

*The*  
WORLD OF  
JESUS

Making Sense of the People and Places of Jesus' Day

DR. WILLIAM H. MARTY



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To my devoted wife, Linda, who loves me  
because of and despite who I am.

And to my daughter, Talitha,  
loving wife of Jeff, and one of the most  
compassionate persons I know.

And to my son, Stephen,  
husband of Monica and father of my two  
grandchildren, Judah and Isaac.

When I was younger, I was blessed  
by my wife and my children,  
and now that I'm older, I am also blessed  
by my two grandchildren.

God is indeed good!



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# Introduction

## *The Time Has Come*

This is a book I've wanted to write for several years. I have been teaching Old Testament and New Testament Survey for more than three decades, and as part of the latter, I teach about the history of Israel between the Testaments. In most Bibles, you simply turn a page from Malachi, last book in the Old Testament, to Matthew, first book in the New. But in fact, there was an intertestamental period between the Old Testament and the New—four centuries of history, happenings, changes and developments, kingdoms and empires, births and lives and deaths. Knowing what happened during that era is crucial to understanding the earthly life of Jesus Christ and the New Testament settings and events.

My lectures and books on the subject are detailed and technical. Often I've thought about how useful it would be to make this material accessible, available to everyone. That's what I've sought to do in this book—provide reader-friendly information and insight on the world of Jesus.

## Why Is This Important?

When reading through the Bible, turning from the Old Testament to the New is like visiting another country. A few years ago, I had the opportunity to teach in Russia for about a year. It was an incredible experience. The people were wonderful, not like I had anticipated because of the relatively recent hostilities between the former Soviet Union and the United States.

It was also challenging. To prepare, I studied Russian history and culture. I even took a course in the language. Though I would have an interpreter, I knew I should know enough Russian to ask where to find food, water, and the bathroom. My preparations helped, yet still I was surprised by the differences between the two nations. While many Russians looked like Americans, I quickly realized their language and culture were completely different from mine. Anyone who has visited another part of the world can appreciate this.

The world of Jesus was not the Old Testament Hebrew world. Like the United States now, Israel was multicultural, including a combination of Aramaic, Greek, and Roman influences. The people looked Jewish but spoke Aramaic and Greek. The Bible that many used was a Greek translation of the Old Testament (see chapter 2). Some dressed like Jews; others dressed and lived like Greeks. When Jesus began his ministry, his chief opponents (Pharisees and Sadducees) were from groups the Old Testament doesn't even mention.

In addition to worship in the temple, Jews met in synagogues for prayer and for reading the Scriptures. Jesus and Paul taught in synagogues. Jesus was executed by crucifixion, a Roman method of punishment. Paul was sent to Rome for a hearing before the emperor. And most of all, the Jews were



not a free independent nation. Their land was occupied by the Romans and ruled by client kings who weren't descendants of David. It wasn't even a single nation; the land had been divided into provinces. Foreign soldiers were everywhere. The Jews paid taxes to Rome. One of Jesus' disciples was a tax collector.

To understand these elements, and many more, we need to find out what happened there in those centuries between the Old and New Testaments.

## What's the Plan?

I have tried to write the story of Israel-between-the-Testaments in plain English. In addition to the Bible and my lecture notes, for additional information on this period I have used 1 and 2 Maccabees, books about the Jewish war for independence, and Flavius Josephus, a Jewish historian.

I have divided the pertinent years into four distinct periods:

Persian (539–331 BC)

Greek (331–143 BC)

Jewish—Maccabean/Hasmonean (143–63 BC)

Roman—Life of Christ/Early Church (63 BC–AD 70)

Regarding the Persian period, in the first chapter I have briefly interwoven some happenings from the Babylonian era, which you might find familiar from the Old Testament, in order to explain and illustrate how Israel went from being a powerful kingdom to a people overpowered and in exile. Regarding the Roman age, as you'll see in the book's later chapters, I have extended beyond the era between the Testaments so as

to include background information for the Gospels and Acts. I have set off some blocked material in a contrasting font to provide more in-depth information on certain key individuals and events, and timelines open most chapters to help clarify the historical sequence. There are discussion questions after each chapter, and you'll find a glossary of terms at the end of the book.



