

# Reading Among the Ruins

Taking a book outdoors to read in the open air is a pleasure for many of us. Indeed, reading certain books in specific places can really heighten our enjoyment, especially if the story and the setting are connected.

Our front cover shows the ruins of an abbey in England, where to read your Bible would be an experience of contrasts. Among the ruins of a large man-made building, which ceased to be used in 1539, we can hold in our hand the unchanging, indestructible word of God.

The Bible was compiled over more than 1500 years and was completed nearly 2000 years ago. Yet today it remains relevant, explaining the world in which we live and telling us about the wonderful future for the world.

The first five books of the Bible were compiled by Moses, who lived about 1500 BC. So when these earliest scriptures were being written down, Egypt was at the height of its power and building projects such as the pyramids were under way. The Acropolis in Athens had not been started and Jerusalem was a Canaanite village called Jebus.



The New Testament was written in the first century AD, so at the time of the Roman Empire. As these writers were at their task, the Caesars ruled, the Colosseum in Rome was being planned and London was a remote Roman outpost. When we look at the buildings from this time, we see ruins which fascinate us because of their age and the history they embody. Yet as these were in their prime, the final pages of the Bible were being written.

## Divine Commentary

Today's world of high-speed global travel, of instant communication and technological sophistication bears little resemblance to those early times, but the Bible is still with us and remains the vital guide for life. In fact, it has provided commentary from God's viewpoint throughout history. As Pharaohs, emperors, powers and empires came and went, the Bible often explained why, and what was God's plan for the world.

For example, Babylon was a great empire which was invaded and defeated by Medo-Persia in 539 BC. The prophet Jeremiah explained that this was happening because of the Babylonians' cruelty when they had taken Israel into captivity:

*For behold, I will raise and cause to come up against Babylon, an assembly of great nations from the north country, and they shall array themselves against her; From there she shall be captured. Their arrows shall be like those of an expert warrior; none shall return in vain... Because you were glad, because you rejoiced,*

*you destroyers of My heritage (Jeremiah 50:9, 11).*

The Jewish exile of that time ended under the Medo-Persian Empire. Over 150 years previously, another prophet, Isaiah, had foretold that God would elevate this nation for His purpose, even naming the leader who would send the Jews back to Israel:

*Thus says the LORD to His anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have held — to subdue nations before him and loose the armour of kings... For Jacob My servant's sake, and Israel My elect, I have even called you by your name; I have named you, though you have not known Me (Isaiah 45:1, 4).*

These are just a few examples of the many Bible descriptions and prophecies which show not only that it is always current, but also how God is in control of world affairs.

## **Remarkable Preservation**

The Bible's survival over thousands of years is something of a miracle in itself. We can compare the text we have today with very old copies and see that we have exactly the same message that was written down so long ago. The oldest New Testament manuscripts date back to just after the time of the Apostles (e.g. the Rylands Fragment of John's Gospel has been dated to 125 AD). We have copies of the Old Testament which date back to a similar period (e.g. the Dead Sea Scrolls, which date from 300 BC to 100 AD) and in both cases the text is what we find in the Bible we read today.

Since those times there have been many opportunities for the Bible to be

corrupted or to disappear altogether, but this has not happened. The Jews are passionate about the Old Testament writings, copying it carefully over and over again ever since each part was written, to preserve it and keep it accurate. This care for God's word has continued, despite the Jews having been scattered throughout the world.

The New Testament writings spread quickly by land and sea, thanks to the communications network of the Roman Empire, so it was impossible for its opponents to stamp it out. Ever since, there have been individuals prepared to stand up for the Bible, to make sure it could be read and shared. When mechanical printing was invented, books could be reproduced quicker than ever before and the first major book to be printed was a Bible. In many countries we remember men and women who dedicated their lives and even died, to translate the Bible into local languages and allow everyone to read it for themselves.

## **Our Benefit**

People come and go, but the Bible is always there to guide and help. The apostle Peter makes this contrast, quoting words from the prophet Isaiah about the frailty of the human race:

*All flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of the grass. The grass withers, and its flower falls away, but the word of the Lord endures forever (1 Peter 1:24–25).*

We really are privileged to hold such an amazing book in our hands. It explains the dramatic events of the past, and more importantly it offers us a future in the Kingdom of God.

**Editor**