

**The Intertestamental Period and its Preparation for Christianity**  
by Michael R. Jones

Time and history appear inscrutable. Historians write books such as *What If?*<sup>1</sup> seeking how history might have been different had certain events happened or not happened. While such questions are interesting and thought-provoking, the Christian views time differently. For the Christian, time is viewed in light of God's purposes. God wills and permits and moves all history toward the goal he has set for it.

Paul speaks of history in just such a way in Galatians 4:4 when he writes, "...when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son" (NKJV). Paul's statement in its surrounding context indicates that the time for the birth of the Messiah was not chosen haphazardly, but was the result of preparation on the part of the Lord. While the Lord could have sent the Messiah at any time of his choosing and with little or no preparation, a study of the history of the world and of the Jewish people in the centuries preceding the birth of the Messiah reveals the providential hand of God guiding the world and preparing his covenant people for the Messiah's birth. Paul says as much in his sermon to the philosophers on Mars' Hill in Athens (Acts 17:22-31) where he describes history as leading up to the momentous events of the Incarnation, Crucifixion and Resurrection, and Final Judgment.

**The Intertestamental Period**

The Intertestamental Period is the period between the ending of the Old Testament and the events recounted in the beginning of the New Testament. It is roughly equivalent to what is known as the Second Temple period, the period from 516 B.C. to A.D. 170. The events of these

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Cowley, ed., *What If?* (New York: Berkley, 1999) and Robert Cowley, ed., *What If?* 2 (New York: Penguin Putnam, 2001).

roughly 400 years in many ways set the stage for the events of the New Testament, especially with regard to the birth of Christianity and its expansion.<sup>2</sup> A good understanding of the events of this period will reveal to the careful and devout student that God providentially prepared the world to receive the Messiah through the missionary activity of the early church.

### **Historical and Cultural Preparation**

Alexander the Great Hellenized the known world, bringing Greek culture to the Mediterranean basin, and the rest of the known world, by installing Greek institutions, philosophy, architecture, culture, and language as the standard, often overthrowing established standards that had been in place for centuries. After a period of civil war following Alexander's death in 323 B. C., his kingdom was divided into four sections ruled by four Greek generals. This division of the Greek Empire ruled by Greek generals solidified the Hellenization of the ancient Mediterranean world. Even the later Roman conquest of the world could not overthrow the installation of the Greek culture. The Romans themselves even adopted many aspects of Greek culture such as religion and philosophy.

Knowledge of Greek philosophy permitted the early evangelists to contextualize the Gospel and thus express the Gospel in terms understood by many. Paul exemplifies this approach in Acts 17 when he confronts a group of philosophers on Mars Hill in Athens. In his epistles, Paul alludes to or quotes pagan writers several times.<sup>3</sup>

With regard to the New Testament and the spread of the Gospel, the spread of the Greek language is important. The Hellenistic dialect called "*koine*" became the *lingua franca* or common tongue of the world, even after the rise of the Roman Empire. Though official business

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<sup>2</sup> This period is also referred to as the "400 silent years" because there was no new word from God during those years between the prophecy of Malachi and the ministry of John the Baptist.

<sup>3</sup> See for example, Titus 1:12 where Paul quotes from a work of Epimenedes of Crete which is apparently no longer extant. At least four others citations are usually discussed: Acts 17:28; 26:14; and 1 Cor. 15:33.

in the Roman Empire was still conducted in Latin, the common language of the world remained Greek for several centuries. The Old Testament was translated into Greek within the two centuries preceding the birth of Christ and the New Testament was written in this language. This unified language permitted the Gospel to be spread from one end of the world to the other and the New Testament writings to be passed around from region to region with little difficulty. Some scholars claim that Jesus taught in Greek as well as Aramaic, the language of the Jews during the first century.<sup>4</sup>

