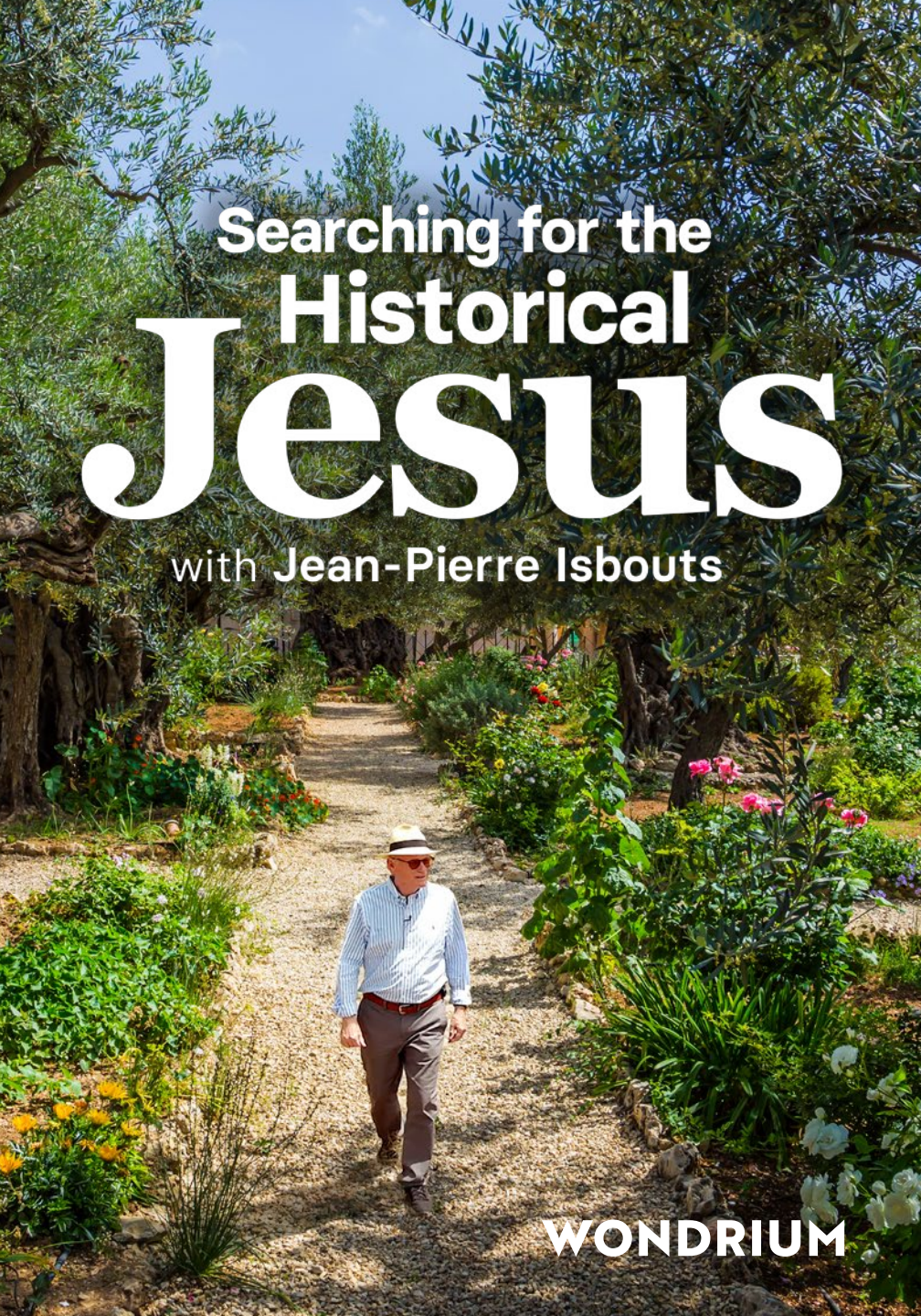
Searching for the
Historical
Jesus
with Jean-Pierre Isbouts
WONDRIUM

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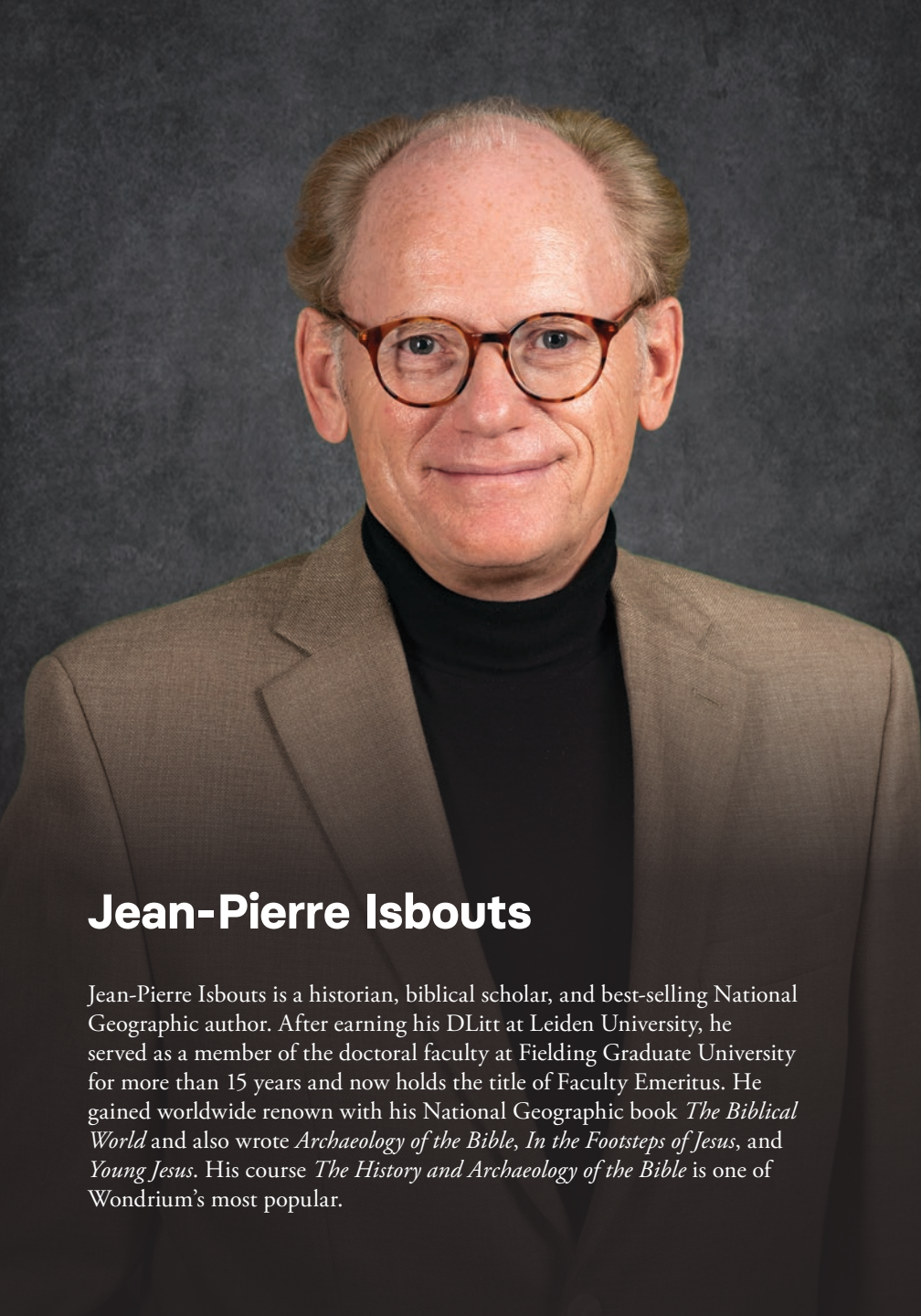

Jean-Pierre Isbouts

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 *Young Jesus*. His course *The History and Archaeology of the Bible* is one of Wondrium's most popular.

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The Historical Jesus

Some 2,000 years after his appearance, Jesus is still a dominant figure in many civilizations. Christianity is today the world's largest religion, with some 2.5 billion followers. That is an incredible success, yet the religion is quite fragmented. This chapter asks: Who was the historical Jesus? And will the answer help to heal the great divisions in the Christian community?

A Divided Religion

Today, there are more than 40,000 different Christian denominations in the world. By comparison, Judaism knows three main branches today: Reform Judaism, Conservative Judaism, and Orthodox Judaism, which has several movements in itself.

With 2 billion followers, Islam is the world's second largest faith. That tradition is divided into two main branches: the Sunni, who make up around 87%, and the Shi'a, who make up around 13%.

Even though these branches of Judaism and Islam have certain divisions within themselves, they don't come anywhere near the incredible fragmentation of the Christian movement. In the United States alone, there are more than 200 Christian denominations. The question of how that is possible inspired this series.

The host of this series, Jean-Pierre Isbouts, grew up in a Catholic family. As a biblical scholar, he has often lectured at Lutheran, Methodist, and Episcopal churches. In the process, he has found that Christians in the 21st century have many things in common, despite Christianity's apparent divisions.

A Short Ministry and a Contentious Divinity

One reason for the existence of Christianity's many denominations is that Jesus's ministry was very short—not more than 18 months, to judge by the stories of the Synoptic Gospels, which describe his life in a similar way. That means that for a full generation after his life on earth, his memory was kept alive by oral traditions before they were committed to documents that have survived to this day, such as the Gospels.

That is one reason why even during the rise of Christianity, the traditional strand formulated by Paul of Tarsus—the idea of universal salvation through faith in Christ's sacrifice on the cross—was challenged by other Christian factions. Among these were Gnostic Christians who focused on Jesus's teachings rather than the role of his crucifixion as an agency of redemption.

Another source of contention was the nature of the divinity of Jesus. The Synoptic Gospels seek to present Jesus as the Jewish Messiah, the *mashiach*: an iconic figure who would liberate his people from foreign occupation and restore a land ruled by the laws of God.

Paul, on the other hand, found many eager converts among Gentiles in the Mediterranean, who had no idea what a messiah was. In response, Paul and other ministers like him changed the focus of Jesus's ministry from that of a messiah to the universal redemptive role of the son of God.

But that raised all sorts of questions among Gentile followers, who were raised in a polytheistic culture full of Greek and Roman gods. How could a man be a mortal human being and a god, the source of a new religion, at the same time? That question proved irresistible to the Greek mind, which loved to debate a paradox such as this.

From the 4th century onward, debates ripped the early church apart and led to the splintering of Christianity, followed by the Great Schism of 1054 between the Eastern and Western churches. Then, five centuries later, Europe itself was deeply divided when Martin Luther launched the Reformation. A similar process occurred in colonial America, where many different groups rose to prominence.

Guiding this series are some questions related to Christianity's divisions: Why are Christians so divided in America and the world? Is it because our cultures and politics have moved people apart? And if that's the case, what can Christians do to heal the divide?

Returning to Jesus's Time

This series explores the idea that all the branches of the Christian community can come together by returning to the essential teachings of Jesus's ministry. To that end, it focuses on the things that Jesus talked about, the reason he began his ministry, and the achievements he hoped to reach. That will necessitate reconstructing the historical Jesus from the very beginning, stripped of all the church doctrines and political ideas that have accumulated around his presence over the past 2,000 years.

Regarding the Jesus of history versus the Christ of faith, people sometimes ask if there is a difference between the two. The Jesus of history is an incredibly inspiring figure, but he was not yet equipped with the theological legacy of centuries of church teachings.

Another question is if the differences between the two are essential. Here, the answer is no. The fundamental facts of both figures are the same.

The Structure of This Series

Early on, Jesus's ministry unfolded in a crisis very similar to the one modern people face. The daily news feed of thousands of people who are out of work, ill, facing eviction, or struggling to feed their families reflects a world Jesus would have recognized.

Throughout the series, you will learn about the principal places described in the Gospels, moving from the small, 1st-century village of Nazareth to Sepphoris, where Jesus and his father Joseph worked on building a new capital city. You will also make stops in Bethany on the Jordan, where Jesus joined the movement of John the Baptist, and then the key sites of his ministry, including Capernaum, Bethsaida, Chorazim, Magdala, and other places outside of Lower Galilee, such as Banyas.

Bethsaida in modern times

Next, you will follow Jesus to Jerusalem for Passover of 30 AD and see the chronology of events that precipitated the Last Supper, Jesus's arrest in Gethsemane, his indictment in the house of the high priest Caiaphas, the trial presided by Pontius Pilate, Jesus's crucifixion, and the Easter events. Finally, you will follow the spread of early Christianity through the eastern Mediterranean and beyond.

Guiding Sources: The Gospel of Mark

For guidance, the series relies on a number of ancient documents. That includes a critical analysis of the four New Testament Gospels as well as other Gospels that were not included in the New Testament.

Here, the term *critical analysis* doesn't mean examining the Gospels in a negative or disrespectful way. It means using a set of tools often used by historians to understand the sources, the form, and the development of these texts.

That is particularly important because the earliest Gospel manuscripts available today date from the 3rd and 4th centuries. There is a gap of at least 250 years between the life of Jesus and the date of these texts.

The Gospels included in the New Testament will be very important for this series. The oldest Gospel is the one written by the author we know as Mark, using a very basic form of Greek known as Koine. But the actual text of the Gospel does not mention a Mark, nor does it identify its author.

Church tradition has identified the author with John Mark, a friend of Paul who visited the community at Colossae. But a growing number of scholars believes that Mark's Gospel was written in Rome by a member of the Jewish community there, possibly in the wake of the outbreak of the First Jewish Revolt between 66 and 70 AD.

