

# ROUTE 66: THE CHRISTIAN WAY

## WEEK 11: BACKGROUND LANDMARKS

I hope those of you who have been travelling along Route 66 enjoyed your ‘services’ break over the summer. Before jumping to our next major landmark there are just a couple of points we need to bear in mind.

This stage deliberately starts as week 11 because we are not changing to a new road but continuing along the old one. It is here we reach the first background landmark which informs us of the continuity of God’s planning. We have reached a stage where the Bible does not give the details of how God was working to prepare for the next and final stage of the revelation of salvation history and, because we don’t have the Biblical account of that, we have divided God’s single plan into two separate parts. Theologically, this human time division, while very convenient for Christians, is wrong from God’s standpoint. That can be said without a doubt because, when Jesus was born, the time division that we now know as BC- before Christ; and AD – Anno Domini = the year of our Lord, did not exist. That calculation of time was not made for more than 500 years after Jesus’ birth and it has led to Christians seeing a breach between the two testaments. In fact, according to the Jewish calendar we are now in the month of Tishrei in the year 5779. What we see as a gap of around 400 years spanned from around 3361 to 3761. By the Jewish calendar there is no gap or break God’s progression of His plans and purposes set in motion in Genesis, continuing to the present day and into the future. These landmarks of the New Testament show that although our Bibles indicate a cessation of prophecy for around 400 years, God was far from inactive. And knowing how history is a tedious subject for some people, you should probably thank Him that He didn’t put all the details of what He was doing during this time in His Word. However, if we want to be sure that the Bible is one continuous account of God’s plans for humanity, then we need to see the continuity between the stages of route 66 we have already travelled and the next stages of that route heading to the book of Revelation. For that has been a continuous, uninterrupted process since before the world began.

Just to recap how far we have already travelled this route. From the landmarks we have looked at previously we know that each stage of route 66 has taken us landmark by landmark through the history of the world from the beginning of time to approximately 415BC. Each stage showed us principles and people and prophecies that contributed to God’s on-going plans. The 4 fundamental principles governing all else being the outcomes of rebellion, retribution, repentance and restoration. What all that information also told us was that human beings were incapable of saving themselves, simply because they preferred to reject God’s ways, rebel against His laws and in general preferred to live their lives without Him. God found that in spite of His love, mercy and compassion for His people; despite His willingness to forgive and forget their disobedience and rebellion; in spite of His provision of the means of the sacrificial means of atonement for sins that would bring people back into a right relationship with Him, those whom He had chosen to be witnesses to His holy character, His supreme, sovereign power and His goodness, failed in that task. It is a measure of God’s patience, justice and righteousness, that He was prepared to give the world a final revelation of His love and commitment to its salvation. Yes, it is true God gave no new prophetic revelation to His people for 400 years, but that did not mean He had given up on them or the rest of the peoples in the world. That did not mean that His love for humanity had grown cold. In fact, the complete opposite is true. Instead of speaking, He was acting. And His actions speak louder than any words could. For in this period of prophetic silence God was preparing the world for the greatest manifestation of His love for people and His overwhelming desire for their salvation. What God was doing was putting in place what we might call the ‘infrastructure’ of His final revelation of His plan to save the world from the consequences of sin and evil. The

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developments God was engineering would ensure that when the time was right, Jesus and the message of the gospel would emerge on the earth in conditions which would enable His name, His ministry and His message to be spread throughout the then known world and continue to endure far beyond it. Today, I believe with conviction, that what God engineered in that 400 years were the ways and means by which the gospel of Jesus Christ, 2000 years later is still being broadcast to every accessible place and people on earth.

The landmarks we are going to see show the practical details of that and they follow a similar pattern to that of times of the kings of Israel and Judah. The first of those three landmarks deals with the political and territorial situation. Looking back, we left Daniel, Esther, Nehemiah, Ezra and the last prophets and the returning exiles subjected to the rule of the Medes and Persian empire. But in 331BC this empire too fell, this time to Alexander the Great. When he died in 323, his empire was divided and the Jews came under the subjection of the Seleucid dynasty for around 200 years. During this time, the Romans were gaining in strength and expanding their empire with the result that by the first century BC, the Romans were the masters of the Greek empire.