Two other characteristics of the world of the apostles, slavery and poverty, were not new by any means but were significant for the spread of Christianity during that period. While slavery had been practiced for centuries, as far back as recorded human history goes, it was an institution during this period and was not only legal but also culturally accepted throughout the Roman Empire.<sup>5</sup> Two out of three people living in Rome during the time of Christ and the apostles were slaves. It appears that many in the early church were slaves and there were also slave-owners in the church.<sup>6</sup> (That Paul does not call for discipline or a distortion of the accepted social order but for Christian love on the part of both slave and slave-owner points to how ingrained the institution of slavery was in the social consciousness of the first century world.) Christianity seems to have been especially prevalent among slaves who, in the Ancient world, sometimes, but not always, had more freedom and rights than slaves in other eras.

Christianity appears to be prevalent not only among the slave class but among the economically lower class. Christianity has always blossomed during times of cultural

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<sup>4</sup> Stanley Porter, "Did Jesus Ever Teach in Greek," *Tyndale Bulletin* 44, no. 2 (1993): 199-235, cited in Walter A. Elwell and Robert W. Yarbrough, *Encountering the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 60.

<sup>5</sup> A good online resource is at <[http://www.pbs.org/empires/romans/empire/slaves\\_freemen.html](http://www.pbs.org/empires/romans/empire/slaves_freemen.html)> (accessed 12/06/08).

<sup>6</sup> Perhaps the most well-known example is that of Onesimus (the slave) and Philemon (the slave-owner) from the books of Colossians and Philemon.

disillusionment.<sup>7</sup> Jesus himself is presented as poor<sup>8</sup> and so the common people could relate to him in his humanity. Jesus also reserved harsh words for the wealthy,<sup>9</sup> not because of their wealth, but because of the injustice and favoritism wealth, especially ill-gotten wealth, breeds. Paul, too, cautions against the pride of the wealthy and warns everyone against covetousness and uses the images of wealth and poverty as a picture of the Gospel.<sup>10</sup> James reminds the church that the rich are the ones who persecute them and so they should not be shown preferential treatment in the assembly of the saints.<sup>11</sup>

### **Religious preparation**

The Babylonian captivity of Israel instilled in the people a strict monotheism. Never again would they worship other gods or incorporate the worship of other gods into the worship of Yahweh. While this was good until the greater revelation of God came in Christ, it also instilled in them an almost superstitious regard for their religion (exemplified in their refusal to pronounce the name of God and the Pharisaical regulations) and fostered in them a deep suspicion of anything that was against the status quo.

During the final centuries of the last era, the Old Testament canon was solidified.<sup>12</sup> The Dead Sea Scrolls to some extent confirms the Old Testament canon and Jesus himself verified the canon by quoting or alluding to each book of the Law, most of the books of the Prophets, and some of the books of the Writings. This was not only the “Scriptures” from which Jesus

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<sup>7</sup> William H. Willimon speaks of this often, as does Stanley Hauerwas.

<sup>8</sup> His mother gives the offering prescribed in the Law for the (Luke 2:22-24; cf. Luke 12:2-8) and Jesus himself states that he “had nowhere to lay his head (Matt. 8:19-20).

<sup>9</sup> For example: Matt. 19:24 // Mark 10:25 // Luke 18:25.

<sup>10</sup> 2 Corinthians 8:9.

<sup>11</sup> James 2:1-7.

<sup>12</sup> See R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 260-288 for a conservative explanation of the formation of the Old Testament canon with its attendant questions. A more popular-level discussion may be found in Norman L. Geisler and William E. Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 235-256.

preached, it was also the Bible of the Early Church, until the writings of the apostles came to be regarded as Scripture in themselves.<sup>13</sup>

Two centuries before the birth of Christ the Jewish Scriptures, the Old Testament of the Christian Bible was translated from Hebrew into Greek so that Jews living outside the Holy Land and did not know Hebrew could read the Scriptures. This translation was known as the Septuagint.<sup>14</sup> This translation would allow early Christians, both Jews in Diaspora<sup>15</sup> and Gentile Christians to read the Scriptures. It also provided texts for the early Christian preachers until the letters of the apostles and leaders began to circulate.

