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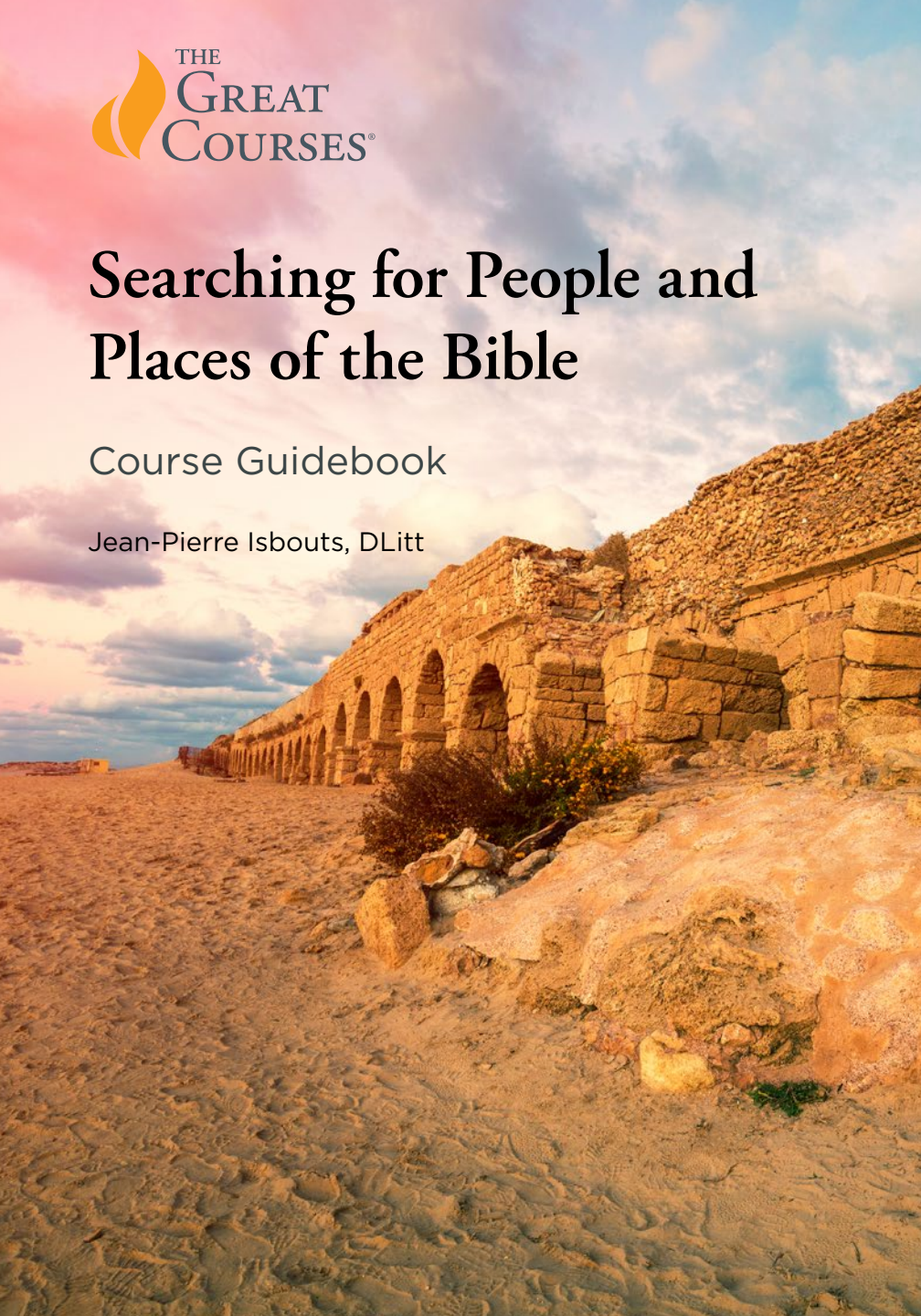
Searching for People and Places of the Bible

Course Guidebook

Jean-Pierre Isbouts, DLitt



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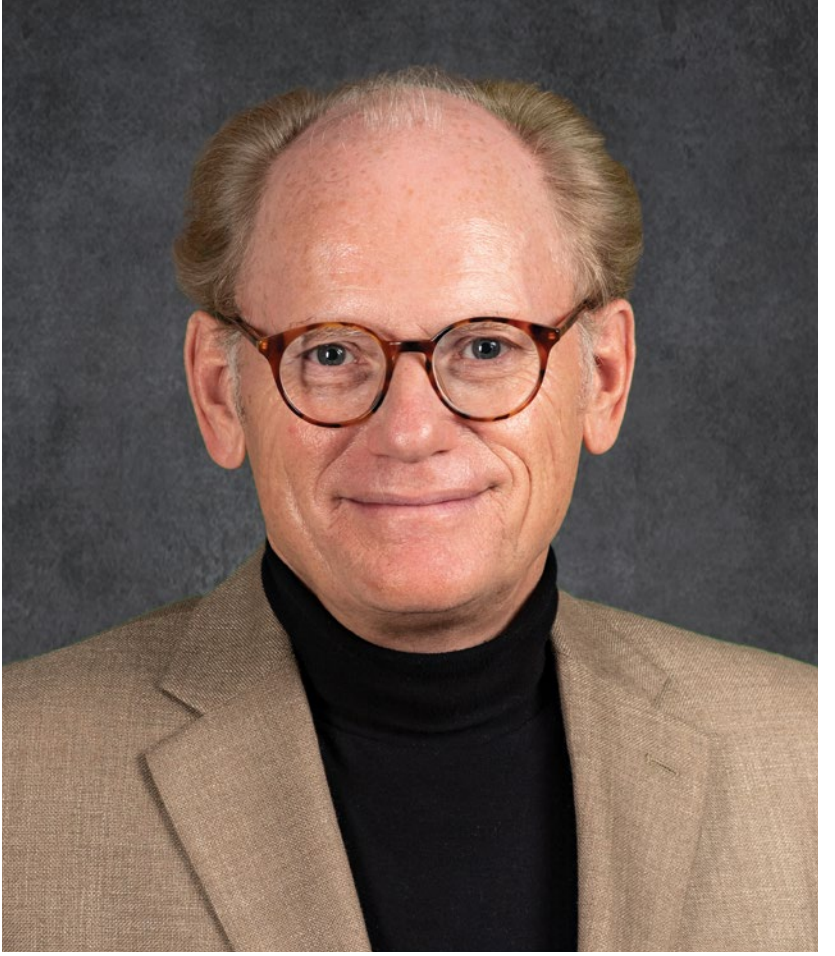

Jean-Pierre Isbouts, DLitt

Jean-Pierre Isbouts is a historian, biblical scholar, and best-selling National Geographic author. After earning his DLitt at Leiden University, he served as a member of the doctoral faculty at Fielding Graduate University for more than 15 years and now holds the title of Faculty Emeritus. He gained worldwide renown with his National Geographic book *The Biblical World* and also wrote *Archaeology of the Bible*, *In the Footsteps of Jesus*, and *The Dead Sea Scrolls*, which has sold more than 2 million copies. His other Great Courses include *Searching for the Historical Jesus* and *The History and Archaeology of the Bible*.

Table of Contents

Searching for People and Places of the Bible

The Judeo-Christian Bible is, above all, a collection of stories about people: patriarchs and prophets, rulers and kings, mothers and fathers. What makes these stories so interesting is that they take place in different locations in the Near East. They take us from the very north of Israel to the very south, in the Negev; from the most fertile region in Egypt—the land of Goshen in the Nile Delta—to deep in Asia Minor, today's Turkey; and to Greece. *Searching for People and Places of the Bible* is a unique course that seeks to retrace the footsteps of the most prominent people in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament across the Near East.

As such, the course unfolds over a large territory, filmed on location in some of the region's most remote places rarely visited by tourists or pilgrims: Tanis and Tell el-Dab'a in the upper Nile Delta; Uyun Musa, Wadi Gharandel, and Wadi Feiran in the Sinai; and scores of archaeological sites in Israel, Turkey, and Greece.

The result is a deeply immersive journey through the lands of the Bible. Each episode features presentations at the very location where biblical figures lived, vividly attested by the beauty of the area or archaeological excavations and further enhanced with dramatic 3D animation. From Abraham and David to Jesus and Paul, and from the book of Genesis to the Gospels and Acts of the Apostles, *Searching for People and Places of the Bible* is a unique way to experience the beauty of the Bible.

1

The World of Abraham

The Bible remains a bedrock of faith and a moral compass for navigating the complex issues of our existence. Its stories are told in the context of the greatest civilizations of the ancient world. This course will take you on a journey in search of men and women of the Bible and the actual locations across the Middle East where their stories took place. You'll discover whether learning about those places can shed new light on the stories.

In the Beginning

> In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the waters. Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night (Gen. 1:1–5).

"Bere'sheet. In the beginning." With these words, the Hebrew Bible begins its story in Genesis. The book describes how one all-powerful God created the universe, Earth, and life. The first chapter of Genesis shows that with His words, God created all animals of every kind and made humankind in His image, giving them dominion over every living thing.

Genesis compresses the evolution of the universe and Earth—a process of nearly 14 billion years—into a timespan of 6 days, after which God rests on day 7. Seven symbolizes perfection, emphasizing the divine nature of this process.

The book's purpose is twofold: to describe the origins of the world as the work of God and to tell the history of Israel through the lives of its founding fathers. Thus, Israel's origins are shown to be the product of divine involvement from the very beginning of time. The story of God creating the world out of nothing by simply speaking His creative word is a theme that resonates through Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

The First People

Genesis tells the story of the first humans. God formed man "from the dust of the ground," which is reflected in the man's name: *Adam*. The root—*adama*—in Hebrew means "earth." Adam was lonely, so God caused him to fall into a deep sleep and used one of his ribs to make Eve, or *hawwah*, the "mother of all things" or the "source of life."

Adam and Eve lived in a beautiful place the Bible calls the Garden of Eden. Its meaning is unclear, but the Akkadian word *edinnu* means "well-watered," suggesting that Eden was a beautiful valley. Genesis notes it was located at the source of a river that split into four tributaries: Pishon, Gihon, the Tigris, and the Euphrates. The last two remain rivers today, and their location places the Garden of Eden near the head of the Persian Gulf, which several 18th-century European maps suggest as well. The garden had many trees, but one was out of bounds.

> But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die (Gen. 2:16–17).

But Adam and Eve did eat from the tree, and they were evicted from the garden. Eve later gave birth to two sons, Cain and Abel—a farmer and a shepherd, respectively, who symbolize the tensions in the Stone Age world between settled farmers and nomadic shepherds. The groups clashed repeatedly over control of precious resources, and Cain killed his brother. For this, Cain was cast out in a land east of Eden, named Nod. There, Cain "built a city and named it Enoch after his son" (Gen. 4:17). These words provide the Bible's first reference to a city, suggesting that farming settlements had grown to become communities protected by walls.

The Great Flood

Genesis then begins to chart the history of the prehistoric world. Because of man's wickedness, God decides to return the Earth to its pre-Creation state, covered by water. Only Noah and his family would be saved. God tells Noah to build a large boat, even providing detailed specifications. Once it is finished, God tells Noah to embark two of every species to spare them from the coming catastrophe, the Great Flood.

In Mesopotamian lore, there are countless references to great floods. The Tigris and Euphrates tended to rise and inundate the land. In Mesopotamian mythology, the gods get annoyed and, depending on their mood that day, may decide to eliminate human beings. The Hebrew tradition argues that God chooses to be predictable.

Noah and his family were the only survivors of the flood and the forebears of the generations that would populate the Earth. One of those generations built the tower of Babel to reach into the heavens, a story likely inspired by the tall ziggurats that were built in Sumer as shrines to the gods. Ziggurats had the form of a pyramid, shaped as a series of receding platforms with tapered walls, rising to a flat platform. They were temples for worship and sacrifices to the gods.

One such ziggurat was built in the Sumerian city of Ur by Ur-Nammu—the king of Ur—around 2100 BCE. Nine generations after the Great Flood, it was here that a man named Terah lived with his family, including his sons Abraham, Nahor, and Haran. Abraham's wife, Sarah, was barren. Haran died, leaving his son Lot in the care of Abraham.

Abraham's Journey

Ur was the first major civilization. The Bible provides a clue about the period the story of Abraham is set in. It says that Terah took Abraham, Sarah, and Lot out of Ur and led them to Harran, a major crossroads on the caravan routes between Sumer, Anatolia, and Egypt. In ancient history, this was a drastic move. In the 20th century BCE, the Third Dynasty of Ur was invaded by the Elamites, people from region that is now knowns as Iran. Such invasions led to the displacement of the local population, and that may be the reason Terah moved his family from Ur to Harran at the beginning of the Bronze Age. Today, ancient Harran is identified with the town of Urfa in Turkey, which is believed to have been founded by Sumerian traders around 2000 BCE.

The Bible gives several specific geographical indications. It is possible to trace Abraham's journey, starting on the eastern side of the Fertile Crescent in what is now Iraq. It progressed across the top of the Fertile Crescent into what is now Syria—then into southern Turkey to Harran, which would become the last outpost of paganism under the rising Christian tide in the 7th century CE.

Abraham and Sarah did not stay in Harran. After Terah died, Abraham heard the word of God.

> Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great so that you will be a blessing (Gen. 12:1–2).

Abraham may not have known God at this point, as the culture of Sumer recognized many different gods. But he did what God told him: He packed up his family, including his nephew Lot, their servants, and their herds. They traveled down to the land of Canaan, the future territory of Israel.

With this move out of the polytheistic environment, Abraham is linked closely to the birth of monotheism and ancient Israel through Isaac, Jacob, and the 12 tribes of Israel. This is carried over into Christianity.

The Land of Canaan

The first place Abraham visited in Canaan was Shechem. Today, it is identified with an archaeological dig in Tell Balata, which is in the West Bank, close to the Balata refugee camp. It is one of the oldest attested cities in Canaan. The remains of a monumental gate and a temple have been dated to the Middle Bronze Age, not far from the period of the story of Abraham (1800–1500 BCE). It is here that God said, "To your offspring I will give this land" (Gen. 12:7).

Abraham and his entourage then traveled to Bethel and on to the Negev desert. But a famine occurred in the land, and Abraham joined the many people moving down to Egypt and the fertile lands of the River Nile.

Genesis does not say where he went, but since Pharaoh took Sarah into his harem—believing she was Abraham's sister—it may have been near the capital of the Middle Kingdom in El-Lisht. The oldest remains of ancient Egypt are in Saqqara, which served as the burial ground of Egyptian royalty. Here is one of the oldest pyramids, that of King Djoser, built in the 27th century BCE.

While Sarah remained in Pharaoh's harem, Abraham became a very wealthy man. Soon, however, Pharaoh and his house were afflicted with plagues because Sarah was married. When Pharaoh discovered this, he returned Sarah to Abraham, and they moved back to Canaan.

Eventually, Abraham and Lot accumulated large herds, and as there wasn't enough grazing land for them both, Abraham let Lot choose any of the land before him. Lot saw that the plain of the Jordan was well watered everywhere and chose the entire plain, conceding the portion of the land that now belonged to Abraham. Chapter 13 of Genesis ends with God telling Abraham, "Walk through the land."

Settled in Canaan without Lot, Abraham had no heir, as Sarah was still barren. The laws of the time stipulated that if a wife could not bear children within 2 years of the marriage, she must procure a slave woman for the purpose of conceiving her husband's child. Sarah took Hagar—an Egyptian slave girl Pharaoh had given Abraham in exchange for Sarah's favors—and told Abraham to lie with her.

Abraham had a son, Ishmael, with Hagar. But God looked kindly on Sarah, and she had her own son, named Isaac. With that began the battle for succession. Being the oldest, Ishmael should have had the birthright, but God decided to establish His covenant with Isaac. The reason for this is found in the Musée du Louvre in Paris, where a large monument contains the Code of Hammurabi—the best-preserved legal text from the ancient Near East. Written in Akkadian, it says that if a man has children by his wife as well as a concubine, the children of the principal wife should be favored.

Sarah insisted on getting rid of Hagar and Ishmael, and with regret, Abraham sent them into the desert. But God did not abandon Abraham's firstborn son, promising to "make a great nation of him" (Gen. 21:18). That nation would become Islam, which considers Ishmael the rightful heir of Abraham.

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2

From Isaac to Jacob

The book of Genesis establishes Ishmael as the forefather of Arab tribes and Abraham as the father of three monotheistic traditions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. It then narrates the story of Isaac—the son of Abraham and Sarah—and his descendants. In this episode, you'll discover how deception continues to play a large role in the way the lives of the characters unfold, eventually leading to a group of brothers selling a favored son to the descendants of Ishmael.

Abraham's Test

Just when God's covenant with Isaac seemed to assure Abraham's heritage, God told Abraham:

> Take your son, your only son Isaac whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you (Gen. 22:2).

Abraham was deeply shocked, but he obeyed. He went to the land of Moriah, which was Mount Zion in Jerusalem—later known as Temple Mount. Just before he could strike Isaac with a knife, the angel of the Lord called to him to stop the killing, saying, "[N]ow I know that you fear God."

Why would God test Abraham this way? The traditional view is that God wanted to validate Abraham's qualification as the recipient of His covenant. Another view holds that Abraham was being punished for his transgressions—specifically, his decision to send his other son, Ishmael, into the desert and to almost certain death. The most persuasive argument is that the episode illustrates God's complete rejection of human sacrifice.

Abraham had nothing to gain and everything to lose by sacrificing Isaac. It was not just his son on the altar; it was the covenant, all of God's promises. Abraham's obedience demonstrated that he truly feared God.

In Canaan, God was revered—but as the supreme god of pagan gods. Therefore, Abraham wanted Isaac to marry a girl from his family in Harran, not a Canaanite woman. He sent a servant back to Harran to find a suitable young woman. The servant returned with a lovely girl, Rebekah, and she became Isaac's wife.

