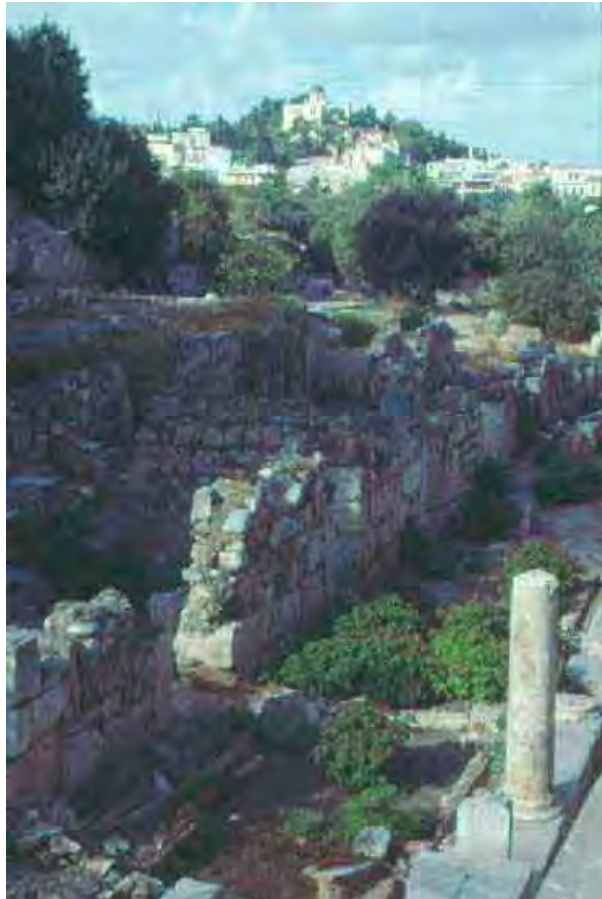
On Paul's first visit to Greece, and possibly his subsequent visits, he landed at the port of Neapolis (modern Kavala) and visited nearby Philippi, site of the first church he planted in Europe.<sup>1</sup> Any trip from Philippi west would use the Egnatian Way, a Roman highway that joined Neapolis on one side of Greece with the Adriatic Sea on the other. Along this route was Thessalonica,<sup>2</sup> modern Greece's second largest city.

Paul planted a vigorous, outreaching church in Thessalonica, and another in Berea, which was off the Egnatian Way and on the route south to Athens.<sup>3</sup> Athens was a magnificent city and a famed centre of learning and philosophy. But if Paul had hopes of establishing a strong church there, he was disappointed. The church that became prominent in Achaia was not Athens but Corinth, though in time it became for Paul a source of heartache.<sup>4</sup>

Today Greece has many ancient landmarks to remind people of its glorious past, but the church in general does not reflect the robust Christianity of apostolic times. The Orthodox Church, while enjoying a status of privilege with the government, is more an upholder of Greek culture than a guardian of the gospel. Most people belong to the Greek Orthodox Church, but fewer than two percent attend church regularly. There is widespread resistance to the proclamation of the gospel.

At some stage during his travels, Paul went to Illyricum, a region that stretches north from Greece along the Adriatic coast through Albania and into the countries of Former Yugoslavia. The southern part of this region was known in Roman times as Dalmatia.<sup>5</sup> Today the religion of most people throughout ancient Illyricum is either Orthodox, Catholic or Muslim.

1. Acts 16:11-12; Phil 4:1,15-16
2. Acts 17:1; 1 Thess 1:5-9
3. Acts 17:10-12
4. Acts 17:15-16; 18:1
5. Rom 15:19; 2 Tim 4:10



*Athens: view from the Roman Forum to an Orthodox church*

## Islands

Israel has never been known for its seafaring, and the islands of the Mediterranean do not feature often in the biblical story. Crete, however, was an indirect source of influence in Israel's affairs, because it was the original land of the Philistines.<sup>1</sup> In New Testament times, Paul visited the island and left Titus there to deal with difficulties in the churches.<sup>2</sup> The island today is part of the nation of Greece.

Cyprus was once known as Kittim, and its people were renowned sea traders.<sup>3</sup> In New Testament times the island had a large population of Jews, some of whom, on becoming Christians, broke loose from their more traditional brothers and embarked upon a radical mission to the Gentiles. Barnabas, a Jewish Cypriot, went with Paul, and later Mark, on evangelistic missions to Cyprus.<sup>4</sup>

In Cyprus today local evangelicals are few. But the country is an important base for many Christian ministries to the Middle East. Politically, it struggles to establish its independence, the land being partitioned between a majority population that is Greek and Orthodox and a minority population that is Turkish and Muslim.