Though the synagogue has its roots in the Divided Kingdom preceding the Babylonians and further developed during the Babylonian captivity, as an institution it came into its own during the Second Temple Period, the period extending from 516 B. C. to A. D. 70. The synagogues not only provided a setting for the preaching of Jesus, especially at the start of his ministry<sup>16</sup> and also for the disciples during the mission outreach,<sup>17</sup> it also, to some extent, provided the pattern for the New Testament church in terms of the structure of its services and polity.<sup>18</sup>

The division of Judaism into four sects occurred during the Intertestamental period. The Pharisees, Sadducees, Zealots, and Essenes all originated during Maccabean times and played influential roles in Jesus' ministry as portrayed in the Gospel narratives.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> See 2 Peter 3:16 for an example of this where Peter regards Paul's writings as "Scripture."

<sup>14</sup> Karen H. Jobes and Moises Silva, *Invitation to the Septuagint* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 33-37.

<sup>15</sup> Those Jews who had been scattered and lived outside the Holy Land.

<sup>16</sup> For example, Mark 1:21-28 and Luke 4:16-19.

<sup>17</sup> For example, Stephen in Acts 6:8-15, other early evangelists as Paul mentioned in Acts 22:19 and 26:11; and Paul's method on his missionary journeys: Acts 13; 14:1; 17; 18; 19:8.

<sup>18</sup> The synagogue of Jesus' day was a place of education, a place of worship, a place for mediating and settling disputes, and a place for social interaction. For explanations of these four areas, see Elwell and Yarbrough, *Encountering the New Testament*, 56. It is easy to see how each of these four functions parallels the church.

<sup>19</sup> Robert H. Gundry, *A Survey of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 47-53.

The development of the Gentile mystery religions began in the centuries preceding the birth of the church. These religions contained many parallels to the primitive Christian faith. Though some scholars today view Christianity as an amalgam of Jewish sectarianism and these Gentile mystery religions and it is true some false teachers of the apostle's day may have confused elements of Christianity with these mystery religions due to some similarities both real and perceived, it is possible that familiarity with certain elements of these mystery religions paved the way for a better Gentile understanding of Christianity.<sup>20</sup>

Syncretism resulting from Hellenization presented an obstacle to the purity of the Gospel which was battled by the apostles and the early church. The teaching of the apostles and their disciples regarding syncretism serve as lessons to the church today which still battles syncretism.

Gentile God-fearers were at a high number as they became disillusioned with the worship of the pagan gods and their self-serving worship and mythology and the immorality of the aristocracy of the Roman Empire. Many of them were prepared to receive the Gospel due to their having come to understand the teaching of the Old Testament Scriptures.

## **Political**

The Roman Empire was the outworking of the Roman desire for order. One can see this desire prominent in their military discipline, their legal system, and their bureaucracy. The Rome's enemies and brought peace and common protection to all. From roughly 27 B. C. to A. D. 180, the ancient world knew peace under the rule of Rome. These roughly 200 years of peace coincide with the birth and ministry of Christ and the beginning and earliest expansion of the

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<sup>20</sup> Don Clossan answers those who accuse Christianity of stealing from the ancient mystery religions in "Paul and the Mystery Religions" available at <<http://www.leaderu.com/orgs/probe/docs/mystery.html>> accessed 12/06/08. For an introduction to the ancient mystery cults from reputable sources, see the online database at the Internet Ancient History Sourcebook available at < <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/asbook10.html>> accessed 12/06/08.

Christian movement allowing missionaries, evangelists, and everyday Christians to travel freely in order to spread the gospel far and wide.