Esau and Jacob

Isaac and Rebekah settled in a valley, and Isaac told his servants to find a well for themselves and their herds. Eventually, the servants were successful, and Isaac called the place Shibah. "Therefore, the name of the city is Beer-sheba to this day" (Gen. 26:33). Indeed, Beersheba has access to several wells, each fed by an underground aquifer.

Rebekah gave birth to twin boys. Esau, the firstborn, became a renowned hunter. He was covered in red hair—*Ēśāw* means "hairy." He would become the forefather of Edom, the land below the Dead Sea. Jacob, who was born second, was gentle and preferred to stay in his tent or tend to his father's flocks. The root of the word *ya'aqov* is *'aqev,* meaning "heel." At birth, Jacob had gripped Esau's heel.

Jacob, the younger twin, was his mother's favorite, so Rebekah began to plot how he could inherit the birthright. While she was pregnant, God had made a prophecy that "the elder shall serve the younger" (Gen. 25:23).

One day, a famished Esau asked Jacob for some "red stuff" (stew), or *Edom*. This phrase provides an example of the use of double meanings in Genesis: Edom was also Esau's nickname and the name of the land where he would dwell in the future. Jacob, sensing his advantage, offered Esau a deal. "First sell me your birthright," he said, and Esau agreed (Gen. 25:29–33). The deal, however, would not have held up in Isaac's eyes.

Rebekah then told Jacob to bring his father food while pretending to be Esau. She covered his hands and neck with sheep fleece and gave him one of Esau's coats. Isaac, who was nearly blind, touched Jacob's arms, smelled Esau's scent on his coat, and readily granted Jacob his brother's birthright (Gen. 27:27–29). When Esau found out, he was furious, and Rebekah sent Jacob to Harran to keep him safe.

Throughout Genesis, this theme of deceit is repeated. Eventually, Jacob and Esau would reconcile, but in the centuries to come, Edom and Israel would often be at war.

Few tokens of Canaanite culture remain. The British Museum has a statue of a man named Idri-mi, ruler of Alalakh, dated close to the period in which the story of Jacob is set. The statue bears an inscription in cuneiform with the first known reference to *ma-at kin-a-nim*—or "the land of Canaan." It also refers to a group of people known as the *hapiru*, which is similar to the reference in the Egyptian Amarna Letters to a tribe known as the Habiru and possibly connected to the word *'ibri* in the Hebrew Bible, meaning "Hebrews."

Leah and Rachel

Jacob went to his mother's family in Harran to find a bride. Along the way, he fell asleep and dreamed of a ladder reaching into heaven. At the top stood God, who confirmed his covenant with Abraham that had now passed on to Jacob: "The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring" (Gen. 28:13). When he woke up, Jacob anointed the stone on which he had slept with oil and called the altar *bet'el,* meaning "the House of God."

It has been difficult for researchers to identify ancient Bethel in today's Israel. The 19th-century scholar Edward Robinson believed it was located near the West Bank village of Beitin based on the similarity between the names and the fact that the place was a major crossroads on the way from Beersheba and Hebron to Shechem and Harran.

Jacob traveled from Shechem through the Jezreel Valley; past the fortified settlement of Megiddo; and on to Hazor, Damascus, Aleppo, and ultimately Harran. There, he went to the town well, where he met the young woman he wanted to marry: Rachel, who was the daughter of Laban, Rebekah's brother. Jacob had to pay a stiff price for Rachel—he must work in Laban's pastures for 7 years.

In Mesopotamia, the average price a groom's family was supposed to pay the bride's father was around 40 silver shekels. This payment was held in trust on the daughter's behalf in case the marriage ended. If the groom was unable to pay, he could work for his future father-in-law until the price was satisfied. A shepherd's annual wage was about 10 shekels; therefore, 4 years of labor should have sufficed. But Rachel was exceptionally lovely, and Jacob—who was on the run from Esau—was not in a position to bargain. Laban did not hesitate to exploit the situation.

Once Jacob completed the 7-year term, the wedding took place. Unbeknownst to Jacob, Laban replaced Rachel with her older sister Leah because Rachel marrying first would diminish Leah's chances of finding a husband. The next morning, Jacob was surprised to find Leah lying beside him. He complained, but Laban told him that if he still wanted to marry Rachel, he had to work another 7 years. Jacob had deceived his father to obtain his birthright, and now, his father-in-law had deceived him.

Jacob honored his marital obligations toward Leah and spent another 7 years in Laban's service. Leah, the unloved wife, and her maid Zilpah were fruitful and gave Jacob many sons, whereas Rachel was barren. Rachel gave Jacob her maid Bilhah as a surrogate; the maid bore sons as well, all of whom would become the heads of the tribes of Israel. Like Sarah, Rachel was only able to have her own sons—Joseph and Benjamin—late in life. Thus, Genesis sets the stage for the story of Joseph, who was as despised by his brothers as Leah once was by their father, Jacob.

From Jacob to Israel

Jacob decided to take his extended family and his herds back to Canaan. They traveled across the Transjordan to the desert southeast of the Dead Sea, the region known as Edom, where his brother Esau lived. As they approached the Jabbok River, Jacob heard that Esau was marching toward him with 400 men. Fearing a battle, Jacob brought his wives and livestock to safety. That night, an angel wrestled with Jacob until dawn. The angel then said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed" (Gen. 32:28).

Thus, Jacob received the name of the nation that his descendants would build in the centuries to come—a name meaning "one who struggles with God." The next day, his brother Esau arrived. There was no confrontation; Esau ran toward Jacob and embraced him, amazed to see his wives and children.

After a difficult pregnancy, Benjamin's birth was too much for Rachel, and she died. Jacob buried her in Ephrath, also known as Bethlehem—a town that would play a major role in biblical stories to come. Her tomb is located in what is today a mosque and is revered by Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike.

Jacob's father, Isaac, passed away in Hebron. His sons buried him in the same tomb that Abraham had built for Sarah and himself—the tomb of Machpelah, which today is known as the Tomb of the Patriarchs. Around 30 BCE, King Herod built a large rectangular monument over the cave using the same Hellenistic style as his expansion of the Second Temple in Jerusalem.

Joseph

Joseph, Rachel's firstborn son, was his father's favorite. Jacob even gave him a beautiful coat, often referred to as a multicolored robe. The true meaning of the Hebrew words *ketonet passim* is "a garment with strips," indicating that Joseph's coat had long sleeves and was cut from the finest strips of cloth—certainly a luxury for the now 17-year-old shepherd boy. This favoritism made his brothers jealous, and the situation worsened when Joseph told them about some strange dreams he'd had.

> Listen to this dream that I dreamed. There we were, binding sheaves in the field. Suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright; then your sheaves gathered around it, and bowed down to my sheaf (Gen. 37:6–7).

The dream clearly suggested that Joseph was superior to his brothers, no doubt because he was Rachel's son. When Jacob told the brothers to take the flocks to pastures near Shechem, Joseph decided to come along, and the brothers saw their chance to teach him a lesson. While the herds grazed in Dothan—associated with Tel Dotan in the West Bank, just south of the city of Jenin—the brothers seized Joseph, took off his coat, and threw him in a dry cistern.

Just then, a caravan of Arab traders passed by on its way to Egypt. Judah, one of the brothers, suggested selling Joseph to the Ishmaelites rather than harming him (Gen. 37:26). *Ishmaelites* refers to Arab tribes, the descendants of Ishmael. Genesis makes a subtle point: Ishmael was sent away from his family, and his descendants take Joseph away. The deal was made "for twenty pieces of silver" (Gen. 37:28), which was the going rate for a healthy male slave in the Bronze Age.

The brothers decided to pretend that Joseph had met with an unfortunate accident. They slaughtered a goat and poured its blood on Joseph's precious garment, which they then showed Jacob. "A wild animal has devoured him," Jacob cried. He collapsed in grief, refusing to be comforted. "No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning" (Gen. 37:35; the word *Sheol* means "netherworld").

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3

The Story of Joseph

While Jacob certainly thought he would never see his beloved son again, Joseph's story goes on to describe how Joseph—now a slave—became a high-ranking official in the land of Egypt. In this episode, you'll follow his journey from Canaan to Egypt and discover how his special gift saved a nation from famine. It is a story of hardship and leadership, and it brings the book of Genesis to a close with a moving reunion and a peaceful period during which the Hebrews in Egypt prosper and grow in numbers.

Joseph's Journey

One part of the story in Genesis does not ring entirely true. The book states that the Ishmaelites traveled with camels, but archaeological evidence has shown that camels were not domesticated in the Near East until around 1200 BCE and only became the preferred mode of long-distance transport after 1000 BCE. The traders would have used donkeys, but the 6th- and 5th-century BCE scribes who compiled and documented the Torah could not imagine risking the long voyage to Egypt on any other animal than a camel.

Arab traders often carried a group of slaves. Like other ancient civilizations, Egypt depended on slaves to build and maintain its temples, homes, and irrigation canals. Most slaves were taken during military campaigns, when both soldiers and civilians could be captured. For example, back in 2600 BCE, Pharaoh Snefru took 7,000 slaves and 200,000 cattle after his victory over the Nubians. But at the time of Joseph's story, Egypt had not waged a major war for some time, and the slave market relied on private enterprise to obtain the necessary slaves, usually in armed raids on unsuspecting villages.

The caravan would have traveled the King's Highway from Mari to Damascus, moving across the Transjordan plateau before crossing into Canaan through the lowlands of the Jezreel Valley. The King's Highway then led south to the ports of what today is called the Gulf of Aqaba, where ships were waiting to carry cargo to Upper (or southern) Egypt. The story implies that the Ishmaelites favored the coastal road along the Mediterranean, later known as the "Way of the Philistines," which led to Lower Egypt in the north by way of the Sinai—a distance of some 300 miles. Later, this would become the main highway of Egyptian military campaigns against Canaan, Syria, and the Hittites.

Traders chose such well-traveled trails because they typically had watering holes located at a travel distance of no more than 2 days—the maximum time a man on a donkey could travel without replenishing his water bags. Even so, the route was dangerous. In 1270 BCE, a high official of one of Egypt's mines reported to Pharaoh that "only half of the caravans arrive safely, for they die of thirst on the road, together with the asses they drive before them."

It would have been a tough journey for Joseph. However, after many days, the caravan would have crossed the Wadi el-Arish. Green pastures bordered by small groves of palm trees would gradually replace the sand and dunes. The caravan would have traveled another few days before reaching the border of Egypt at the ancient city of Peremun, which was later known as Pelusium.

Egypt

Egypt had experienced several periods of political unrest, often caused by poor harvests when the flooding of the Nile failed to properly inundate the land. Such events always had an immediate effect on the mostly agrarian economy of the unified kingdom. The disintegration of Egypt's central authority would invite a wave of immigration from the East—including people from Canaan, Syria, and Anatolia. One Egyptian document, the Prophecy of Neferti, laments that: "The land is being cast away … by Asiatics who pervade the land. … They have come down into Egypt, for a fortress lacks another beside it, and no guard will hear."

Around 1780 BCE, the wave of poor immigrants pressing at Egypt's borders was overwhelming. These people were fleeing from instability and famine in their native lands, and they eventually took control of the Nile Delta. This period likely encompasses the time of the story of Joseph.

Joseph was sold to Potiphar, a captain of Pharaoh's guard, implying that he was taken to the capital city of Avaris. In Potiphar's house, Joseph would have been one of many foreign slaves and "guest workers." An 18th-century inventory of an upper-class household from Thebes, for example, lists 80 servants—including cooks, weavers, a brewer, and a tutor. Half of them were Semites, and most would have been given an Egyptian name. Egyptian elites were notoriously racist. A 14th-century hymn to the Egyptian god Aten has this to say about Asiatic slaves: "Their tongues are separate in speech, and their natures as well … their skins are distinguished. … Yet everyone has his food, and his time of life is reckoned."

Slaves had to learn enough Egyptian to understand their master's commands. Joseph did just that, and he soon impressed his master with his dedication. As a result, Potiphar "made him overseer of his house and put him in charge of all that he had"—a foreshadowing of Joseph's future role in Egypt (Gen. 39:4).

The Grand Vizier

Joseph was handsome, and he quickly came to the attention of Potiphar's wife. According to the Qu'ran, she was called Zuleikha—a name that would later be adopted in rabbinic literature. Zuleikha tried to seduce Joseph and pulled off his garment, but he ran away. To cover her tracks, Zuleikha claimed that Joseph had tried to force himself on her, and Potiphar threw Joseph in prison.

Two prominent figures from Pharaoh's court—the royal baker and the cupbearer—were in prison at the same time as Joseph. They both had disturbing dreams, and Joseph explained their meaning. Dreams played a large role in Egyptian culture, and as their meaning was often hidden, they needed to be decoded. Scores of professional soothsayers worked to interpret them, and many "dream books" were written to serve as a guide to unlocking dreams' meanings. One day, Pharaoh had two dreams that his councilors could not explain. One was as follows:

> There came up out of the Nile seven sleek and fat cows, and they grazed in the reed grass. Then seven other cows, ugly and thin, came up out … [and] ate up the seven sleek and fat cows (Gen. 41:1–4).

The cupbearer remembered Joseph's gift for divining dreams. Summoned from prison, Joseph explained that the dream was a warning of great famine: Egypt's 7 years of plenty would be followed by 7 years of drought. As everyone knew, that was a death sentence. No dynasty could survive a 7-year drought. It would destroy the law and order in the kingdom. Then, Joseph said,

> Now therefore let Pharaoh look for a man who is discerning and wise, and set him over the land of Egypt. … Let them gather all the food of these good years that are coming. … That food shall be a reserve for the land against the seven years of famine (Gen. 41:33–36).

In response, Pharaoh said to Joseph: "You shall be over my house, and all my people shall order themselves as you command; only with regard to the throne will I be greater than you" (Gen. 41:40).

So, the young slave from Canaan became the grand vizier—the prime minister of Egypt. Some scholars claim that such a slave could not have risen to the position of grand vizier. They believe that the idea runs counter to everything that is known about ancient Egypt and, therefore, the story is a myth. However, by the mid-17th century BCE, immigrants from Syria and Canaan controlled the Nile Delta and Lower Egypt. These Semitic tribes, or *Hykos*, had replaced the Egyptian monarchy with a dynasty of their own—the Fifteenth Dynasty. They had also built their own capital city, which was called Avaris. Joseph's rise to grand vizier becomes plausible when considering that during the Hyksos period, all officials hailed from Syria or Canaan.

Myth or truth, the story has a clear purpose: to demonstrate God's people's moral superiority over Egypt's despicable polytheism. Egypt's power will eventually turn to dust, and the Hebrews will emerge as a nation for all time.

Some available evidence supports the story of Joseph. Egyptian texts often use "7 years" to estimate a space of time. According to Genesis, when Joseph was raised to his high office, Pharaoh "put a gold chain around his neck" (Gen. 41:42). This detail is accurate, as several such gold chains—capped with falcon heads—have survived and are in museums in Cairo and New York. Furthermore, since Joseph had to travel all across the land, Pharaoh gave him a horse-drawn chariot (Gen. 41:43). These vehicles did not exist in Egypt before the invasion of the Hyksos, who introduced chariots with spoked wheels—one of which is preserved in the Archaeological Museum of Cairo.

The Brothers

For 7 years, Joseph worked hard to prepare for the Great Famine: "He stored up in every city the food from the fields around it" (Gen. 41:48).

Large granaries were filled with grain. Many such granaries have survived, in miniature form, in tombs throughout Egypt.

Genesis provides a deeply moving conclusion to Joseph's story. When the famine came, it ravaged not only Egypt but also the neighboring territory of Canaan. Jacob had no choice but to send his sons to Egypt to buy grain. The brothers met with Joseph but did not recognize him. Joseph put them to the test: He gave them all the food they could carry but hid a precious cup in the bag belonging to Benjamin, his youngest brother. As they tried to cross the border, the goblet was discovered. Benjamin was arrested and brought back to the capital. Judah—the same brother who had sold Joseph to the merchants—pleaded with the grand vizier for Benjamin's life, not knowing that this powerful man was his sibling. Hearing Judah's plea, Joseph cried out:

> I am *your brother*, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now don't be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life (Gen. 45:4–5).

Joseph invited his entire family to come back and settle in Goshen, in the Nile Delta. Jacob agreed, and the story of Genesis and God's covenant shifts to Egypt for many generations to come.

Goshen was a highly fertile region located near Wadi Tumeilat in the northeastern part of the Nile Delta, between the easternmost tributary of the Nile and the Bitter Lakes. It was extensively irrigated and offered not only excellent soil for tilling but also grazing fields for large herds. Since the construction of the Aswan Dam in the 1960s, many of the Nile's branches that existed in Joseph's time have disappeared, but the region is still among the most fertile in Egypt. Avaris was established close to this territory, in the eastern Nile Delta, where the Hyksos had gradually taken control of the land with the vast numbers of immigrant labor that had settled here. The story of the Hebrews in Egypt continues in Goshen, as described in the book of Exodus.

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4

Moses in the Midian

The book of Genesis affirms God's covenant through the generations of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The aim of the book of Exodus is to make this a tangible reality by way of a dramatic escape from Egypt. When the story continues in Exodus, Joseph and his family are well established in Goshen and have become a sizable population. Then, the political situation in Egypt changes—and so do the lives of the Israelites. In this episode, you'll discover what this political shift meant for the Jews and witness the beginning of a mysterious character's life and calling.

