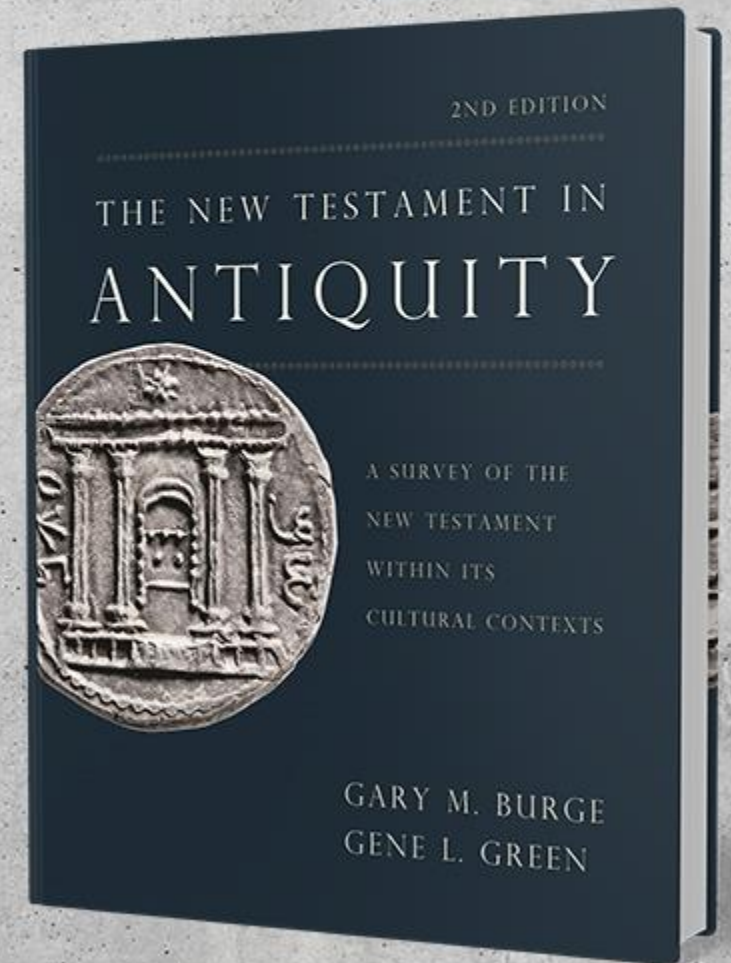


Chapter 3
The World of Jesus and His Jewish
Homeland



PERSPECTIVE

- Trade and communication between Mesopotamia and Egypt logically passed through Israel, thus making the territory crucial.
- Most of Jesus's ministry took place in Galilee, particularly in Capernaum.
- Judaism is not comprised of one monolithic voice but several. It is better to describe the culture as comprised of different "Judaisms."
- We gain much insight into first-century Judaism through its literature (Septuagint, Pseudepigrapha, Mishnah, Josephus, etc.).

THE LAND OF ISRAEL

- “The land” is a prominent concept in the Old Testament.
 - Yahweh’s charge to his people to inhabit the land and the promise of land is one of the great themes of the Old Testament.
 - Ancient society was agrarian and religious, thus the land was vital for the gift of life and was appreciated as a gift from God.
- The land of Israel was important to the New Testament community.
 - Living in the land was very seriously considered in the Mishnah (35%).
 - The location of the temple oriented Jewish life through festivals and sacrifices.

Geographical Setting of Israel

- Israel is located between the great empires of antiquity.
 - The massive deserts of Arabia and Syria
 - Trade between Mesopotamia and Egypt
 - Western Mediterranean cultures
- In times of peace, this brought prosperity; in times of war, devastation.



Zone One: The Coastal Plane

- Runs From Mount Carmel in the North to Gaza in the South
- Numerous fishing villages such as Joppa (Acts 10)
- Coastal cities such as Asotus, Ascalon, and Caesarea home of Cornelius (Acts 10:1)
- Caesarea became a critical harbor linking Judea to the Roman Empire.