This revolt was prompted by the cruelty and corruption of the Roman government in Judea. But Jews living in Rome would have been at pains to stress their patriotic allegiance to Rome rather than to the rebels in Judea. A major theme of Mark's Gospel is to shift the blame for Jesus's death from the Roman prefect, Pontius Pilate, to the Jewish crowds attending his trial.

Mark was the first to arrange the acts and sayings of Jesus in a narrative that propels the arc of the story toward the climax of the crucifixion. The other Gospels followed his example.

Guiding Sources: The Gospels of Luke and Matthew

The author of the Gospel of Luke was probably a Greek-speaking Jew who accompanied Paul on his journey to Greece. Luke is also credited with writing the Acts of the Apostles, and this suggestion is usually accepted by most scholars.

However, neither the Gospel itself nor the Acts of the Apostles provide a clue to the identity of its writer, so here too there is no certainty about its authorship. More than likely, the person we call Luke was a scribe living in the Diaspora, who was charged by a local Christian community with writing a book about Jesus based on the available oral traditions.

Matthew is often identified as a tax collector named Levi who eventually joined Jesus as an apostle. But the Gospel text never actually identifies its author.

Both the Gospel of Luke and that of Matthew were written some two decades after that of Mark. In fact, Matthew and Luke copied as much as 60% of Mark's story into their own narrative. But both evangelists also used another source, which is now lost but which scholars have tried to reconstruct. It is known as Q, based on the German word *Quelle*, which means "source."

It is unlikely that any of the evangelists were members of Jesus's entourage or witnessed the events they wrote about. They lived in different cities outside of Roman Palestine and relied on a variety of sources, both in oral and written form, which had probably been circulating for several decades. That is why the Gospel accounts do not always agree with one another.

Ancient Authors' Credibility

Our modern understanding of authorship did not exist in antiquity. In ancient times, artists seldom autographed their work, and writers, who were usually professional scribes, were rarely identified by name. To readers in ancient times, the authority with which an author wrote or the literary tradition with which they identified were what mattered—not the person who wielded the pen.

Guiding Sources: The Gospel of John

Most scholars date the Gospel of John to the last decade of the 1st century, so it is difficult to imagine that it could have been written by someone who was a member of Jesus's circle. The Gospel itself makes no claim about its authorship, but it does say that its account is based on the testimony of the apostle John, "whom Jesus loved" and "who is testifying to these things and has written them." It is quite possible that the Gospel is based on an oral or written tradition associated with this apostle.

John's Gospel is a very sophisticated document, elegantly written and inspired by Neoplatonic ideas. Jesus emerges as a transcendent being, and the document contains many long monologues that do not appear in the other Gospels. This version of Jesus is far removed from the very human, down-to-earth figure who inhabits the Gospel of Mark.

Guiding Sources: Josephus

There are other sources from the 1st century about Jesus. One very important source is the historian Josephus. He was born around 37 AD—just a few years after the crucifixion—into a Jewish priestly family in Jerusalem.

Thirty years later, when the First Jewish Revolt against the Romans began, he was pressed into service as an officer leading a regiment of Jewish resistance fighters. While fighting in Galilee, he was defeated by the Roman legions under the command of General Vespasian. But he saved his life by foretelling that this general would one day become emperor.

Sure enough, in July of 69 AD, Vespasian's legions pronounced him imperator. Josephus was released and eventually followed the emperor to Rome, where he wrote a book about the revolt. He later published another, more detailed book about Jewish history.

Even though Josephus is not particularly interested in early Christians, his books are incredibly valuable for understanding the world of 1st-century Galilee and Judea. He even writes about John the Baptist as well as Jesus.

Guiding Sources: The Mishnah

Another important source is the Jewish Mishnah. The Mishnah is a record of debates between rabbis about the application of the Torah, the Jewish law, in everyday life.

Although the book was first compiled around 200 AD, many scholars believe that some of its case studies go back to the 1st century. The Mishnah is particularly important because it touches on many topics that Jesus and the Pharisees debate in the Gospels, such as the observance of the Sabbath, ritual purity, marriage laws, and the role of women in society.

Guiding Sources: Archaeology

Finally, there is archaeology. Particularly in the last 10 to 15 years, biblical archaeology in the Holy Land has produced discoveries that profoundly affect our understanding of the historical Jesus. Many of the most exciting discoveries were made in Galilee, notably in Magdala, the city of Mary Magdalene, and other towns around the Sea of Galilee—all of which will appear in this series.

2

Rome and Herod the Great

The story of the historical Jesus is inseparable from a unique moment in time: the birth of the early Roman Empire, founded by Emperor Augustus. At its peak, the Roman road system covered some 250,000 miles. There were also extensive maritime connections between key cities around the Mediterranean. These would become the bloodstream through which the story of Jesus would spread across the empire.

Rome and Judea

When Jesus was born, Galilee still formed part of the kingdom of Herod the Great, a vassal king who served at the pleasure of Rome. During the reign of Julius Caesar, Rome made a strategic decision to bring much of the Near East under its control. The purpose was to create a buffer state between Rome's principal source of grain, Egypt, and the Parthians, heirs to the ancient empire of Persia.

The architect of that plan was the Roman general Pompey. First, he conquered the kingdom of Pontus, in today's Turkey, and then he invaded Syria. In between was the small, Jewish Hasmonean kingdom of Judea, which had earned its independence after a bitter war known as the Maccabean revolt.

But its ruler, Queen Salome Alexandra of the Hasmonean family, had died in 67 BC, and now a power struggle was raging between her sons Hyrcanus II and Aristobulus II. It was the perfect pretext for General Pompey to intervene. In 63 BC, he conquered Judea and made it part of the Roman Empire.

Julius Caesar received support from the Jewish governors in Judea, and in return, he granted Jews throughout the empire special privileges, including the right to worship according to the Torah, to operate their own court of justice, and to be exempt from military service. His successor, Augustus, also exempted Jews from making sacrifices to the ruling emperor and even allowed the Roman tax system to collect the annual Jewish tithes.

These privileges sparked envy in people throughout the world. They would also provoke the wrath of the man who would sit in judgment of Jesus: the prefect Pontius Pilate.

Introducing Herod

The greatest impact on the life of people in Judea, including Jesus, was the decision of the Roman Senate to appoint Herod as king of the Jews. Herod was of Arab descent and was from Idumaea, which is today analogous to the Negev desert.

Even though Idumaea had been forcibly converted to Judaism by the Hasmoneans, in his heart, Herod remained a pagan. He had very little love for the Jewish people—and particularly the people of the northern province of Galilee.

While Herod's father, Antipater, served as a chief of staff in the Hasmonean administration of Hyrcanus II, he had in 47 BC appointed his sons to rule the various provinces in the kingdom. The 25-year-old Herod was appointed governor of Galilee, and so, very early on, Herod was able to recognize the unique value of this province. Owing to the Galilee region's fertility, the farmers of Galilee typically produced a surplus that made Herod want to chase its profits.

Aound this time, a civil war was raging in the Roman Empire between the assassins of Julius Caesar and Caesar's heir, young Octavian, later known as Augustus. One of the assassins, Cassius, appealed to Herod's father, Antipater, for a huge sum of money—700 talents—so that he could raise an army to fight Octavian. That sum would be about $6 million in today's currency.

Antipater turned to his sons to raise these funds, and Herod saw his chance. He squeezed the Galilean peasants with ruinous taxes until they produced the needed cash: 350 talents, or some $3 million. Farmers unable to pay the tribute were sold into slavery. Not surprisingly, Herod's regime prompted a resistance movement led by a man named Hezekiah, who may have been a member of the old Hasmonean nobility. According to the Jewish historian Josephus, the revolt was put down, and scores of people were killed in the process.

These events would set a pattern, an endless cycle of violence, in Galilee. In the eyes of the Roman Senate, however, this did not disqualify Herod to become the future king of Roman Judea. In fact, they liked having a vassal king who could be relied upon to keep his restive people under control and to pay his annual tribute on time. But the memory of Herod's brutal regime would create a deep hatred between Herod and the population of Galilee that would cast a long shadow over the ministry of Jesus.

Herod's Rule

After he was crowned king in 37 AD, Herod would rule Roman Judea for 33 years, enjoying a greater autonomy than any other king in the region, backed by the awesome power of Rome. His kingdom was now almost as large as the legendary kingdom of Israel founded by David and Solomon.

However, Herod was not Jewish by birth. His mother, Cypros, was an Arab princess from Petra. That violated the rule in Deuteronomy that only "one of your own community" shall rule as king.

Herod tried to legitimize his kingship by marrying the Hasmonean princess Mariamne, granddaughter of Aristobulus II, in 37 BC. But few Jews bought it, which is why Herod was resented by the population from the outset.

In response, Herod created a police state. Prominent officials and citizens were ordered to swear an oath of allegiance to Herod. Everyone was closely watched by Herod's secret police. Citizens were encouraged to inform on one another, says Josephus. Dissidents were arrested, sent to concentration centers in Herod's fortresses, and executed without trial.

Herod's Construction

At the same time, Herod embarked on a vast construction program to solidify his reign. He surrounded his kingdom with fortified castles, both to keep his foreign enemies out and to keep his own people in. They also served as pleasure palaces for himself and his court and places of refuge in times of trouble. The most famous of these is the citadel of Masada, a former Hasmonean fortress on a high rock plateau near the Dead Sea.

With his kingdom secure, Herod set about to embellish his domain. He took his cue from his master, Emperor Augustus, who had famously changed Rome, a city of brick, into marble.

In the old capital of the northern kingdom, Samaria, Herod built a city called Sebaste, the Greek equivalent of the name Augustus. Designed like a Greek city, or polis, it had a forum, a theater, and a large-scale temple dedicated to Rome.

Herod's Sarcophagus

Excavations led by the Israeli archaeologist Ehud Netzer in the early 2000s uncovered Herod's palace and what is believed to be his sarcophagus.

Such a pagan temple was deeply offensive to observant Jews, but Herod didn't care. His sole concerns were to have the approval of Augustus and to make Judea one of the leading kingdoms of the Roman Near East.

Herod and Trade

Herod also knew that the future of his kingdom depended on trade. It was trade that had made Asia Minor, today's Turkey, the most affluent region in the empire. Egypt, which had become a Roman possession in 30 BC, was famous for its export of glass, jewelry, alabaster, granite, papyrus, and above all, grain. From Africa came delicacies such as walnuts, coconuts, apricots, and peaches, while Syria produced dates, figs, and sugared plums. Near the end of the 1st century, Rome's annual receipts totaled 1.5 billion sesterces, roughly the equivalent of $6 billion today.

To tap into that global economy, Herod needed a large and modern port that could accommodate Roman cargo ships. Thus began his most ambitious enterprise: the construction of a deep-sea harbor on the Mediterranean coast.

In another nod to Augustus, this harbor was named Sebastos. Around it rose a new city, which became known as Caesarea Maritima. Eventually it became the largest Greco-Roman city ever built on Judea's soil, equipped with a hippodrome for chariot races.

The investment paid off. Herod's vast construction program, and the growing trade with cities on the Mediterranean, created a boom economy. But this boom mostly benefited the upper crust of Jewish society: the merchants, the priestly elite of the Sadducees, and Herodian officials eager to collaborate with the Roman occupiers. The vast majority of Jews, living in rural communities, saw very little of this wealth. Instead, they were taxed to the limit of their endurance.

But Herod didn't stop there. Even in the holy city of Jerusalem, he built a number of Greco-Roman projects, such as a large amphitheater for Roman amusements like gladiator battles—which, according to Josephus, greatly offended the Jews. Herod also built a sumptuous palace for himself.

Hellenism and the Second Temple

Hellenism, which was displayed in Herod's building projects, proved a sticking point for the Jews. Hellenism is the influence of Greek civilization, including the astounding achievements that the Greeks had made in philosophy, sculpture, the arts, and architecture. Greek civilization was polytheistic and therefore pagan. The Greek fondness for nude sculpture in particular was upsetting to observant Jews.

Herod knew he needed to do something to calm his restive kingdom, and to that end, he decided to make the Second Temple in Jerusalem into the largest sanctuary of the ancient world. He did that by building a huge colonnaded court around the temple, which was surrounded by a vast, floating platform supported by massive arches and retaining walls. Several of these retaining walls are still visible. One of these, the Western Wall, is today the holiest place in Judaism.

Raising the Funds

Where did Herod get the funds to pay for these magnificent projects? He certainly didn't get them from Rome. Instead, Rome was expecting a hefty annual tribute from its vassal king. Nor did he get it from the trade of any natural resources. Instead, he got it from the place that he had ransacked a decade earlier to raise the cash for the army of Cassius. This was the province of Galilee—the home of Joseph and Mary.

3

Mary and Joseph in Galilee

Even today, visitors are bound to be impressed by the beauty of Galilee. Thanks to the Israeli policy of limiting development in this region, we can still imagine what it must have been like to walk with Jesus through the fields and orchards of this region. But this beauty could barely disguise the terrible conditions that Herod the Great had inflicted on the Galileans—conditions that would have a major impact on Jesus's ministry.

Background on Galilee

For much of its history, the north (including Galilee) had been separate from the south, which in biblical times was known as Judah, and later, under Greek rule, as Judea. For example, after the Babylonian Exile, King Cyrus the Great had granted Judah (then called Yehud) a great measure of autonomy and provided the funds to rebuild the Temple of Jerusalem, which had been destroyed by the Babylonians. But that generosity did not extend to Galilee in the north. That region remained a captive province ruled by Persian officials.