The era between the Testaments is often called “the Four Hundred Silent Years” because during that time God stopped speaking to his people through the prophets. From the time of Malachi, the last Old Testament prophet, God was “silent” until the coming of John the Baptist. Mark’s gospel summarizes John’s message: “After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he [the Messiah] will baptize you with the Holy Spirit” (Mark 1:7 NIV1984).

Even though God was not then speaking through prophets, he had by no means forgotten his promise to send a Savior. He was actively working through history to prepare the world for the coming of his Son. In his first announcement of the “gospel,” Jesus declared, “The time has come. . . . The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!” (Mark 1:15 NIV1984).

## **Israel’s Actions, God’s Promises: A Look Back**

To find out why Israel was in exile near the end of the Old Testament timeline, we need to look back into the nation’s history.

About four thousand years before, Abraham had lived in the city of Ur in Mesopotamia (northwest of the Persian Gulf). God appeared to him and promised to bless him, make him into a great nation, and bless all the earth through him. God's promises to Abraham were passed to his son Isaac and then to Isaac's son Jacob, or *Israel*, as he was later known. Israel's twelve sons became the heads of Israel's twelve tribes.

Out of jealousy, his brothers sold Jacob's favorite son, Joseph, to slave traders who took him to Egypt. God blessed Joseph there, and ultimately he became an influential ruler, the nation's second-in-command under the Pharaoh. Because of a famine, Jacob's sons had to go to Egypt just to buy food. When they saw Joseph was alive, they thought he might kill them. But he invited them to move their families there and promised to provide for them.

Over approximately four hundred years, the children of Israel (Jacob) multiplied and prospered in Egypt. In fact, the *Hebrews* (as they'd become known) became so numerous that the Egyptians feared they might take over. The king (the new Pharaoh) enslaved them, and he ordered the midwives to kill at birth all their male children. Moses was born into this desperate, lethal situation. When he was grown, God called him to deliver his people from slavery. Their exit out of Egypt marks the beginning of national Israel.

Instead of leading the Israelites directly to the Promised Land (Canaan), which God had promised through Abraham, Moses led them south to Mount Sinai. While they were encamped, God gave Moses a set of legal codes. The Law of Moses became the new nation's constitution.

Because the Israelites refused to trust God, they spent the next forty years trekking around in the desert. When they

arrived on the plains of Moab (east of modern-day Israel), Moses told them God would bless them in Canaan if they were devoted to him, yet he warned that if they abandoned him to serve other gods he would expel them from the land and scatter them over the earth.

God also promised that they would return to him and that he would restore them to their Promised Land. The Law's promises and warnings were similar to a customary section in ancient treaties known as "blessings and curses," in which a suzerain pledged to bless his servants yet warned of severe consequences for breaking the covenant. The blessings and curses became Israel's guiding principle through the rest of the Old Testament story. When they honored God, he blessed the nation. When they disobeyed him, he judged them. Eventually their disobedience would result in exile from the land.



After the death of Moses, Joshua led the children of Israel's conquest of Canaan. They were now a complete nation and a people devoted to the Lord. They had a constitution, the Law of Moses, and they had land, a place to call home. Joshua and his generation loved the Lord and served him.

However, the next generation was disobedient and suffered the consequences of breaking the covenant: God allowed their enemies to enslave them. When they were oppressed, the people cried out to God; he answered their prayers by raising temporary leaders (judges) who defeated their oppressors. This cycle in which they persisted—the cycle of disobedience, oppression, and deliverance—continued for approximately three hundred years.

Because Israel did not have a king like other nations, the people asked and then insisted that the prophet Samuel give them one; Samuel anointed Saul as Israel's first king. David was the second, and Solomon, David's son, the third. During the 120 years of the "united monarchy," when the king and people were faithful to worship and serve the Lord, he protected them. They enjoyed peace and prosperity when they obeyed; when they disobeyed, God used other nations to judge them.