**Luke 2:1-2 (NKJV) And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2 This census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria.**

**Acts 2:9-11 (NKJV) Parthians and Medes and Elamites, those dwelling in Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10 Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya adjoining Cyrene, visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, 11 Cretans and Arabs—we hear them speaking in our own tongues the wonderful works of God.”**

Under Augustus who was emperor from 63BC to 14 AD the Pax Romana had ushered in a period of relative peace and safety for travellers in the imperial territories. The roads the Romans built were patrolled and guarded by the Roman army and the sea had been cleared of pirates. Paul's missionary journeys were only made possible by the political and territorial circumstances God had put in place during 400 years of prophetic silence. During this period too, Jews had travelled and settled in all parts of the empire as this verse from Acts shows. As the Roman empire continued to expand over the next 4 centuries the territory it covered became the mission field of the first Christians. God's sovereign direction of the nations and peoples of the world during that 400 years had brought together a political and territorial entity that, to date, has never been equalled. Human attempts have been made to unite nations and peoples under such banners as the Holy Roman Empire or even the European Union. None, however, have succeeded. Only the sovereign power of Almighty God in furtherance of His plans, was capable of harnessing the ambitions of Greek rulers like Alexander the Great and Roman ones like Julius Caesar, to create the ideal political and territorial circumstances for the coming of His Christ and the spread of His gospel of salvation.

Judea itself, however, was not happy politically. By the end of the 4 centuries subjected to foreign rule, there was still great resentment because of developments in their territory. In spite of restoring the magnificence of the temple, resentment, amounting to hatred was reserved for King Herod, the ruler of the Jews appointed by the Romans. King Herod was an Idumean, from the land which had once been called Edom. And it was Herod who tried to kill Jesus when He was born, a damning echo of the enmity that had existed between the descendants of Esau and Jacob throughout the Old Testament. To add insult to injury, the Romans built the Antonia fortress which enabled them to observe everything that was happening at the Temple,

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the seat of Jewish religion and symbol of their ethnic and national identity. The fact that the High Priest was also a Roman appointee inflamed Jewish nationalism. So, in both political and territorial terms, the past was going to have a major impact and effect on how God's final revelation in Christ and the Christian movement that emerged from it, was going to affect this status quo.

The same could be said of God's permissive will in allowing the religion of these centuries to develop as they did. On the landmark of religion we find that some religious beliefs and practices changed radically, others remained the same. What remained was the prevalence of pagan religion throughout the Roman empire.

**Acts 14:11-13 (NIV) When the crowd saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, "The gods have come down to us in human form!" 12 Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul they called Hermes because he was the chief speaker. 13 The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought bulls and wreaths to the city gates because he and the crowd wanted to offer sacrifices to them.**

**Acts 19:35 (NIV) The city clerk quieted the crowd and said: "Fellow Ephesians, doesn't all the world know that the city of Ephesus is the guardian of the temple of the great Artemis and of her image, which fell from heaven?"**

The renaming of Paul and Barnabas as the Greek gods Zeus and Hermes was the result of the Lycaonians witnessing the miracle of the healing of the man lame from birth. The riot recorded in Acts 19:23-41 happened because Paul was saying these gods were made with human hands and, as a result of Paul's preaching, people were deserting the pagan temples and ruining the businesses of those who serviced them. The Romans, took the view that the peoples they had conquered should be left to worship their local gods, but many chose to worship the gods of the Greeks and Romans. The so-called emperor cult flourished in territories like Asia, where traditionally people had always worshipped their rulers as gods and had offered up sacrifices and prayers to them. To their credit, the Romans allowed the Jews to practice their own religion and permitted them to only to make sacrifices and offer prayers in the temple 'on behalf of Caesar' but not to him as a god.

This religious distinction further entrenched the Jewish national, ethnic and religious identity which we saw had been inaugurated during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. By the end of those 4 centuries, all non-Jews were referred to as Gentiles or Greeks. What remained the same was that the Torah was still the religious bedrock of the Jewish faith. The sacrificial system still operated in the Jerusalem temple but the Old Testament priesthood had fallen by the wayside during the Greek period. The successful Maccabean revolt led to Jonathan Maccabee being appointed High Priest and that office became dynastic in nature. It was the Sadducees who dominated this tier of the religious hierarchy. The interpretation and teaching of the Scriptures and religious rules of observance were the preserve of the Pharisees and scribes.