After the conquest of the Persian realm by Alexander the Great, Galilee fared no better. It now became thoroughly infiltrated by Greek influences that alienated the Jewish population from their brothers and sisters in the south.

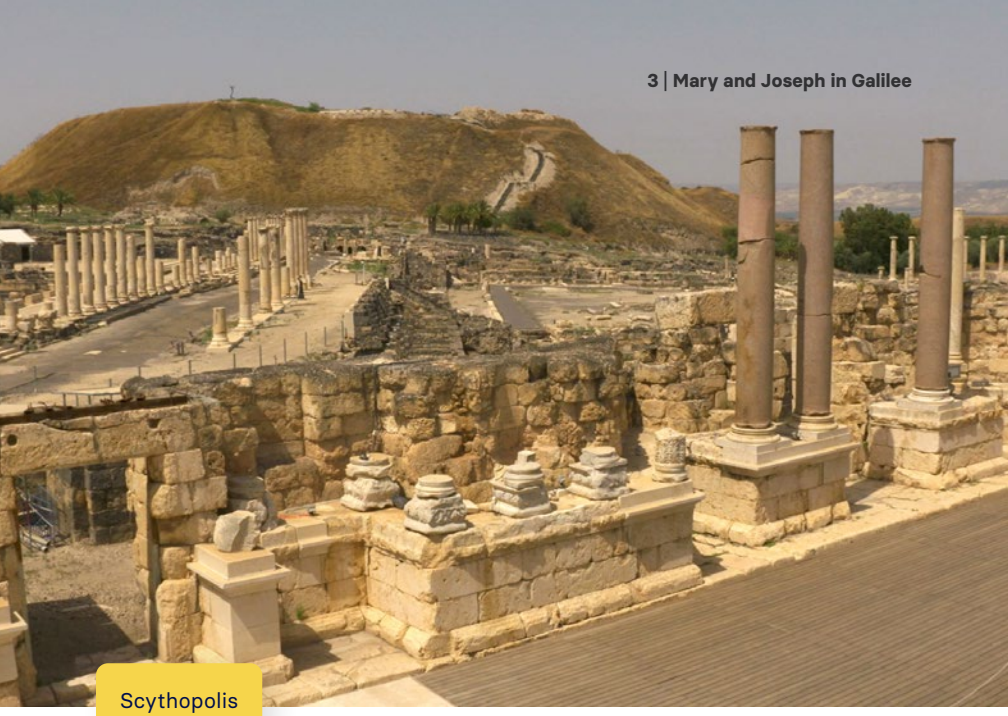
Many immigrants from Syria, Phoenicia, and Asia Minor decided to settle in this fertile land, and Jewish farmers became a minority. After the Maccabean revolt, the Hasmonean rulers tried to convert all of Galilee to Judaism, by force if necessary, but a deep prejudice against all things Galilean remained.

In sum, Galilee was not the type of place where pious Judeans expected to find a *hasid*, or "holy man," like Jesus—particularly because so many places retained their Greek imprint. Archaeologists such as Eric Meyers and Mark Chancey have found that whereas rural areas usually remained devoutly Jewish, the larger towns were where people spoke Greek and traded in Greek products. That deep division between a Greek urban culture and a Jewish rural imprint would last well into the days of the Talmud, the primary text of Rabbinic Judaism from the 2nd century onward.

Cities, Towns, and Villages

Cities such as Scythopolis, also known as Bet She'an, could have a population of 20,000 or more, usually a mixture of Jews and Gentiles. Townships, also mixed, numbered anywhere from 2,000 to 5,000 inhabitants. Only villages were predominantly Jewish, though many were no larger than 8 to 10 dunams, with each dunam representing around 10 families.

Nazareth is a typical example. It was such a small hamlet that it wasn't even included in a list of agricultural villages compiled by Josephus.



Scythopolis

Rural Galilee lay prone to any predator who was ready to exploit internal tensions. That predator was Herod the Great.

Agriculture before Herod

Herod recognized the tremendous agricultural potential of Galilee. Here was a region that, because of its bounty, could produce a vast surplus, allowing the king to become a player in the global economy under Augustus.

However, Galilean agriculture was inherently inefficient. The land was divided into hundreds of small plots that had been held by individual families for generations.

Joseph, who would soon be wed to Jesus's mother Mary, is relevant here. The Gospel of Mark refers to him as a *tekton*, which has traditionally been translated to mean "carpenter" but actually means something like "skilled worker," a handyman familiar with wood, stone, or metal. But Jesus's parables don't give that idea at all. His stories are filled with the metaphors of agriculture rather than carpentry.

Josephus tells us that almost everyone in Galilee was involved in cultivation. Farmers would use their plots to sustain themselves and their families with mixed farming. Some patches of land were set aside to cultivate cereals such as wheat and barley, while others grew garden vegetables such as onions, radishes, beets, and leeks. Many farmers also had orchards to cultivate olives, figs, and grapes.

This is known as subsistence farming—the idea of growing a variety of small crops to feed a family with a balanced diet. Any surplus that might be left over was considered a bonus and was usually sold or bartered.

Before the advent of Herod, farmers like Joseph lived on a knife's edge of survival. As subsistence farmers, they had no room for error. That was because the Torah, the Jewish law, expected a farmer to pay a tithe.

Ten percent of the harvest had to be donated to the priests and priestly assistants known as the Levites. In addition, Joseph had to pay a temple tax of half a shekel, which was the equivalent of a worker's wages for two days.

Herod's Predations

Then came Herod with his megalomania and zest for building. Herod decided that to fund his vision, he would tax the Galilean peasantry to the fullest. According to scholars like Richard Horsley, the tax burden on the farmers now tripled, becoming comprised of the tithes and temple tax, a charge to pay the tribute to Rome, and a heavy tax to fund Herod's construction program.

Already, the Galilean farmer had no margin of error, given the frequency of droughts, pests, and bad harvests. This triple layer of taxes was bound to push him off his land—but that was the whole point of Herod's devious plan.

Herod knew that to meet the tax burden, a farmer would have to borrow. And the people with the means to give such loans happened to be the same people who collected the taxes: the *telonai*, meaning "tax collectors." In the Gospel of Luke, we learn of debtors who owed their creditors staggering amounts under conditions that suggested interest rates of anywhere between 25% and 50%. When the loan came due and the farmer was unable to pay it, his land was confiscated.

That is why these tax collectors are so despised in the Gospels. Thousands of Galilean farmers and their families became homeless, dispossessed, and without the means to support themselves—but, of course, Herod didn't care. The ultimate goal of his plan was to integrate all of these plots into large estates to be run by professional stewards. In this way, Herod could maximize Galilee's surplus for sale.

In sum, Herod's scheme of wholesale exploitation ravaged the land and created a socioeconomic crisis that formed the immediate context of Jesus's ministry—particularly because these same taxes were then continued by Herod's son Antipas, the ruler of Galilee.

Mary and Joseph in Context

When seen in the light of Herod's destruction, the story of Mary and Joseph gains an entirely different meaning. Joseph was a farmer, but he also had to work as a *tekton*, a construction worker, to feed his family.

Joseph and Mary were poor. After the birth of Jesus, when Mary went to restore her purity by sacrificing at the temple, Luke says that she sacrificed two young pigeons rather than a lamb, since such was specifically allowed by Leviticus for people who were poor.

When they first became engaged, Joseph was probably a young man of between 18 and 20 years, whereas Mary was probably much younger, 14 or 15. In biblical times, girls were wed as soon as their periods started.

Luke tells us that Mary lived in Nazareth, but we're not quite sure where Joseph lived. Luke says that he was of the house of David but was living in or near Nazareth.

Matthew says that before the birth of their son, Mary and Joseph were living in Bethlehem, so the two stories disagree. We do know, however, that their marriage was most likely arranged by their families, as was customary in biblical times. A wedding was only scheduled if both parties agreed to the ketubah—the marriage contract.

The Ketubah

A ketubah was an extremely important document because it established the dowry that the bride's parents were prepared to present to the husband, such as money, livestock, or a plot of land. The ketubah also defined the rights and responsibilities of the couple—for example, in case the husband should die suddenly, leaving his wife to care for their children, or if the man decided to take a second wife, as the Torah allowed him to do.

Women did not have many rights in biblical times, and very few were allowed to have property or inheritance rights. That's why a woman was entirely dependent on the goodwill of her husband. These factors made the ketubah very important, as shown in a marriage contract from the 2nd century. In it, a Jewish groom faithfully made the promise of "the sum of 400 denarii," among other things.

The 400 denarii were a bridewealth, a pension of sorts, in case her husband died or divorced her. A denarius, a Roman coin, was the equivalent of a day's wages. And if the husband did marry a second wife, the Torah made sure she was protected to some degree:

> If [a man] takes another wife to himself, he shall not diminish the food, clothing, or marital rights of the first wife.

Even so, a bridewealth was rarely sufficient, and many widows lived in poverty as a result. Jesus was well aware of it. In the Gospel of Luke, he saw how many wealthy people made a big deal of making large donations to the korban, the treasury of the temple, and how a poor widow deposited just a few prutot or copper coins. Because the poor widow "put in all she had to live on," her donation actually outpaced those of the wealthy.

Eventually, the ketubah between Joseph's and Mary's families was agreed upon, and the scheduling of the wedding feast began. But then, something happened that appeared to upset these carefully laid plans: Mary was found to be with child.

4

The Birth of Jesus

The story of Jesus's birth, the theme of the Nativity, only appears in the Gospels of Luke and Matthew. Mark and John begin the story of Jesus when he is a grown man. Only Luke and Matthew give us the news that Mary was pregnant before she and Joseph were married. But each goes about it in a different way.

A Pivotal Event

It would be difficult to overstate the impact of a premarital pregnancy on a Jewish observant village such as Nazareth. A premarital pregnancy, if the father were not the intended husband, would bring great dishonor and shame on a woman's family. According to the Torah, Mary's relatives would have been entitled to take her out of her parental house and punish her through stoning.

Many scholars are prepared to accept that Mary's premarital pregnancy must therefore be a historical event. Usually, when such potentially damaging stories appear in the Gospels, it means that the underlying oral or written tradition was simply too persistent or well known for the writer to ignore.

Both Luke and Matthew use the Hebrew Bible to frame the story in a theological context. Luke tells the story from Mary's perspective. The angel Gabriel visits her, and says:

> "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."

Matthew, on the other hand, tells the story from Joseph's point of view, and here we get a sense of the scandal on Joseph's mind. Being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, he planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream 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."

The Messages of Matthew, Luke, and Paul

The miraculous power of God to create life where none was expected and the device of angels to announce such news to unsuspecting women are motifs found throughout the Hebrew scriptures. But this raises the question: Are the Nativity cycles of Matthew and Luke motivated by the desire to anchor Jesus's birth in prophecy, or are they based on an authentic tradition?

On this topic, a relevant piece of information is that the story of Mary's premarital pregnancy does not appear anywhere else in the New Testament literature. The only other reference to the event is found in a hostile document against Christianity called "The true discourse," written by a pagan author named Celsus around 178 AD.

When seen in the context of their time, the differences between Luke's and Matthew's accounts are not truly important. Both evangelists want to make the case that the birth of Jesus was framed by miraculous events, such as her conceiving a child by the Holy Spirit. This is a typical feature of ancient sagas; the protagonist of the story isn't born by happenstance but as a result of a divinely ordered plan.

At the same time, though, the evangelists do maintain that Joseph, a descendant from the house of David, was Jesus's biological father. That may seem like a contradiction, but it is necessary to qualify Jesus as the Jewish Messiah. This is the focus of the synoptic Gospels: to demonstrate that Jesus is the long-awaited redeemer.

For their part, Paul, his followers, and the Book of Acts do not have much interest in the virgin birth but rather in Jesus's pedigree as a descendant of the house of David. Indeed, Paul appears to suggest that Jesus became a son of God, and therefore divine, through his sacrifice on the cross.

Bethlehem

When was Jesus born, and where? It may seem obvious that the answers are the year 1 and the city of Bethlehem. But here, resolving some unknowns is key. First off, Matthew and Luke make it very clear that Jesus was born near the end of the reign of Herod. For instance, Matthew tells us that after Jesus's birth,

> Wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? … For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage."

This turn of events frightened King Herod, who then ordered that all the newborns in Bethlehem be put to death. There is no historical evidence that this massacre actually took place; Josephus, whose book is filled with stories of Herod's cruelty, would certainly have included the story otherwise.

But we have to look at the allegorical meaning behind the story, which is typically the case with Matthew's messages. In this case, Matthew wants to draw an explicit parallel with the pharaoh who in the book of Exodus ordered that all the newborn among the Jewish slaves be killed. Just as Moses escaped from that evil, so too did Jesus. But it also means that Jesus must have been born before 4 BC, the year that King Herod finally died, much to the relief of his people.

Getting the Couple to Bethlehem: Luke's Approach

Another issue that Luke and Matthew had to tackle is that the 8th-century prophet Micah wrote that the Messiah would have to be born in Bethlehem, the city of David. The problem is that the oral tradition about Jesus specified that he was born and raised in Galilee in a tiny village called Nazareth.

The challenge for the evangelists was therefore how to get Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem in Judea in time for Jesus's birth. In response, Luke and Matthew each arrive at a different scenario.

Luke, who is more concerned about the historical context of his story than any of the other evangelists, links the story to the census ordered by the governor of Syria, Quirinius. The problem is that this census did not take place until 10 years later, in 6 AD.

