

THE WORLD JESUS KNEW

The World Jesus Knew

ANNE PUNTON

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Anne Punton
September 1996

* Jack Punton died in 1999.

INTRODUCTION

The Bible speaks to us all in the west today but it is not a product of today's western society. It is basically a Middle Eastern book which was written many centuries ago. It reflects the cultures and world views of peoples whose ways were quite different from ours. Above all, it mirrors the world of the Israelites and of the Jewish people from the Babylonian exile to the time of the apostles.

To understand the Bible more fully, we must read it with an awareness of all its original contexts. Obviously, the more we know about the ways of those times and places, and in particular of the Jewish world, the greater our appreciation of its stories, characters and teaching will be.

For instance, we only grasp the full impact of many passages when we discern some of the nuances of the Greek and Hebrew languages in which they are written. Hebrew thought, culture and religious values underlie the way in which even the Greek language is used in the New Testament. After all, apart from Luke, the writers were Jews. Although Luke was probably not Jewish by birth, the evidence suggests that he was either a proselyte to Judaism or, at the very least, someone who was deeply influenced by Jewish spirituality and the Jewish Bible.

Some scholars note how often Hebrew and Aramaic

idioms occur in the style of Greek used by New Testament writers. They feel that certain books, such as Mark's gospel, were perhaps first written in Hebrew and only later translated into Greek. The importance of Hebrew, and Greek too, cannot be over-emphasised. Without doubt, translations of the Bible are a great gift from God but something is always lost in a translation.

Our comprehension of certain passages and events is also enhanced when we know their historical background. Social, agricultural, religious and other customs condition events and the behaviour of people in specific situations. Even climate and geography, so different from that in the western world, play a part in determining what happens and why.

Many of Jesus' parables which are based on agricultural images only make sense when we understand the oriental ways of working the land or caring for livestock. These ways are rarely the same as those of western farmers, more especially in modern times when everything is so mechanised.

Rabbinic traditions preserve a record of how Judaism functioned during the Second Temple period, both preceding and during the life of Jesus. The New Testament takes it for granted that its readers know all about these things, but we, today, do not.

When we learn, for example, about the magnificent pageantry of the Temple festivities, it opens up a rich, new dimension to the ministry of Jesus, as we shall later see. A case in point is the feast of Tabernacles. A rich symbolism, associated with water and light, underlies the elaborate rituals of that festival. As we learn about this, suddenly, the full power of Jesus' words, recorded in John 7 and 8, dawns upon us.

The Bible did not come to us in a vacuum, nor was God's choice of the Jewish people a mere whim. Salvation does not depend on a good knowledge of the background of its contents, but any moving forward to a mature grasp of the Scriptures cannot take place without such knowledge. In

general, then, this book seeks to inform modern, western readers about such issues. In particular, we are concerned to deepen our appreciation of Jesus himself.

The chapters each cover a distinct aspect of the life of Jesus as we examine his birth, childhood and education, the way he dressed, the languages he spoke, prayers he would have said, and much more. The method used is to portray specific aspects of his life and then, from this base, to branch out into numerous highways and byways, taking time to traverse many different areas of the whole Bible record. Along the way we shall see how the Christian faith springs uniquely from solid, biblical, Jewish roots.

There are one or two occasions when we refer to a place called Palestine. In the light of events in the Middle East during the latter part of the twentieth century, this name has become a politically loaded term. We must emphasise that on no occasion does any use of the word Palestine imply a political bias.

The Romans first used the appellation, Palestine, to describe the territory along the eastern Mediterranean seaboard. The southern part of that coast had long been inhabited by the Philistines and their descendants, from whom the name is derived. In the historical and geographical context of this book, the usage is correct. However, in consideration of any sensitivity amongst our readers, we avoid frequent use of the word and substitute some other descriptive phrase.