Zone Two: The Coastal Hills

- To the East, there are hills rising from the coastal plain
- The largest city is Beersheba, but smaller ones as well, such as Emmaus (Lk 24:13–32)
- Remarkably fertile and enjoys coastal rainfall without the problems of low-lying sand and swamp



Zone Three: The Central Mountains

- From Hebron up into Samaria
- Mountains are up to 3,000 ft tall and made of hard limestone
- Excellent building material
- Porous stone holds water and erodes into the rich *terra rosa* soil
- Hebron and Jerusalem significant for Jewish life
- Those in Samaria denied their Jewish identity and built their own temple above Shechem



Zone Four: The Jordan Valley

- The valley running the length of the Jordan River
- Dramatic descent from the mountains to the lowest point on earth
 - 700 ft below sea level by the Sea of Galilee
 - 1,200 ft below sea level by the Dead Sea
- Occasional Oases such as Jericho
 - Largely uninhabitable
 - Wilderness for King David and Jesus (1 Sam 19–24; Mt 4:1–11)
 - John the Baptist often baptized people here



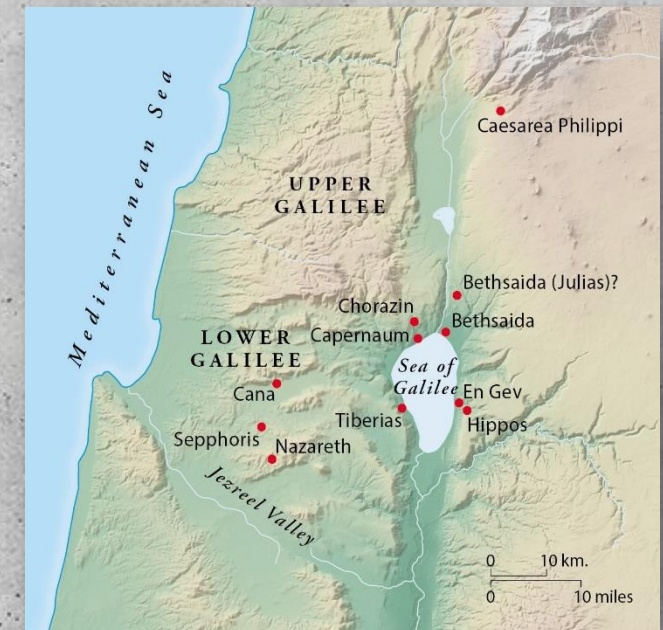
Zone Five: The Eastern Plateau

- East of the Jordan a plateau rises high.
- Catches rainfall missed by the Jordan Valley
- Some cities grew cereal crops.
- The cities of the Decapolis
- John the Baptist lived in this desert.
- In the South was Nabatea where Paul lived after his conversion (Gal 1:17, called Arabia).
- Here Paul was threatened by governor of Damascus, who served the Nabatean king, Aretas IV (2 Cor 11:32).



Galilee

- The Jezreel Valley separates Galilee from the central mountains
- The Sea of Galilee
 - Fed by the descending Jordan River
- Upper Galilee is desolate
 - Mountains where Jesus departs to be alone
- Lower Galilee is more populated
 - Nazareth (Mt 2:23) and Cana (Jn 2:1; 4:46) were conservative Jewish communities.
 - Jesus moved and called Capernaum *home* (Mk 2:1).
 - Most ministry done in Galilee
 - The “Galilee of the Gentiles” (Mt 4:15), Sepphoris



JEWISH VOICES IN THE FIRST CENTURY

- Judaism was dynamic and differentiated
 - Prayer, Scripture, festival worship, practice of the law, temple sacrifice
 - Different groups competing for the mainstream
- It was well-known throughout the Roman Empire.
 - In its native province (*Judea* to Romans, *Israel* to Jews), 1.5 million people
 - In the Diaspora 4 million (7% of the Roman Empire)
 - One thousand synagogues in AD 70
 - Roman occupation, though, fueled resent and rebellion
- Josephus outlined three sects: Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes
 - There was also the violent “fourth philosophy” of the Zealots

The Pharisees

- The Hasmonean ruler John Hyrcanus I persecuted “the Pharisees.”
 - He named them *the separated ones*, though they were the Hasidim (*the pious ones*).
- Characteristics of the Pharisees:
 - Chastised those who flirted with Hellenism
 - Promoted vigorous adherence to the law
 - Anticipated a coming messiah who would bring righteousness to the land
 - Religious practice was an individual and personal decision.
- They often appear as opponents to Jesus.
 - Both care about interpreting the law.
 - He criticized their adherence to external, legalistic formalities.