Additionally, the purpose of a Roman census was not to count the population but to establish the value of the tax base in a particular region. That's because until 6 AD, Judea was an autonomous region with its own tax collection system. But that changed when its ruler, Herod's son Archelaus, was ousted and Emperor Augustus decided to make Judea a crown province of the Roman Empire.

That meant that collecting the annual tribute now became a Roman responsibility, using the *telonai*, the middlemen who served as tax collectors. The purpose of the census, therefore, was to establish the net worth of the property of those who happened to live in Judea at that time. To do that, the Romans wanted the people to stay in their homes, where tax collectors could find them, rather than in the place of their ancestors.

The census would not have applied to Joseph and Mary for multiple reasons, including the fact that their place of residence was Nazareth in Galilee, rather than Bethlehem in Judea, as Luke says. Additionally, Galilee was an autonomous province that was exempt from the Roman census. And finally, in that year of 6 AD, Jesus was already at least 10 years old.

An Important Note

This examination of the Gospels is not meant to criticize the Bible or to challenge the story told by the evangelists. The goal is to identify the historical, authentic Jesus and get to know him as well as possible. That is why it is sometimes important to separate the oral traditions about Jesus from the literary devices that the evangelists use to frame the story with a theological message.

Getting the Couple to Bethlehem: Matthew's Approach

For his part, Matthew resolves the problem of getting Mary and Joseph into Bethlehem in a far more straightforward manner. Put simply, Matthew says that the engaged couple was living in Bethlehem all along. And then Matthew adds an interesting coda, relaying that "an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream" to give Joseph direction:

> "Take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him."

Joseph subsequently "took the child and his mother by night," went to Egypt, and stayed there until Herod's death.

As always with Matthew's Gospel, we should look for an allegorical meaning. In this case, it seems Matthew is looking for a parallel between the story of Jesus the newborn king and that of the Israelites, who, after their long sojourn in Egypt, finally came home to the Promised Land. Similarly, the newborn king would travel to Egypt with his family, and ultimately return and settle in Galilee.

Indeed, says Matthew, as soon as Joseph heard that King Herod was dead and the land of Judea was now ruled by his son Archelaus, Joseph decided to move his family up north, to a village known as Nazareth in Galilee. This is where all four Gospels come together to continue the story.

Conclusion: The Joy of Christmas

This chapter's analysis of the Nativity story is in no way intended to take away the joy of Christmas. In the end, it doesn't matter where or when Jesus was born; the important thing, and the true purpose of Christmas, is to celebrate that he was born as a new light to the world.

That is why early Christianity decided to combine Christmas with the ancient Roman celebration of the winter solstice and the feast of the Saturnalia, when Romans would decorate trees and give each other presents. That festival was so popular that no one wanted to get rid of it, and so in the end, that is how the modern Christmas celebration came about.

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Growing Up in Galilee

Today, Nazareth is one of the largest Arab towns in Israel. But its modern form does not reveal much about what Nazareth would have looked like in the 1st century. For that, this chapter draws on descriptions based on a village in the very north of Israel, close to the Syrian border, which was first excavated by Israeli archaeologists in the 1970s.

Galilean Communities

Communities in Galilee were typically structured around multifamily dwellings. The houses would have been built of stacked stone, then coated with stucco made of clay and mud. Such buildings would have housed a number of couples in a family, grouped around a common courtyard.

This unique composition of family members living in close proximity to one another illustrates the role of the family as the principal support mechanism for Galilean peasants. There was absolutely no support forthcoming from the local or state government, in this case the Herodian regime, even though it exploited the peasantry with heavy taxes.

The second principal level of support was the village. The family provided a shared resource for food, clothing, companionship, and love. The village offered access to water, social contact, communal worship, and agricultural facilities, such as an oil press or a threshing floor. Farming tools and draft animals could also be shared.

Villages also produced their own pottery, though the quality was usually inferior to the more expensive ceramics sold in townships. And finally, a village was also responsible for the construction and maintenance of roads to its fields and to the nearest town, where farmers could sell surplus produce.

A Galilean Home

The main room in which a family like Mary, Joseph, and Jesus would have lived was a simple affair of packed earth, with a roof made from thin beams and branches, covered with palm fronds and packed with mud. Rather than sitting in chairs made of wood, which was an expensive material, people sat on the floor using rugs, which is still common in many parts of the Middle East.

A hearth provided warmth in winter, when the Galilean climate turns cold. But houses of Jesus's time did not have chimneys, so the room was usually filled with smoke. A platform suspended by ropes from the ceiling held the family's provisions, such as grain and fruits, so that rodents couldn't get at them. If the room had two levels, a simple ladder would lead to a bedroom above.

Sometimes the kitchen was separate from the main living room. The kitchen could contain useful items such as an oven and flour mill, which someone like Mary could use to bake bread.

Then, the family would gather in the morning to enjoy the freshly made bread and talk about the day. Jesus would later remember this essential ritual of Galilean life with the words "give us today our daily bread" in the prayer he taught his disciples.

After Joseph had left for the fields and little Jesus was busy playing in the courtyard with other kids, watched over by her relatives, Mary would then attend to her next task: weaving. It was the responsibility of every woman in the village to make the garments for her husband and her children. To do so, Mary would use a loom.

A Disruption

Village life was eventually disturbed by developments that took place in the capital of Jerusalem. The ruler Herod died in 4 BC, stirring the hope of many that change was on the horizon and that they would be spared from the crushing taxes that had ravaged the peasantry.

Some may have hoped for a restoration of the Hasmonean house. Ambition was also rife at the court in Jerusalem, where a fierce competition was raging among Herod's sons to determine who would succeed him.

Herod had nine sons and five daughters by at least eight women, but three sons had been executed in the years prior on suspicion of having plotted a conspiracy against their father. A surprise was in store for the remaining children.

In his will, Herod proposed to Emperor Augustus that his kingdom be carved up. Herod proposed a return to the traditional separation of Palestine's southern heartland, Judea, from the north, including Galilee. According to Herod's will, Judea as well as Idumaea and Samaria would be granted to his son Archelaus—the same Archelaus whom Matthew presents as the reason for Joseph's decision to settle in Galilee.

Since this was by far the largest portion of Herod's territory, Archelaus hoped to inherit Herod's title, termed the *basileus* ("king"), but he was wrong. Augustus merely bestowed upon him the title of *ethnarch*, meaning "ruler of the people."

The second-largest portion, that of Galilee and Perea, the Transjordan, was given to Herod's son Antipas. That was a curious decision because the regions of Galilee and Perea were not connected in any way. Antipas was also denied the title of king and had to make do with an even lesser title—that of *tetrarch*, or "ruler of a fourth."

Herod's son Philip would become ruler of various territories to the northeast of Galilee, including Batanaea and the Gaulanitis, the region of the Golan. Finally, Herod's daughter Salome received control of part of the coastal region, including Ashdod and Ashqelon. Once again, Galilee became separate from Judea, though both were ruled by sons of King Herod.

After Partition

Once the partition became known, the new ruler of Judea, Archelaus, was besieged by people clamoring for social change. Mothers and wives petitioned for news of their sons and husbands who had been jailed as political prisoners.

Eventually, people demanded a restoration of a nation under the Torah, God's law. In response, says Josephus, Archelaus summoned "a regiment of armed men," and the protest turned violent. Before long, the entire country was in an uproar. While Archelaus traveled to Rome to receive his formal appointment from Augustus, the riots spread and turned into a civil war.

This was the moment that Judas, the son of Hezekiah, had been waiting for. Hezekiah had led a revolt while Herod was governor of Galilee. Now his son was ready to exact his revenge. He organized a group of resistance fighters and waged a guerrilla war on anyone associated with the old Herodian regime.

The rebels lacked weapons, but Galilee's provincial capital, Sepphoris, had a depot where arms were stored. They broke into the building and took off with whatever they could carry.

Sepphoris in modern times

Within a short period of time, all of Galilee and Judea was in revolt with the aim of restoring Jewish independence. The governor of Syria became so alarmed that he dispatched three separate Roman legions: the III Gallica, the X Fretensis, and the VII Fulminata. Soon, much of Galilee was plundered, looted, and destroyed.

Aftermath of the War

The Gospels are silent about the civil war. That is perhaps not surprising because the four evangelists lived outside of Roman Palestine in places throughout the Mediterranean, and they wrote at least around 70 years after these events took place. But the impact on the lives of Joseph, Mary, and Jesus would have been immense.

Nazareth was just four miles from the city of Sepphoris, the center of the revolt, which was burned to the ground. But Sepphoris would play an important role during Jesus's teenage years.

A decade after the revolt, in 6 AD, reports of the utter misrule of Archelaus convinced Augustus that something needed to be done. Archelaus was dismissed from his throne and exiled to Gaul, now known as France. This raised the question of who would replace Archelaus as ruler of Judea. Antipas, who governed Galilee, hoped that Augustus would once again unite the country and place him at its head as king. But the emperor decided otherwise.

Given its penchant for riots and revolts, Judea now became a province to be governed by a Roman official—a prefect reporting to the Roman governor of Syria. Thus, Judea lost its autonomy and became a possession of Rome. This is when the governor of Syria, Quirinius, ordered a census to assess the tax value of the region now under his command.

New Anger

When word of Quirinius's census spread, a new revolt was brewing. Once again, it was led by a man named Judas, though scholars don't know if this was the same Judas who led the rebellion 10 years earlier. It is also unclear whether this resistance movement was as violent as the one that preceded it. But based on Josephus's work, it is clear that the resistance spawned a new movement: that of the Zealots.

The Zealots were the so-called fourth philosophy during the early years of the Roman occupation. The other movements included the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes. The aim of the Zealots was to restore the land as a kingdom of God—ruled by the Jewish law rather than the laws of Rome. In their view, no man could possess or tax the land because it was the property of God.

But the annexation of Judea made that goal even more remote. The accumulation of large estates by wealthy landowners accelerated. Land that had previously sustained scores of families was now seeded exclusively for popular export products such as grains, olive oil, grapes, and dates.

The anger of the displaced peasantry runs through the Synoptic Gospels. For example, Jesus told the parable of the wealthy landowner who had such a plentiful harvest that he didn't know what to do with it. In another story, tenant farmers turn their wrath on the stewards who come to collect the harvest.

Antipas's Response

In response to the anger of displaced peasants, Antipas, ruler of Galilee, came up with a plan. Just like his father Herod, he would create work by building a city—in this case, by rebuilding the town of Sepphoris, which had been burned to the ground during the revolt 10 years earlier. That city was rediscovered in the 1990s, and archaeologists from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem have worked on studying it.

Given that the city was largely destroyed, Antipas had the luxury of creating a new provincial capital virtually from scratch. Josephus reports that Herod Antipas set out to make Sepphoris "the ornament of all Galilee." His architects designed a layout that was used throughout the Roman Empire: a main boulevard, termed a *cardo*, bisected at right angles by another axis known as the *decumanus*, with subsidiary streets in between.

This is an example of a *cardo* from Gerasa, which is today's Jarash in Jordan—one of the best-preserved Roman cities in the world.

Mark tells us that Joseph was a *tekton*, a skilled worker, so it is very likely that he would have been involved in a major construction project so close to Nazareth. And because sons were trained in the trade of their fathers, it may be safe to assume that Jesus worked on building this city as well.

Archaeologist James Strange has suggested that Jesus and his father may have worked on the city's most prominent feature: a Roman-style theater. That is speculation, but if it is true that both father and son worked in Sepphoris, then it would explain why the Gospels are silent about Jesus's years as a teenager and young adult. After all, Jesus and Joseph were building a city designed by Roman architects on Galilean soil, though it is doubtful that they had any choice in the matter.

6

Rabbi Jesus

The Gospels explicitly state that at some point in his life, Jesus became a rabbi. This chapter looks at the questions of how that happened and where Jesus would have received his education. It also touches on how Jesus likely appeared and the language—or languages—he spoke.

A Big Event at Age 12

There is a tantalizing reference in the Gospel of Luke to an event that took place when Jesus was 12 years old, just before his bar mitzvah. Mary and Joseph decided to take him to Jerusalem for the Passover festival, together with other pilgrims from nearby villages. But when they returned to Nazareth, they discovered that Jesus was not part of the group. They went back to Jerusalem to find him. That led to this event:

> After three days they found him in the Temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers.

The story is not found in any of the other Gospels, and perhaps we should look for an allegorical meaning that must have been obvious to Luke's audience. One interpretation of the story is that its purpose is to show Jesus is not only educated but that he has a better understanding of the Torah than the scholars in the temple. He is therefore qualified to adapt the law to the unique conditions of his time—in essence, to redefine what it means to be a Jew in the 1st century. That idea returns throughout the Gospels.

The Site of Jesus's Education

As for where Jesus received his education, the Mishnah suggests that by the 3rd century AD, every town and village had a school, a bet midrash, in the local synagogue, where young boys were taught scripture. Educating the young was a particular priority for Rabbinic Judaism of that time, as it is today, but scholars question whether such a system already existed in the early 1st century.

After all, Jesus lived in a period known as Second Temple Judaism, which was focused on the rites of sacrifice at the temple rather than on Bible study. But some authors believe that the Pharisees may have anticipated Rabbinic Judaism in some ways and that they, too, were devoted to teaching children the Torah, regardless of their station in life. That brings the story to the city of Sepphoris.

