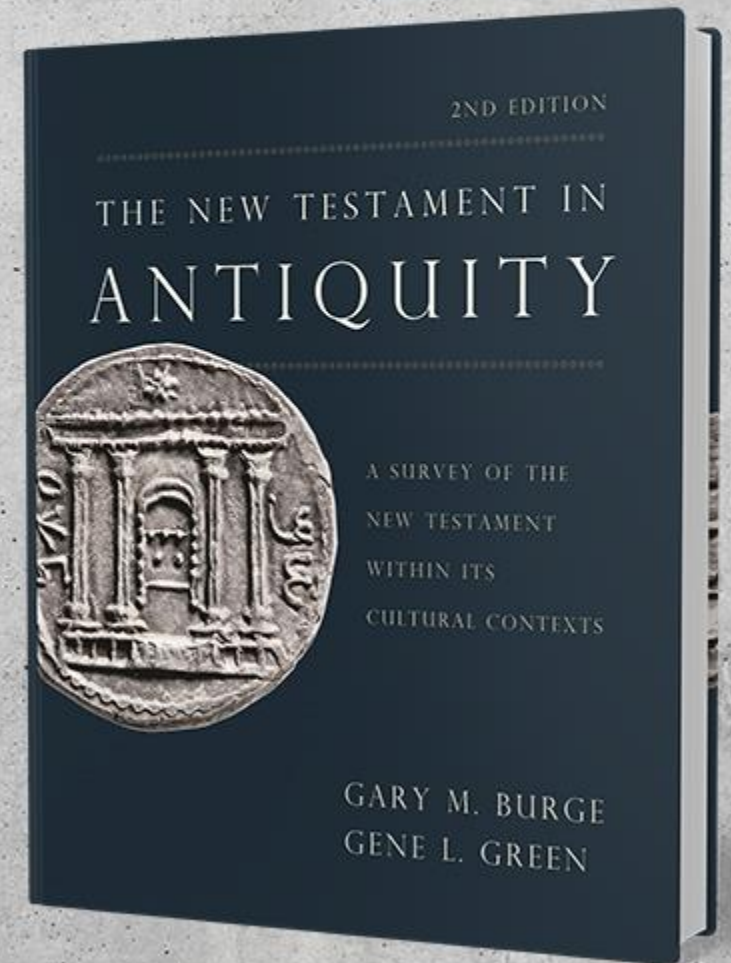


# Chapter 1

## Studying the New Testament



# PERSPECTIVE

- To become alert, capable readers of the New Testament
- To understand its various books
- To gain essential background material
- To digest the New Testament's most important teachings
- To appreciate it more as *Scripture*
- To grow in one's own Christian commitment

# METHODOLOGICAL PRESUPPOSITIONS

## Scripture and Study

- The New Testament *is* “the Word of God”
- Revealed through the Holy Spirit and the church
- The message is timeless, but the form is not

# METHODOLOGICAL PRESUPPOSITIONS

The message of the Bible may be timeless, but the form of that message is not. To accomplish his self-revelation in history, God necessarily had to embed that revelation in the historical and cultural context of its original readers. When Jesus told a parable, he framed it in ways that made sense to first-century farmers and fishermen.

# METHODOLOGICAL PRESUPPOSITIONS

When Paul wrote a letter, he used not only his own personal cultural preferences, but he wrote to be understood, using words and ideas meaningful to a first-century audience. Today we may understand a great deal of that message, but probing its depths requires effort. In many ways, we are foreigners to this story, outsiders looking in and struggling to comprehend it fully. Which means that we will need to become historians and archaeologists as we read these ancient manuscripts.

## A Reader's Bias

- Bias often interferes with interpretation
  - We understand through our own experience.
  - We bring this “pre-understanding” to the text.
- Overcoming bias by knowing contexts
  1. We must understand our own context clearly.
  2. We must embrace the biblical world's context.

## Context, Context, Context

- Each word has many meanings
  - The breadth of meaning is its *semantic range*.
  - This semantic range is determined by context.
- Interpretation requires humility
  - We are reading as foreigners not sharing the original context.
  - The New Testament's own context should determine its meaning.
  - We study *The New Testament in Antiquity*, because the New Testament emerged from *the context of antiquity*.
  - Context is often assumed rather than stated, but there are some key elements to pay attention to if we are to recreate the context.

Context, Context, Context

- The job of interpretation thus requires humility of the first order because we are admitting that we are reading this story as foreigners and outsiders, not as readers who share its original context.



## Context, Context, Context

- The title of this book is deliberate: The New Testament in Antiquity. Our primary responsibility is to gain the meaning of our Scriptures by understanding not only our own interpretative contexts but also the original context of the New Testament. The context of antiquity should control how we understand the New Testament today.

# RECREATING THE CONTEXT

Three important elements contribute to rebuilding the New Testament context:

1. Land
2. History
3. Culture

# RECREATING THE CONTEXT

## 1. Knowing the Land

- The New Testament took place in many regions throughout the ancient world.
- Jesus's teaching, Paul's missionary work, and the evangelism of the early church took place in diverse areas of the ancient world.
- Natural features such as mountains, water, and climate play roles in the story.