After Solomon died, the united monarchy came to a sudden end; the single kingdom divided into two nations. Ten tribes broke away and formed the kingdom of Israel in the north, and the tribes of Judah and Benjamin became the kingdom of Judah in the south.

The northern kingdom was a disaster from start to finish. The frightening statement "*He did evil in the eyes of the Lord*" was true of *all* its nineteen kings. Though warned by the prophets, kings and people were incurably infected with idolatry and spiritual apostasy. Because they abandoned God, he brought on them "the curses" of covenant violation. In 722 BC, the mighty Assyrians invaded and scattered Israel's population all over their empire.

Judah, the southern kingdom, endured about two hundred years longer. This was in part because some kings listened to the prophets' warnings. Still, of the nineteen kings and one queen, only eight did "what was right in the eyes of the Lord." The others copied the sins of the kings of Israel, and they too teetered on disaster's precipice for ignoring their covenant obligations.

Finally the Babylonians, who had conquered the Assyrians, invaded Judah, captured Jerusalem, and took thousands of

captives as prisoners to Babylon in 586 BC. The Bible states that the exile was not the result of superior military strength but because the people of Judah had broken their covenant with the Lord and refused to obey the prophets.

Despite both Israel's and Judah's unfaithfulness, God was faithful to his covenant promises. As he had pledged through Moses: "When you are scattered among the nations, if you will return to me with all your heart, I will have mercy on you and bring you back to the land."

The Babylonian exile lasted seventy years.



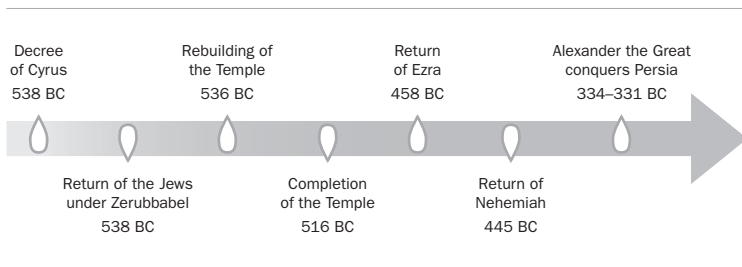
*The World of Jesus* begins with the return from the exile. I hope you enjoy the story.

*Note:* If you would like more information on Israel, see *The Whole Bible Story* (Bethany House, 2011).

# 1

## Homeward Bound

### *The Persian Period*



### Introduction

(The Jews had been in exile for approximately seventy years. The Persians had conquered the Babylonians; Cyrus, king of Persia, issued a decree that opened the door for the exiled Jews to return to Judea.)

The messenger had sprinted from the palace all the way to the house of Zerubbabel, a Jew who worked for the Persian government. “Zerubbabel! The king has given his word—granted permission to go back! We can go *home*.”

As soon as Cyrus announced his decision, Daniel the prophet, an advisor to Persia’s king, had sent his most trusted servant with the unbelievable news. Under his “return to

normalcy” dictum regarding conquered nations, Cyrus had reversed the policy of the Babylonians.

The year was 539 BC when the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob moved the heart of Cyrus to proclaim that the Jews could return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple of the Lord (Ezra 1:2–4). The prophet Jeremiah had foretold it truly; the exile had lasted about seventy years (Jeremiah 25:11–12).

## **The Fall of Judah**

Before looking at the return to Judah, we need to backtrack momentarily and note how the Jews ended up away from there in the first place.

When Israel first entered Canaan, God promised he would protect and provide for them if they worshiped him and not the gods of the Canaanites. Israel remained faithful for almost two centuries, but after David and Solomon were gone, they began to worship other gods. The prophets warned the kings and the people that God would judge them for spiritual apostasy. They didn’t listen. In 722 BC the Assyrians conquered Israel in the north and dispersed thousands of the chosen people throughout their territories. That empire fell when the Babylonians captured Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, in 612 BC.