**Luke 2:41-48 (NIV) Every year Jesus' parents went to Jerusalem for the Festival of the Passover. 42 When he was twelve years old, they went up to the festival, according to the custom. 43 After the festival was over, while his parents were returning home, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, ..... 46 After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. 47 Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers.**

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**Luke 24:27 & 44-45 (NIV) And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself..... 44-45 He said to them, “This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.” 45 Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.**

The actual teaching of the Torah and the prophetic books of the Old Testament was conducted locally in the synagogues and in the family to every Jewish boy. Jewish boys reached their majority at the age of 12 and the record of Jesus’ visit to Jerusalem at the age of 12, gives us an indication of how seriously pious Jews regarded their Scriptures. This episode and His own words provide the indisputable evidence that Jesus’ ‘Bible’ was the books of the Old Testament.

The backbone of Jewish religion were the five books of Moses, the prophetic books and the psalms through which God was worshipped in the temple and on the major festival occasions. And that takes us to one other major action of God during the 400 years when He did not speak. That was perhaps because He was ensuring that the language through which the Scriptures would spread throughout the world in the first Christian centuries had become the common language of people when Christ did come. In all the conquered Greek territories Greek became the common language and the Romans continued its use. The Greek usage itself changed over the centuries but, although in Palestine the Jews spoke Hebrew and Aramaic, the common language to communicate with all other peoples, both within and beyond Palestine, was Koine or common Greek. So significant and widespread was the use of this language that between 300-200 BC the Hebrew Old Testament was translated into Koine Greek for Jews scattered throughout the Greek and Roman empires. Today we know that translation as the Septuagint or the LXX. So, for around 200 years before Jesus was born, even Jews in Palestine had their Scriptures in Greek. By the time the New Testament writers came to record their accounts of what Jesus’ arrival in the world meant, they had a common language in place to spread the news as far and as wide as was possible.

Once again God’s providence was making sure no one would miss out on salvation through lack of hearing the preaching and teaching of the gospel message in a language that all could understand. And that message was being explained through the revelation God had given in the Old Testament. When Paul told Timothy  
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**2 Timothy 3:16-17 (NIV) All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, 17 so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.**

he was referring the Scriptures of the Old Testament for he was writing in the 60s AD. There is continuing debate over when the 4 Gospels were written, but when Paul wrote this to Timothy it is certain that two of the Gospels had not yet been written and the gospel of Mark, which is regarded as the earliest, would not yet have circulated widely among the Christian communities. Scholars do agree that the Gospel of John was not written until the 80s or 90s AD, at least 20 and possibly 30 years after this letter to Timothy.

But is there any evidence that other New Testament writers were familiar with the Hebrew and Greek versions of the Old Testament. Strong evidence comes from the letter of James, believed by some commentators to be the earliest of the New Testament writings, possibly as early as the mid-40sAD. An analysis of the language used in James shows that he included 73 words

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that do not appear elsewhere in the NT. Of those 73 words, 43 occur in the Septuagint. Regardless of the dating of the letter, scholars are agreed that James' familiarity with both Hebrew and Greek versions of the OT cannot be denied as he also refers to Hebrew practices mentioned only in the Septuagint.

**James 2:21-22 & 25(NIV) Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? 22 You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did..... In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction?**

**James 5:11 (NIV) As you know, we count as blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.**

**James 5:17 (NIV) Elijah was a human being, even as we are. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years.**

This is further evidenced by the fact that in the 108 verses of James, OT references occur 90 times according to the cross references in the NIV bible. The 27 verses of the first chapter have 27 of those references gleaned from Genesis, Exodus, Deuteronomy, 1<sup>st</sup> Kings, Job, Proverbs, Psalms, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel and Malachi. Elsewhere in the other 4 chapters, in addition to some of these, there are references to Leviticus, Hosea, Joel, Ezekiel and Zechariah. We also find Abraham and Rahab (2:21 & 25) mentioned by name in relation to their faith being proven by their works. Job and the prophets (5:11) are mentioned in connection with teaching on patience and Elijah (5:17) mentioned in teaching about prayer. James' use of the expression 'before the Lord' in 4:10 is used more than 500 times in the LXX (McKnight p357). Thus, the book of James alone gives ample evidence of dependency on both the Hebrew and Greek versions Old Testament

Like Jesus before him, James was teaching how Jesus' lifestyle and teaching, such as the Sermon on the Mount, fulfilled the law of the Old Testament, and gave it new and more meaningful practical expression for the communities starting to emerge as the church. In particular James highlights Jesus' concern for the poor and the marginalised in society. The commentator J. B. Adamson (p20) has even called James the 'Amos' of the new covenant because, like Amos, he condemned the social and economic unjust practices which seemed to be present even within his believing community.