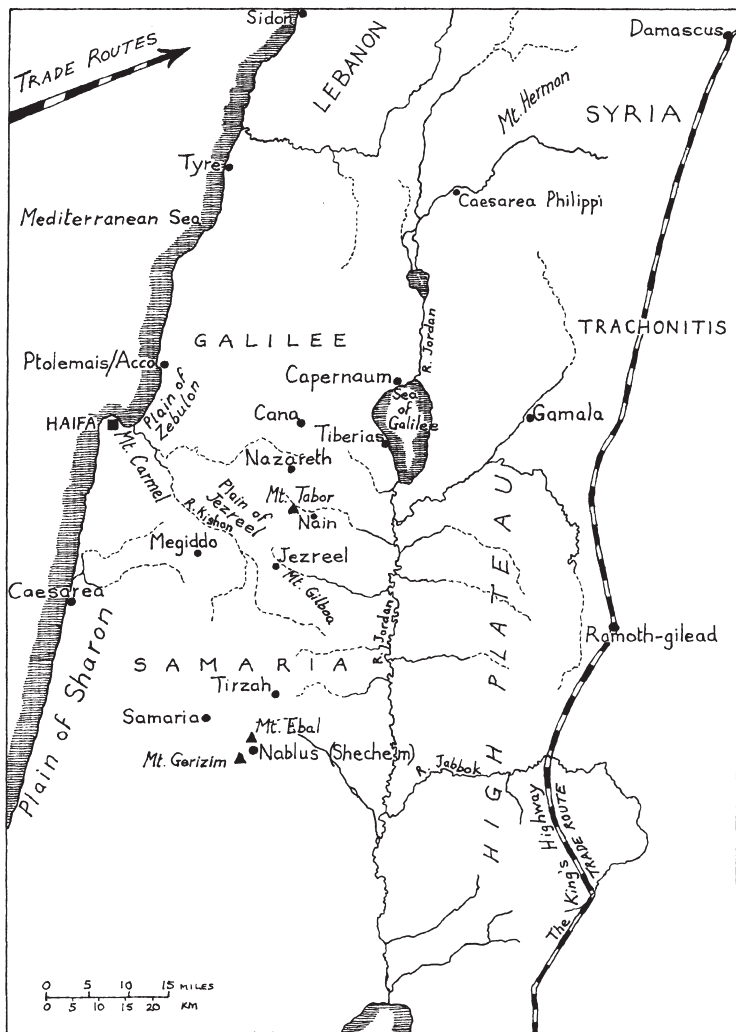
We are also careful in our use of the word Bible. For Christians, the Bible contains the Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek New Testament. The Jewish Bible consists only of the former. Moreover, the title Old Testament is offensive to Jewish people in its implications. The chapter on the Scriptures explains this more fully. At present, we simply point out that we try to make the necessary distinctions by talking about the Hebrew Bible or the Jewish Scriptures in references to the Old Testament.

Throughout the book we use the abbreviations BCE

(Before the Common Era) for the times before Jesus and CE (Common Era) for the years after his coming. This is done in accordance with a growing scholarly consensus which prefers this neutral terminology to the directly Christian convention of using BC and AD. It enables Jewish and Christian people to work more easily together. In part, it marks the fact that some of the best research being done today into the original contexts of the life of Jesus is by Jewish scholars. We certainly do not underestimate the significance of the coming of Jesus into the world or lack confidence in the power of the Gospel.

We give biblical references where appropriate but do not provide references to rabbinic sources or to the writings of people like Josephus because we do not anticipate that many of our readers will have access to such works. If they do, they will doubtless already have some knowledge of matters covered in this book and will be able to use the appropriate indices to trace any further information required.

Scripture references come from the Jerusalem Bible unless stated otherwise. Quotations from Jewish prayers are taken from the Hertz edition of the Authorised Jewish Daily Prayer Book, bearing in mind that for many of these prayers, the traditional English usage is almost as fixed as the original Hebrew and varies very little from one edition of the Prayer Book to the next.



*Map of Israel at the time of Christ with places mentioned
in the book*

CHAPTER ONE

A WORD ABOUT SOURCES

Before ever we can embark on a work like this, we must answer one vital question. Where do we find the information which makes such a book possible?

Material comes from many sources and we cannot use all that is available. Nor can the accuracy of everything be guaranteed. For example, archaeological discoveries must be interpreted, the historian Josephus is known to exaggerate, rabbinic records sometimes offer the slightly divergent recollections of two different sages. No matter! The overall picture which emerges is as authentic as it is possible to be.

Historical Records

Bible history is part of Middle Eastern history. It is revealed in diverse forms; the writings of ancient historians, the deciphering of clay tablets, hieroglyphic carvings and pictures on the remains of buildings unearthed by archaeologists, papyrus documents and even the traditions and legends of local peoples. Archaeological digs disclose houses, temples, synagogues, city streets, public baths, sports stadia, sewage and irrigation systems, pottery, jewellery, artefacts, mosaics, tombs and much more. All these things help to make up the jigsaw picture of everyday life in the ancient world.