Under Nebuchadnezzar’s leadership, the Babylonians invaded Judah three times. First, in 605 BC, they took Daniel and other young men from the royal family as hostages to Babylon but allowed Jehoiakim to remain as king. When his son, Jehoiachin, rebelled, Babylon re-invaded (597 BC); they took captive the king and thousands of others, and they sacked the temple and took all the treasures Solomon had



## Cyrus

More than a century before the Babylonians conquered Judah and dragged the Jews into captivity (c. late seventh century BC), Isaiah prophesied, *by name*, the people's restoration through the as-yet-unborn "Cyrus" (Isaiah 44:28–45:7). He identified Persia's future king—a non-believing, foreign ruler—as God's "shepherd" and "anointed one," a divinely commissioned deliverer.

Cyrus originally ruled Anshan, a small kingdom within the empire of Media. In 550 BC he rebelled against Media and captured Ecbatana, its capital city. Unlike other ancient rulers, Cyrus was a benevolent conqueror and did not slaughter captives or plunder cities. His "return to normalcy" principles honored local deities and allowed captured people to return to their land. This was wise, too—by showing respect he gained his subjects' support.

After consolidating control of the Persian Empire, Cyrus began expanding his kingdom to the west and then to the east. He conquered the kingdom of Lydia, captured the Greek cities of Asia Minor (modern Turkey), and then marched east to attack Babylon. But instead of bracing for a lengthy siege, its priests and people welcomed him as "king of Babylon" and "ruler of the world."

When Cyrus took over the Babylonian realm, the seventy years of exile were nearly over (Jeremiah 25:11–13; 29:10). Daniel realized the time was almost complete and sought the Lord in prayer, fasting, sackcloth, and ashes (Daniel 9:1–19). God was faithful to his covenant promises, in 539 BC motivating the "Edict of Cyrus" (Ezra 1:1–4) that willing Jews could return to their land. On top of permission to go home, Cyrus supplied the returnees with gold and silver and returned the treasures the Babylonians had taken when they plundered the temple (Ezra 6:1–5). Approximately fifty thousand Jews returned to rebuild their nation and God's house.

Cyrus placed his son Cambyses in charge of the campaign to conquer Egypt while he led a small force to put down a rebellion in the east. Mortally wounded in a minor battle, he was buried in Pasargadae, his capital.

Widely held to be one of the world's greatest conquerors, to the Jews, Cyrus was the Lord's "anointed one," chosen to fulfill God's covenant promises to his people.

placed in it. Nebuchadnezzar placed Zedekiah on the throne but marched against Jerusalem a third time (586 BC) when he also rebelled. The Babylonians overran towns and cities, captured Jerusalem, burned the temple, and demolished the city walls. They executed Zedekiah's sons, then blinded Zedekiah and took him to Babylon in bronze shackles.

Nebuchadnezzar, thinking to reestablish some security and stability in the area, appointed a Jewish governor. Gedaliah strove to restore communities, encouraging those who'd hidden in the hills or fled to other nearby lands during the invasion to return and settle and replant the vineyards and fields. But Ishmael, the leader of a band of Jewish diehards, assassinated Gedaliah and killed many of the Jews who'd joined him; they also slew many of the Babylonians whom Nebuchadnezzar had left for their protection. Then Ishmael and his followers, taking captives from among the survivors, fled and sought refuge with the Ammonites.

The remaining Jews were terrified of Nebuchadnezzar's wrath, given not only that once again he would see the region as troublesome but also that Jews had murdered his men and his governor of choice. Johanan and a group of officers pursued and tried to capture Ishmael; he escaped, though Johanan was able to rescue the hostages. Fearing Babylonian reprisals, Johanan and others fled to Egypt even though the prophet Jeremiah warned them that the flight was a fatal mistake. Sure enough, when the Babylonians attacked Egypt, Jews who had sought safety there were killed or captured.



When Zerubbabel heard that the exiles could return, all those decades later, his heart overflowed with joy. Still, many

memories also flooded his mind. God's people had lost so very much. Thousands upon thousands had grown old and died, or had been born and raised, with another life, in another land. Judah, no longer independent, was an empire's province.