Sepphoris

Given its very Greco-Roman design, with a theater, a bathhouse, and many beautiful mosaics, archaeologists originally thought that the population of Sepphoris was mostly Gentile rather than Jewish. But recent discoveries of various *mikva'ot*, ritual baths used by observant Jews, have suggested that the city must have had a sizable Jewish population.

When Bill Grantham of Troy State University examined ancient garbage near the western summit of the site, he identified a remarkable absence of pig bones, contrasting with remains found near Gentile communities. Jews don't eat pork because it's not kosher. And although the layout and style of Sepphoris was Roman in character, excavators have found no sculptures or any other form of graven images that might have given offense to Jews. Overall, the evidence suggests that the city of Sepphoris in Jesus's time was predominantly Jewish.

Additionally, the discovery of many stone vessels may also point to the presence of a large group of Pharisees. Water kept in stone vessels, rather than clay pottery, could never become impure. That is why stone vessels were in great demand among pious and relatively affluent Jews—precisely the demographic associated with the Pharisees. That makes sense because as a major administrative center, Sepphoris would have attracted a large number of educated Pharisees.

If it's true that Sepphoris had a large Pharisaic community, that would explain why in later years Jesus appears to be so familiar with Pharisaic customs, how they lived, and the great emphasis they placed on the application of the law in everyday life. That is exactly what separated them from the Sadducees, for whom the rite of sacrifice was the only path to redemption.

A Major Discovery

Until recently, scholars dismissed the idea that there could have been schools for the young in Galilee during the time of Jesus. But that changed with a major discovery by Israeli archaeologist Dina Avshalom-Gorni on the shores of the Sea of Galilee.

At the remains of the ancient city of Magdala, the home of Mary Magdalene, excavators found what appears to be an ancient synagogue in 2009. They found a coin underneath the floor, which is dated to 29 AD. This was the first evidence to emerge that there were synagogues in Galilee in the time of Jesus.

The most exciting find involved a room in front of the synagogue. The presence of several benches in the room suggests it was a bet midrash, a school for young boys, exactly as described in the Mishnah several centuries later.

A bet midrash does not in itself provide the necessary education to become a rabbi. That took many years of study, either in a yeshiva or by having an individual tutor. For Jesus to be educated as a rabbi, there are two possibilities: that he was trained in Jerusalem or that he was tutored by Pharisees in Sepphoris.

Joseph's Disappearance

Jesus's father, Joseph, disappears from the Gospel stories soon after a visit to the temple in Jerusalem. He may have died, which would have left Mary with at least seven mouths to feed. According to Mark and Matthew, Jesus had four brothers and at least two sisters.

Joseph's death would have made a young Jesus the head of the household and the main breadwinner. That would have made it very unlikely that he could have left for Jerusalem to be educated there, particularly given the prejudice against Galileans; instead, he had to keep working in Sepphoris.

That is why it is far more likely that as a young teenager without a father, he was taken under the wing of a kind teacher in Sepphoris, perhaps even a Pharisee, given their keen interest in educating the young. That would also explain why Jesus would become so familiar with Pharisaic debates in later years.

After Augustus

In 14 AD, Emperor Augustus, who had ruled the Roman Empire for more than 40 years, passed away. An extraordinary period of peace in much of the known world—the celebrated Pax Romana—had come to an end. The future loomed with uncertainty, even as the heir of Augustus, his stepson Tiberius, assumed the throne.

In Galilee, the tetrarch Antipas greeted the news with joy. His relationship with Augustus had always been tense, but he had cultivated excellent connections with the Tiberius party.

Around 20 AD, when Jesus was 24 or 25 years old, Antipas decided to shift from building the town of Sepphoris to a new city located on the Sea of Galilee. To curry favor with the new emperor, he named it Tiberias. This time, Antipas wanted to build a true Greco-Roman polis, with temples, a gymnasium, and bathhouses in the Hellenistic style.

To that end, he picked a spot close to some hot springs, which had once been a Jewish cemetery. In Jewish eyes, the site was therefore unclean; no observant Jew would want to work or live there. That was perfectly fine with Antipas, who wound up populating Tiberias with Gentiles from towns west of the Jordan.

The Lost Years

Not much of ancient Tiberias has survived because in 145 AD, after the Second Jewish Revolt was suppressed, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai cleansed the city of all pagan influences and rebuilt the city as a completely Jewish town. But in Jesus's time, it was still mostly Gentile, and he likely never visited this town.

Scholars refer to Jesus's adolescence as the lost years of Jesus. There is no evidence of what he may have done during this period. This may have been a time when he finished his schooling and began his practice as a young rabbi, serving the needs of the villages and hamlets of Lower Galilee.

These journeys brought him face-to-face with the terrible devastation wrought by the preceding decades of economic exploitation. Villages once populated by freeholders were now poverty-stricken hamlets, crowded with families devastated by malnutrition. It would have made him angry and desperate to remedy their suffering.

At the same time, reading between the lines of the Gospels, we sense a certain alienation between Jesus and his family. In the source known as Q, or *Quelle*, which forms part of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, we hear Jesus say wistfully, "The son of man has nowhere to lay his head."

When, many years later, some people want to follow Jesus but worry about what to tell their families, Jesus rebukes them, saying:

> "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple."

These were strong words, obviously spoken in a moment of passion. But this is a Jesus for whom family life meant little—one who had rarely tasted the simple pleasure of running around the village with friends or siblings.

The theologian Bruce Chilton has suggested that since Jesus was conceived out of wedlock, he may have been considered an illegitimate child and therefore shunned by other children in the village. Alternatively, as a young boy, Jesus may have been taken away from home and hearth to work in the harsh construction pits of Sepphoris.

Jesus's Appearance

In American culture, people often imagine Jesus as a tall, slender, pale-skinned man with flowing long hair and moist blue eyes. But that portrait of Jesus is a projection of a Western model, first established in the Renaissance.

Ancient Judaism forbade the depiction of living things, which is why we don't have a portrait of Jesus made during his lifetime. The earliest depictions were made in Gentile territories, in places like Rome and Asia Minor—today's Turkey. For example, frescos from the 3rd- and 4th-century catacombs in Rome portray Jesus as an Apollo, the god that the Romans believed Jesus resembled the most: a beardless young man topped with golden hair and shining like the sun.

Under Byzantine rule, the divine nature of Jesus gained new emphasis. He was no longer portrayed like a Greek sage but as an ephemeral, two-dimensional character using the shimmering medium of the mosaic. His face became sterner. From this Byzantine paradigm, the Orthodox Church developed the image of the Pantokrator—"Christ the all-powerful"—that would remain a fixture of Eastern Christianity for centuries to come.

But then Christianity moved to Europe, where sensibilities were different. Europeans embraced the Passion of Jesus, and in the process, they produced a uniquely Western iconographic type. He was now portrayed as a suffering human being with hollow eyes and sunken cheeks.

Then the portrayal of Jesus entered the Renaissance. A new element emerged: the sweetness of Jesus. The result was the warm, pale-skinned Jesus, smiling at his accusers, that endures to this day.

The reality of Jesus's appearance was different than Western-tinged portrayals. The Gospels imply that Jesus looked like any other Galilean, for on the evening of his arrest in the garden of Gethsemane, the temple guards had to rely on Judas to point him out. If that is true, then Jesus would have been about five feet two or five feet four in height—the average size of a Galilean man.

In 2020, a Dutch photographer named Bas Uterwijk used artificial intelligence to recreate the face of Jesus, informed by Leonardo's *Salvator Mundi*, the Shroud of Turin, and a Middle Eastern man with olive-tinted skin, brown eyes, and black hair that fell to his shoulders. Like any observant Jew, Jesus would have worn a beard with pride.

Jesus's Language(s)

Like virtually all other Jewish men and women in Galilee, Jesus spoke Aramaic, which shares some roots with Hebrew but became the dominant language of the Assyrian Empire in the 8th century BC. After the Babylonian Exile, it replaced Hebrew as the language of ancient Israel. The Gospels contain no fewer than 26 words in Aramaic spoken by Jesus, no doubt taken from the oral traditions that were circulating at that time.

Jesus most likely spoke with a strong Galilean accent, as did his apostles, such as Peter. It is possible, though, that Jesus learned some Greek in Sepphoris. For example, the Gospels show him conversing with a Roman centurion as well as the Roman prefect, Pilate. Both would have spoken Greek, which was the international language at the time.

7

John the Baptist in the Jordan

When Emperor Tiberius decided to retire to the island of Capri, a man named Sejanus gained full control of the Roman Empire. Sejanus was the head of the Praetorian Guard—the security detail of the emperor—and had been growing in influence for some time. He was not an aristocrat but a knight. During his tenure, the position of prefect of Judea fell vacant. Sejanus selected a man who, like himself, was a knight to become the new prefect of Judea. That man was Pontius Pilate.

Pilate's Provocation

Pilate moved into the residence of the Roman prefect of Judea, which was located in Herod's city of Caesarea Maritima. People in the diplomatic service considered Judea a bad posting. It had a restless population and lacked any industry or mines that offered the prospect of bribes.

Ambitious as well as obstinate, the new prefect decided to make his mark by teaching the Judeans a lesson. He knew he could get away with it because his immediate boss—the Roman governor of Syria, named Lucius Aelius Lamia—was not in Antioch but residing in Rome at that time.

Josephus tells us that shortly after Pilate's arrival in Judea, he decided on a deliberate provocation. He sent a cohort of Roman soldiers into the Antonia Fortress in Jerusalem, which overlooked the temple, and specifically ordered that the soldiers carry their ensigns in full view.

These emblems carried the image of the emperor, but such offensive images were not allowed in the temple precinct. There was an outcry, and a large group of people decided to march on Caesarea to make their protests heard.

Pilate received them and pretended to listen while his soldiers formed a ring around the protestors. No sooner were the soldiers in place than Pilate stood and declared that unless the crowd left at once, he would order his soldiers to kill everyone in sight. At this, the people threw themselves to the ground and bared their necks, ready to take the sword. They would rather accept death, their spokesman said, than see their ancient laws trampled.

Pilate knew he couldn't begin his tenure with a bloodbath of such proportions. He ordered that the ensigns be removed. But he never forgave the Jews their victory. From that day forward, he secretly plotted his revenge. That moment arrived just two years later, in 28 AD.

A New Scheme

The primary reason why a Roman agreed to serve in overseas diplomatic service was to make money. As a governor, one could sell lucrative licenses or skim the profits of trade and exports. For Pilate, this was particularly urgent because, like any other Roman knight, he wanted to move up to the senatorial class. To become a senator, one had to have at least 1 million sesterces in the bank.

However, Judea was a poor region, with no mines or other resources, seemingly limited Pilate's options for gathering money. There was one exception: the korban, the treasury of the temple in Jerusalem. This was where donations from Jews across the Diaspora were deposited.

It consisted of 13 chests with tapering tops, 9 of which were earmarked for prescribed offerings and 4 of which were used for general donations.

Pilate had heard that the high priest Caiaphas and many of the chief priests maintained lavish mansions in the upper city of Jerusalem. These were usually equipped with a *mikvah*, a ritual bath for the Jewish purification rites. But a *mikvah* had to be fed with running water rather than stagnant water; otherwise, it became impure.

That was a problem in a dry climate like Judea. To solve it, the solution would be a new project from Pilate: an aqueduct. And for funding, the source would be the temple treasury. According to Josephus, Pilate's plan had the full support of the high priest Caiaphas.

Caesarea Maritima's aqueduct

On the surface, the arrangement may have looked legitimate. Later rabbinic sources indicate that the temple treasury was indeed used to pay for municipal needs, including the maintenance of Jerusalem's waterworks, towers, and city walls.

The difference was that these services were supervised by Jewish temple officials, while a large project such as an aqueduct would have to be supervised by the Romans. Pilate would now get his hands on the temple treasury.

Inevitably, word of the project leaked. The Judeans rose in uproar. Tens of thousands of protestors gathered in the temple forecourt, denouncing the theft of their sacred donations.

This time, Pilate gave no quarter. His soldiers infiltrated the crowds, and upon a sign from Pilate, they raised their swords, then killed the protestors and, according to Josephus, some bystanders as well.

After the Massacre

As word of the bloodbath spread, a wave of revulsion swept over Judea and Galilee. People were outraged. Many young men and women rallied to the most charismatic rebel of their day. His name, says Josephus, was John the Baptist. He was wisely operating just across the River Jordan in Perea, outside the jurisdiction of Pontius Pilate.

John's movement was a complete rejection of what the Romans stood for, advocating a return to the three principles of the Torah: social justice, compassion to one another, and faith in God. It is little surprise, then, that among those who flocked to John the Baptist was a rabbi, the 32-year-old Jesus of Nazareth.

John said that a great cataclysm was on the horizon. The end of time—the apocalypse—was near. Jews, said John, should make a total break with their sinful past and do so with the symbolic act of an all-cleansing submersion in water.

Bethany beyond the Jordan

John's movement was likely located near Bethany beyond the Jordan (which is in today's kingdom of Jordan). All four Gospels report that when Jesus arrived in this area, he, too, wanted to be baptized by John. But for the evangelists, that posed a problem. Why would Jesus, who was clearly free from sin, need to undergo a baptism? Matthew says that initially, John refused to baptize Jesus.

Then all four Gospels explain Jesus's baptism. In their view, it was not John who baptized Jesus but the Holy Spirit who came down to anoint him for his mission as the Messiah.