The Sadducees

- Wealthy Hasmoneans who controlled Greek estates and the temple
 - Educated elites, land owners, and members of Jerusalem's urban class
- Sadducees were concerned with maintaining the status quo.
 - They had benefited from Roman occupation and were suspicious of religious fanaticism or messianic uprisings that would upset their social position
 - They did not believe in the resurrection.
 - They debated the Pharisees' commitment to determinism and apocalypticism.
 - Rarely debated with Jesus, though did occasionally question him (Mt 22:23)

The Essenes

- Anchorite and ascetic group
 - Small though widespread throughout the country: about 4,000
- Josephus wrote more about this intriguing group than the others.
- Akin to later Christian monastic practice
 - Took vows of obedience to their leaders
 - Had initiation and anointing practices
 - Denied luxuries and private property
 - Shared communal meals
- Qumran community produced the Dead Sea Scrolls
 - Many suggest John the Baptist was affiliated with them.

The “Fourth Philosophy”

- Responded to Roman occupation and Hellenism with the sword
 - One group, the *Sicarii*, used psychological terror tactics by stabbing in crowds, while others such as the Zealots organized armed campaigns.
- Inspired to the ideal of Jewish military resistance by the Maccabeans
- The Zealots occupied and defended Jerusalem in AD 66–70.
 - Jesus’s movement was tested for zealotry, as when he was asked about taxes (Mk 12:14) because one of his followers was a former Zealot (Mk 3:18).

The Scribes

- Not a sect, but a major profession in the ancient Jewish world
- The ability to read, write, and interpret the law was in high demand.
 - Served as secretaries and chroniclers, teachers of the law, and adjudicated legal cases
 - Many were Pharisees because of their close attention to the law.
 - Another title for them was “teacher” or “rabbi” (Mt 23:7–8).
 - Much of their activity was in Jerusalem.
 - Only scribes who were Pharisees could enter the Sanhedrin to participate in legal conversations.

The Samaritans

- After the northern kingdom's destruction, some settled in Shechem.
- These Samaritans were viewed by Jews as compromised.
 - Samaritans did not participate in the rebuilding of the temple.
 - Assyrians and Persians mingled with Israelites in Samaria.
- Samaritans disassociated themselves from other Jews.
 - They revised the Hebrew Scriptures to promote their own place in history.
 - They built a rival temple on Mount Gerizim towering over Shechem.
- Jewish armies razed Samaria, and Samaria tried to sabotage the temple.
 - The presence of Samaritans in the Gospels is surprisingly positive, as one is a hero (Lk 10) and others are models of gratitude and conversion (Lk 17; Jn 4; Acts 8).



The Herodians

- Little is known about them.
 - Mentioned in Mark and Matthew (Mt 22:16; Mk 3:6).
- Probably political patrons
- They questioned Jesus about paying taxes (Mk 12:13–14).
- The Herodians compromised with Rome.
- Any who followed Jesus would be very secret about it.
 - Luke says the chief financial officer of Herod Antipas was named Chuza.
 - Chuza's wife helped finance Jesus's ministry (8:1–3).

THE JERUSALEM TEMPLE

- The spiritual and spatial center of ancient Judaism
 - Destroyed by Babylonians (586 BC) but rebuilt by Ezra after the exile.
- Herod launched a massive rebuilding campaign (20 BC).
 - Full construction during the time of Jesus
 - The size was 360,000 square feet
- Powerful economic and political center
 - 7,000 priests and 9,600 Levites ran the temple's daily tasks, sacrifices, and worship.
 - Tithe money and sacrifice make the temple very wealthy.

- There was much social traffic at the temple
- The law stipulated that Jewish men must travel to the temple for three festivals yearly.
 - Passover: began Jewish festival cycle, celebrated growth in field and flock, recalled escape from Egypt
 - Pentecost: fifty days later, concluded cereal harvest and recalled Israel's two years at Horeb with Moses
 - Feast of Tabernacles or Booths: marked the harvest of tree and vine, recalled wandering through desert
- Military presence maintained by both Romans and Jewish troops who appear at Jesus's arrest (Lk 22:52) in the Antonia Fortress and do the bidding of priests (Acts 5:26)



THE SANHEDRIN

- Gathering of Jewish nobility to bring order to Jerusalem.
- Lay elders and select members of the priesthood (mostly Sadducees) and leading Pharisees formed this high council.
- Seventy considered the appropriate number to form a council, as Moses appointed seventy elders (Num 11:16; Mishnah, *Sanh.* 1:6).
 - Jesus likewise sent seventy disciples as his delegates to Galilee (Lk 10:1).
- The Jewish high priest Caiaphas led the Sanhedrin during Jesus's trial (Mt 26:3)
 - There was also a "lower court" of twenty elders and the high priest for intermediate cases (Mishnah, *Sanh.* 1:2–5).