## The Exile

The exile, though in itself not excessively harsh, was a national disaster. The deported Jews weren't treated as prisoners of war; however, they faced losing their treasured unique religious and ethnic identity. Providentially, what helped them to persevere was the preaching of the prophets, who said that while the exile was divine judgment, it wasn't the end of the nation. God had not permanently abandoned his people.

The prophets inspired the exiles with promises of a glorious future, one that, meanwhile, would include several developments.

### *A New Empire*

Nebuchadnezzar, the last of the powerful Babylonian rulers, had invaded Judah three times. In 605 BC he took Daniel and other selected Jewish youths as hostages and demanded that Judah pay tribute. When King Jehoiakim of Judah stopped sending it, Nebuchadnezzar invaded again (597 BC) and took captive Jehoiakim with thousands of others, including the prophet Ezekiel. Zedekiah was allowed to rule as king until he too mutinied; this third time (586 BC), the Babylonians devastated the land, destroyed Jerusalem, looted the temple, and hauled off untold thousands into exile. After subsequent events, the survivors abandoned Jerusalem and Judah ceased to exist as a nation.

In Babylon, Daniel and his friends were trained to become counselors to Nebuchadnezzar. God was with them; they excelled in their training, and the prophet Daniel began his remarkable career as an advisor to kings. His ministry spanned over eight decades.

After ruling for forty-three years, Nebuchadnezzar died (561 BC). Three other kings ruled briefly before the empire fell during the rule of Belshazzar.

Even with Babylon under siege, Belshazzar had not been concerned—he believed the great fortress could not be breached. He and a thousand nobles were partying as the city fell to the Persians.

After excessive drinking, Belshazzar ordered his servants to bring the gold cups looted from the temple in Jerusalem. Up to that point, the Babylonians had not defiled the temple's treasure.

God acted decisively. Mysteriously, a human hand appeared and, in their view, began writing on a wall. Belshazzar, now terrified, offered to make the man who could interpret the writing the third-highest ruler in his kingdom.

No one could. The king sent for Daniel.

Daniel, after telling him to keep his gifts, proclaimed the writing to be a verdict, for his arrogance and his disrespect for the “Most High God”: The words *Mene, Mene, Tekel, Parsin* mean “numbered, numbered, weighed, and divided.” Belshazzar’s days were numbered; he had been weighed, and he did not measure up to God’s standards of righteousness even for a pagan ruler.

Unlike Daniel, Belshazzar did not live long. That same night a combined force of Medes and Persians entered the city and killed him. Darius, the Mede, took over the kingdom, at the age of sixty-two. (There is uncertainty regarding the

identity of this Darius. He may have been appointed by King Cyrus to rule over a portion of the vast empire, for to what “the Medes and Persians” had controlled was now added all the Babylonian holdings.)

The Persian conquest was according to God’s sovereign plan for his people. As we have seen, Cyrus issued his decree in 538 BC, ending the exile and freeing the Jews to return to Judea.

### *A New Place of Worship*

If the Jews in exile were to continue observing the Law of Moses, they needed a place to worship. Clearly they wouldn’t have been able to go to the temple even if the Babylonians hadn’t destroyed it. The solution was the synagogue. (Based on passages like 1 Samuel 15:22–23 and Psalm 51:14–17, they substituted the study of the Torah [Scriptures] and prayer for sacrifices.)

Ezekiel the prophet, taken captive in the second invasion, was also a priest. He started a ministry in his own house in Tel-abib. God’s people had based their beliefs and patterned their lifestyles on the Scriptures; to preserve their heritage as “people of the book,” Ezekiel invited a group of elders to study together. Though this isn’t certain, the exiles apparently organized the synagogue on the model of studying the Scriptures in his home.

Any community with ten Jewish males could organize a synagogue. Each synagogue had a “head elder” and was governed by a council of elders.

The synagogue functioned as a religious, educational, and cultural center. Jews would meet there on the Sabbath and other holy days for prayer and reading of the Torah, after which a qualified individual would explain the passage.