We are indebted to many writers for information but the two to whom we most often refer are Philo and Josephus. Philo of Alexandria (c.20 BCE–50 CE) was a Jewish philosopher rather than a historian but his works contain many passages which shed light on biblical matters. Flavius Josephus (c.37–100 CE) was a prolific Jewish author who wrote about every Jewish topic imaginable. His documentation of the historical events through which he lived in first century Palestine (as the country was then called) is invaluable to both secular historians and Bible scholars alike.

If archaeological finds from the ancient worlds of Chaldea, Assyria, Babylonia, Egypt and other vanished empires shed light on Bible days, so too do the writings of the old historians. Those listed below are not quoted in this book but much of what is known about the Bible world comes from these and similar sources.

For instance, the Greek Herodotus (born c.490 BCE) chronicled the conflict between Greece and Persia. He travelled widely, especially in Egypt, and incorporated all the information he could find about the known world of that time into his works. Into that context comes the close of the Jewish Exile in Babylonia and events immediately following.

The Roman Tacitus (c.55–117 CE) wrote a two part history of the Roman Empire and its early emperors. This is the background against which we view the New Testament record. The Roman historian Suetonius (c.69–mid 2nd century CE) refers to people who are mentioned in the New Testament. As a result we can date happenings very accurately, especially those connected with Paul.

Eusebius (c.260–340 CE) was a native and bishop of Caesarea. Despite his later dates, his value as an early church historian lies in the fact that he carefully studied and drew upon earlier sources which were close to the times in question.

Language, Geography, Culture and Tradition

Apart from a few portions in Aramaic, the original languages of the Bible are Hebrew in the Old Testament and Greek in the New Testament. Any translation always loses some of the finer meaning of the original and the Bible is no exception. Jewish rabbis are quick to discover new biblical insights through their knowledge of Hebrew. The careful distinctions of the numerous Greek prepositions and tenses can also add illuminating nuances to many a passage. Even for those who are not linguistic experts, some parts of this book might help to open up the Scriptures through this way.

The geography of an area is important too. If we know about the climate of Bible lands, we know what time of year certain events took place. For example, when Jesus saw the fields ripe for harvest it was spring and not autumn, as western readers might deduce.

Topography determines the strategic importance of some places for military security or trade. King Solomon built a fortress at Megiddo, which overlooks a pass through the hills from the coast to the Jezreel plain inland.¹ From ancient days to General Allenby in the early twentieth century, the world's armies have used this route. Here, we are told, will be the site of the last great conflict, Armageddon or the battle of Har (mount) Megiddo.²

The reason why Ahab constantly fought over Ramoth Gilead was because it was directly on the Kings' Highway, the main trade route along the plateau east of the river Jordan.³ To the north it led to Damascus and thence to Asia Minor or to countries in the fertile crescent formed by the Euphrates and Tigris rivers. Southwards it joined routes into Egypt, Africa, Arabia and the Far East. Roads branched off across Palestine to the Mediterranean. Whoever owned Ramoth Gilead controlled trade in every direction.

Cultural, social and everyday routines have barely changed in the Middle East from ancient times. Only in our own

century are western technology and lifestyles slowly replacing the old customs. Even today, especially in poorer, secluded areas, traditional ways of doing things still persist. So, when the Bible talks of a threshing sledge with teeth, a burden bearer or a water seller, we know exactly what is meant because we can still see these things today.

‘Tradition’ is a key word in the life of the Middle East. Things have been done in the same way for countless ages. People have used the same tools, worn the same clothes and perpetuated the same habits from one generation to another. Only in the twentieth century have the old ways been eroded by the introduction of western technology, standards and lifestyle. Notwithstanding, there are still isolated villages, invariably Arab, where western influence has barely penetrated and where the tourists do not go. There, the general way of life and such things as agricultural equipment and methods remain the same as in Bible times.

Fortunately, a few Bible-loving travellers who visited the Holy Land last century recognised what they were seeing and recorded their findings in words, paintings and collections of artefacts. Little did they know how soon the traditions of time immemorial would be modified or swept away by twentieth century innovation. How important their records now are for an understanding of everyday life in Bible times.

Traditions of the Elders

There is, however, a further source of biblical understanding. Judaism has preserved a large body of ancient traditions about how religious life was regulated in the Second Temple period (c.520 BCE–70 CE). As even secular life was subjected to religious law, these traditions reveal a great deal about the everyday affairs of ordinary people.

This is of great value when we try to imagine the private, daily life of Jesus. The gospel narratives take knowledge of these things for granted and see no reason to explain them.

We do not necessarily need this extra information, but Scripture is immeasurably enriched when we can fill in some of the details behind what is happening.