Life in Goshen

The Bible says that, as grand vizier, Joseph was installed in the city of On, later known as Heliopolis. Located just 5 miles north of Cairo at the apex of the Nile Delta, On was the obvious place to create a central depository of grain and organize Egypt's newly "nationalized" agriculture. From here, Joseph could travel north to oversee the harvesting of grain or west to supervise the gathering of dates, figs, and other fruits from the nearby fields of the Fayyum. Today, the fields of the Fayyum are as green and fertile as they were then, with a canal called Bahr Yusuf (the Joseph Canal).

Jacob's children married and were "fruitful and prolific; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong" (Exod. 1:7). The sons of Joseph assimilated to Egyptian ways because—as Joseph once said—"all shepherds are abhorrent to the Egyptians" (Gen. 46:34). Goshen was a wonderful land, a paradise on earth. A papyrus document from around 1290 BCE says that Goshen offered a "wealth of good things."

> The pools are filled with fish, the lagoons are thick with birds; the meadows are covered with succulent grass; the fruits from the cultivated fields all taste like honey. … People are glad to be living here.

The New Kingdom

However, the political situation was unstable. The evicted Egyptian dynasty did not go away but moved to Thebes, hoping to one day reunify the land. Invaders from the kingdom of Kush saw that the power of Egypt was much diminished and exploited the situation. They conquered many of Egypt's colonial possessions in Nubia—today called Sudan—thus robbing Thebes of a primary source of income and slaves. There was also dissent among the Egyptians themselves. The control of Upper Egypt was contested by a group of breakaway noblemen who ruled part of the region as the Abydos Dynasty from 1640 to 1600 BCE.

Around 1570 BCE, the Seventeenth Dynasty gathered sufficient forces to invade the north. The pharaoh was killed in battle, but his army eventually defeated the Hyksos forces. Led by King Ahmose I, the Eighteenth Dynasty emerged victorious. Egypt had returned, and Ahmose's successors occupied much of Canaan to create a buffer zone around the Egyptian homeland. For the next 300 years, Megiddo would be the main Egyptian administrative center in the region, with an Egyptian governor ruling over the land of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The New Kingdom had begun.

The Hebrews living in Goshen had long assimilated to Egyptian culture, harvesting their land. They were no longer the nomads from the days of Jacob; they were settlers who built their lives around the mud-brick homes that sheltered their families. But the kings of the Eighteenth Dynasty—such as Thutmose III—pursued their dream of a vast Egyptian empire across much of the Near East. Their prejudice against the Habiru—the "sand-dwellers" so despised by Egyptians—is proclaimed by Thutmose's reliefs in Karnak: "Thou hast smitten the Sand-dwellers as living captives! Thou hast made captive the heads of the Asiatics of [Canaan]."

The Egyptian economy had suffered, and the nation needed to build more forts to deter invaders. The kings of the Nineteenth Dynasty avoided political instability by implementing a new military effort to secure the empire. Seti I built a new garrison city—called Pi-Ramesses—near the village of Qantir, 70 miles north of Cairo. With its population of more than 300,000, Pi-Ramesses was one of the largest cities in Lower Egypt. Here, the history of Egypt and the stories of the Bible come together.

The Israelites Oppressed

The king needed a labor force to build the new construction projects. As many young Egyptians served in the armed forces, he turned his attention to the Israelite tribes herding sheep and cultivating land in the Nile Delta, amazed by their numbers. The book of Exodus suggests that even after 400 years of settlement in Goshen, the Israelites were still considered a separate community.

"Now a new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph" (Exod. 1:8). The kings of the New Kingdom no longer recognized the special license by which Joseph and his family had gained permanent resident status in the Nile Delta. They were foreigners to be exploited.

> Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land (Exod. 1:9–10).

The Egyptians set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. The Israelites built supply cities—Pithom and Ramses—for Pharaoh.

However, the Egyptians began to fear the Israelites so much that they ordered the Hebrew midwives to kill all the male babies born in their community (Exod. 1:15–16). While that appears to contradict Pharaoh's desire for more workers, it is likely that there was fear the Israelites would join Egypt's enemies and instigate another Hyksos-type revolt. Later, the murder of the Hebrew infants would justify the terrible retribution of the 10th plague, when all the Egyptian firstborn sons were slain.

Moses

One Hebrew couple from the tribe of Levi tried to save their newborn son by setting him adrift on the river in a basket made of papyrus and plastered with bitumen and pitch. The story borrows motifs from Mesopotamian or Egyptian literature to amplify its meaning. It parallels the story of King Sargon I, who was the founder of the Akkadian Empire. When he was born, his mother—a foreign princess—feared for his life. As Sargon told his story:

> She put me in a box made of reeds and plastered with bitumen. She cast me in the river, which carried me along and brought me to Akki, the water drawer. … Akki took me up and raised me as a son.

The same thing happened to young Moses. As his older sister Miriam watched, the basket carried him down the river until the daughter of Pharaoh spotted it and ordered one of her servants to retrieve it. When she saw the crying baby, "she took pity on him. 'This must be one of the Hebrews' children,' she said" (Exod. 2:6). Miriam rushed to the scene and said, "Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?" Pharaoh's daughter agreed, and little Moses and his mother were reunited until such time that Pharaoh's daughter took him as her son.

She named him Moses, as she said, "I drew him out of the water" (Exod. 2:10). The Hebrew verb *moshe* means "to draw out," but *moshe* or *moses* was also a common patronymic in Egypt. The book of Exodus depicts Moses as a mysterious character. He is a Hebrew but is raised as an Egyptian prince. He grows up in luxury but is able to make his way across the Sinai desert and survive. He feels a kinship with the Israelites of Goshen, but they consider him an outsider. Moses only finds true happiness while living as a shepherd in the Midian desert with his Kenite wife, Zipporah, but he would become a cardinal figure in the Jewish faith—the lawgiver of the Jewish nation.

The Burning Bush

One day, when Moses was a grown man, he visited the construction pits to watch the Hebrews toiling away. One of the supervisors was beating a slave, "one of his kinsfolk." Incensed, Moses "looked this way and that, and seeing no one he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand" (Exod. 2:12). When Pharaoh heard of this, he wanted to punish Moses by killing him, and Moses fled into the wilderness of the Sinai.

He made his way to the Midian, just east of the Gulf of Aqaba, in what is today southern Jordan. There, several shepherds were harassing a group of young women at a well. Moses came to the women's defense, and the girls rushed back to their father with news of the Egyptian who had saved them. That father was Jethro the priest. Jethro gave Moses his daughter Zipporah, who soon presented Moses with a son, Gershom. Jethro appears several times in the story of Moses. In Exodus 4, Jethro sends Moses back to Egypt with his blessing. In Chapter 18, he comes to meet Moses at Mount Sinai and gives him advice. That is when he hears about the exodus and praises Yahweh.

The Midianites were descendants of Abraham. According to Genesis, they traced their origins to a son of Abraham's second wife, Keturah, whom he married after Sarah's death (Gen. 25:1–2). It is reasonable to assume that they had continued to worship the God of Abraham. It has even been suggested that Moses may have been the son of a Midianite governor who was raised at the palace of Pharaoh as a hostage prince.

Moses took his father-in-law's flocks and ventured into the lower Sinai. In the shade of Mount Sinai, he witnessed a strange phenomenon: a burning bush. He looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed (Exod. 3:2). God called out to him and said,

> I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt;
> I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. …
> So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people,
> the Israelites, out of Egypt (Exod. 3:7,10).

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5

In the Footsteps of the Exodus

The book of Exodus recounts how Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt. Its depictions of places suggest the route onto which Moses guided God's people. It was not the shortest or fastest route; rather, there were detours and stopovers. The narrative tells of hardships the way God provided for His people. This episode will describe the escape from Egypt and allow you to follow along and explore the places the Israelites went to on their way to the Promised Land, right up to where Moses received the Ten Commandments.

The Mission

When God charges Moses to bring his people out of Israel, Moses is filled with doubt. Why should these Hebrew slaves accept him as their leader? Why would Pharaoh agree to receive him? On whose authority should he speak? God answers,

> I AM WHO I AM. … Thus you shall say to the Israelites, "I AM has sent me to you. … The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." (Exod. 3:14–15).

"I AM WHO I AM." From this point forward, the God of Abraham is known to Moses and all of Israel by the tetragrammaton—the four Hebrew consonants of Yahweh (YHWH). Scholars do not agree on its meaning. Some say it means "He who is." Others believe it means "He who causes to exist." It may simply mean that God's magnificence cannot be captured in the words of mortals.

More importantly, the nature of God has changed. He is no longer a remote God who occasionally issues instructions to the patriarchs but a God who takes a passionate interest in the fate of the Hebrew tribes. The long period of silence has come to an end. Yahweh will not rest until the children of Israel are safely out of Egypt and settled in the land of Canaan.

Moses's reluctance to undertake this great mission underscores the theme of alienation that runs throughout the story of the exodus. The Israelites are alienated from their God, possibly as the result of their assimilation into Egyptian culture. Moses is not only alienated from the Egyptian court that raised him but also from the people he is tasked to save. Throughout the saga, the people abandon their faith in either God or Moses.

God tells Moses to bring his brother Aaron the Levite, who will meet him on the road to Egypt. Thus begins the tradition of the Levites as servants of the Lord, which will later culminate in their role as Temple servants.

The Journey through Sinai

The confrontation between Pharaoh, Moses, and Aaron may have taken place in one of the new garrison cities at the southeastern rim of the Nile Delta. Pharaoh refused to let the Israelites go; instead, he made them work harder. In retaliation, God sent 10 plagues to Egypt. During the last plague—which made Pharaoh give in—all Egypt's firstborn males were slain by God's angels. To ensure that the angels passed over the Hebrew homes, each family was told to slaughter a lamb, roast it, and brush its blood on the doorposts. God said that this event should be celebrated as "the passover of the Lord" from this time forward (Exod. 12:11). Finally, the Israelites were freed.

They traveled to Succoth, possibly near Wadi Tumilat, where the Way to Shur's long path across the Sinai would have taken the Israelites to Beersheba—the doorstep of Canaan—in just weeks. But God told Moses to turn back (Exod. 14:2); the detour was meant to deceive and confuse the Egyptians because Pharaoh had changed his mind. The Hebrew fugitives were being chased by 600 chariots. When confronted by a large body of water, Moses lifted his staff. The sea divided, allowing the Israelites to pass on dry ground, with Pharaoh's men following closely. When the last Hebrew was safely on the opposite bank, Moses stretched out his hand, and the waters closed. The Egyptians were buried in a watery grave.

The Bible does not place the destruction of Pharaoh's forces at the Red Sea, as was originally thought. The Hebrew words *Yam Suph*, translated as "Red Sea" in the King James Bible, mean "Sea of Reeds." There are no reeds on the shores of the Red Sea, but sandbanks—sometimes covered with reeds—can be found near the marshes of the Bitter Lakes, which lie directly along the path from Goshen to Sinai. Thus, it is possible that this is where the Israelites crossed while the sandbanks were exposed during low tide. The bottom of this marshland is mud—solid enough for a person but too soft to support heavy chariots.

Moses did not lead the Israelites straight to Canaan; most oases along that road were guarded by Egyptian soldiers looking for deserters or foreign infiltrators.

> God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was nearer; for God thought, "If the people face war, they may change their minds and return to Egypt" (Exod. 13:17).

Moses followed the southern road along the rim of the Red Sea that ultimately led back to Midian—the same route he had traveled as a fugitive. Today's road from Ismailia to Sharm el-Sheikh covers much of the same ground that the Israelites may have taken. Running along the western rim of the Great Bitter Lake, the road goes past El-Shallufa into the vast Ahmed Hamdi tunnel under the Suez Canal, which connects Cairo with all points east in the Sinai Peninsula. From there, the road runs south along the Red Sea.

The Lord Provides

The Israelites traveled for 3 days without finding water. Then, they came to the oasis of Marah, where the water was "bitter" (Exod. 15:22–23), but Moses made the water sweet. Marah has been identified with the small oasis of Uyun Musa (or "Springs of Moses" in Arabic), located 25 miles from the Bitter Lakes. Even today, the thermal well is so rich in minerals that its water tastes slightly metallic. It may have appeared bitter to people who were used to the sweet water of the Nile.

Moses used the ancient Egyptian trail that led through the Wadi Matalla to Serabit el-Khadem. The Hebrews were desperate for water. They eventually came to "Elim, where there were 12 springs of water and seventy palm trees; and they camped there by the water" (Exod. 15:27). Quite possibly, Elim was the small grove known today as Wadi Gharandel, located 5 miles from Serabit el-Khadem. *Elim* means "tamarisks," and the oasis is still surrounded by date palms and tamarisks. From there, Moses turned inland into a desolate region known as the wilderness of Sin (Exod. 16:1).

The Hebrews complained of hunger, so God promised Moses that He would send food: meat to eat in the evening and bread in the morning. Then, "in the evening quails came up and covered the camp." In the morning, there "was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground" (Exod. 16:13–14).

Initially, the bewildered Israelites called the flaky matter *manna* (possibly, "What is it?"), but they soon discovered it could be rolled into dough and baked as bread.

The Sinai Peninsula is positioned on the path of migrating birds—including quail—on their annual trek from Africa to cooler regions. To this day, Bedouins in northern Sinai set up nets to capture them. Manna is the secretion of a small insect that feeds off the sap from tamarisk trees. The existence of manna to this day suggests that the narrative of Exodus is based on actual phenomena witnessed in the ancient Near East.

The Israelites continued their long journey through the wasteland of Sin. Moses turned southeast, away from the Red Sea. Here, the ancient road east plunges into the mountains, past a rock that the local Bedouins call the Spring Hidden by the Scribes. In Bedouin lore, the scribes are Moses and Aaron.

The Israelites camped at Rephidim (Exod. 17:1). Today, Rephidim is the vast palm grove known as Wadi Feiran, an immense stretch of trees surrounded by the rise of the Sinai mountains. It is the largest oasis in all of the Sinai, big enough to water a large flock of sheep—and people. Here, Moses struck a rock and caused water to come from it (Exod. 17:6). A local tribe called the Amalekites took offense and attacked the Israelites to defend their water rights. A bitter battle ensued, but the Israelites prevailed.

The Torah

Jethro arrived with Moses's wife, Zipporah, and their two sons. He had "heard of all that God had done for Moses and for his people Israel" (Exod. 18:1). Jethro saw how Moses got involved in countless disputes with his people. He told Moses that he needed to delegate and that his task was to "represent the people before God."

"You must teach them the statutes and instructions," he said. "You should also look for able men among all the people, men who fear God, are trustworthy … let them sit as judges for the people" (Exod. 18:19–22).

With these words, Jethro prepared Moses for the moment when God would hand him the laws that would govern the nation of Israel for all time—this was the purpose of leaving Egypt.

Mount Sinai stood a short distance away, rising 7,500 feet above sea level. It remains a deeply moving place. Its summit offers a panorama of desert and mountain peaks, stretching beyond the Sinai to the Gulf of Aqaba. Down below is St. Catherine's Monastery and the place of the burning bush. At the place where his mission had started, Moses received the Ten Commandments from the Lord.

"I am the Lord your God, who has brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me" (Exod. 20:2–3).

God's covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was ratified in a formal treaty between Yahweh and his people: the Jewish Law, the Torah. It stipulates that as long as the Hebrews remain faithful to their God and obey his laws, God will dwell in their land and protect them. If they failed to do so, danger would follow, usually in the form of foreign invaders. This is the dominant theme in the books of the prophets that document the history of ancient Israel.

Above all, the Torah emphasizes social justice. "You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard. You shall leave them for the poor and the alien" (Lev. 19:10). Deuteronomy states, "You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Deut. 10:19).

From Mount Sinai, the people of Israel headed to Ezion-Geber, near today's Eilat. Guides from the Midian led the caravan from one major oasis to another—including the oasis of Hazeroth and the great oasis of Kadesh-Barnea—toward the Promised Land.

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6

Joshua's Conquest of Canaan

After their long journey through the desert, the Israelites had to prepare for their return to Canaan, guided by a new leader. The subsequent invasion may not have been exactly as described in the Bible, but in the end, the tribes of Israel settled in the land they set out for when they escaped from Egypt. In this episode, you'll be able to follow story of the Israelites' return to the Promised Land and explore the meaning of the described events in light of archeological evidence.

Joshua

The Israelites were now close to the Promised Land, but Moses knew that his exhausted people were not ready to fight their way into the territory. The Bible stresses that, first, they had to build a strong army.

By the Jordan in Jericho, the Lord said to Moses,

> Speak to the Israelites, and say to them: When you cross over the Jordan into the land of Canaan, you shall drive out all of the inhabitants of the land before you, destroy all their figured stones, destroy all their cast images, and demolish all their high places (Num. 33:50–52).

The Israelites stayed in the desert for 40 years, slowly building up the necessary forces. At last, they were ready to invade the Promised Land. Moses would not be with them; he died on Mount Nebo, where he had gone to cast one last look over the valley of the Jordan and toward Canaan. He was not granted a magnificent burial, and the location of his grave remains unknown, adding to the mystery surrounding this hallowed figure.

The Bible describes the entry into Canaan as a series of great military victories, and evidence indicates some fierce battles occurred in this region in the 12th century BCE. However, this era was a time of great instability, caused by extensive movement of peoples throughout the Near East. As such vast migrations often left major cities in ruins, it is not possible to see the destruction in Canaan as the sole work of the Israelites.

After Moses's death, Joshua took over the leadership of the Israelites. Joshua was not a prophet or a lawgiver but an experienced military commander who had already led a scouting mission into Canaan. His first goal was to destroy the city of Jericho, which controlled the main road between the Transjordan and Joshua's ultimate objective: the spine of the high country running across the length of Canaan.

Jericho and Ai

According to the Bible, Joshua and his troops marched around the walls of Jericho for 6 days. In the middle of their column was the Ark of the Covenant containing the sacred tablets of Moses, accompanied by seven priests blasting away on their war horns. When the Israelite army repeated the military parade on the 7th day, Joshua rallied his people to a mighty war cry, and the wall "fell down flat" (Josh. 6:20).

