

How would you answer the question, “In what direction is Jerusalem?” We writers addressed that question many times in the New Testament, and any Israelite of my time would easily have been able to answer it.

We writers of the Gospels did not spend precious scroll space writing about such things as politics, geography, trade routes. You probably have little knowledge of those things as they existed in my time, but everyone in our time had a good understanding of them!

With a rudimentary understanding of our trade routes, geography and politics, you will be able to spot many nuances in our Gospel stories that you would otherwise miss. I will tell you nothing here that is critical to your salvation, but there are some things that will enhance your understanding and enjoyment of the New Testament.

More important than having that knowledge is the new ability you will attain of understanding my peers as people not much different than yourselves. Many people of your time consider people like me as so distant in time and experience as to be almost mythical characters. But we were concerned with the same things as you. Just like you, we worried about how to make enough money to feed our families and ourselves, we wanted to wear clothes that made us feel good around our friends, and we wanted to be loved by others. We got tired when we walked uphill, and hurt badly when we got beaten or stoned. The daily news informed us about making decisions, and world events, politics and economics influenced our lives whether we liked it or not, exactly like your lives are influenced by those same factors.

Let’s start by looking at the last Old Testament book, *Malachi*. It was written more than four centuries before Jesus was born. What happened during that long, long period of God’s silence?

On the world stage, empires influencing Israel came and went. During Malachi’s time, the Persians were dominant. Following them were the Greeks, the Roman Republic, and the Roman Empire. Jesus and I were born during the rule of the Roman Empire.

Augustus was the first Roman Emperor, and he ruled from 27 BC to 14 AD. He was Emperor when Jesus was born. He established new laws and ensured peace throughout the empire that would last for more than a century. Tiberius was his son, and he ruled from 14 AD to 37 AD, the time period when Jesus taught and when the early church was established.

Rome’s emperors ruled their vast empire by delegating authority to local leaders, who would delegate some authority to native leaders. Emperor Augustus granted his authority over Judea

to King Herod in 37 BC, and he ruled until about the time of Jesus' birth. He was also known as Herod the Great. Upon his death, Judea was split into four parts which were ruled by his descendants and various Roman appointees. One son, Herod Antipas, ruled Galilee during the life of Jesus and for a decade thereafter. He was involved with the trial of Jesus and the death of John the Baptist.

Agrippa I was the grandson of Herod the Great. He ruled over much of Israel from 37-44 AD, which was during the growth of the church. His son, Agrippa II, ruled over much of Israel from 44 AD until 92 AD when the church really exploded in growth. These are the Agrippa's referred to in the Bible. Additionally, Rome had their own officials who dealt with Judea, such as Pontius Pilate.

On a more local level, the Romans allowed the Jewish leaders to make many decisions. In Judea, virtually all of the citizens were Jewish. Since the time of Malachi, the Jews had grown in number and once again dominated the population of the area formerly controlled by the twelve tribes of Israel.

During those four "silent" centuries, the Jews had greatly developed their theology and leadership structure. The Jewish leaders were organized into a body known as the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was primarily composed of leaders from the Pharisees and Sadducees, two Jewish sects. The Sadducees were wealthier and more politically motivated, while the Pharisees were more legalistic about the Jewish religion.

There was constant tension between the Romans and the Jews. The Jews wanted to be independent and not pay taxes to Rome, while the Romans wanted the Jews to be peaceful and pay taxes. However, the Roman and Jewish leaders had several things in common. They both wanted trade to increase, peace to prevail, and wanted to retain their political positions. To do those things it was all about money. Just as America's President Clinton's 90s's campaign once trumpeted, "It's the economy, Stupid!"

Before I started following Jesus, I was a doctor. I was highly educated, and was acutely aware of how the rise and fall of countries, rulers, and families began with international trade, and how trade routes functioned. In fact, I was quite aware that Jesus located his headquarters in Capernaum because it was located on a critical spur of the ancient trade route known as the Via Maris, or Way of the Sea.

The Via Maris trade route went from Damascus to Caesarea to Egypt. On its northeast end, it met other trade routes in Damascus which went to Europe and Asia. On its southwest end, it met other trade routes in Egypt which reached Africa. In its middle was the city of Caesarea, a newly built deep-water port that reached Rome and the rest of the Mediterranean Sea. The Via Maris trade route was critical to world-wide trade, and whoever controlled it became fabulously wealthy. In fact, the Via Maris was the main reason Israel was a critical country in my time, instead of an unimportant piece of property like most of the land in the world.