# RECREATING THE CONTEXT

## Knowing the Land

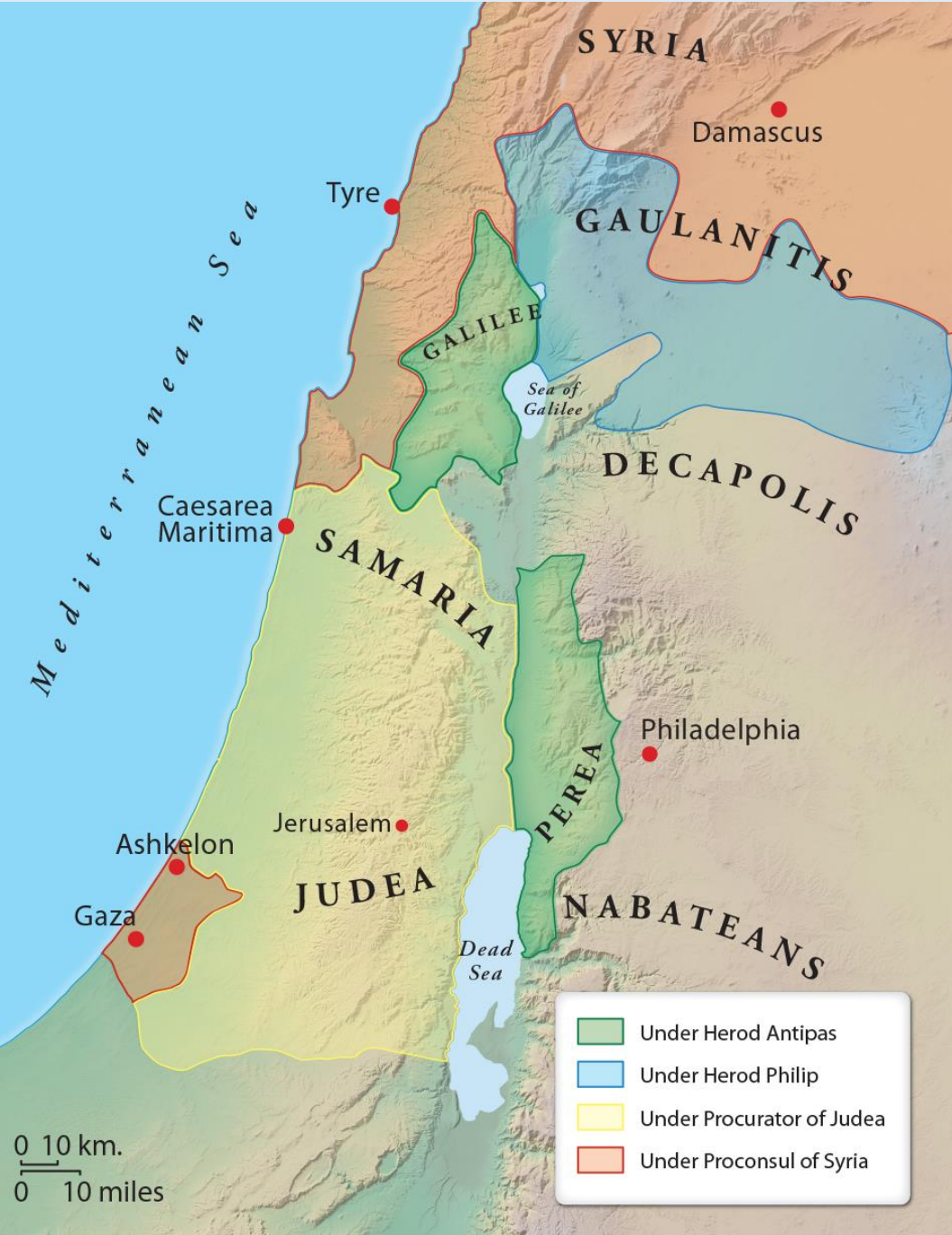
- Where Hellenistic, Jewish, Roman, and other cultures were separated or mingled made a difference in the teaching and work of Jesus and his disciples.
- The geographic range for interpretation runs along with the Roman Empire from Persia to Spain.





- Yellow: Roman Empire by the time of Julius Caesar (44 BC)
- Orange: Territory added by Augustus Caesar (AD 14)
- Light Blue: Territory added by Trajan (AD 117)
- Pink: Territory temporarily annexed by Rome

0 300 km.  
0 300 miles



## 2. Knowing the History

- Time makes a significant difference in interpreting the New Testament.
- “Every culture knows its own history” and the ancient world placed a high value on remembering one’s cultural history.



- The historical struggles between Romans and Greek influenced Jewish self-identity during the New Testament era.
- The historical range for interpretation begins around 333 BC with Alexander’s defeat of the Persians, to the second Jewish War against Rome in AD 132–135.



### 3. Knowing the Culture

- Every society has a set of predictable reflexes and rituals, aesthetics and values, social habits and politics which help make up its cultural identity.
- Knowing a culture helps one understand *what was the expected response* of the audience to whom Jesus and his apostles brought the gospel.
- If we don't learn their culture, we'll fill in the blanks with our own, which often leads to sometimes superficial, sometimes serious misinterpretations.
- One Cultural Key: Shame and honor
  - Avoiding shame and accumulating honor organized ancient society.