Joshua then focused his attention on the hill country. Two roads made their way westward from Jericho to the high desert plateau of the Judean Hills. One road—rising some 4,000 feet—led to Jerusalem, the fortified city of the Jebusites. The second and more manageable road led to the settlement of Ai, located north of Jerusalem. Joshua thought it would be easy to take Ai. He sent a small group of soldiers to conquer the city, but they were defeated. God intervened and gave Joshua a new plan. Ai was captured, and Joshua burned it and made it a permanent heap of ruins (Josh. 8:28).

The site of ancient Jericho is well known. It is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities on the planet. First identified by Charles Warren in 1868, it is located 20 miles east of Jerusalem. Jericho was a flourishing city during the Middle Bronze Age, but it was destroyed well before the Israelites invaded. When the city was later rebuilt, it was surrounded with mud walls that would not have held up against a determined enemy. According to British archaeologist Kathleen Kenyon, these mud walls were destroyed and rebuilt at least 17 times.

Ai—or *hāʿAy*—means a "heap of ruins." It has been identified with the archaeological site of Et-Tell in the West Bank. As in the case of Jericho, the town flourished in the Bronze Age, but Egyptian forces destroyed it. Excavations in the 1930s revealed that the city was then abandoned until about 1200 BCE, roughly the time of the conquest. At that time, a group of settlers farmed the slopes of the hill. No signs of destruction or violence from this period exist. Archaeologist Lawrence Stager has shown that of the 31 cities said to have been taken by the Israelites, 20 have been identified. The vast majority show no evidence of violent destruction in the late 13th or early 12th century BCE.

There is an obvious disconnect between the Bible's account of destruction and archaeologists' discoveries on the ground. Several possible explanations exist for this. First, the timing of the conquest may have been misjudged, and the escape from Egypt and entry into Canaan took place much earlier, during the 15th century BCE. This explanation would push the conquest back into the Late Bronze Age, thus solving some—but not all—of the discrepancies. Second, it may be that the Bible contracts the migration from Egypt to Canaan into one heroic story that reveals God's awesome power by defeating Joshua's enemies one by one, thereby showing that the Israelites took control of Canaan through a massive conquest that not only remained relatively unchallenged but also legitimized the Israelites' control of the area.

The Hebrews did not capture the most desirable areas, particularly the rich and fertile valleys. These areas remained under the control of the Canaanites, whose weapons were far superior to those made by the Israelites. All these factors suggest that Joshua's campaign may not have been as successful or violent as the Bible suggests. Instead, it was likely a process of gradual settlement by Israelites in the highlands of Canaan—today's West Bank in the Palestinian territories, where places such as Shechem and Shiloh were once visited by Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Evidence indicates that the town of Ai was settled peacefully by farmers around 1200 BCE. An Egyptian monument that was built in 1207 BCE refers to victories in Libya and Canaan and specifically mentions Israel.

The Town of Hazor

With many foreign invaders passing through Canaan, most major towns in the region had been fortified. Hazor—a large town covering 200 acres in northern Galilee—was one of the most strategic places in all of Canaan. The only access to this heavily fortified city was through massive gates in the Lower City.

At one time, Hazor had a population of more than 15,000. It had active trade links throughout Egypt, Anatolia, and Syria and a strong army. The Bible calls the ruler of Hazor the king of "all the kingdoms of Canaan" (Judg. 10:11). In one of the Amarna Letters—diplomatic dispatches from

the time of Pharaoh Akhenaten—the king of the Transjordan complained to the Egyptian king that the ruler of Hazor "took three cities from me." By this time, King Jabin of Hazor knew that the Israelites were invading the highlands of Canaan. He rallied all the kingdoms of the north into a defensive coalition against the Israelites, but Joshua was able to defeat this coalition. He captured Hazor and burned it to the ground (Josh 11:10–11).

Hazor is one of the best-preserved places from that period. In the 1950s and 1960s, Israeli archaeologist Yigael Yadin led the excavation of Hazor. He exposed the northwest corner of a large building, which bore clear traces of soot. Subsequent excavations found more evidence of fire. Yadin identified the building as the palace of King Jabin and concluded that the Israelites had indeed destroyed Hazor around 1230 BCE. Another city that may bear the marks of a violent Israelite conquest is the town of Lachish, a key center of the Egyptian occupation during the Eighteenth Dynasty. The Bible says that Joshua "struck it with the edge of the sword, and every person in it" (Josh. 10:32). The site—known as Tel Lachish—shows clear signs of violent destruction, although perhaps not before 1150 BCE.

Most scholars believe that the Israelites' settlement in Canaan was a gradual process of infiltration that only occasionally resulted in armed conflict. The Israelites were one of several migrating peoples passing through the region—thus weakening the ability of local Canaanite cities to respond.

Dividing the Land

Joshua had to decide where the 12 tribes of Israel should settle. The highlands of Canaan did not have the type of fertile land they were used to in Goshen. The valleys of Galilee, the Carmel, and Samaria were green and lush but remained mostly in the hands of the Canaanites. In contrast, the central highlands were hot and dry. The soil was hardly suited for agriculture, and there was not enough water. Only the coastal regions enjoyed a predictable amount of rainfall, while the Jezreel Valley and the Jordan Valley were irrigated by rivers and streams.

Joshua tried to be fair. The tribes of Reuben and Gad received the Transjordan plateau. One part of the Manasseh tribe settled in Gilead, between the Jabbok and Yarmuk Rivers, while the remaining Manasseh clans went to the foothills between Shechem and the Jezreel Valley. The tribe of Joseph's other son, Ephraim, settled in the hills south of Shechem. Judah received the land south of Jerusalem, close to Hebron, while the city of Hebron itself became the possession of Caleb (Josh. 14–15). The priestly tribe of Levi was divided among various towns throughout the land to serve the entire nation of Israel.

The remaining seven tribes drew lots. Benjamin's tribe moved to the hill country north of Jerusalem, while the tribe of Dan went to the coastal plain. Simeon's tribe was sent south to the desert, to the Negev region around Beersheba. The tribe of Issachar moved into the valley between Beth She'an and the Jezreel (Josh. 18–19).

Galilee was one of the most desirable regions of Canaan due to the fertility of its fields and orchards. Asher received western Galilee, Zebulun was settled in central Galilee, and Naphtali went to eastern Galilee (Josh. 19:32–39). Many centuries later, Jesus would leave Nazareth and make his home "in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali" (Matt. 4:13).

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7

From Saul to Solomon

Not everyone was satisfied with the way the land had been divided. Many tribes were surrounded by hostile states or kingdoms. The situation became even worse when another group of invaders arrived—the Philistines. The Israelites decided that with so many enemies in the land, they needed to unify, and so began the period of the Israelite monarchy. This episode will take you on a tour of the places where Israel's kings battled to defend their land and built places for the Ark of the Covenant.

A New Enemy

The Philistines were part of a vast population movement through the Mediterranean region around the 12th century BCE. They were a tough, highly experienced military force, and they pushed their way through the Near East. Their original objective was not Canaan but the Nile Delta in Egypt—the same region where the Israelites had settled so many centuries ago. As shown by reliefs on the mortuary Temple of Ramesses III in Medinet Habu, the Philistines were well equipped. They rushed down the Egyptian plain on fast chariots while an allied group landed their forces along the Mediterranean coast to confuse and split the Egyptian defenses. "They came with fire prepared before them, forward to Egypt," say the hieroglyphics at Medinet Habu.

King Ramses III was able to defeat the allied troops, but the Philistines settled in the nearest land—the southern coast of Canaan, near the ancient city of Ashkelon. The local Canaanites, the Israelites, and the Philistines began to compete for Canaan's scarce water and land resources.

The book of Judges tells the story of Samson, a man of great physical strength. Samson fell under the spell of a woman named Delilah, who discovered the secret of his strength: his long hair. While he slept, she cut his hair and delivered him to the Philistines. Blinded, he was forced to push a grain mill in Gaza. When the Philistines took him into one of their temples, Samson asked God to give him his strength back, and he brought the whole temple down—killing everyone, including himself (Judg. 16:28–30). Israeli archaeologist Amihai Mazar uncovered such a Philistine temple in Tell Qasile. The building's roof rests on a huge crossbeam that is supported by two large pillars of cedarwood, just as the Bible describes it.

By the end of the 12th century BCE, the Canaanites and Israelites had developed a form of coexistence that allowed for social contact and even a certain level of trade. The Israelite settlements in the highlands and other outlying regions expanded. Meanwhile, the Philistines flourished and were keen to take possession of the fertile valleys. A clash between the Israelites and Philistines was inevitable.

King Saul

Samuel was the first major prophet of ancient Israel. When the Israelites lost yet another battle, the tribes recognized that they needed a unified command to counter the highly disciplined Philistine forces. They knew that only Samuel had the wisdom to choose such an individual from their midst and appoint him as their *melekh*—a word that means both "king" and "commander." Here, two different narrative strands are at work in the Bible: One believes that the creation of Israel's monarchy was the will of Yahweh, and one argues that the tribal elders imposed the kingship on Samuel against his will. "He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards," the latter warns (1 Sam. 8:14). Eventually, Samuel anointed Saul—a young man from the tribe of Benjamin—as king over the tribal population, which had grown to more than 150,000 people spread over more than 500 villages and hamlets.

At that time, not only the Philistines but also groups from neighboring lands were pressing into Israelite territory. Saul rallied his troops and pushed both forces back, but he was never able to win a decisive victory over the Philistines. Moody and depressed, he relied on a young man named David to play the harp for him and lift his mood. Again, the Bible presents two different narrative strands: one showing David as a promising young warrior who is brought to Saul's court as a musician and one presenting him as a shepherd boy whose singing lifts the spirits of the workers in the fields of the village where he was born. That village was Bethlehem.

One day, the Philistines deployed a new weapon: a giant named Goliath. No one in the Israelite camp dared to challenge him—except David. Armed with only a sling, David drew one of the stones he had gathered and launched it at Goliath. The rock struck Goliath on the forehead, killing him instantly. David became a hero, and Saul placed him at the head of the army.

King David

After Saul fell on his own sword following a battle in which the Israelite army was defeated, the tribe of Judah anointed David as king, while the northern tribes chose Saul's only surviving son, Ishbaal. When Saul's army general transferred his allegiance to David, the northern tribes followed suit, but the threat of a split kingdom was an omen of things to come.

King David realized that he needed to solidify the fragile tribal federation into a nation—a kingdom called Israel. He had to rally the people behind a national ideal, create a center for the worship of Yahweh, levy taxes, and raise an army. He looked for a capital city in neutral territory—lest the northern tribes accuse him of favoritism toward Judah—and selected the city of Jerusalem, the stronghold of the Jebusites. The city perched on a high ridge overlooking three valleys: the Hinnom, the Kidron, and the Central Valley. It had its own water supply, the Gihon Spring in Kidron Valley. David and his forces conquered the city by entering it through a water shaft that connected the Gihon Spring with the city (2 Sam. 5:8).

David also needed a central place of worship that would hold the Ark of the Covenant, which contained the stone tablets God had given Moses. He purchased a piece of land on the northern end of the ridge and placed the Ark there in a temporary structure—a tent known as the tabernacle, first described in Exodus. Now known as Temple Mount, this area is where Solomon would build the First Temple.

King David drove the Philistines out of Israelite territory, back to the coastal region of Philistia. He then conquered Aram-Damascus (modern-day Syria) in the north, the territory of the Ammonites and Moab (presently Jordan) in the east, and Edom (roughly today's Negev desert) in the south. From a theological perspective, the message is clear: God blessed David more than He had Saul. David's kingdom would emerge as the most powerful nation in the region.

Tel Motza

Some scholars believe that the City of David dates to a later era and that the kingdom of David is a legendary concept—the ideal of a unified kingdom that never existed but would inspire Jewish nationhood for centuries to come. Some historians do not believe there is support for the biblical idea of a large kingdom or the claim of a united monarchy under King David and King Solomon. Instead, they see the gradual emergence of two rival entities—Judah and Israel—and believe that biblical authors blended their history into a unified model for the future restoration of an independent Jewish state. Others believe that King David and his son Solomon did exist, as attested by discoveries at Tel Dan, Megiddo, and Tel Motza.

In 1993, archaeologist Gila Cook found a victory stele at Tel Dan that is dated around 850 BCE. The slab refers to King Jehoram, son of King Ahab, with a phrase that could mean "house of David." If correct, it is evidence of David's existence.

Tel Motza is located in an agricultural area just 4 miles outside Jerusalem. The book of Joshua refers to the town as being in the territory of Benjamin (Josh. 18:26). In 2019, excavations revealed a temple from the 10th or 9th century BCE.

The temple is around 65 feet long and 42 feet wide and built according to a design that was current in Canaan and Syria at that time. Its courtyard served as the focal point of public worship, including an altar for animal sacrifice, an offering table, and a pit filled with animal bones and ash. It is essentially a miniature version of the temple that, according to the Bible, was built by King Solomon on Temple Mount in Jerusalem. While there are no references to either David or Solomon, the site supports the idea that around the 10th or 9th century, a temple in Jerusalem served as the model for the smaller shrine in Tel Motza.

King Solomon

Solomon was David's son by one of his wives, Bathsheba. When David lay on his deathbed, he ordered that Solomon should be taken to the spring of Gihon, in the valley of Kidron, where Zadok the priest should anoint him king without delay—before his other son, Adonijah, could be crowned (1 Kings 1:34).

The first 11 chapters of the first book of Kings describe the reign of King Solomon, estimated from 970 to 931 BCE. Archaeological evidence of Solomon's rule is scarce. Some scholars believe that in Megiddo, King Solomon rebuilt an old fortress, adding a large exercise yard for his cavalry and a monumental gateway that is almost identical in design to the one in Hazor. Both have a long and narrow passage flanked by large chambers, which were probably used to house guards with their weapons. Close to the site are rows of rectangular stalls. Each of these stalls is furnished with hollow stone blocks that may be feeding troughs. Solomon had "forty thousand stalls of horses … and twelve thousand horsemen," the equivalent of a division of 4,000 chariots (1 Kings 4:26).

The greatest monument that Solomon reportedly built was the First Temple in Jerusalem, which replaced the tentlike tabernacle to house the Ark of the Covenant. This was God's house, the House of Yahweh. Another model of Solomon's Temple can be seen in the acropolis of Tel Arad, excavated during the 1960s and 1980s. The Arad temple may be the oldest surviving Israelite sanctuary from the 10th century BCE. It has a courtyard surrounded by administrative rooms and an altar for burnt offerings, all built of undressed stones. The inner sanctuary—or "holy of holies"—is preceded by two columns, just as in Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem.

The construction of the Temple in Jerusalem was the high mark of Solomon's reign.

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8

Kings of Israel

After the First Temple was built, Israel went through a period of decline. Following the death of King Solomon, the nation of Israel divided into two independent nations: the kingdom of Israel in the north and the kingdom of Judah in the south. Influenced by other cultures, Israel's kings turned to paganism and even built altars to foreign gods. Eventually, the Northern Kingdom ceased to exist. In this episode, you'll discover the people and the places at the center of the political and religious battles that ensued and explore the events that took place.

The Nation Divided

Solomon failed to stay devoted to the Laws of God. "His heart was not true to the Lord his God, like the heart of his father David" (1 Kings 15:3). The first book of Kings blames the bad influence of his foreign wives, who had continued to worship their ancestral gods. Solomon even built shrines for the deities of Ammon and Moab on the hills surrounding Jerusalem.

However, the seeds of political unrest were present long before the end of Solomon's reign. Rather than being part of a unified kingdom, the northern tribes had always preferred to be an affiliated territory. They had never accepted the idea that the monarchy would draw its kings exclusively from the tribe of Judah and did not agree with Jerusalem being the sole place of national worship. The economy in the north had suffered due to Solomon's heavy taxes and his policy of recruiting forced labor. When King Solomon died, his empire broke apart along tribal lines. It split into the Northern Kingdom—which is still known as Israel—and the Southern Kingdom, now known as Judah. Each claimed to be the rightful heir to Yahweh's Covenant.

The split in Solomon's realm began with one of his ministers, Jeroboam, who was urged to plot against Solomon by the prophet Ahijah. Solomon discovered the conspiracy and condemned his former official to death. Jeroboam escaped to Egypt, where King Shishak granted him political asylum. Shishak has been identified with Pharaoh Shoshenq I, the founder of the Twenty-Second Dynasty. This is the first time a story of the Bible intersects with a figure who is attested by nonbiblical sources—in this case, the records of ancient Egypt. Jeroboam did not stay in Egypt. The northern tribes of Israel refused to accept Solomon's son and successor, Rehoboam. Instead, they anointed Jeroboam as king of the North, the kingdom of Israel. Thus began the period of the Divided Monarchy.

King Shoshenq was determined to rebuild Egypt, which was experiencing a period of decline. He took advantage of the political chaos and invaded Judah. Unable to defend itself, Judah sought to buy Shoshenq off by giving him "the treasures of the house of the Lord"—the gold and silver in the Temple of Jerusalem (1 Kings 14:26). Shoshenq continued north and invaded Jeroboam's kingdom. He forced his way to the mightiest fortress of the north—Ma-ke-thu, or Megiddo, where a stele that commemorates Shoshenq's victorious

campaign in this region remains to this day. Based on reliefs that Shoshenq created in the great temple of Karnak, most historians date this invasion to 925 BCE.

King Jeroboam's Shrines

As soon as the Egyptian invasion came to an end, Jeroboam wanted to secure the legitimacy of his rule. His priority was to create a national shrine to Yahweh in the north to compete with Solomon's temple in Jerusalem. Rather than building a new temple, he decided to revive the ancient cult centers of Bethel in the south and Dan in the north. Both had been in use as shrines during Israel's early prehistory. Jeroboam did not have the Ark of the Covenant for his new Yahweh cult; instead, he commissioned two golden calves to be placed in the sanctuaries of Bethel and Dan.