From just these examples it can be seen that in terms of religion, pagan practices and the latest form of Jewish orthodoxy based on the Old Testament Torah, prophets and psalms, continued to exist side by side at the end of this stage of our route. What stands out above all else on the landmark to religion is the empire wide use of the Koine Greek language, the lasting legacy of the Greek empire.

And once this political, territorial, religious/linguistic infrastructure, engineered by God during His 'silent stage' was in place, God was ready to once more revive the third landmark from its history in the Old Testament – the revival of prophecy in the person of John the Baptist.

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**Malachi 3:1 (NIV) “I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the Lord Almighty.**

**Matthew 11:7-11 (NIV) .....Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: “What .....did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. 10 This is the one about whom it is written: “I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.’....**

**Mark 1:1-3 (NIV) The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, 2 as it is written in Isaiah the prophet: “I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way”— 3 “a voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, (NIV) make straight paths for him.”**

So much could be said about these verses and prophecy in general, but this key landmark makes one thing clear. All God’s words spoken by a true prophet will come true, even if it has to wait for fulfilment for 4 centuries. Matthew and Mark make it abundantly clear that the arrival of John the Baptist was in accordance with Old Testament prophecy. This assertion is beyond dispute, because, according to Matthew, it was Jesus Himself who drew the crowd’s attention to that text in Isaiah. It is easy to pass over these texts because their plain language is so easily understood. Behind their relative simplicity, however, lies great theological significance, not least of which is that the coming of John the Baptist was the signal for God’s direct intervention in the affairs of humanity regarding the furtherance of His plan of salvation. Mark’s reference to preparation of the way of the Lord in verse two is also the direct quote of Exodus 23:20 in the Septuagint. The Exodus text, spoken in the wilderness, and Isaiah’s reference to the wilderness, together with all else that has been mentioned by Matthew and Mark, make it abundantly clear that what we read in the New Testament was a direct continuation of the salvific plans of God.

**Matthew 11:11 & 13-14 (NIV) For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John. 14 .... Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist;.....And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come.**

**Matthew 17:12-13 (NIV) But I tell you, Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but have done to him everything they wished. In the same way the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands.” 13 Then the disciples understood that he was talking to them about John the Baptist.**

**Luke 1:16-17 (NIV) He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. 17 And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”**

These verses reinforce that statement and make it clear what John’s arrival was to achieve. The verses from Luke fulfil the prophecy of Malachi 4:5-6 and are the angel’s description of the destiny of the son Zechariah and Elizabeth had been praying for. What had Elijah’s mission been – to turn the Israelites from the worship of Baal and other foreign gods and return to the Law and the worship of the one true God. That was to be John’s task and he would be endowed with the Spirit and the power of Elijah.

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**Luke 3:7-9 & 18 (NIV) John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? 8 Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.... And with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them.**

Certainly, Luke’s account of the ministry of John shows that he was faithful to his commission and used very blunt and uncompromising language to add force and urgency to his message. Just in these few verses, we can also see that, in essence, John’s message had all the hallmarks of the four principles his predecessors had emphasised. Vipers pointed to a rebellious people who would try to flee the retribution that would come if they did not repent and be restored, through accepting the good news of the gospel, and living their lives in accordance with their acceptance of all that that good news entailed.

Three landmarks starting from the last stage of route 66 we looked at, although covering approximately 4 centuries, I hope have shown that God was continually at work directing and controlling the affairs of this world to achieve His ultimate goals. It was what happened in the Old Testament together with the hidden landmarks that enabled all that we read in the New Testament to develop as it did. And as we travel the last 5 stages of our route, it will become even more clear that God meticulously planned the salvation of humanity, quite literally, from Genesis to Revelation.