The Roman postal system was the most advanced in the Western world up until that time. Postal carriers followed routes that allowed riders on horseback to cover up to 170 miles in a day and averaged 100 miles a day.<sup>21</sup> This system used roads that lasted well into the 9<sup>th</sup> century before in the west and even longer in the East where the Byzantine Empire and the Islamic empire centered in Baghdad absorbed the system into their own postal services.<sup>22</sup> While it was not always so reliable,<sup>23</sup> it was still the most advanced the ancient world had seen and was second only to China's. This postal service allowed the apostles to correspond with others from one end of the Empire to the other. Such an advanced system not only made it possible for the apostles to correspond, it also almost guaranteed such correspondence since it was an easy and reliable method of long-distance communication. The letters written provide the basis for not only for the scholar's and historian's understanding of the ancient church, they are also the foundation of the Christian's theology and, despite some scholarly objections to the contrary, are still the best source for the theology of the apostles and the early church.

## **Geographical**

Though the Roman Empire covered desert, mountains, hills valleys, lakes, seas, and many different terrains in between, the dominance of Rome made the world a smaller place in that a common language, government, and culture made it easy for one to travel from one end of

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<sup>21</sup> Will Durant, *Caesar and Christ* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1944), 324.

<sup>22</sup> See "A History of Information Highways and Byways" on the NYU Press Book Companion Website called The Wired Professor, available at < <http://www.lookd.com/postal/history.html> > accessed 12/06/09.

<sup>23</sup> Cicero wrote of a letter travelling from Athens to Rome that took seven weeks while the return letter, from Rome to Athens, only took three. See Lionel Casson, *Travel in the Ancient World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 221 cited at <http://nyupress.org/professor/webinteaching/history3.shtml> accessed 12/06/08.

the world to the other and still feel at home in some sense. From Great Britain to the Indus River, the western border of modern India, Roman roads covered the entire empire.

Rome began building roads as early as 312 B.C. in order to quickly and efficiently move troops throughout the Empire. Rome eventually built some 51,000 miles of roads. Some of them were in use for over a millennium without needing repair and many modern European roads are built on top of old Roman ones. These roads were protected by Roman law and provided an easy and fast way of traversing the Empire. One Caesar traveled 800 miles in just eight days. When Nero died, messenger traveled 332 miles in thirty-six hours to convey news of his death. Such Roman roads allowed early Christian evangelists to travel from one end of the known world to the other spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

## **Conclusion**

This providential ordering of history and events to accomplish God's will does not end with the Intertestamental period. The ramifications of this divine ordering of things is demonstrated in the ministry of the Apostle Paul. In the New Testament, Paul had longed to travel to Rome<sup>24</sup> but had great difficulties that hindered him.<sup>25</sup> He finally wrote to the Roman Church and told them that he hoped to come to them while journeying on his way to Spain.<sup>26</sup> When Paul finally began his journey to Rome,<sup>27</sup> he went on Caesar's dime, under Caesar's protection<sup>28</sup> by drawing on the rights of his Roman citizenship<sup>29</sup> which granted him the right to appeal to Caesar.<sup>30</sup> This also gave him to opportunity to preach the Gospel to many along the way that he might not otherwise have encountered. The Acts of the Apostles end with Paul, in

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<sup>24</sup> Romans 1:11.

<sup>25</sup> Romans 15:22-23a.

<sup>26</sup> Romans 15:24.

<sup>27</sup> Told in Acts 27:1-28:11.

<sup>28</sup> Paul traveled under the protection of a centurion named Julius (Acts 27:1).

<sup>29</sup> Which also saved Paul a violent and brutal scourging (Acts 22:22-29).

<sup>30</sup> Acts 25:11-12.



Rome preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ with freedom while under house arrest, all at Caesar's expense and under his protection. While we have no way of knowing whether Paul made it to Spain, the believer can clearly see God guiding events providentially to ensure Paul's safety and liberty to preach in answer to God's calling.

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