Bet-El, which means "the house of God," is now identified with an archaeological site first excavated by William Albright in 1927. It has been dated to the Iron Age II, in sync with the reign of King Shoshenq of Egypt. The site features a *bamah* ("high place") that was often used for religious worship.

The high platform of Tel Dan is in the north of the modern state of Israel, close to the border with Lebanon and Syria. Here, archeologists discovered a city gate similar to the one in Hazor along with a paved courtyard with a low stone platform, where Jeroboam's golden calf may have stood. It is also the place of the stele that references *Beth David*—the "house of David."

Scholars continue to debate the motive behind Jeroboam's decision to place a golden calf in the sanctuary. They suggest that he may have wanted to return to the original worship of El, the god of Abraham. The Canaanite El had traditionally been depicted as a bull, the symbol of strength and fertility. The same was true for the Canaanite god Baal. Another view is that the golden calves may not have been intended as the representation of the deity but as his symbolic attendants—in the same way that the Ark of the Covenant was "guarded" by golden angels. The close association of calves with traditional Canaanite deities would doubtless have appealed to those Israelites who continued to complement their worship of Yahweh with native gods.

King Omri

The Northern Kingdom of Israel entered a period of cultural and economic growth. The north was more populous and covered more territory than Judah. The northern tribes possessed the best farmlands and fertile foothills, including the Jezreel Valley. With their manpower restored, they began to exploit these rich agricultural lands, producing olive oil, wine, dates, and cereals. This prosperity culminated in the reign of King Omri.

Omri had been a general, commanding the forces of the Northern Kingdom during one of its periodic campaigns against the Philistines. He seized power after implementing two strategic decisions. First, he made peace with Judah. He then secured his eastern flank by entering into a treaty with King Ittobaal of Sidon, on the Phoenician coast. That treaty was sealed with the marriage of Omri's son, Ahab, to Ittobaal's daughter, Jezebel. With the borders secured, Omri defeated Aram-Damascus. Evidence of Omri's aggressive campaigning can be found in the Mesha Stone, which was created by King Mesha of Moab. The Mesha Stone refers to both Omri and Ahab as kings over Israel.

King Omri then focused on creating a new capital for the Northern Kingdom. He chose a location on a summit in the hills of Ephraim, just northwest of Shechem, and called it Samaria. After Omri died in 871 BCE, Ahab continued the construction. Today, the remains of Samaria are still visible just outside the village of Sebastiya, 8 miles north of Nablus.

The remains of the palace contain 500 ornaments of carved ivory, which depict both plants and living beings, including animals and foreign deities. This supports the reference in the first book of Kings that the palace was adorned with ivory (1 Kings 22:39), possibly carved by Phoenician artisans brought over by King Ahab and his Phoenician princess Jezebel. When the king made Baal—the pagan god of storms—an officially recognized god, "Ahab did more to provoke the anger of the Lord, the God of Israel, than had all the kings of Israel who were before him" (1 Kings 16:33). God's wrath came in the form of the Assyrian Empire, as described in the second book of Kings.

The Assyrians

British archaeologists excavated the palaces of the Assyrian kings in Mesopotamia, notably in Nimrud and Nineveh. They discovered vast interior walls covered with reliefs and paintings depicting the exploits of Assyrian kings. Many of these large decorations are in the British Museum in London. They make it possible to trace the development of the Assyrian Empire and the acute threat that these kings posed to Israel and Judah.

By the 9th century BCE, after the kingdom of Solomon had split, Assyria dominated the northern half of Mesopotamia, from Baghdad in Iraq to Harran in today's southern Turkey. King Ashurnasirpal II pushed the Assyrian border south and east, then moved southwest through Syria, reaching Mount Lebanon and the Mediterranean in 877 BCE. He wanted to convert foreign peoples to the faith of the Assyrian god Ashur—a conversion for which they had to pay. The money Ashurnasirpal collected was used to restore ancient Babylonian temples and ziggurats and build a new palace in the city of Nimrud, which became his capital.

The king's successor—his son, Shalmaneser III—continued the quest for more territory. The states of Aram-Damascus, Phoenicia, the Northern Kingdom, and Judah joined in an unprecedented defensive coalition. They met the Assyrian army in 853 BCE near Qarqar, 150 miles north of Damascus. A large stele, which was discovered in 1861 in the city of Kurkh in Turkey, provides an account of the battle. At the bottom, Shalmaneser III lists the forces that he defeated, including "2,000 chariots and 10,000 infantry" of King Ahab. While these figures are exaggerated, there is no question that Shalmaneser III defeated the coalition against him.

Within a few years, during the reign of King Jehu of Israel, Assyria had succeeded in forcing the Northern Kingdom to convert. This achievement is illustrated by a large black obelisk, discovered by Austen Henry Layard near the ancient city of Nimrud. It states, "The tribute of King Jehu, son of Omri," and it shows a figure prostrating himself before King Shalmaneser, quite possibly King Jehu himself.

Shalmaneser III died in 824 BC. He was succeeded by Tiglath-pileser III, who wanted to build a vast new empire that would stretch from the Tigris to the Nile. Ten years after assuming the throne, Tiglath-pileser was close to realizing his goal.

> In the days of King Pekah of Israel, King Tiglath-pileser of Assyria came and captured … Kedesh, Hazor, Gilead, and Galilee, all the land of Naphtali; and he carried the people captive to Assyria (2 Kings 15:29).

The kingdom of Israel was broken up into the separate Assyrian provinces of Dor, Megiddo, Gilead, and Karnaim. Entire villages were forcefully moved to Assyria, as illustrated by an 8th-century relief from the palace in Nimrud. The Northern Kingdom of Israel no longer existed.

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9

Kings of Judah

The kingdom of Judah was a relatively small and insignificant nation with a modest economy. In the 8th century BCE, it became a vassal state of Assyria. Since Judah considered the Northern Kingdom its enemy, it had supported the Assyrian invasion. Like Israel, Judah was influenced by other cultures' pagan religions, and its kings worshipped and imported foreign deities. Despite one king's attempt to reunite the nation, the kingdom of Judah would come to an end. This episode will explore what happened to this small nation, the kings who ruled it, and the people who lived there.

King Hezekiah

The kingdom of Judah tried to stay on good terms with Assyria, even worshipping its pagan gods. After Damascus fell to the Assyrian armies, King Ahaz went to the occupied city and bowed deep before Tiglath-pileser and the Assyrian gods. When he returned to Jerusalem, he built a pagan alter and imported pagan gods. He also brought in the cult of Moloch, which he established in the Valley of Hinnom in Jerusalem. According to the second book of Kings, he even sacrificed his own son to this cult (2 Kings 16:3).

At this time, Judah was experiencing internal conflict. Rich landowners had destroyed the fabric of local land ownership held by countless clans and families—a situation that would return in Galilee during the days of Jesus. The prophet Micah believed that the kingdom's social misconduct violated the fundamental precepts of the laws of Moses. He warned that unless the royal government decided to act and remove this inequity, "Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins" (Mic. 3:12).

Around 716 BCE, Hezekiah became the king of Judah. He destroyed the "high places" of pagan worship and purified the temple. He restored the economy of Judah, which had been negatively affected by the Assyrian invasions, and built a new aqueduct from the Gihon Spring to bring water directly into the city. The kingdom became stronger, and Jerusalem became a fortified city-state.

Having made successful changes, Hezekiah began to think that Judah could play a key role in the power play between Egypt and Assyria. This idea was encouraged by the Babylonian king Merodach-baladan, who wanted to rebel against Assyria. Hezekiah invited him to Jerusalem to show him his treasure house, with all the silver and gold and other precious things (2 Kings 20:13). Impressed, the Babylonian king continued plotting with Hezekiah.

The Battle of Lachish

News of the plot reached the new Assyrian king Sennacherib, who mobilized his forces and defeated the forces of the Babylonian rebels. He then turned west, determined to punish Judah. A detailed account of this campaign, which matches the account of Second Kings to a remarkable degree, survives on a carved clay prism, which was found at Nineveh in 1830.

One of the cities in the path of the Assyrian armies was the Judean city of Lachish, 30 miles southwest of Jerusalem. At first, the city was hopeful it could be defended. Among several pieces of inscribed pottery sherds, used to give military orders, excavators found one that reads: "May Yahweh cause my lord to hear news of peace, even now, even now." But after a fierce battle, the city was taken. Sennacherib commissioned his artists in Nineveh to produce four panels with scenes of the unfortunate city. These provide a frame-by-frame reconstruction of this terrible siege. To serve as an example, the male defenders were impaled on wooden stakes; the women and children were led away to an uncertain fate in captivity.

King Hezekiah sent a message to the Assyrian king while he was still encamped at Lachish: "I have done wrong; withdraw from me; whatever you impose on me I will bear." Sennacherib agreed and demanded that Hezekiah pay him a ransom of 300 talents of silver and 30 talents of gold. To pay for this indemnity, Hezekiah was forced to strip the temple of all its gold and ornaments (2 Kings 18:14–15).

The next king of Judah to have significant impact was King Josiah, who rose to the throne around 640 BCE. During the reign, the various books of the Torah were formally collected and redacted. It began when the high priest Hilkiah discovered an ancient scroll in the temple archives that contained "the book of the law"—probably an early version of what would become the book of Deuteronomy (2 Kings 22:8). This prompted the effort to put together all the other books that had been circulating in various forms up to this point, starting with Genesis. Thus began the project to create a canon of the full Torah, the Five Books of Moses—a process that would not be completed until after the Babylonian exile.

The End of Judah

The old Assyrian Empire was steadily crumbling, and King Josiah seized the opportunity to invade the Assyrian provinces in the country's north, thus combining Judah and Israel into a united monarchy—just like the legendary kingdom of David and Solomon. The Egyptian king, who may have been Necho I, decided to come to the aid of the Assyrian king. Josiah wanted to stop the Egyptians before they could reach the Assyrian lines, and he decided

to attack the supply lines of the Egyptian army near the fortress of Megiddo. Judah's forces were defeated, and the king himself was fatally injured. He died soon thereafter.

The Assyrian Empire was defeated by the forces of the Babylonian commander Nebuchadnezzar II, who soon became its new king. Judah's king at the time, Jehoaikim, plotted a rebellion against the Babylonians. King Jehoaikim also began to restore many of the pagan practices that had been outlawed by his father, Josiah, including sacrifice to Baal and Moloch. The prophet Jeremiah warned Jehoaikim, "I am going to send for all the tribes of the north, says the Lord, even for King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. … This whole land shall become a ruin and a waste, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years" (Jeremiah 25:9–11).

A clay tablet from the palace of Babylon states, "In the seventh year, Nebuchadnezzar mustered his troops, marched to Syria-Canaan and encamped against the city of Judah, Jerusalem." By that time, Judah had a new king, Zedekiah. When the Babylonian armies surrounded the city, Zedekiah sought shelter, but he did not escape his fate. As described on a tablet, in 586 BCE, Nebuchadnezzar attacked the city and captured it after a bitter struggle. The Temple of Solomon was destroyed. Many inhabitants were killed or marched into captivity along the rivers of Babylon. Only Jeremiah was spared, probably because he had advised against provoking the Babylonian king.

Another group that was spared were the farmers, who were familiar with the land and were crucial to sustaining the local economy. The Babylonians redistributed the land among the poor to help rebuild agriculture. According to Jeremiah, the Babylonians installed a local viceroy in Mizpah whose name was Gedaliah, a member of the Judean family of Shaphan (2 Kings 25:22). In the mid-1920s, the American archaeologist William Badè identified Mizpah as Tell en-Nasbeh, a small plateau in the West Bank, 7 miles northwest of Jerusalem. Here, Gedaliah urged the local farmers to collaborate with the Babylonians—or "Chaldeans," as the Bible calls them.

"Do not be afraid to serve the Chaldeans. Stay in the land and serve the king of Babylon, and it shall go well with you" (Jer. 40:9). But Israel's kingdoms were gone, and the great Babylonian exile began, displacing many.

Cyrus II

Back in Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar launched a vast program to rebuild the city in a fashion that would put the Assyrian capitals of Nineveh and Ashur to shame. One of the king's most impressive monuments—the Ishtar Gate—remains in the Pergamon Museum in Berlin. This gateway is one of eight that led to the city's inner precinct, covered with glazed color tiles depicting mythological beings. Shortly after the Ishtar Gate was completed, however, the Neo-Babylonian Empire began to crumble. In Iran, a vassal king decided to revolt against his Persian overlord. The name of that king was Cyrus II.

In 540 BCE, Cyrus turned his armies against the Neo-Babylonian empire, now ruled by King Nabonidus. This king had placed his son Bel-shar-usur at the head of his army. Bel-shar-usur may have inspired the character of Belshazzar in the book of Daniel, which describes the visions of a Hebrew exile at the court in Babylon. According to this book, Belshazzar presided over a great feast served on vessels looted by Nebuchadnezzar from the Temple in Jerusalem. As Belshazzar, his concubines, and other royal guests ate their fill, "the fingers of a human hand appeared and began writing" on the ornate wall of the banqueting hall: "*MENE, MENE, TEKEL,* and *PARSIN*."

Daniel was summoned to explain the text. He said, "*MENE,* God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end; *TEKEL*, you have been weighed on the scales and found wanting; *PERES*, your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians" (Dan. 5:26–29).

Daniel's prophecy was fulfilled. In 539 BCE, Cyrus reached the city of Babylon. According to the "Verse Account of Nabonidus," a Babylonian tablet recovered in 1924, the citizens of Babylon opened the gates to let the Persian conquerors march in. Cyrus's own chronicle—a clay cylinder shaped in the Babylonian tradition—says, "I returned the sanctuaries which have been ruins for a long time to the sacred cities, and established for them permanent sanctuaries."

> Thus says King Cyrus of Persia: The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem in Judah (Ezra 1:2).

Cyrus released the refugees in Babylon and made funding available to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem—the people of Judah were allowed to keep their religious identity. As the exiles from Judah and the Northern Kingdom were now free, they could move their families and belongings back to their homelands. However, many Jews chose to remain in Babylon. Their communities remained faithful to the Jewish Law and the worship of Yahweh, and many would develop into important centers of Jewish scholarship, responsible for major tracts of the Babylonian Talmud. King Herod would later appoint several high priests who came from Babylonia.

The exiles who returned to Jerusalem traveled the 1,000-mile journey through the Syrian desert. Judah was now known as the sub-province of *Yehud*, part of the fifth Persian satrapy known as *'Abar nahara* ("Beyond the Euphrates River"). While no longer a free kingdom, Judah had some autonomy and was ruled by the religious elite of the priesthood. For the next several decades, the population focused on rebuilding the temple. The Second Temple was finally completed around 515 BC. The era of Second Temple Judaism, which would last until 70 CE, had begun.

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10

From Alexander the Great to King Herod

At the start of the era of Second Temple Judaism, the Jews experienced significant freedom, but this would not last. New threats were on the horizon. Greek states began to play a large role in the region's culture, economy, and battles. However, in the end, the Roman Empire would decide the fate of the Jewish people. In this episode, you will get a glimpse of the freedom and the oppression the Jews experienced as different rulers took control of the region.

Greece

After the death of King Cyrus the Great, the Persian Empire faced a major challenge to its power: the city-states of Greece. They vied for the lucrative trade across the Mediterranean, and Greek settlers built port cities in an area that Persia considered part of its empire. Though the Greek city-states were often busy fighting each other, they fought together against Persia. King Darius I of Persia was defeated at the battle of Marathon in 490 BCE, but the clash between the two cultures continued.

Since the 6th century BCE, Greek culture had produced innovations that were the envy of the ancient world. In architecture, builders had begun to design their temples to the gods in stone rather than wood. Greek sculptors and painters were developing a new style, the Archaic, achieving a form of naturalism that would not be matched until the days of the High Renaissance by sculptors like Michelangelo.

Greek pottery became the fashion on the tables of the elite throughout the Mediterranean, including Persia. Greek philosophy, theater, science, and literature were highly influential too. In the city-state of Athens, the architect Ictinos designed the Parthenon, dedicated to the virgin goddess Athena. The temple bore sculptures of young maidens as well as riders on horseback and various battle scenes, produced by the artist Phidias. These sculptures—known as the Elgin Marbles—are now in the British Museum in London. The influence of Greece's creativity and achievements of its artists, architects, philosophers, and mathematicians reverberated throughout the ancient world. Historians refer to this Greek cultural influence as Hellenism.

Alexander the Great

In 334 BCE, the Macedonian king Alexander took his army of 40,000 soldiers and crossed from Europe into Asia at the Dardanelles, which is now called the Strait of Gallipoli. The far greater army of the Persian king Darius III was waiting for him, but Alexander was able to defeat Darius in the battle of Issus.

> After Alexander son of Philip, the Macedonian … had defeated King Darius of the Persians and the Medes, he succeeded him as king. He fought many battles, conquered strongholds, and … advanced to the ends of the earth (1 Macc. 1:1–3).

Alexander added Syria, Phoenicia, Judah, and Egypt to his territory before turning east. He captured the cities of Babylon, Susa, and Persepolis before reaching the Upper Indus Valley. In 323 BCE, Alexander died of a mysterious disease, and his empire fell apart while under the control of his former generals. Cassander ruled the homeland of Greece and Macedon; Seleucus won much of the original Persian empire; and Ptolemy, one of Alexander's best generals, became the king of Egypt, including Judea.