Qumran

There are many places associated with John's activity, but Bethany beyond the Jordan has the best claim. On the famous 6th-century Madaba map, it appears under the name Bethabara, identified with a small church. During the Six-Day War of 1967, it was located right on the front line and therefore heavily mined by the Jordanians, but after the 1994 peace treaty between Israel and Jordan, archaeologists moved in and discovered the remains of a church from as early as the 2nd or 3rd century AD.

This location is intriguing because it is less than 12 miles from the ancient settlement of Qumran, located on the west side of the Dead Sea. The small community of Qumran is widely believed to have been responsible for storing the Dead Sea Scrolls in nearby caves. And because of some striking similarities between John the Baptist and the Qumranites, some scholars have wondered whether perhaps John was once a member of the Qumranite community.

Qumran was originally settled by a group of devout Jews who wanted to distance themselves from the urban culture of Judea, which had become increasingly infatuated with Greek customs. They were particularly upset when the Hasmonean kings decided to also assume the position of high priest. According to Leviticus, only descendants from Aaron, the brother of Moses, could become high priest.

Qumranites devoted themselves to studying and copying the complete Hebrew Bible as it existed at that time, possibly using scrolls taken from Jerusalem. Some scholars believe that the community was an offshoot of the Essenes.

The idea that John the Baptist could at one point have been a member of the Qumran sect has created a lot of excitement in some circles. Both the Qumranites and John the Baptist lived in isolation in the Judean Desert and subsisted on a sparse diet. Membership in the group could explain John's intimate knowledge of Hebrew scripture because he would have had access to the complete canon of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

But there are also important differences. The Qumran sect formed a fairly closed community into which one had to be initiated; John the Baptist, on the other hand, welcomed anyone who was willing to repent and be baptized in the living waters of the Jordan.

And while the Qumran group also practiced immersion in waters, they only used private baths, the *mikva'ot*. For John, however, immersion was not a daily cleansing ritual but a sign of repentance. In John's hands, baptism became an instrument of individual transformation. And John didn't use a private *mikvah* but the flowing waters of the Jordan River, available to all.

The Beginning of Jesus's Ministry

We don't know how long Jesus stayed in the company of John's disciples. If we place the encounter between Jesus and John in 28 AD, then he would have only spent a few months in Perea. But we do know that John had a very large following. It was his public appeal that brought Jesus in contact with him to begin with.

The prophet's celebrity would also be his undoing. John operated in Perea, in an area ruled by Herod Antipas, the tetrarch of Galilee. John's fame became so widespread that Antipas felt he had to act. But Luke and Josephus offer different reasons for John's arrest.

Luke says that Antipas fell in love with Herodias, the wife of his half brother Herod Philip. She accepted his proposal of marriage, but on one condition: that Antipas divorce his first wife, Phasaelis, the daughter of King Aretas IV. This was the king of Nabataea, with its capital of Petra.

Divorcing such a prominent princess would have major repercussions. But when Antipas went ahead and married Herodias anyway, John the Baptist denounced the marriage. The new wife became so angry that Antipas felt compelled to have John arrested.

Josephus, however, gives a political reason behind Antipus's attack on John. In his telling, Antipas's concern over John's ability to "raise a rebellion," which came from John's influential personality, spurred him to move against John.

Josephus says that John was taken to Machaerus, one of the border fortresses of King Herod. According to the Gospels, he was put to death after Antipas fell under the spell of his stepdaughter, Salome, who was a talented dancer. After he promised to give Salome anything she wished, her mother Herodias whispered in her ear that she should ask for John's head, and the girl did as she was told.

John's death left his followers in disarray. No one knew if Antipas was also going to try to arrest the leading members of his movement. The Gospel of John suggests that some of the disciples of John the Baptist went over to Jesus, including the brothers Andrew and Simon.

Jesus took a liking to Simon and gave him a nickname. “You are to be called Cephas,” he said. He actually used the Aramaic word *kêfa*, meaning “stone” or “rock.” So, Simon now became known as Rocky, or Petros in Greek and Peter in English. Together with another disciple called Philip, they left the camp on the Jordan and returned to the north. This was the beginning of Jesus’s ministry.

8

The Ministry Begins

The Bible has many stories in which people enter a period of preparation before a major event. In the Gospels, one such story occurs as Jesus prepares for his ministry over the course of 40 days and 40 nights, a stretch of time that allegorically signals a time of intense reflection and preparation. This is a time when Jesus likely tried to absorb what he had experienced in the camp of John the Baptist, to reflect on his pastoral work as a village rabbi, and to consider the devastation of Galilee's social fabric.

John's Influence

There is reason to believe Jesus was already very familiar with the Galilean crisis upon his return to Galilee. He's never surprised to see hundreds of poor and hungry people come and listen to him. Instead, the foremost question on his mind is, "What am I going to do about it?"

That is why he went to the Jordan and why the weeks or months he spent with John the Baptist are so important—because in some ways John served as a role model. John had some answers to that question. Essentially, his message was that anyone who wanted to change the world had to begin with themselves. That involved repenting and returning to the principal tenets of the Torah—or risking being tossed into the fire, as a major cataclysm was on the horizon.

John was tapping into apocalyptic currents that had been steadily building over the previous two centuries. Scholars refer to these as eschatological ideas—prophecies about a cataclysmic change in the near future that would end the world as we know it and would leave only the righteous untouched.

There were things that Jesus learned from John, but there were also areas where the two differed. The most important was that for Jesus, social and religious renewal didn't have to be political in nature. It didn't have to be imposed from above; it could be a popular movement that would originate from below.

Additionally, Jesus realized that the confrontational attitude that John took toward his audience wouldn't work in Galilee. Judea was different; it was full of people who either collaborated with the Romans or no longer bothered to live and behave like Jews. That's why John's style was to yell at them, to shock them out of their complacency.

But in Galilee, there was genuine suffering. People were hurting because they had lost their land, lost their homes, and could barely scrape by. Many had also suffered terrible injuries in the recent revolts, while others had chronic diseases.

Bethsaida

In the meantime, Jesus and his companions, former disciples of John the Baptist, made their way back from Perea until they arrived on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. It seems likely they came to Bethsaida at this time. One reason for that is the fact that his new followers—Andrew, Simon Peter, and Philip—all came from this town. In other words, they were going home to see their families. But there was another good reason why Jesus and his early followers would have decided to come here.

Bethsaida's city gate in modern times

Bethsaida was part of Gaulanitis, which was ruled by Herod Philip. No one knew if Antipas's soldiers were still looking for John's followers. In Bethsaida, they would have been safely out of Antipas's jurisdiction.

Capernaum

Eventually, the group decided it was safe to cross the Jordan into Galilean territory. Simon Peter's mother-in-law had a house in Capernaum, which was a major crossroads. Capernaum had a harbor as well as a tollbooth to tax the caravans coming down from Syria. It was the perfect place to start a ministry.

At the beginning of his teachings, according to Luke, Jesus

> stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor."

Jesus was going to bring the good news to all those who had been dispossessed, diseased, and oppressed during these past decades of Herodian rule. He was going to make things right. And then, after he read from Isaiah, he sat down and said, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

In Mark's Gospel, people were amazed at his words, but in Luke's Gospel, the congregation was so upset that they nearly drove him off a cliff. Jesus then performed an exorcism on a man with an unclean spirit, possessed by a demon.

Josephus tells us that holy men, or *hasidim*, who claimed to be prophets had to perform a supernatural sign, a *semeion* in Greek, to authenticate the divine nature of their mission. The ability to perform a miracle, such as an exorcism, was a prerequisite for Jesus's mission to be accepted, and in this he did not disappoint. As Mark writes, "At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee."

In time, Jesus performed his second miracle: Simon's mother-in-law was suffering from a high fever, but Jesus healed her. That news hit the region like a bombshell. Luke explains that many sick people "were brought to him," and Jesus "land his hands on each of them and cured them." During this process,

> 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.

From a Jewish perspective, the meaning of these exorcisms is threefold. First, it authenticated Jesus as truly a *hasid*, a holy man, filled with the Spirit. But it also showed that Jesus had the power and authority to defeat demons, the henchmen of Satan.

In ancient times, when people suffered from a chronic illness—particularly a mental illness—they were believed to be possessed by demons. In Luke's view, Jesus's ability to exorcise such evil spirits sealed his status as the Messiah. And because these demons are supernatural, they already recognized him as a son of God, the Jewish definition of a messiah, even when the people around him did not.

Expanding the Circle

Now that his ministry was set in motion, Jesus was ready to expand his circle of disciples. In ancient times, it was customary for a potential pupil, or *mathētḗs*, to seek out the teacher and ask him if he was prepared to accept him. But Jesus had another way of attracting disciples: He was going to recruit them.

He would walk along the harbor front, where the fishermen were busy mending their nets or working on their boats, and call on them to follow him. The Gospels claim that these fishermen, such as James and John, the sons of Zebedee, promptly dropped whatever they were doing and joined his group. (Given that most fishermen were married with families to support, it may have taken a bit more effort on Jesus's part.)

In any case, Jesus's goal was to look for an audience in the towns and villages of Galilee. On the face of it, that was a rather novel practice for a teacher, but Jesus had already worked as a traveling rabbi in the years before joining John the Baptist in the Jordan. In a way, those years had prepared him for the ministry that he was now going to deploy on a far greater scale.

Organizing such a campaign was not something that a man could do by himself. For that, he needed helpers, or what today we would call advance men—people who would go to a village to announce that Jesus was going to preach and to find a place for him to do so. In a sense, they were each playing the role of delegate, or *shaliach* in Aramaic. In the Gospels, that word would be translated as *apostolos*, meaning "he who is sent," which then became the English word *apostle*.

9

In the Kingdom of God

This chapter focuses on a seminal moment in Jesus's ministry: when he revealed his great program for restoring the social and religious fabric of this troubled land. The moment is believed to have happened on a hill that is located close to Tabgha, which offers a beautiful view of the Sea of Galilee. More importantly, the hill formed a natural amphitheater that could amplify his voice for the hundreds—or perhaps thousands—of people who came to listen to his words. The oral traditions about this great moment must have been very strong because both Luke and Matthew report the speech almost verbatim, with ample quotes.

Jesus's Goal

There are differences between Luke's and Matthew's retellings, as always happens when events are transmitted by word of mouth. Matthew's version is more legalistic, while in Luke, Jesus's Sermon on the Mount is filled with compassion and hope, as exemplified by Jesus's words,

> "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."

These statements are also paradoxical, though. Jesus is willing his people to listen because at first, it doesn't make sense what he says. The Sermon on the Mount does two things: It acknowledges the people's misery but also their dignity, and it announces that Jesus and the people can do something about it.

This church on the Mount of Beatitudes is believed to mark the place where Jesus delivered his Sermon on the Mount.

How to Improve

Then Jesus proceeds with the most difficult part of his program: how to make things better. His idea is to radically change the way that people behave toward one another. Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Pray for those who curse you. Give to everyone who begs from you, regardless of who is doing the begging.

His target audience is the people who have created this crisis: the tax collectors, the landowners, and the elites. Jesus is trying to create a grassroots movement to reform the Judaism of his time by going back to the three cardinal pillars of the Torah. Those are social justice, compassion for one another, and an abiding faith in God.

There is no mention whatsoever of sacrifice, the principal redemptive practice of Second Temple Judaism. In this, Jesus harks back to the prophets who were likely a major source of inspiration for him, such as Hosea, who said, "I desire mercy rather than sacrifice, and the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings."

The Messiah

Next, Jesus tackles an even more difficult topic, which was central to the teachings of John the Baptist: the coming of the Messiah. Jesus has a very different take on that.

Jesus says the Messiah is not going to come down with a mighty army because that has been tried twice in his lifetime, and each time, the rebellion was bloodily suppressed. Nor does it make sense to wait for some major catastrophe to wipe the Romans and the pagans off the land.

Instead, Jesus says it doesn't matter. If we want to change the way things are, we must begin with ourselves. The kingdom of God can only become a reality if we make it so—by changing the way we act toward one another, showing mercy and tolerance.

Here, too, Jesus reaches back to the prophets, notably Jeremiah, who said that if people changed their behavior and "do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow," or hurt innocent people, then "God would dwell in this land." The kingdom of God would have arrived.

These are words that Jesus himself could have spoken. Or, as he puts it in Matthew, the law is "justice and mercy and faith."

People Power

Jesus's manifesto was a call to all Jews to rise up and build the kingdom of God in their midst, irrespective of the Romans or the high priest or anyone else responsible for the decay of Israel. In short, he believed in people power.

He believed that by sowing the seeds of a new sense of social solidarity, grounded in faith, he could restore Israel to the nation it once was during the settlement in the Promised Land.

Jesus must have known that his message would resonate with the people he had worked with for so many years: the Galilean peasantry. He spoke their language, and he knew the toll of their daily suffering, so they were bound to respond to his words of hope and promise.

The Elites

The hard part was for Jesus to convince his other target group: the agents of corruption themselves—the soldiers, tax collectors, landowners, and other elites who continued to exploit the Galilean masses for their personal gain. As he confronts these groups, Jesus presents himself as an apocalyptic prophet in the image of John the Baptist.

Scholars often refer to this group of Gospel sayings as the Eschatological Discourse. By threatening God's imminent judgment, Jesus pressures these people to abandon their selfish accumulation of power and wealth, to share their bounty with the poor, and to embrace the justice of God's kingdom. In Mark, he issues a stern warning that the elites should stay alert because they "do not know when the master of the house will come."

To reinforce his message, Jesus often shares a meal with the elites who were most responsible for the abysmal conditions in Galilee. Jesus felt that it's best to persuade one's opponent by sitting down and breaking bread together. This horrified the Pharisees because no one knew if the meal was kosher and if the plates and cups were ritually pure. But Jesus truly believed this was the way to change things: by sitting down and sharing a meal.