The rabbinic records are particularly rich in matters to do with the Temple, the festivals and ritual purity. All these topics are referred to in the Gospels. We can look back to Leviticus and Numbers for some elucidation but it is the rabbis who tell us the details of how things worked in practice. So important are the 'traditions of the elders', as the Gospels call them, for a fuller comprehension of the times of Jesus, that we ought to know briefly how they developed.

From Torah to Mishnah

The source of Jewish belief and practice is the Law or Torah. It was given by God at Sinai and is recorded in the first five books of the Bible. It was soon apparent that some matters needed elucidation. For example, the Torah allowed a bill of divorce; but what form should it take and how should it be administered? The Law ordained rejoicing at the feast of Tabernacles with palms, willows, fruit of goodly trees and leafy branches; but exactly what fruit and leafy branches were meant and how should one rejoice with them?

In answering such questions, a body of explanatory, oral tradition accumulated around the written Law. Before long, the Oral Torah, as it was called, became as binding as the Written Torah.

Israel exchanged its nomadic existence for a settled, agricultural way of life under a king and with a Temple. Then followed the exile and subsequent return to the land, but no longer as an independent, sovereign nation. The second Temple was erected and the synagogue became an established institution.

Throughout these changes, the Oral Torah grew apace, keeping step with the history of the nation. Men of phenomenal memory devoted their lives to studying, memorising and

teaching it. They were called the Tanna'im and many of the religious leaders of Jesus' day were of their number.

Only after the destruction of the second Temple (70 CE) and a failed revolt against Rome (131–135 CE) did two serious problems threaten the Oral Law. Firstly, it had become such an unwieldy body of material that it challenged even the most accurate memory. Secondly, the Jewish people were so decimated that many of the scholars had either died or were scattered throughout the diaspora. There was a real danger that much of it would be lost.

A rabbi called Judah the Prince therefore decided to write it down. He and his followers made it their lives' work to classify and record all the important oral traditions which stood alongside the Written Torah. By 200 CE their work, called the Mishnah, was complete. The Mishnah is divided into six parts. Its contents are complicated and often abstruse. An English version comprises one thick, closely written book of heavy, legalistic material.

Although the Oral Torah was a kind of commentary on the Written Torah, the Mishnah deals with subjects which appear mainly in the book of Leviticus. It covers things like sacrifice, priesthood, leprosy, food laws, ritual purity, festivals, Temple practice, agriculture, tithes, offerings, marriage, divorce, adultery, civil rights, vows and more. It tells us what the traditions of the elders were all about and how religious affairs were conducted in Second Temple times. The Mishnah, therefore, reveals and explains much of the religious context in which Jesus and his compatriots lived.

Although we must emphasise that the rabbinic traditions were written down much later than both the times to which they refer and the New Testament documents themselves, this does not invalidate their usefulness. Many societies have recorded their own, ancient, oral traditions and it is generally accepted that such material is handed down through many generations, by word of mouth, with considerable accuracy.

The rabbinic traditions preserve a record of how Judaism

functioned during the Second Temple period. Naturally, we must use some caution and discernment but, overall, we can be reasonably sure that the contents of the Mishnah reliably reflect the way of life in New Testament times. This is particularly so where certain customs, facts or events are corroborated from other sources.

Rabbinic Insights

Over the years, the rabbis have studied this foundation text of Judaism to produce the Talmud and many other classical works. Their method of study is combative. Two or more people open up a passage in a face-to-face confrontation with question, answer, counter question, argument, logic and even an element of one upmanship. The exercise sharpens the mind. It means that when the rabbis look at the Jewish Scriptures, they see them differently from most Christians.

In this connection, we must note that the New Testament is not part of the Jewish Bible. Jewish scholars and rabbis have not traditionally given their attention to the Christian Scriptures. Only in recent times are a few beginning to do so. When they do, their thoughts on familiar passages are well worth considering.

As far as their own Scriptures are concerned, the rabbis offer many interesting and unusual insights. Some, though fascinating, are not greatly significant. Have you ever wondered what fruit Adam and Eve really did eat? How about the fig, seeing that they later used fig leaves to cover their nakedness? If we take the story literally, then a fig is as likely as an apple. The climate is too hot in that part of the world for apples to grow well except on high ground.

Many of their understandings have great spiritual value, such as their discussion on the laws of leprosy. When Miriam spoke against Moses behind his back, she contracted leprosy for a week as a punishment.⁴ The rabbis therefore associate gossip and criticism with this disease.