Despite the division of Alexander's empire, Greek became the dominant language of trade, politics, and the arts. New cities were designed in the Hellenistic style. Greek literature, theater, and philosophy were studied and debated in cities throughout the Mediterranean basin, including in Tarsus, the future home of Paul. Literacy rates rose, as did standards of living. The Greek currency known as the drachma became the standard in international trade. Prosperity and peace entered the new Greek commonwealth. However, there was also considerable conflict between Judaism and Greek paganism, and many practicing Jews would fight this cultural imperialism for 300 years—with varying degrees of success—until the reign of the Roman Caesars.

The Diaspora

Egypt and Judea were now one political entity, and the movement of people between the two realms increased. Some Jews settled in Alexandria, the capital city of the Ptolemaic kingdom. Alexandria had a university, an observatory, a zoo, a botanical garden, and a large library. Other Jews settled in the cities on the coast of Asia Minor, now Turkey. For those who left Judah, the greatest challenge was to remain faithful to the Jewish Law and the worship of Yahweh. In areas with strong Greek influence, the tension prompted the Jewish community to greater faith. They continued to observe the laws of kosher food at home and honored God with the reading of the Torah during community assemblies.

The Jews built small community halls known as synagogues, from the Greek word that means "house of assembly." Some of the earliest synagogues in Egypt date back to the 3rd century BCE, but it is possible that such assembly halls had been in use much earlier. Usually, a synagogue was a rectangular hall, flanked on the long sides by benches. One wall faced Jerusalem, where a niche called the Ark contained the scrolls of the Torah. The only surviving synagogue from the Second Temple period is located near the northwestern wall surrounding the Herodian Mountain fortress of Masada. It was built around 31 BCE and could hold about 250 people.

Synagogues were used for readings and commentary on the Torah. However, few Jewish expatriates could still understand the ancient texts, which were written in Hebrew. The solution was to translate the Hebrew Bible into Greek. Though there is an apocryphal story that the Bible was translated into Greek by 72 Jewish scholars from Jerusalem, most scholars believe that the translation was carried out by scribes in Alexandria and without Jerusalem's endorsement.

Around 200 BCE, Ptolemy V was defeated by the army king Antiochus III of the Seleucid Empire. Syrian kings forced the population of Judea to embrace Greek art, customs, and worship to enforce a common culture, language, and religion throughout the empire.

The Maccabean Revolt

The enforced worship of Greek gods led to the Maccabean Revolt, the subject of the books of Maccabees. This successful revolt was launched by a priestly family of five sons and one grandson. One family member, Judas, was nicknamed Maccabeus ("the Hammer"). Until recently, there was no archaeological evidence of the Maccabean Revolt or its victory over the Seleucid Empire. That changed in 2012, when Israeli archaeologists found weapons, slingshots, coins, and other evidence of a major battle between Maccabean and Seleucid forces near the city of Lachish. The rebels—led by John Hyrcanus—overtook a fortress and burned it to the ground. John Hyrcanus became a leader of the Maccabean Revolt and a high priest. In 164 BCE, the Maccabee forces took control of Jerusalem and cleansed the Second Temple of all the Greek idols and symbols. The event is still celebrated during the Jewish festival of Hanukkah.

The Maccabean victory led to the restoration of an independent Jewish kingdom in Judea, eventually adding Samaria and Galilee. The kings who ruled over this territory during that period are known as the Hasmonean Dynasty. They restored the worship of Yahweh, although they retained a fondness for all things Greek. The Hellenism of the previous periods endured, as shown by several monuments from this era in the Valley of Kidron in Jerusalem. One is called the Tomb of Benei Hezir. Its façade has two columns in the Doric style and an architrave and frieze with a Hebrew inscription. Next to the tomb is another monument from the Hasmonean period. It contains eight burial niches and an inscription referring to an individual named Jason—possibly a Hasmonean high priest—along with the depiction of ships and a menorah.

Hyrcanus was followed by his son Aristobulus; his other son Alexander Jannaeus; and finally, Alexander's queen, Salome Alexandra. When Salome died, a power struggle erupted between her sons, plunging the country into civil war. This war became a matter of great concern to Rome. The Roman Senate feared that the turmoil could spill over into Egypt—a vital supplier of grain to Rome's growing population of one and a half million people. Rome had one of the best generals in the region: General Pompey. As soon as Pompey heard of the trouble in Judea and was invited to intervene, he assembled his troops and conquered the region. Thus, the Hasmonean kingdom came to an end, and so did Jewish independence.

Herod

Greater Judea, including Samaria and Galilee, became a vassal state of Rome. Like all other states in the Roman Empire, it was to have a city in the Greco-Roman style: an urban center with a main boulevard or cardo maximus; a theater large enough to accommodate the people of the city; and thermae, or Roman baths. It was built in the ancient city of Beth Shean. Judea would remain a key part of the Roman Empire until well into the 7th century CE.

Pompey put Queen Alexandra's son Hyrcanus II in charge—not as king but with the title of ethnarch or "ruler of the people." Hyrcanus II deferred much of his rule to a man of Arab descent named Antipater, who had two sons,

including Herod. Antipater put his sons in charge as governors of various districts. Herod controlled Galilee, where he was despised for forcefully imposing high taxes.

In 40 BCE, the Parthians invaded Judea, again putting Rome's supply of grain from Egypt in danger. Herod convinced the Roman Senate that with Rome's military support, he could defeat the Parthians and rule Roman Palestine. Thus, the Senate not only voted Herod "King of the Jews" but also gave him a Roman legion to drive the Parthians out and seize the throne of Jerusalem. It took Herod nearly 3 years of hard fighting before he subdued the country. By now more hated than ever, he built fortresses around his kingdom to allow rapid deployment of his forces in case of internal or external threats and to provide refuge for the king and his family.

To benefit from the economy of the Roman Empire, Herod's kingdom needed to become part of the network of interstate commerce. Herod developed a large deep sea port on the Mediterranean coast, building it in the prevailing Roman style. His subjects were not pleased to see this massive influx of pagan culture. In the holy city of Jerusalem, Herod even built a theater designed for gladiator battles, which greatly offended the Jews. Eventually, the king realized he needed to placate his Jewish subjects. Thus, he began a project that would form a key stage for the story of Jesus: the expansion of the Second Temple into one of the largest sanctuaries of the ancient world.

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11

Women of the Bible

For many women in the Bible, their principal role was that of wife, mother, and homemaker. Still, women play an important part in the stories of the Bible—certainly in comparison to the sagas of other civilizations in the Near East. While women had few rights, they were powerful, and their impact on the nation was great. This episode will allow you to discover what life was like for the women of the Bible and how they were involved in changing the course of many events in Jewish history.

Marriage and Children

The woman's role of bearing children was fundamental to the survival of Israel and the fulfilment of God's promise of a great nation. In ancient times, girls often married as early as age 13 or 14. However, many of the leading women in the Bible struggled with infertility. Women who were initially barren include not only Abraham's wife Sarah and Jacob's wife Rachel but also Rebekah; Hannah, the mother of the prophet Samuel; and Elizabeth, the wife of Zechariah. Only an intervention from God gave them the children they so desperately wanted.

During the Bronze Age, the life expectancy for women was short due to the risks of childbirth. This may be the reason patriarchs of the book of Genesis chose to have multiple wives and concubines, a practice called polygamy. These wives were often chosen from within the clan or tribe to preserve ownership of property—a custom known as endogamy.

After the Babylonian exile, marriage customs began to change. Even though Jewish Law allowed men to have more than one wife, most husbands were monogamous during the Second Temple period. Mortality rates remained high, so men and women were often married more than once. For example, Ruth remained with her mother-in-law, Naomi, after her husband died. Naomi then urged her to marry her kinsman Boaz (Ruth 3:1–5). Ruth did so and eventually bore a son called Obed, grandfather of King David.

Inside a Jewish Home

Women took care of the family in the home. In Qatzrin, in the north of Israel, Israeli archaeologists have created a reconstruction of such a home. It was usually a humble dwelling made of rocks and stones, mortared with mud and coated with clay. The roof was latticework of wooden beams, interwoven with branches, palm fronds, and mud. As the family grew, some would add another level—a custom that remains in many parts of the Middle East. Homes of this type were usually built in a multifamily complex around a common courtyard. This arrangement not only offered protection against thieves and wild animals but also allowed the children to play in the safety of the courtyard enclosure.

The floor was usually made of dried clay, and woven rugs served as seating areas, as is still the case in many homes in the Near East today. Furniture was sparse—most people sat, ate, and slept on rugs on the floor, although sometimes suspended shelves were used to keep food away from dust or vermin. The ground floor contained the living room, while a small second floor served as the bedroom for the parents and their children.

Every day, the women would make fresh bread. They would draw a measure of grain from a jar and pour it into a grain mill to crush the kernels and grind them into fine flour that sifted down to the bottom. The dough was rolled into thin round cakes because these rose quicker than loaves, thus saving time and fuel. The woman would then fire a small clay oven with kindling and branches. Once the clay chamber was hot enough, the dough patties were placed inside and baked until the bread rose. Jesus paid homage to this quintessential ritual of daily life with the words “give us this day our daily bread” in the prayer he taught his disciples.

In addition to food preparation, a woman was responsible for producing garments for her husband, her children, and herself. Girls were trained in the use of the loom from an early age. A loom could produce a sleeveless shirt (*haluq*) that would fall just below the knees—or, in the case of a woman's garment, to the ankles—with fringes on the bottom.

Women's Rights

Despite the pivotal role that a woman played in the household, she had few rights. That is true of most ancient societies. For example, women could not go out without their father's or husband's permission. In addition, women had few property or inheritance rights above and beyond those of the principal man in the house, whether father or husband. Few women had access to education because their primary responsibility was to bear children and be the principal caregiver for the family (1 Cor. 14:35). This explains why Jesus's consideration toward women—and his efforts to include them into his circle as disciples—was so extraordinary.

When it came to rights for a divorce, the issue is not so clear-cut. The Torah allowed divorce. The husband could simply write his wife a note known as a *get*—a 12-line document written in Aramaic that told the wife that "you are hereby permitted to all men." Thus, just as the man was free to marry someone else, the same was true of the woman. It is not clear if a woman could contest a divorce or present her husband with a *get* of her own. Some references in the Mishnah suggest that even as late as the early 3rd century CE, only husbands could initiate a divorce. However, after the Babylonian exile, the virtues of monogamy were emphasized, and divorce was discouraged.

Scholars continue to debate whether there is a basis in Scripture for the supposedly subservient role of women. Some point to the book of Genesis, where God told Eve, "Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you" (Genesis 3:16). Other scholars disagree. Genesis is composed of multiple strands of oral transmission, and one of these strands about the Creation says that God shaped humankind in his own image—"male and female he created them" (Gen. 1:27)—suggesting an equitable role for men

and women. This may be the reason the women in the Bible were generally treated with more dignity and kindness than was the case in other ancient societies of the time.

Regardless of the issue of rights, the stories of the Bible illustrate that a woman could have a powerful influence on the fate of her husband and her family. Sarah got her way—regardless of the status of her husband, Abraham, as the leader of her tribe—thereby ensuring that her son would continue the covenant. Rebekah saw to it that Jacob would get the birthright instead of Esau. The book of Judges tells the story of a prophetess named Deborah. As the first and only female judge in the book, she was determined to establish Israelite power in the Jezreel Valley. She knew what to do, and her leadership was accepted.

Bathsheba

David was the leader of a formidable kingdom. With God's help, he was able to defeat the Philistines and then went on to conquer all the regions in Canaan that had previously eluded the Israelites, including the Jezreel Valley, the Shephelah, Galilee, and the stronghold of Beth Shean. While the army was engaged, David seduced a woman named Bathsheba, and she became pregnant.

Bathsheba was married to one of David's most successful generals, Uriah. David summoned Uriah back from the field to make it appear that he could have fathered Bathsheba's child, but that plot failed. David then decided to get rid of Uriah by placing him at the front of the planned attack against the Ammonites, where he was certain to be killed. Once Uriah was killed in battle (2 Sam. 11:27), David married Bathsheba in time for her to give birth to his son.

The prophet Nathan found out about the affair and rebuked David for his evil scheming because it had "displeased the Lord," and indeed, the baby died (2 Sam. 12:18). David repented, and God promised him that Bathsheba would bear him a second son, Solomon.

As David had many wives and many sons, Bathsheba began to plot her son's future against her rivals at court. It was clear that David did not have long to live. His oldest surviving son, Adonijah, was the crown prince. Confident of his impending anointment, Adonijah organized an official sacrifice of thanksgiving in the Kidron Valley. Solomon was not invited to the ceremony. When Bathsheba found out, she went to David and warned him that Adonijah was planning to seize power, exclaiming, "The eyes of all Israel are on you to tell them who shall sit on the throne of my lord the king after him" (1 Kings 1:20).

David ordered that Solomon be taken to the valley to be anointed king by Zadok the priest (1 Kings 1:34). His command was fulfilled, and Solomon—Bathsheba's son—became king. Thus, Bathsheba had a powerful impact on the story of Israel.

Saving Lives

The apocryphal works—books written between 200 BCE and 100 CE that are outside the biblical canon—contain stories of heroines who saved their fellow Jews from being killed. One of these women was Judith, a widow who lived in the town of Bethulia. King Nebuchadnezzar had sent a military commander named Holofernes on a punitive expedition against Israel.

Judith entered the enemy's gates with her maid, and once she was alone with Holofernes, she seized his sword and cut off his head. With the severed head in her bag, Judith and her maid left the camp and returned to Bethulia, where Judith presented the head of Holofernes to the astonished elders of the city.

Queen Ester—the adopted daughter of Mordecai, a Jewish exile in Persia—prevented the massacre of the entire Jewish population, a deliverance still celebrated during the Jewish feast of Purim.

The New Testament also contains stories of influential women, including key figures such as Mary, Elizabeth, and a female disciple named Mary Magdalene.

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12

Young Jesus of Nazareth

Today, Nazareth is the largest city in northern Israel. It has a population of nearly 80,000 people—mainly Arabs, both Christian and Muslim. The city surrounds the Church of the Annunciation, the largest Christian church in the Middle East. However, in the 1st century CE, Nazareth was just a small hamlet in the center of Galilee. This episode will explore how the Gospels describe the events and places that played a role in Jesus's early life.

The Annunciation According to Luke

Galilee was under foreign occupation until the rise of the Hasmonean Dynasty. During these 700 years of foreign rule, the region had attracted a variety of settlers, including Assyrians, Phoenicians, Greeks, and Persians. These immigrants mixed with the remaining Jewish farmers. Over time, the Jewish element in Galilee became different from that of Judah. Rural hamlets formed a tight, devoutly Jewish community, whereas the larger towns had a strong Hellenistic imprint.

Nazareth was a small village of not more than 500 people. The Gospel of Luke says that the angel Gabriel appeared here to a young girl named Maryam—or Maria in Greek. Mary would have been the daughter of a poor farming family. As she was engaged, she was probably 12 or 13 years old. The angel Gabriel said to Mary:

> Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus (Luke 1:30–31).

Mary, a virgin, was confused. The angel told her:

> The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God (Luke 1:35).

Luke states that Gabriel told Mary what to name the child: Jesus, or Yeshua in Aramaic—a contraction of Yehoshuah, meaning "Yahweh is salvation." It was a common name in 1st century CE Palestine.

Gabriel's language has a strong parallel in a manuscript from the Dead Sea Scrolls, first published in 1990:

> He shall be great upon the earth. … He shall be called the son of the Great God, and by his name shall be hailed as the Son of God, and they shall call him Son of the Most High (Q4Q246).

According to tradition, the annunciation took place in a grotto that is now located inside the Church of the Annunciation. It is not possible to confirm this location with archaeological means, but in the mid-1950s, the archaeologist Bellarmino Bagatti discovered the remains of granaries and olive presses from the 1st century CE underneath the church, confirming that there was an agricultural village. In the late 19th century, the local villagers still used a well that was called the Well of Saint Mary.

Mary and Joseph

The story of the annunciation is told only in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, and each offers a different perspective. Luke depicts the events from Mary's point of view, while Matthew uses Joseph's perspective. The only information about Joseph is that he descended from "the house of David." This confirms Jesus's messianic lineage (Luke 1:26–27). The Gospel of John explicitly refers to Joseph as originating "from Nazareth" (John 1:45).

In the Gospel of Matthew, the angel appears to Joseph, who is obviously deeply concerned that his fiancée is pregnant. Since he was "a righteous man, and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, [he] planned to dismiss her quietly" (Matt. 1:18–19).

But then the angel appeared to him and said:

> Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit (Matt. 1:20).

The miraculous power of God to create life where none was expected and the use of angels to announce such news to unsuspecting women are themes that are found throughout the Hebrew Bible. Furthermore, both narratives stress that Jesus had Davidic blood in his veins as a result of Joseph's lineage, even though it was the Holy Spirit who led to Mary's conception.

Under normal circumstances, Mary would have given birth in her home in Nazareth, but Luke and Matthew both write that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, in Judea. According to the 8th century BCE prophet Micah, as quoted by Matthew,

"And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel" (Matt. 2:6).

Luke noted that Joseph and Mary traveled to Bethlehem because of a decree by Emperor Augustus, but evidence suggests that this is incorrect.

Bethlehem

While in Bethlehem, Mary gave birth to Jesus in either a stable or a cave because there was no room in the local inns. To this day, this event is celebrated at Christmas.

As early as the 3rd century CE, Christian pilgrims to Bethlehem visited the grotto where Jesus was reportedly born. Like Jesus's burial tomb in Jerusalem, the place was deliberately destroyed in the 2nd century CE to discourage Christian worship. However, after Constantine the Great issued the decree of religious tolerance in 313 CE, Queen Helena—the emperor's mother and a devout Christian—built a church to mark the place of the grotto. In 382 CE, this church was visited by a Roman noblewoman named Paula, who left a detailed description in her diary. Two centuries later, the church was rebuilt by Emperor Justinian. Thus, the Church of the Nativity is one of the oldest Roman churches that is still in use.