The Role of Fishermen

In the book *In the Footsteps of Jesus*, Jean-Pierre Isbouts makes the argument that Jesus's ministry unfolded in three distinct phases. In the first phase, Jesus restricted his movements to places that could be reached on foot from Capernaum, such as Tabgha and Chorazim.

In the second phase, Jesus cast his net wider—to all the principal towns around the Sea of Galilee, including Gennesaret, Magdala, Bethsaida, and the region of the Gerasenes. To do that, though, he needed a boat, which fishermen had access to.

Since fishermen were usually poor, they would pool their resources and lease a boat together. With such a boat, Jesus could visit any of the towns along the shore and be back by nightfall.

And then, during the third phase, Jesus moved beyond his native territory of Galilee to visit the surrounding regions, which were primarily Gentile in nature. That signaled a major change in strategy.

Regardless, Jesus's expanding reach is the reason a fishermen's boat plays such an important role in the Gospels and why such a vessel is referenced at least 20 times. It allowed Jesus to exploit the unique geography of the Sea of Galilee and canvass an area that he would have never been able to do on foot.

10

The Mystery of the Miracles

Stories of Jesus's miracles appear in the oldest oral strata about Jesus—the earliest traditions that were collected and then edited by the evangelists. The canonical Gospels are replete with miracle accounts, and so are source documents such as Q and the Gospel of Thomas. About a third of the oldest Gospel, that of Mark, is devoted to miracle stories.

Skepticism

Given their abundance, stories of Jesus's miracles cannot be ignored. However, certain scholars, beginning with Immanuel Kant and Georg Hegel, have tried to discredit these accounts. They point out that Jesus lived in a society that, unlike ours, strongly believed in supernatural phenomena.

In the Hebrew Bible, extraordinary men, possessed by the spirit of the divine, were expected to be able to do extraordinary things. It validated their claim of prophecy. According to these critics, the evangelists grafted miracle accounts onto the words and deeds of Jesus so as to underscore the validity of Jesus as a prophet in his own right.

John Meier, author of a book series called *A Marginal Jew*, makes a careful distinction between the so-called healing miracles, exorcisms, and nature miracles in the Gospels. This last category includes such phenomena as the feeding of the 5,000, the stilling of a storm, the changing of water into wine, or Jesus's ability to walk on water.

Meier showed that unlike the healing stories, which have a predictable sequence, the nature miracles have no recognizable pattern. And these supernatural miracles typically occur only in one or two Gospels, whereas stories of Jesus's healing ability are reported across all four Gospels. Many scholars are therefore inclined to ascribe the nature miracles to the enthusiastic imagination of oral transmission and a desire to underscore the unprecedented nature of Jesus, lest the message somehow be lost on future generations.

Healing's Abundance

The most common element in the earliest strata about Jesus, such as Q, is his ability to heal. One of these strands is included in the Gospel of Luke, which recounts Jesus as saying, "The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear."

Many segments in Mark's Gospel are devoted to detailed and almost clinical reports of healings. These stories are so persistent that we cannot just dismiss them, as some scholars have tried to do.

Agriculture

Another factor is the fact that disease in Galilee had now become truly endemic. The accumulation of land by a small group of very wealthy landowners had changed the nature of agriculture in Galilee.

The region's agriculture previously saw peasants cultivating a broad spectrum of products, offering a varied diet. Now, however, it prioritized seeding the land for popular export products such as grains, olives, and grapes, which were in high demand throughout the Roman Empire. This had been the whole point of Herod's project to build a vast new harbor at Caesarea.

Jesus denounced the agricultural hoarding at the expense of others, for it left the peasantry with very little to eat. With what little they made as tenant farmers or day laborers, their daily diet was reduced to bread made from barley and perhaps a piece of salted fish if they were lucky.

Barley bread lacks the vitamins A, C, and D found in bread made from wheat, which is why it was primarily cultivated as animal fodder. Modern studies have shown that vitamin deficiency leads to chronic disease in children, including eye lesions and blindness, loss of calcium, and stunted growth.

Reduced vitamin intake would also have lowered people's resistance to some of the infectious diseases circulating in 1st-century Galilee. Such diseases are amply reported in the Gospels.

Jesus's Methods

Jesus's healing interventions tried to address these very severe conditions. His healings follow a consistent pattern. The first thing that Jesus does is tell the patient, "Your sins are forgiven." In ancient Israel, illness and disease were regarded as God's punishment for sins.

By saying, "Your sins are forgiven," Jesus tells the patient that they don't deserve to suffer and they have just as much dignity as anyone else. As modern science has shown, the brain plays a key role in recovery from disease. Removing the stigma of sin offers the patient the prospect of being accepted back into the community, which is a powerful motivation to heal.

The second part of Jesus's healing formula is the recurrent question, "Do you have faith?" This, too, carries an important psychological meaning. Jesus is asking whether the patient has faith in his ability to heal. In other words, the patient must have the sheer will to get better. That expectation is a key element of recovery.

But we cannot dismiss the healing stories as simply the result of the so-called placebo effect, as some scholars have done. An important factor here is the third element of Jesus's healing strategy: his touch. Jesus makes a point of touching or embracing the ill, thus rejecting the prevailing notion that diseased people were unclean. For someone bereft of human intimacy for years, the physical touch of Jesus must have been an electrifying experience.

The Role of Touch

Touch is the key to understanding Jesus's healing ability. For thousands of years, Eastern medicine has recognized the use of energy healing in dealing with chronic illness. Both the Indian chakra philosophy and the Chinese concept of qi identify certain energy concentrations in the human body.

These energy centers allegedly must be kept in balance for a person to stay healthy, giving us practices like acupuncture, shiatsu massage, and herbal medicine. But there are also people who claim to manipulate magnetic field phenomena in patients.

As Jean-Pierre Isbouts explains in the book *The Search for Heaven*, we are only now beginning to understand the pervasive influence of various forms of energy on our lives. The problem is that we cannot see energy; we can only experience its effects. Based on the reports in the Gospels, Isbouts concludes that there is a strong possibility that Jesus had the gift of electromagnetic healing.

For example, the Synoptic Gospels describe a situation when, unbeknownst to Jesus, a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for 12 years came up behind him and touched him. Her hemorrhaging stopped, but Luke also reports that Jesus was immediately aware "that power had gone from him."

Mary from Magdala

Another woman whom Jesus may have healed was called Mary from Magdala. As recounted in Luke, Jesus traveled through "cities and villages," accompanied by a group that included "Mary, called the Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out."

This may suggest that Mary actually suffered from epilepsy. Luke also says that she was one of the women "who were assisting them out of their means," signaling that they were financing the Jesus movement.

The archaeology of ancient Magdala supports that idea. The excavation team led by Marcela Zapata Meza has discovered scores of luxury objects, including domestic and ritual pottery, all roughly from the time of Jesus. It seems that Magdala was a very wealthy town.

That also explains why Mary Magdalene was able to go wherever Jesus went, even though she was, as far as we know, an unwed woman. In ancient Galilee, a young woman was typically accompanied by a parent or a relative whenever she left her home. But apparently, Mary enjoyed an unprecedented amount of freedom, possibly because she came from a wealthy family.

Ancient Magdala in modern times

Mary Magdalene in the Gnostic Gospels

Mary Magdalene plays a very important role in the other Gospels not included in the New Testament. Scholars refer to these documents as Gnostic Gospels; they were written by Christian communities that did not subscribe to Paul's idea that the crucifixion was the most important agency of Jesus's ministry. Instead, they focused on Jesus's teachings and believed that Jesus preached a form of spiritual surrender which ultimately led to a secret knowledge, or *gnosis* in Greek, of the divine within oneself.

Many of these groups revered Mary Magdalene as one of Jesus's most important apostles precisely because she was his confidante, his loyal companion, and possibly his lover. Seen from a Jewish perspective, there was nothing wrong with that. Most prophets in the Hebrew Bible were either married or known to have had relations with a woman.

Elaine Pagels, a leading expert on Gnostic Christianity, believes that Mary Magdalene came to exemplify the tensions between early Christians and Gnostic Christians. In many Gnostic communities, women worked as teachers, as healers, and even as priests—roles they did not always enjoy in the early church.

To discredit these Gnostic groups, the church began to cast Mary Magdalene in a negative light. There is no evidence that she lived a sinful life, but by the 3rd century she had become assimilated with the unnamed woman in Luke who is "a sinner" and who bathes Jesus's feet with her tears. It was not until 1969 that Pope Paul VI explicitly separated the figure of Mary Magdalene from the "sinful woman" character in the Gospels.

Regardless, Mary Magdalene was a key figure in the Gospel drama. That is particularly true given the key role she was to play after the crucifixion.

11

The Conspiracy against Jesus

Was there a conspiracy against Jesus? This is a question of great interest to the oldest Gospel, that of Mark. It claims that as the ministry unfolded, growing opposition rose from the elites of the land. In fact, the Gospel of Mark suggests that the arrest and execution of Jesus was the result of a carefully laid conspiracy.

Opposing Forces

The core of the anti-Jesus opposition, says Mark, were the Sadducees, the Pharisees, and the scribes. However, it is important to remember that Mark wrote in Rome for a Roman audience, and it would have been very difficult for him to make the Romans—including their prefect, Pontius Pilate—the villains of the story, even though they clearly were.

Instead, Mark's Gospel develops the thread of a grand conspiracy to destroy Jesus's ministry. It seems that every prominent Jew is involved in this plot: the Sadducees, the Pharisees, the scribes, and even Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee.

With all due respect to Mark, this is unlikely because those four were deeply opposed to one another. To argue that these mutual enemies were somehow in collusion to destroy a simple rabbi from Galilee is historically difficult to defend. To explain that, it's helpful to look at who each of these four really were.

The Sadducees and Pharisees

The Sadducees were the aristocracy of Judea, a deeply conservative community of priests who controlled operations at the temple. Back in the 6th century BC, the Persian king Cyrus the Great had given Judea—or Yehud, as it was called then—a large measure of autonomy to be governed by priests.

For several centuries now, Judea had in fact been ruled by a theocracy. Originally, their power was split between the Sadducees and the Pharisees. But after the Maccabean revolt, the Sadducees struck a deal with the Hasmonean kings. The deal meant the Sadducees would not object to these kings taking the position of high priest if the Sadducees were granted more political power at the expense of the Pharisees.

This did not sit well with their principal opposition, the Pharisees. They were a brotherhood of both priests and laymen, such as Joseph of Arimathea. The Pharisees opposed the Hasmonean rulers' fondness for Greek culture and objected to the Sadducee control of the temple.

In response, they developed a different approach to Judaism. Whereas the Sadducees emphasized the sacrificial cult as the only redemptive activity in Jewish life, the Pharisees felt that men and women should please God in everything they did, particularly when it came to matters of purity.

The Pharisees were trying to shift the emphasis from the temple to the home. In effect, they were trying to give every man and woman an opportunity to serve and worship God on their own terms, without the intervention of the priesthood. That was a very radical idea, and in many ways, this explains why the Pharisees were the only group to survive the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 AD.

Whereas the Sadducees considered the Torah a closed book, the Pharisees continued to debate and interpret the application of scripture to everyday life. Among others, the Pharisees embraced the Greek idea of the immortality of the soul—an idea that also appears in the teachings of Jesus.

Socially, too, the Pharisees were very different from the wealthy Sadducee aristocracy. In a sense, they were a professional middle class of teachers, tradesmen, and craftsmen, and so on. For them, the idea of debating and adapting the Torah to the changing conditions of everyday life was the very essence of being a Pharisee.

The Scribes

The so-called scribes could include anyone from a simple secretary to a notary, or even a trained lawyer who catered to the needs of the illiterate peasantry by preparing legal documents, including wedding contracts, land deeds, and wills. Given that observant Jews in Galilee followed the tenets of the Torah, many scribes were therefore considered experts in the application of that law.

Mark, however, often groups the scribes together with the Pharisees and the Sadducees, even though these people had very little in common. We should remember that Mark did not live in Galilee but most likely in Rome itself, and he was writing based on the oral traditions about Jesus that had already been circulating for several decades.

Herod Antipas

That leaves Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee. According to Mark, Herod was well aware that Jesus had become quite famous. He asked his advisors who Jesus was. They gave answers such as "John the baptizer has been raised from the dead" or "It is a prophet." According to Mark, on hearing the answers, Herod said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised."

The synagogue of Chorazim, one of the three towns of Jesus's original "ministry triangle" in Galilee

Was Jesus a Threat?

Were Jesus's teachings truly a threat to the elites of his time? Jesus certainly denounced those who hoard their wealth, but that was not new; prophets such as Amos and Hosea had done the same thing. The same was true for the promise of a kingdom of God, as prophets had talked about that for centuries. Performing miraculous deeds was not a threat to the established order, either. Josephus tells us of several other men during this time who claimed to perform miracles or magic.

But the coming of the Messiah was another matter. That idea had clear political implications, which is precisely why John the Baptist had been killed. According to Josephus, Antipas truly believed that John could incite a rebellion.

That is why Jesus was careful never to call himself the Messiah, at least not in public. He knew the political pitfalls of that title. And that was likely why he often couched his teachings in the form of parables, or allegorical stories, the meaning of which was not always clear to his followers. Generally, the parables were meant to illustrate that the kingdom of God should spring up spontaneously as long as the people were receptive to the ideas and ready to put them into action.