VILLAGES AND SYNAGOGUES

- Israel was forced to rethink its worship without a temple in Babylon.
 - The synagogue (Gk. “assembly”) was a Jewish meeting to continue study, discussion, and prayer in the absence of the temple.
- The synagogue revolutionized Jewish identity.
 - Ten Jewish men were enough to convene a synagogue.
 - Synagogues were accessible to average people, unlike the temple.
 - The synagogue became a network for conservative Judaism.
 - The synagogue *decentralized* Jewish identity and made it very personal.
 - Religious expression could be in the village as much as the temple.
 - Jesus’s ministry included synagogues (Mk 6:2; Lk 4:15) and general village life whether in hills or streets.

JEWISH LITERATURE

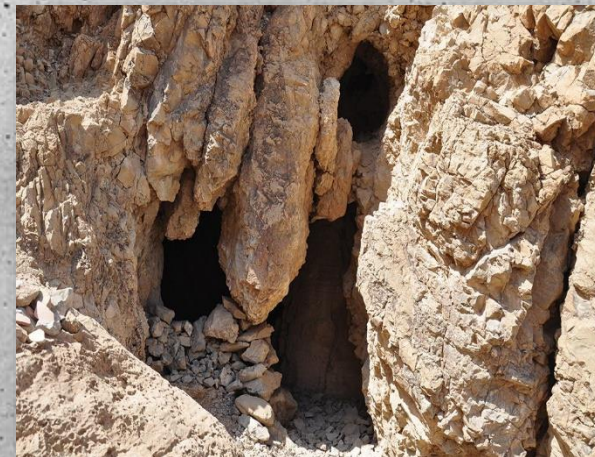
- The Bible for Jews was what Christians call the Old Testament.
 - They called it *Tanak*: the law (*Torah*), prophets (*Nebiim*), writings (*Kithubim*).
 - The Scriptures were generally read in Hebrew, but the Greek Septuagint (LXX) became increasingly popular in the 2nd cent. BC.
 - For Diaspora Jews they only knew the Septuagint.
- The Septuagint also included intertestamental books sometimes called “Apocrypha” or “Deuterocanonical.”
 - Contained various genres such as historical books: 1 & 2 Maccabees; fiction: Tobit, Judith; and wisdom: Ben Sirach, Wisdom of Solomon.

Extracanoncal Books

- Some books considered inspired by some communities, others rejected
- “Pseudepigrapha” are fifty-two books from 200 BC to AD 200
 - Apocalyptic (*Enoch*), historical interpretations (*Jubilees*, *Assumption of Moses*), exhortations staged as blessings (*Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*), hymns from under Greek and Roman occupation (*Psalms of Solomon*)

- Dead Sea Scrolls

- Composed in the Qumran community of Essenes
- Written before the Jewish war (settlement destroyed AD 68)
- Eight hundred manuscripts
 - Discipline manuals, liturgies, commentaries
 - Three most cited OT books: Psalms (36x), Deuteronomy (29x), Isaiah (21x)
 - Its citation of the OT is very similar to that of the NT



Rabbinic Literature

- The interpretations of Jewish scholars shed light on debates in Jesus's day.
- Jewish scholars wrote commentaries on Hebrew Scriptures.
 - Expansive rewritings such as *Jubilees*
 - Collections of comments called *midrashim* (Hb. "inquiries")
 - Catalogues of legal collections and narrative commentaries
- Aramaic was the common language, and so there are Aramaic paraphrases of the Bible called *Targums* (Ara. "translation").
- Category of primary laws of oral tradition written down: *Mishnah*
 - Supplements to the *Mishnah* such as *Tosefta* and *Talmud*.

Josephus

- General of Galilee during the first Jewish War
 - Recognized the Jewish revolt would not win
 - Accompanied Vespasian to Judea and Titus to Jerusalem
 - Tried to convince his former allies, the Jews, to surrender
- After the war, he retired to Rome.
 - Wrote *Antiquities of the Jews* and *The Jewish War*
 - Often idiosyncratic and deeply polemical
 - Defends his role with Rome, and downplays Jewish rebellion

Philo of Alexandria

- Most important writer of the Diaspora
- Lived in Egypt during the time of Jesus and Paul (20 BC–AD 50)
- Gives insight into the tension between Hellenism and Judaism
 - A tension clearly seen in the Diaspora
 - A tension also found in New Testament writings: especially John's gospel (esp. the Prologue) and certain epistles (esp. Colossians and Hebrews).
- Philo was deeply influenced by the dualism of late Platonic thought.
 - This was typical for most synagogues throughout the Mediterranean.