The story Matthew wrote follows the three Magi—the three wise men from the East—to the place where Jesus is born.

> [The three wise men] set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. … On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage (Matt. 2:9–11).

Matthew uses the Greek word *oikia* for "the house." *Oikia* means a "residence." Thus, Matthew implies that Mary and Joseph had been living in Bethlehem all along; they were residents of Judah.

He adds that the birth of Jesus was attended by a bright star (Matthew 2:2). Some historians have linked this phenomenon to a nova—or exploding star—observed by Chinese astronomers in the year 5 BCE. Others have associated it with a striking conjunction of the planets Jupiter and Saturn, which would have been clearly visible to the naked eye. When he observed this phenomenon in 1603, the astronomer Johannes Kepler calculated that it also must have occurred in 7 BCE.

According to Matthew, Jesus was born during the reign of Herod the Great, meaning he was born no later than 4 BCE.

The Return to Nazareth

After 8 days had passed, Jesus was circumcised and presented in the Temple as part of the purification rite every new mother had to undergo at the time. The rite also involved a sacrifice according to means. Mary and Joseph offered a sacrifice of "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons," which confirms that the couple was poor (Luke 2:24). They then returned to Nazareth, and the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom.

Matthew's account is different. The news that "a child has been born king" soon reached King Herod, who was immediately struck with fear. He summoned the "wise men" from the East and asked them to go find the child. "When you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage" (Matt. 2:8). But the Magi were warned in a dream not to go back to the king. This angered Herod, who then ordered that "all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under" be killed immediately.

According to Matthew, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and warned him to "take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt." Thus, Joseph got up and led his young family to Egypt, where they stayed until Herod died and the danger had passed.

Matthew's story is likely meant to be symbolic: It parallels the story in Exodus in which Pharaoh ordered his officials that "every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile" (Exod. 1:22). Moses was saved because his mother placed him in a basket and cast him adrift on the river, where Pharaoh's daughter would find him.

Joseph's vision reveals Jesus as the new Moses, the man who has come to renew God's covenant with His people by creating a new covenant that will redeem not only the Jewish people but all of humankind. When King Herod had died, the angel told Joseph that he could take his family home. However, when Joseph heard that Herod's son Archelaus was now ruler of Judea, he decided not to return but to settle in Galilee, where he made his home in a town called Nazareth (Matt. 2:23).

According to the Gospel of Mark, Joseph was a carpenter, and this is subsequently mentioned by other Gospels. But the Greek word that Mark uses—*tektōn*—does not mean carpenter but "skilled worker," a craftsman in a variety of trades. Joseph did what almost everyone did in Galilee—he tilled the land to feed his family. This factor explains why the parables told by Jesus never feature the workshop of a carpenter but the land of a farmer, as in the parable of the sower, the mustard seed, the fig tree, or the vineyard. These parables show a close familiarity with the annual cycle of cultivation in Galilee, which Jesus probably observed as a young child.

Young Jesus in the Temple

The Gospels mention just one other event in young Jesus's life:

> Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. And when he was 12 years old, they went up as usual for the festival (Luke 2:42).

After the festival ended, Jesus was missing. Eventually, Mary found her son sitting quietly in the Temple, immersed in a debate with "the teachers." These teachers were probably rabbis who were in the Temple to advise visitors about topics related to the Jewish Law. Now, the roles were reversed; instead of the rabbis, Jesus did the talking.

"And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers" (Luke 2:47).

Mary cried, "Child, why have you treated us like this!" (Luke 2:48).

Jesus replied, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" (Luke 2:49).

With those words, he emphasized that his destiny did not lie in a workman's cottage but in the Temple.

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13

The Lost Years of Jesus

For the next 20 years or so, the Gospels are silent. This silence was always a great mystery—that of Jesus's "lost years"—until archaeologists made two important discoveries recently. The Gospels refer to Jesus as a rabbi, which means "teacher" (Mark 4:38). Jesus must have had a deep familiarity with the Torah, and it is now possible to trace where he may have received his education. In this episode, you'll discover the people, places, and events that influenced Jesus in his early years, before his ministry began.

The Early Years

The Mishnah—the first written collection of Jewish oral traditions—says that by the 3rd century CE, every town and village had a school, a *beit midrash*, attached to the local synagogue. There, young boys were taught Scripture. But until recently, no synagogues from before 70 CE had been found in Galilee.

Everything changed when Israeli archaeologist Dina Avshalom-Gorni found the remains of what appears to be a synagogue in the ancient town of Magdala, on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Under the floor of the synagogue, the excavators located a coin that was dated to 29 CE—the time of Jesus. Near the front of the discovered synagogue is a room with several benches, indicating this room was a school for young boys, exactly as described in the Mishnah. Jesus may have been taught in a synagogue school such as this one.

Young men had to study for many years—either in a yeshiva or via an individual tutor—to become recognized as a rabbi. At the time, the yeshivas were in Judea, including the academies led by Rabbi Hillel and Rabbi Shammai. It is unlikely that Jesus left for Judea to be educated there.

In 6 CE, when Jesus was 10 or 11 years old, Emperor Augustus saw that the territory of Judea and Samaria was on the verge of economic ruin. He dismissed the territory's ethnarch, Archelaus, and banished him to Vienne, a city on the left bank of the Rhône River in Gaul. Augustus did not hand the territory of Judea and Samaria to Herod's other sons, either Antipas or Philip. Instead, he made it a crown province of Rome known as Roman Judea, to be ruled by a Roman prefect reporting to the governor of Syria. Judea was no longer a self-governing nation.

This move was a major disappointment for Herod Antipas—the tetrarch of Galilee and Perea—who had hoped to acquire the territories of his brother. Antipas responded by doing what his father, Herod, had done before him: He built new cities. He chose the provincial capital of Sepphoris to build a true Greco-Roman city, which had to be constructed by the local people. Sepphoris was in Lower Galilee, just a few miles from Nazareth. Joseph

was a skilled worker; his services would have been especially needed in the construction pits. However, Joseph may have died around that time, as he is not mentioned again.

In ancient times, sons always followed in the footsteps of their father; therefore, it is likely that Jesus helped rebuild Sepphoris. That would explain when and where he received his formal schooling in Scripture. Jesus read from Isaiah in the synagogue of Nazareth, and all in attendance "were amazed at the gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth" (Luke 4:22). This feat was unusual for the son of a small village, as attested by the Gospel of John, which notes: "The Jews were astonished at it, saying, 'How does this man have such learning, when he has never been taught?'" (John 7:15).

The Pharisees

It is possible that as a teenager without a father, Jesus was taken under the wing of a kind mentor in Sepphoris. The city had a sizable Jewish community, including Pharisees, a group of religious laymen who rejected the idea that the only path to salvation was the rite of animal sacrifice at the Temple. The Pharisees believed that the Jewish Law should be applied to everything a person did, and they were devoted to educating the young. The Pharisees are often depicted as people obsessed with the details of the Law, but they were a strong progressive element in Second Temple Judaism.

The Pharisees believed that Jews were free to interpret and debate the tenets of the Law and that this could help them to cope with the great social challenges of their time. Such ideas resonated strongly in Jesus's teachings, which is why the Pharisees were so keen to debate Jesus during his ministry. Finally, if Jesus was tutored by a Pharisee sage in Sepphoris, it would explain why he became familiar with Pharisaic customs, as noted in the Gospels.

In 14 CE, after ruling the Roman Empire for more than 40 years, Emperor Augustus died. His passing marked the end of a long period of peace in much of the known world. His successor, Julia's son Tiberius, was a relatively unknown character. Around 20 CE, when Jesus was 24 or 25 years old, Antipas decided to shift his focus from the town of Sepphoris to the construction of a new city, which he named "Tiberias" in Tiberius's honor.

The years between 20 and 28 CE can be called the "lost years of Jesus." It is likely the time when Jesus began his practice as a young rabbi. In the villages of Lower Galilee, he would have seen the devastation caused by 4 decades of crushing taxes by the Herodian regime: Once prosperous villages were now poverty-stricken hamlets, crowded with starving families.

John the Baptist

> In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee … the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness" (Luke 3:1–2). John the Baptist was the son of Zechariah, a priestly official, and his wife, "a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth (Luke 1:5).

By around 28 CE, John was a leading dissident and preacher in the wilderness of the Jordan. That year, the new Roman prefect of Judea, Pontius Pilate, ordered the massacre of a peaceful demonstration in the forecourt of the Temple. The demonstrators were protesting the fact that Pilate—in collusion with the high priest Caiaphas—was stealing money from the treasury of the Temple to finance a new aqueduct into Jerusalem. Josephus, a 1st-century Jewish historian, wrote that not only demonstrators but also innocent bystanders were killed. As a result, many people—including a young rabbi from Galilee—went to John the Baptist in search of answers. John told the Jews to be virtuous, to be righteous toward one another, and to have piety toward God. Only then would the baptism he gave them be acceptable to God.

John had chosen a spot in Perea, just on the other side of the Jordan River, outside of Pilate's jurisdiction. It is called Bethany-beyond-the Jordan. Just across, on the Israeli side, is a 5th-century Greek Orthodox Church, which also claims to be the place of Jesus's baptism.

Contrary to the customary cleansing that was a core element of ancient Judaism, the baptism John performed was not meant to affect the body but the soul. It was a symbolic gesture that signified a resolute break with immoral living, possibly inspired by the words of Ezekiel: "I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your impurities, and from all your idols I will cleanse you" (Ezek. 36:25).

Mark's Gospel says that "people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins" (Mark 1:5).

These sins included collaborating with the Roman enemy, either for political influence or for profit. And just as former prophets had warned that the Lord would save Israel only if the nation repented and returned to its covenant with God, so, too, did John warn of a major reckoning in the form of the coming of the Messiah.

The Messiah

The word *Messiah*—or *Mashiach* in Hebrew—means "Anointed One." At the time, the messianic tradition in Israel was a powerful image of someone who would come from the line of King David. He would not only preach a renewed faith but also rescue his people from the Romans. Many at the time saw the Messiah as a warrior-king like King David; others saw him as a supernatural being. The Gospels leave no doubt about identity of the Messiah in John's sermons: It is Jesus. John's role is that of a prophet who prepares his way.

The four Gospels converge when Jesus joins the movement of John the Baptist. Jesus insisted on being baptized. When he emerged from the waters of the Jordan, the heavens split, and the Holy Spirit descended on him in the shape of a dove. It symbolizes the anointing ritual that established Jesus as the Messiah or Christos ("Christ" in Greek).

John began to attract so many people that Herod Antipas decided to act. He sent his soldiers to arrest John and take him to one of his father's fortresses, the citadel of Machaerus. With his fiery sermons, John had attracted broad layers of Judean society, and his arrest served as a warning against becoming involved in political entanglements with the Herodian regime. Later, John was beheaded.

After John the Baptist had been arrested, three of John's disciples—Andrew, Simon, and Philip—returned to Bethsaida to see Jesus. "We have found the Messiah," Andrew said (John 1:41). The time in Bethsaida may have given Jesus an opportunity to reflect on the next stage of his life. In many ways,

John the Baptist had served as a role model of how a charismatic preacher could attract a large following and become an agent of change. In the book of Matthew, Jesus calls John the "Elijah who is to come" (Matthew 11:14).

In the months to come, Jesus would often pay homage to John the Baptist, saying that John was "more than a prophet" and that "among those born of women no one is greater than John" (Luke 7:26–28).

Eventually, Jesus and his small group of followers left Bethsaida and crossed the Jordan into Galilee. They went to Capernaum, where Simon Peter's mother-in-law had a house. In the coming months, it would serve as their base as Jesus prepared himself for the next phase in his life: his own ministry.

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14

The Ministry of Jesus in Galilee

Jesus began his ministry in the synagogue of Capernaum, a prosperous town on the road from Damascus to Jerusalem. He revealed himself as a teacher in the mold of John the Baptist. The man from Nazareth—known for his charitable work among the poor—had become a rabbi who spoke expertly and confidently about Scripture. In this episode, you'll be able to explore the three phases of Jesus's ministry, meet his disciples, and see the places where he delivered his message of justice, mercy, and faith.

The Ministry in Capernaum

Jesus taught with unexpected authority. On his first Sabbath in Capernaum, he read from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah:

> The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor (Luke 4:16–19).

Jesus sat down and said, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21).

To underscore Jesus's authority, the Gospel of Mark relates how a man possessed by a "demon" appeared in the synagogue. Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, and it left the man. The exorcism sealed Jesus's new role as not only a teacher but also a man with power over demons, showing him capable of taking on the great eschatological battle between the forces of good and evil.

The remains of an octagonal church from the early Byzantine era stand across from the synagogue. Churches with such an elaborate design were usually reserved for important places, and many believe the remains mark the house of Simon Peter's mother-in-law, the headquarters of the new Jesus movement in Galilee. News of Jesus's healing powers spread quickly. Luke wrote:

> As the sun was setting, all those who were sick with various kinds of diseases were brought to him; and he laid his hands on each of them and cured them. Demons also came out of many, shouting, 'You are the Son of God!' But he rebuked them and would not allow them to speak, because they knew that he was the Messiah (Luke 4:40–41).

Fishermen as Disciples

Jesus expanded his circle of disciples beyond the core of John the Baptist's followers. He walked along the shore of the Sea of Galilee, where fishermen were cleaning and repairing their nets. He found "James son of Zebedee and

his brother John, who were in their boat mending the net." Jesus called to them, and "they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him" (Mark 1:19–20).

Jesus needed a group of *talmidim*—followers who could serve as the core support of his movement. His followers would not be students in the Platonic tradition or disciples like those of John the Baptist; they would be delegates, empowered to assist the teacher and speak on his behalf. Rather than waiting for people to come to him, as John the Baptist had, Jesus moved across the region, often visiting several villages in a day.

Jesus dedicated the remaining 18 months of his life to propagating his great plan for social and religious renewal in Galilee. He referred to this vision as "the Kingdom of God." With this manifesto, Jesus aimed for a grassroots renewal that would end the social and economic exploitation of the poor and restore Israel as a nation governed by Yahweh.

The Kingdom of God

This vision was the core of Jesus's teachings—in his parables, in his conversations with his followers, and, most importantly, in the Sermon of the Mount. This speech attracted hundreds of people and was delivered on a hill that is now marked by a church. The site has long been recognized as the hill of the Sermon on the Mount. Archaeologists have found the remains of a Byzantine church that was built as early as the 4th century CE, shortly after Christianity became a tolerated religion in the Roman Empire.

> He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. … Then he looked up … and said: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh" (Luke 6:17–21).

Jesus reached out to his audience with empathy, acknowledging their suffering. In Matthew's version, the sermon developed into a series of legal precepts well beyond the ethical parameters of the Torah. They appear to dismiss the idea of

ancient Judaism that Jews can atone for their digressions with animal sacrifice. "If you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother and sister, and then come and offer your gift" (Matthew 5:23–24).

Luke's version of the Sermon has a different perspective. It focuses on the pursuit of social justice, attacking those who were responsible for the exploitation of the poor in Galilee. "Woe to you who are rich," says Jesus, "for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep" (Luke 6:24–25).

Jesus focused on *agape* ("selfless love") in his ministry. Most of his contemporaries looked for outside intervention—a great cataclysm or a violent regime change—to establish the reign of God, but Jesus expressed his belief in people power. "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed. For in fact, the kingdom of God is among you" (Luke 17:20–21). His concept was a new social covenant, based on the quintessential virtues of the Law: compassion toward one another, justice toward the poor and the weak, and love and faith in God.

Mary the Magdalene

Jesus acquired a steady group of disciples. The Gospels refer to 12 disciples and identify them by name, but it is likely that this number had a symbolic significance, referring to the 12 tribes of Israel. Significantly, some women were also in the group.

> Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: [including] Mary, called the Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out (Luke 8:1–2).

Luke also noted that that Mary was one of the women "who provided for them out of their resources" (Luke 8:3), which means that they funded the movement.

Archaeological finds of ancient Magdala support the idea that the family of Mary Magdalene was wealthy. An excavation team led by Marcela Zapata Meza found many luxury objects—including pottery, oil lamps, amphorae, glass objects, spoons, bells, and bone dice—from around the time of Jesus. Magdala was a very affluent town.

Mary plays a crucial role in the Gnostic Gospels. Many Gnostic Christians revered Mary as one of Jesus's most important apostles because they believed she was his confidante and loyal companion. One Gnostic document, called the "Gospel of Mary," suggests she understood Jesus's vision better than the other apostles. It says that Simon Peter asked Mary to "tell us the words of the Savior which you remember—which you know (but) we do not."

Healing the Sick

Jesus's ability to heal played a major role in his growing fame. According to Mark, "all who had diseases pressed upon him to touch him" (Mark 3:10). Eventually, rumors of his healing powers spread so far that "a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon" converged "to hear him and to be healed of their diseases" (Luke 6:17–18).

At the time, medical doctors only practiced in towns, not in rural areas. Many of their treatments were for common afflictions, not for chronic diseases. This factor explains why so many people came to witness the healings and exorcisms that Jesus was capable of. Parents of sick children—including "one of the leaders of the synagogue, named Jairus"—were desperate to find a remedy to alleviate the suffering or even death of their loved ones (Mark 5:22; Luke 8:41). For Jesus, his healing ability was proof that the Kingdom of God could become reality.

Jesus's ministry unfolded in three phases. In the first phase, Jesus limited his movements to places that could be reached on foot from Capernaum. In the second phase, once he had access to a boat, he went to all the principal towns around the Sea of Galilee, including Gennesaret, Magdala, Bethsaida, and the region of the Gerasenes. In the third phase, he left Galilee and moved into Phoenicia. Jesus was intrigued that people from these parts had come to hear him, and he wondered what effect his teachings would have in this Gentile territory.