The Via Maris became critical in my life-time because King Herod created the deep-water port of Caesarea in 10 BC. This greatly increased the trade on the Via Maris and was a main reason King Herod became so famously wealthy.

Trade routes in your modern world are so numerous and ubiquitous that you don't even think about them. Your paved roads, trucks, airplanes, and shipping containers are all part of a massive interconnected and global set of trade routes. Your life is hugely influenced by trade routes, but you don't notice.

In 1956, President Dwight Eisenhower made a drastic change in the trade routes through America, while he also changed the military security of the nation. He began the Interstate Highway system that greatly improved how quickly the military could deploy, as well as vastly improving the trading routes through America.

President Eisenhower was intimately familiar with the vast highway system that the ancient Romans had built, and may have gotten the Interstate Highway idea from them. The highway system of the Romans greatly improved how quickly its military could deploy, as well as vastly improving its trading routes. Its highway system was a major factor in the Empire staying in power over a vast area for hundreds of years.

You have far fewer transportation limitations than we did, but you have the same basic trade limitations we had. There has to be a source of supply and a source of demand for a product. The costs of transportation, thievery and taxes have to be low enough that the price of a product stays reasonable as moves along a trade route. It is much costlier to transport heavy and bulky objects. Finally, governments can force uneconomic transactions through the trade routes by military force and government regulations.

In the times of the New Testament, there were certain products that tended to dominate international trade flows. Rome controlled Northern Africa, so it forced the flow of grain, gold, and slaves from Northern Africa. Rome's one million citizens required a huge amount of food every day that could only be supplied by huge grain ships from Africa. Asia supplied Rome with silks, perfumes, spices and other precious objects in return for gold, jewels and slaves. Israel produced wine, grain, and fish. During my lifetime, Rome was wealthy and trade flowed like never before. From an economic point of view, Israel did better in my life than it had for a thousand years.

The Via Maris trade route went through Capernaum. Don't you think Jesus knew that when he moved his headquarters there? The Roman highways and ancient trade routes spurred trade, but also provided the early Christians missionaries easy ways to travel so they could effectively evangelize. In fact, almost all of the early churches were founded along Roman highways, trade routes and shipping ports.

Looking at some of the cities in Israel, Capernaum was a prosperous city during the time of Jesus because it was a supplier of fish from the Sea of Galilee, it also produced grinding tools

from the local lava rock, and was a natural choke point on the Via Maris trade route. Caesarea was important because it was the only deep-water port on the coast of Israel. Jerusalem was important because it was a crossroads of local trade routes, and was the center of religious worship and local government.

Before leaving these topics, I want to mention one more thing. You may not think of food production very often, since agriculture involves only a tiny number of people in modern countries. In my time, farming was a very critical aspect of life. Owning land was critical, which is why it was handed down from generation to generation. Geographical considerations of space and land fertility were critical to most families. As in most societies, food production was the main source of employment for most people. Some experts believe as many as 90% of people in ancient cultures were involved with producing food. When Jesus used agricultural stories, almost everyone had a vivid understanding of what he was talking about.

As you learn the stories of the Bible, I hope you will be able to remember these facts about trade routes, geography and politics. The people of the New Testament were much like you. They made the best decisions they could, given the information they had. And, they had much more information about their times that you do not have, and they inherently understood how that information was interwoven in the stories Jesus told.

Every listener of Jesus knew that if a Samaritan was going from Jerusalem to Jericho, he would be going downhill on a highway well-known for its thieves and robbers. They knew that Samaritans were religious enemies of the Jews, but some of Jesus' earliest converts were Samaritans. Every listener of Jesus knew that the Jews often took the road from Jerusalem to Jericho to avoid going through Samaria, but the Samaritans rarely took the road. Because of our knowledge of geography, politics and trade routes, we heard Jesus' story of the Good Samaritan as a story of a God extending impossibly, unlikely grace and love to somebody who had chosen to be separated from God. That was incredibly good news to us, not just a nice story.

So, up. The answer? Up. Since Jerusalem is located in the mountains, in what direction is Jerusalem? Up.