The islands Lesbos (location of Mitylene), Chios, Samos, Patmos, Cos and Rhodes, which appear in the biblical record, are all part of present-day Greece. They are, however, on the opposite side of the Aegean Sea and are close to the coast of Turkey.<sup>5</sup>

Malta and Sicily, two islands close to the mainland of Italy, feature briefly in the account of Paul's journey to Rome.<sup>6</sup> Malta is today an independent nation, but Sicily is part of Italy. Both islands are almost entirely Catholic.

1. See page 8

2. Acts 27:7-21; Titus 1:5

3. Gen 10:2-5; Num 24:24; Isa 23:1,12; Ezek 27:6

4. Acts 4:36; 11:19-20; 13:2-6; 15:39

5. Acts 20:14-15; 21:1; Rev 1:9; see also Ezek 27:15

6. Acts 28:1,12-13. Syracuse is on Sicily.



*St Paul's Bay, Malta*

## Looking west

Rome's Empire completely encircled the Mediterranean Sea. From its centre in Italy, it spread west over France and Spain, east over Greece and Asia Minor, south over Syria and Palestine into Egypt, and then west again along the north African coast. Paul had an ambition not just to reach the heart of the empire in Rome, but to keep moving west till he reached Spain.<sup>1</sup>

Tarshish is believed to have been in Spain, near Gibraltar. It was rich in minerals and was one of the great traders of the ancient world. It became famous for the large ships it built to carry its goods far and wide, and in time such ships were called by its name. A 'ship of Tarshish' was the common name for any large ocean-going cargo ship, especially an ore-carrier. The name did not indicate where the ship was built or where it was sailing.<sup>2</sup>

Other large ships were those which, in Greek and Roman times, were associated with Alexandria. These mostly carried grain from Egypt to Greece and Rome, and on occasions provided Paul with transport.<sup>3</sup> It was on one of these ships that Paul first arrived in Italy. He and his party came ashore at Puteoli,<sup>4</sup> which is adjacent to Naples and near Vesuvius, the volcano that destroyed Pompeii in AD 79.

Though a prisoner, Paul was allowed a degree of freedom till his case came before the Emperor. A number of Roman Christians therefore went south to meet him and walk with him on the last sixty or so kilometres to Rome. This route took them along the impressive Appian Way<sup>5</sup> and past huge underground burial areas that Jewish migrants had carved out of the soft limestone. These burial places, known as catacombs, were used also by the early Christians as burial places.

1. Acts 19:21; Rom 15:24,28

2. 1 Kings 22:48; Ezek 27:12,25; Jonah 1:3

3. Acts 27:6; 28:11

4. Acts 28:13

5. Acts 28:14-15



*The Appian Way*

## Rome and beyond

The church was already established in Rome when Paul arrived. The Bible does not record how it began, but Christians would have been among the many travellers or migrants who came to Rome, and these no doubt spread the gospel.<sup>1</sup> Paul had a vision to see Christianity so strongly established in Rome that it would spread across the entire empire and beyond.

In Paul's day, however, the official religion of the state was Emperor-worship. Christianity was an unlicensed religion and subject to official discrimination. Paul could never have imagined that within three hundred years the church would be so powerful that it would, in effect, take over the state. If he had lived to see the outcome of this, he would not have been pleased with what he saw. The apostle who preached Christ's message of commitment would never be pleased with mere nominalism. The man who preached freedom and tolerance among Christ's people would be angry to see legalism and bigotry become all-powerful.

The relics and buildings that survive in Rome are monuments to all sorts of things – the heroism of early Christians, the hedonism of Rome's citizens, the supremacy of the Roman Empire, the cruelty of its Emperors, the creativity of its artists, the power of a state church. Modern Italy may preserve the impressive achievements of former eras, but it displays little of the spirit of those who guided and taught the original church in Rome.

Well-founded traditions declare that Paul and Peter were the victims of anti-Christian persecution and were executed in Rome.<sup>2</sup> But they are only two among thousands who suffered under imperial Rome and gave their lives in the cause of Christ. Around the world today, whether in places sympathetic to Christians or those violently opposed, Christians are still required to count the cost of following Jesus. But it is always the way to fuller life.<sup>3</sup>

1. Acts 2:10; 18:2; Rom 1:13; 16:3-16
2. 2 Tim 4:6; cf. John 21:18-19
3. Matt 16:24-25; John 3:16; 17:3



*Arch of Titus, Rome, completed AD*