Who Am I?

Jesus reflected on his feelings on the way back to Galilee. In the town of Banyas, he asked his apostles, "Who do people say that I am?" (Mark 8:27).

The apostles guessed, "John the Baptist," "Elijah," or "one of the prophets."

Then, Jesus asked, "But who do you say that I am?"

Peter said, "You are the Messiah" (Mark 8:28–29).

These words were what Jesus wanted to hear, even though he knew the political danger he would be in if the authorities found out. Therefore, "he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him" (Mark 8:30). This story refers to the Messianic or Markian secret: the phenomenon that many people did not understand who Jesus was, while Jesus told those who did know to be quiet.

Jesus and his disciples continued, walking along the Jordan to Bethsaida, where they left the Gaulanitis and crossed over into the Galilee of Herod Antipas. Jesus was taken aback by what he found after this long journey: Nothing had changed. The tax collectors and landowners were still extorting the peasants. The homeless had not found shelter. The chronically ill were still ostracized from their villages.

That moment is when Jesus decided to go to Jerusalem. It would soon be Passover, when thousands of Jews from across the land and the Diaspora would converge on the Holy City to perform their ritual sacrifice. Like Jeremiah before him, he would stand in the forecourt of the Temple and declare the coming of the Kingdom of God.

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15

Jesus, Caiaphas, and Pilate

Approaching the Temple, Jesus would have been looking forward to preaching in its forecourt. However, he would be disappointed and angered by what he found. And soon, he would be betrayed by one of his followers and led to his death. This episode takes a close look at the last days of Jesus's life, exploring the reason for his anger in the Temple and the political circumstances that formed the basis for his arrest and crucifixion.

The Temple

Jesus and his disciples would have taken the long way to Jerusalem—an 80-mile route that led from Tiberias through the Jezreel Valley, past Mount Tabor and the border between Galilee and the Roman province of Samaria and Judea, and toward Jericho. Due to its strategic location at the intersection of several trade routes, Jericho had several toll stations. One of these stations was occupied by a tax collector named Zacchaeus, who embraced Jesus's vision of the Kingdom of God.

"Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much" (Luke 19:8).

Encouraged, Jesus and his disciples continued and arrived in the village of Bethany, just a mile and a half from Jerusalem's city gate. Martha and Mary lived here with their brother, Lazarus, whom Jesus ordered to wake from the dead (John 11:43–44). The next day, Jesus and his followers climbed the stairway to the Temple.

When they reached the Court of the Gentiles, Jesus stopped, stunned by what he saw. The forecourt—once hallowed ground—was a marketplace, filled with money changers and dealers selling animals. Priests only admitted sacrificial lambs "without blemish," and as it was not possible to keep lambs in perfect condition on the journey, most pilgrims purchased animals here after exchanging their money for Tyrian shekels, the only currency allowed within the sanctuary. Still, Jesus was shocked by this commercial activity, which previously would have taken place away from the Temple.

Jesus became enraged and "began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves" (Mark 11:15).

He cried, quoting the book of Isaiah, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'?" In the same breath, he cited Jeremiah's Temple sermon: "But you have made it a den of robbers" (Mark 11:17).

Two years earlier, both Pilate and the chief priest, Caiaphas, had been accused of illegally taking funds from the Temple. According to Mark, when "the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him" (Mark 11:18). The Romans and the priests were concerned that Jesus might try to stage another violent demonstration, either in the Temple or in Jerusalem's crowded streets.

The Betrayal

Jesus and the disciples stayed in Jerusalem rather than returning to Bethany for the Passover meal. They had their evening meal in a hall—the Hall of the Last Supper—that may have belonged to John Mark. According to the book of Acts, John Mark lived in a house in Jerusalem with his mother, Mary. The house had a "large upper room." The meal would become a beloved theme in art: the Last Supper.

The disciples were shocked when Jesus declared that one of them would betray him. They loudly protested their innocence, including a disciple named Judas, who said, "Surely not I, Rabbi?" Jesus replied, "You have said so" (Matthew 26:25). Judas got up and left to betray Jesus to the chief priests for 30 pieces of silver.

After the meal, Jesus and his followers went to the Mount of Olives. There, Jesus went to pray in a quiet place: a cave used for oil pressing—called *gat-shemanim*, or Gethsemane in the Bible. As most pilgrims could not afford to stay in a hostel or inn in the city, the Mount of Olives would have been teeming with families sitting around campfires, sharing the Passover meal. As such, the Temple guards insisted that Judas come along to identify the Galilean rabbi among the crowds.

Judas did so with a kiss—an ironic gesture because a kiss was considered a sign of respect. One of the disciples took his sword and cut off the ear of one of the high priest's slaves. "No more of this," Jesus said as he restored the ear to the man's head (Luke 22:51).

Jesus should have been taken to the Temple stockade to await a hearing by the full Sanhedrin after the Passover, as happened to Peter, John, and other apostles following their arrest. After being held overnight, they were arraigned during a full session presided by Annas, the former high priest, and his son-in-law, the current high priest Caiaphas (Acts 4:6). Following a passionate defense delivered by Peter, the apostles were released.

The Trial

Only a full quorum of the Sanhedrin could condemn a man accused of religious crimes. Caiaphas knew that the Sanhedrin was not a unified body; it was split between a Sadducee majority and an opposition made up of Pharisees. The Pharisees respected Jesus as a learned rabbi and had no desire to see him put to death, and there were no legal grounds on which to do so. Therefore, Caiaphas held the indictment in his own home, without delay, in front of a group of chief priests and Sadducees who would do his bidding.

The house would have been in the Upper City, where most of the chief priests lived in lavish homes. One such house was excavated in the late 1960s by archaeologist Nahman Avigad; since the house had several ritual baths, he called it the Priestly House. The house featured an inner courtyard like the one where Peter stood warming his hands by the fire while Jesus was inside. When he was recognized as one of Jesus's followers, Peter denied it and fled.

At the trial of Jesus,

> Many gave false testimony against him, and their testimony did not agree. … Then the high priest stood up before them and asked Jesus, "Have you no answer? What is it that they testify against you?" But he was silent and did not answer (Mark 14:56–61).

The high priest then asked him:

> Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One? (Mark 14:61).

Jesus replied, quoting from the book of Daniel:

> I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven (Mark 14:62).

Caiaphas was pleased. Jesus had spoken the words that would incriminate him in the eyes of Rome. Anyone who declared himself to be "seated at the right hand of power" would be seen as a political rebel and be put to death. Caiaphas referred the case to the highest Roman official in town: Pontius Pilate.

The Sentence

Jesus was not a Roman citizen; therefore, he did not merit a trial according to the Roman law. Jesus was a colonial subject, and colonials were judged by a far more arbitrary law known as the Ius Gentium. Judges who dispensed law under this legal umbrella were given wide latitude to render judgment as they saw fit.

Before Pilate sentenced Jesus, he gave the crowds a choice between Jesus and a rebel named Barabbas, who had been arrested during "the insurrection" (Mark 15:7)—possibly the demonstration in the forecourt in 28 CE that had been forcibly suppressed by Pilate. The crowd responded that he should release Barabbas and crucify Jesus. The record does not mention such an amnesty, and this story may have been added to exonerate Pilate and shift the responsibility for Jesus's murder to the chief priests.

Jesus was sentenced to death. First, he was taken to the courtyard of the palace to be flogged and mocked by the soldiers of the cohort charged with his execution. "Then they led him out to crucify him" (Mark 15:20).

Pilate and Caiaphas are historical figures. Near the Roman theater of Caesarea, excavators uncovered a foundation stone that bears a dedication by Pontius Pilate, Prefect of Judea. An ossuary—a box containing bones of the deceased—with the Aramaic inscription Yosef bar Caifa (Joseph Caiaphas) was discovered in 1990.

Thousands of pilgrims still walk the presumed route that Jesus took to his place of execution, known as the Via Dolorosa or Road of Sorrows. It begins near St. Stephen's Gate and continues through the narrow streets of the Old City to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Along the route, plaques commemorate the 14 Stations of the Cross, each marking the spot where the Gospels place a certain event in the Passion story. However, as Jerusalem has been destroyed and rebuilt since the time of Jesus, the route may not be historically accurate.

The Crucifixion

Many paintings depict Jesus carrying his cross, but as wood was expensive, the Romans had set up a number of permanent upright stakes in an execution area known as Skull Hill ("Golgotha" in Aramaic). Like other condemned men, Jesus carried the crossbeam. It was heavy—at least 75 pounds by some estimates.

Eventually, Jesus arrived at the place of execution, which is now marked by the Church of Holy Sepulcher. He was forced to lay down on the crossbeam, and nails were driven through a spot just below each wrist, between the radius and ulna bones of the forearm. Roman nails were up to 6 inches in length. The soldiers then raised the crossbar and placed it in a notch on top of the stake.

Next, the Romans squeezed Jesus's ankles sideways into a small wooden block, which was then affixed to the stake, with the nail cutting through both the ankle bones and the block. Evidence of this method came to light in 1968, when the skeleton of another Jewish victim from the 1st century was excavated in the vicinity of Jerusalem. The anklebone of the condemned man was still affixed to a Roman nail, in between wooden fragments.

Finally, the Romans nailed a sign to the cross that described the crime: "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews" (*Iesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum*).

It was Friday, the 15th of Nisan, around 10 am. Suddenly, Jesus cried out with all his might,

"Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" (Mark 15:34).

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Psalm 22:1).

Jesus sagged against the nails that held him. He died of asphyxiation, compounded by loss of blood, at approximately 3:10 pm.

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16

From the Resurrection to Paul

The death of Jesus could have meant the end of his ministry, but the disciples decided to continue the mission. This choice would lead to one man's effective outreach to the Gentile population—and the development of a new theology that would grow into the world's largest religion. This episode follows the travels of the disciples after the death and resurrection of Jesus, focusing in particular on the life and teachings of Paul, an apostle whose way of thinking would change the future of Christianity.

The Resurrection

Jesus's body was wrapped in linen cloth and laid in a tomb hewn out of rock (Mark 15:46). Some people believe that tomb was the Garden Tomb. It is located outside the city walls and is a fully intact Jewish tomb, complete with a ridge to hold a stone as described in the Gospels.

The official site of the crucifixion and the tomb is the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. The church was built as early as the 4th century CE, but it was destroyed and rebuilt several times. The structure that stands today is a 12th-century church built by the Crusaders during their 90-year rule of Jerusalem. The complex includes the site of the crucifixion on Golgotha—still accessible through a narrow stairway—and Jesus's tomb, covered by a rotunda. The tomb structure, which is known as the aedicula, dates from the 19th century.

It was customary for relatives of the deceased to visit the tomb periodically to ensure that the person was truly dead. On the third day, Mary Magdalene came to complete the anointing of the body, but the tomb was empty. According to the Gospel of John, the risen Jesus then appeared to her.

> Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" which means Teacher. Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father" (John 20:16–17).

The resurrected Jesus was seen on multiple occasions. One of these took place in Emmaus, where Jesus appeared to two of his disciples. They did not recognize Jesus until later, when he blessed the bread at a meal (Luke 24:30–31). Only the Gospel of Luke refers explicitly to the exaltation of Jesus, stating that Jesus was carried up into heaven while on the Mount of Olives (Luke 24:51).

The Mission Continues

The apostles were not sure what to do next. Eventually, they decided to stay in Jerusalem and continue Jesus's mission in Judea. Simon Peter and Jesus's brother James emerged as the leaders of this apostolic mission. They continued to follow the precepts of the Torah, observe the Sabbath, and preach in the Temple.

The apostles faced several challenges. They had difficulty explaining Jesus's teachings, as they themselves often struggled to grasp their meaning. Jesus had not left a form of scripture that could guide his followers after his departure. Several oral traditions began to circulate about Jesus's teachings, his miracles, and his relationship to God—all claiming equal authority. One challenge was particularly daunting: How could they convince fellow Jews that Jesus was the Messiah even though he had been crucified as a rebel? Now that Jesus was no longer among the living, what was the purpose of acknowledging him as the Messiah? Judea still suffered under Roman occupation; the Kingdom of God had not been realized, at least not in a political sense.

Caiaphas and the Sadducees were surprised that the disciples continued to preach and gain followers. The idea that Jesus had been resurrected from the dead provoked them. Unlike the Pharisees, the Sadducees rejected

the notion of immortality of the soul—and certainly the possibility of a physical resurrection. Peter and other apostles were repeatedly arrested and interrogated by Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin.

One group of followers—the "Hellenists"—refused to join the apostles' worship at the Temple. They were likely Diaspora Jews whose liturgical life no longer revolved around Temple rites but the synagogue. A Greek named Stephen spoke out against Temple worship and sacrifice. When he was arrested, Stephen told the chief priests that "the Most High does not dwell in houses made with human hands." Furious, the crowd dragged him away and stoned him (Acts 7:58). The murder was witnessed by a man named Saul.

After Stephen's death, many followers fled to neighboring states, such as Antioch or Damascus in Roman Syria. James—the brother of Jesus and the leader of the Jerusalem Church—was put to death in 62 CE. According to the historian Eusebius, the Christian community of Jerusalem found refuge in the city of Pella, the last outpost of the original movement.

From Saul to Paul

Saul was born in Tarsus, the capital of Cilicia, which is now southern Turkey. Tarsus was a Greek city, not only in language but also in literature and philosophy. Saul was educated as a Pharisee and thus received a thorough education in Scripture. He was worldly, educated, and fluent in Greek philosophy and ethics. As such, he was the perfect figure to introduce Christianity to the Roman Empire. However, in the mid-30s, he was actively involved in the persecution of the Jesus movement in Jerusalem to protect the traditions of his ancestors (Gal. 1:14).

Luke wrote, "Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison" (Acts 8:3).

When Saul left for Damascus, where some followers had fled, he had a major change of heart. Riding on the road to Damascus, a light from heaven flashed around him. As he fell to the ground, a voice spoke:

> Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? (Acts 9:4).

Saul converted and tried to join the following he had worked to eradicate, but they did not accept him. In response, Saul withdrew from the apostolic community and decided to go his own way.

> I did not confer with any human being, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to see those who were already apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus. Then after 3 years I did go up to Jerusalem to visit [Peter] and stayed with him 15 days; but I did not see any other apostle except James, the Lord's brother (Gal. 1:16–19).

Together with two disciples, Saul went to Cyprus to preach the teachings of Jesus. At this point in the narrative in Acts, his name changes to "Paul." By switching from the Hebrew Sha'ul to its Roman version, Paulus, Paul demonstrated his willingness to adapt his message to a Greco-Roman audience.

From Cyprus, Paul crossed over to the coast of Asia Minor near Perge. He would often return to this affluent region. He noticed that while Jewish communities refused to accept his teachings, many Gentiles were intrigued. According to the book of Acts, many Gentiles "became believers," even though local Jewish communities rebuffed him (Acts 13:48). Throughout the empire, people yearned for an end to the divisions and social injustice of the Roman world. They were attracted to the teachings of a man who preached that the righteous would find ultimate salvation in heaven—and performed miracles to prove it.

The Start of Christianity

The original apostles expected converted Gentiles to behave and live like Jews, but Paul believed that the Jewish rites, including circumcision, had been replaced by baptism and faith in Christ. He wrote, "Real circumcision is a matter of the heart; it is spiritual, not literal" (Rom. 2:29). "A person is justified not by the works of the law, but through faith in Jesus Christ" (Gal. 2:16).

Paul released the early apostolic movement from its Jewish roots, making it open to the influx of Gentiles—and laying the foundation for Christianity as it is known today.

In a vision, Paul was told to bring the news of Jesus—the risen Christ—to the heartland of Greece. He made his way to Athens. Across from the Acropolis was a hill called the *Areios Pagos*, or Areopagus in Acts. It was a popular debating ground, and when Paul came here, he was asked, "What is this new teaching that you are talking about?" Paul replied that while walking through the city, he had come across an altar dedicated to *Agnosto Theo* ("to an unknown God").

"The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things" (Acts 17:24–25).

Eventually, Paul went back to Asia Minor and settled in the town of Ephesus. The city was dedicated to the worship of Artemis, a local deity. Paul came into conflict with local craftsmen who made a living selling statues of this mother goddess. The craftsmen were afraid that Paul's sermons about Jesus Christ were going to hurt their business. They staged a protest, which forced Paul to leave the city.

Paul's Arrest

After these events, Paul went to Jerusalem, where he was arrested on charges that he "is teaching everyone everywhere against our people, our law, and this place" (Acts 21:28). He was accused of bringing Gentiles past the *soreg*, the boundary that marked the sacred area reserved only for Jews—an offense punishable by death.

When the chief priests in Jerusalem demanded that Paul stand trial before the Sanhedrin, Paul appealed to his right as a Roman citizen to be tried in Rome (Acts 25:10). It is generally believed that he embarked on a prisoner ship bound for Rome around 60 CE. The ship ran aground near Malta. All made

it to shore, and Paul was greeted warmly by the local population. He healed the father of a leading man on the island—Publius—after which many other sick came to him to be cured (Acts 28:7–9).

Eventually, Paul made it to Rome and was put under house arrest. It is not known what happened to him after that. It was 64 CE, and a fire had destroyed large parts of Rome. According to the historian Tacitus, Nero blamed the fire on the Christians in the city. The result was a brief but intense period of persecution during which many Christians were killed by wild beasts in the Circus Maximus, one of Rome's largest entertainment venues. According to Church tradition, Peter was crucified and buried on a hill called the Ager Vaticanus—or Vatican Hill—where the first St. Peter's Basilica was built after Constantine the Great made Christianity a tolerated religion in the Roman Empire.

In just 3 centuries, the movement of a rabbi from Galilee who had been crucified by the Romans had grown to become the dominant faith of the Roman Empire—and, today, the largest religion across the globe.

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