

THE WORLD THE CHURCH ENTERED

BY LINDA OWEN

In order to comprehend the world in which the first-century Christians lived and worked, we must begin by looking at their culture and the world in which it evolved. The Greco-Roman world had changed the Jews slowly through the centuries, until many were no longer willing or able to isolate themselves from pagan influences as the earlier Hebrews had done. This change had been caused by a chain of historical events that scattered the Jews and exposed them to pagan influences for centuries.

Palestine's narrow strip of land was a geographic prize in ancient times. It was at the crossroads of great trade routes that joined Egypt with Mesopotamia and Asia Minor with Arabia. For this reason, its inhabitants were at the mercy of one vast empire after another. The people repeatedly suffered invasion, bondage, and exile—leaving Jews scattered in almost every country in the civilized world. This scattered population living in separation from their homeland is often called the *Diaspora* [dee-AS-puh-ruh] or "dispersion."

In 721 B.C., the northern kingdom of Israel was conquered by the Assyrians. Sargon II, king of Assyria, recorded that he deported a total of 27,290 inhabitants to Mesopotamia.¹ In 596 B.C., the Babylonians conquered Judah; and within 15 years its leading citizens, military officers, and artisans had been deported to Babylonia. Recorded numbers of captives vary (2 Kings 24; Jeremiah 52); however, taking into account the deportations in 597 B.C., 587 B.C., and 582 B.C. by Nebuchadnezzar, it is likely that 8,000-to-10,000 Jews were forced to spend their lives scattered all over the Mediterranean world. Later, other wars fought by the Greeks and Romans helped scatter even more of the Jewish population.

When the Persian king Cyrus allowed the Judeans to return home in 538 B.C., many chose to remain in Babylonia. By then, several generations had passed since the first deportees were removed from Palestine; and most Jews had been born in exile and knew nothing else.

Deportees had been allowed to lead normal lives and had been given professional opportunities—if

LINDA OWEN is a former United Methodist pastor, now devoted to a full-time writing ministry. She lives in San Antonio, Texas.

they were willing to settle down and become part of the local people. Since most of the deportees were the educated and skilled of Judah and Israel, they had prospered in their new settlements. Bank records, found by archaeologists in the Babylonian city of Nippur, list Jewish names among the wealthy clients.² Also, after a stay of 45-to-65 years, the Jews had synagogues in which to worship; and many of them saw no reason to relocate to Jerusalem.

In the fourth century, Alexander the Great and his Macedonian armies accumulated a vast empire, including Palestine. Alexander wished to conquer the world and to unite it by transforming the East by means of the Greek culture. To that end, he encouraged his soldiers to intermarry with native women to create one race. Greek became the universal language; and he actively encouraged religious syncretism, whereby local deities were identified and then merged with the gods of the Greeks.

Alexander and the rulers after him set up a large number of towns populated mostly by pagan Greeks. In these new cities were Greek temples and theaters, gymnasiums for leisure and sport, stadiums for horse racing, and youth centers for the cultivation of health and education. As in Greece, the *polis*, or city-state, became the center around which religious activity was organized. It was also a place where citizens could meet, market, debate, and vote. Since wisdom was prized in Hebrew Scriptures, many Jews were attracted to the Greeks' passion for philosophy. Soon the Greek ways and Greek education took hold of many among the upper classes in Judah.

The ancient Greek influence in other countries is referred to as *Hellenism*. After the time of Alexander, the mixture of Greek and Near Eastern ideals produced a combined culture in most places. By 330 B.C., many Jews spoke and wrote in Greek. By 200 B.C., Jewish worship in Egypt was conducted in Greek.

In the Diaspora, Jewish beliefs were forced to come to terms with Hellenism. There was a movement to show the compatibility between the ancient Jewish faith and the philosophy of the Hellenistic culture. The Greeks, who considered themselves great thinkers, tried to show that the best of pagan philosophy agreed with the Hebrew Scriptures. For this reason, Hebrew Scriptures were