The Good Samaritan

The most famous parable is that of the Good Samaritan, in which Jesus tackled the racial prejudice of his time. Samaritans, the people of Samaria, were believed to have mixed blood because of the Babylonian settlement in their region, and they were treated with disdain by most Jews.

The parable tells the tale of a man traveling to Jericho from Jerusalem. Robbers attack him and leave him wounded by the road. A priest and a Levite pass the man without helping, but a Samaritan comes upon him and does help.

This was dangerous talk, which is why some scholars have called this and other parables subversive speech. Jesus denounced racial discrimination, and he also exposed the priests and the Levites as hypocrites who ignored the Torah and its laws of compassion. John the Baptist had done something very similar, but Jesus was more subtle—though that doesn't take away the dangerous tenor of the story. Still, much of this was completely lost on the apostles.

The Lord's Prayer

Then Jesus decided on a different tack. He taught his followers a simple prayer of seven lines.

> Our Father, hallowed be your name. Your Kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And do not bring us to the test.

This is a translation into English, but in its original Aramaic, the prayer is even simpler and easier to memorize. Christians throughout the world know this prayer; many recite it every Sunday. Despite the words' simplicity, though, they are loaded with meaning.

Referring to God as Father was shocking in itself, for in Judaism the name of God plays a unique role. Unlike other ancient religions, Judaism did not allow anyone to make an image of God, either in painting or in sculpture. That gave the name by which people prayed to God a very special meaning, for it was only through this form of address that believers could turn their mind to the divine.

In the Torah, God is referred to by two names: the four-letter construct known as *YHWH* or the title *El* and its plural, *Elohim*, to stress the majesty of God. Some two centuries before Jesus, the name *Adonai* became the accepted form; in English, this is usually translated as "the Lord," a custom that would be continued in the Gospels. Finally, in the 1st century, another form of address emerged: *Ha-Shem*, meaning "the Name"—another indirect term that is as mysterious as God itself.

But Jesus dared to address God as *Abba*—as Father. In doing so, Jesus tries to eliminate the great distance between God and human beings.

The line "Your kingdom come" brings up the idea that we could build the kingdom of God on earth, which was the central focus of Jesus's teachings. "Your kingdom come" is not an appeal for political liberation but a pledge, an article of faith. To be a disciple of Jesus, the prayer says, one must believe in the possibility of the kingdom of God as a society based on faith, love, and social justice.

The line "Give us today our daily bread" is relevant to how in Jesus's time, people were reduced to eating bread made from barley, grown as animal feed. It lacked the necessary vitamins and calories, which is why so many children in Galilee grew up stunted, blind, or with deformities. The line is saying that bread—real bread made from wheat—is an essential condition of human health and dignity. The Gospels are full of stories of Jesus breaking bread with others, including the Pharisees, who also cultivated the fellowship of the meal.

The line "And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors" differs in Matthew and in Luke, which has led to several interpretations. Matthew refers to "sins," but Luke refers to "debts," perhaps because the Aramaic word *ḥovenan* can mean both "debts" and "sins."

Most Christian denominations follow Matthew in interpreting it as meaning "sins" or "trespasses." In this reading, the line means that we are all sinners, but God is ready to forgive us. In the kingdom of God, that requires reciprocity. In other words, if we expect God to be merciful toward us, then we have the moral duty to extend that same mercy and forgiveness to others.

The final line, "And do not lead us to the test," is hotly debated in scholarly circles. One view interprets the word *test* as the apocalyptic clash, described in the Dead Sea Scrolls, that would herald the coming of the Messiah. Revelation 3:10 suggests something very similar.

But this may not be the case. For Jesus, the kingdom was a matter of the heart: a perfect state of faith and goodwill toward one another. That is why the Aramaic *lenisyôn*, which would be translated into Greek as *peirasmos*, does not necessarily mean "test" but "temptation"—the temptation of Satan, of evil, which is ever present in our world.

12

The Road to Jerusalem

In the first phase of his ministry, Jesus concentrated on places within walking distance from Capernaum, and in the second phase, he widened his reach to places along the Sea of Galilee by using the boat of his fishermen. All along, he had insisted that his teachings were intended for the lost sheep of Israel only. But eventually, people were coming from all over the region, including Gentiles from Tyre and Sidon, in Phoenicia. Like any other preacher of his time, Jesus must have been amazed by this development.

A Wider Net

In time, Jesus decided to cast his net even wider. If he could reach the hearts and minds of Gentiles, then he should go and seek them out, just as he had done with Jewish villages in Galilee. In this third phase, Jesus left the familiar boundaries of his native Galilee and traveled to the regions around the principal cities of Phoenicia and the Decapolis, including Tyre, Sidon, and Gerasa.

Jesus was on a reconnaissance mission of sorts. Mark says that "he did not want anyone to know he was there." That gambit failed, however, when he came to the region of Tyre and this occurred:

> A woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet.

For Jesus, this posed a dilemma. His healing ability was always designed for Jews, not for Gentiles, for how could a Gentile woman summon the necessary faith to make the healing work? He dismissed her, saying, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

Those were harsh words. But the mother had a quick comeback, saying, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Her answer impressed Jesus so much that her daughter was healed. It also, most importantly, changed his idea about the ability of Gentiles to believe in the kingdom.

Banyas

In time, Jesus traveled to what was perhaps the most pagan place in the north of the country: the town of Banyas, which would later become known as Caesarea Philippi. Banyas was built around a mountain spring that served as the cult center for the Greek god Pan.

Here, Jesus decided to pause and reflect on his experiences, to take stock of his ministry. What had he accomplished during this time? Had the people taken his vision of the kingdom of God to heart? Had the tax collectors and the landowners lessened the burden on the peasants and shared their wealth?

Gerasa's entrance gate

Gerasa

Ancient Tyre no longer exists. But another city, Gerasa, now called Jarash, has been remarkably preserved, and here we can get an impression of what it was like for Jesus to travel to Gentile lands that were more sophisticated than rural Galilee. Gerasa was one of the urban areas of the Decapolis, a commercial alliance of 10 major cities. At the heart of Gerasa was a stunning Roman forum. However, the Gospels do not tell us whether Jesus actually visited the city, merely that he traveled through the region of Gerasa. Nevertheless, the encounter with Gentile culture must have struck him deeply.

In Banyas, Jesus turned to his apostles and asked, "Who do people say that I am?" The apostles were taken aback and gave answers like "John the Baptist" or a prophet. Jesus then asked, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter spoke up and said, "You are the Messiah."

These were words that Jesus longed to hear, but at the same time, he knew of the danger of the authorities getting wind of it. And so, says Mark, Jesus ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

But the authorities were already aware of what Jesus was doing, as shown by Herod Antipas's launching of an investigation. This explains why in the Synoptic Gospels—whose agenda is clearly to present Jesus as the Messiah—Jesus himself is ambivalent about the title.

The Son of Man

Still, the question remains: How did Jesus see himself? The answer is not clear. Jesus could never bring himself to state unequivocally, "Look here, I am the son of God." This was probably a source of some frustration to the evangelists as well as to early Christian communities, particularly in the Greco-Roman world, for whom Jesus's divinity was an article of faith.

There is no question that Jesus felt a deep and intimate bond with God as his father, but at that time, the idea of sonship was bound up in the Jewish expectations of the Messiah, a descendant of David. Instead, Jesus referred to himself as the Son of Man. In all of the four canonical Gospels, the term *Son of Man* appears more than 80 times. That implies Jesus chose the title deliberately. Moreover, it's a title that is only used by Jesus himself—never by those around him.

As for what the term *Son of Man* means, the book of Daniel, written around the 2nd century BC, uses the title in a potentially revealing way. In one of his visions, Daniel saw

> one like the Son of Man coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him.

This is a very important verse because Jesus cites it during his indictment in the house of the high priest Caiaphas. It stands to reason that it is Daniel's Son of Man that Jesus had in mind to describe himself. The character is a messenger—an angelic figure who is carried on clouds of heaven to the presence of God.

With Israel cleansed of foreign invaders, Daniel's vision welcomes the Son of Man as the figure to whom God will give "dominion and glory and kingship." In other words, calling himself Son of Man was a form of code—a code that would be meaningless to the Herodians or the Romans but that would be instantly recognizable by observant Jews who knew their scripture.

In sum, Jesus saw himself as the figure foretold in Daniel's prophecy—as the Son of Man whom God had designated to restore the Lord's dominion over Israel in the form of the kingdom of God. The Gospels seem to agree. In one passage known as the synoptic apocalypse, Jesus told his disciples that "they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory."

After Banyas

From Banyas, Jesus and his disciples eventually made their way back to the Galilee of Herod Antipas. But Jesus was taken aback by what he found after this long journey: Nothing had changed. The tax collectors and the landowners were still extorting the peasants. The homeless hadn't found any shelter. The chronically ill were still ostracized from their villages.

Jesus became angry. After his countless sermons and endless healings, he had reached a tipping point. As a result, Jesus lashed out at the places where he had begun his ministry, condemning Chorazim and Bethsaida. He went so far as to say that the Gentiles that he had just visited had more faith than the Jews of Galilee.

At this moment, Jesus likely decided on a new and very different strategy. Once again, he was inspired by the great prophets of the Hebrew Bible, such as Amos and Jeremiah.

Like Amos before him, Jeremiah had heaped scorn on wealthy landowners and denounced those who "amass wealth unjustly." And by forsaking social justice and true faith, Jeremiah said, the people of Israel had violated covenant law. But Jeremiah, too, had experienced a moment of deep despair. God then spurred the prophet to "stand at the gate of the Lord's house" and to preach.

Jesus decided to do the same. He, too, would go down to Jerusalem and stand at the gate of the Lord's house: the temple. And there, in the heart of Israel, he would preach just as Jeremiah had preached. We know that because shortly thereafter, standing in the temple, Jesus would quote from Jeremiah.

A Dangerous Plan

Jesus's plan was fraught with danger. Soon it would be Passover, when thousands of Jews would converge on the Holy City to perform their ritual sacrifice. It also meant that the Roman forces in the city would be on high alert. After all, the massacre perpetrated by Pilate was still fresh on everyone's mind. The disciples had strong misgivings, according to Mark.

Nevertheless, per Matthew and John, they traveled to Judea using the southern route along the Jordan Rift Valley, which Jesus had previously used to reach the camp of John the Baptist. It crossed past the Gentile city of Scythopolis and into the dry, barren landscape of the Jordan Valley. They then passed through Jericho, where Jesus spotted a tax collector named Zacchaeus. Surprisingly, Zacchaeus embraced the kingdom of God with all his heart.

That excited the apostles. It seemed that people in Judea would be more receptive to Jesus's teachings than those in Galilee. Eventually they arrived in Jerusalem via the village of Bethany, on the Mount of Olives.

In Jerusalem

On seeing the Temple of Jerusalem, the apostles were stunned by its splendor. All around the forecourt, as far as they could see, ran a double colonnade of Corinthian columns, carved of the purest marble. But Jesus was taken aback. He had imagined a forecourt full of worshippers who would be ready, even eager, to hear him speak. Instead, he saw that the forecourt had been changed into a bazaar—a chaotic open-air mall.

To be fair to the high priest Caiaphas, there was a reason why this market had been brought inside the temple walls. It was to streamline the process of people obtaining sacrificial lambs to offer to the priests for Passover.

In practice, the whole venture led to a chaotic market. Jesus was devastated. This was supposed to be the moment when he would make his dramatic appeal to the nation, telling all of Israel, gathered in the Temple of Jerusalem, to join him in building the kingdom of God.

Instead, he found himself surrounded by a seething mass of frantic pilgrims. The moment was slipping away, and a great anger welled up inside him. Per Mark, Jesus "began to drive out" people taking part in the marketplace, and he screamed at the chief priests that

> "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations. But you have made it a den of thieves."

Jesus was quoting from Jeremiah's temple sermon, but that was probably lost on the chief priests. Their feelings were still raw from the great aqueduct affair, when Caiaphas and Pilate had been accused of stealing from the temple treasury.

And this type of disturbance was exactly what the Roman troops were trying to prevent, which is why the Antonia Fortress had towers overlooking the temple forecourt and why Pontius Pilate himself had traveled to Jerusalem. Jesus's action sealed his fate. Before long, the warrant went out for his arrest.

13

The Arrest and Trial

Christians celebrate the Last Supper as the moment when Jesus began the tradition of the Eucharist, the consecration of bread and wine, based on the Greek word *eucharistia*, meaning "thanksgiving." This chapter begins with the Last Supper and moves on to Jesus's arrest and trial.

The Last Supper

The Gospels tell us that Jesus sent out two of his disciples to look for a room where they could have the Passover meal, which suggests that they had not originally planned to have it in the city. They were staying with Mary and Martha in Bethany, who probably had been cooking all day in the expectation of hosting the meal for Jesus and his followers. Jesus may have decided it was not safe for them to venture out of the city in daylight while the temple guards were still looking for them.

After the meal, under the cloak of darkness, Jesus and his followers slipped out of the city and moved to the Mount of Olives. Jesus wanted to pray, and here they could lose themselves among the crowds of pilgrims who were camping out on the hill. Most pilgrims couldn't afford to stay in the city, given the high prices charged by the inns and the hostels, so they camped.

That is why Judas, one of the apostles, had been approached to identify Jesus. Judas was different from the other apostles because he was from Judea rather than Galilee, and only he could identify Jesus among the masses on the Mount of Olives. Jesus obviously trusted him because he had given Judas control of their purse. That's why his betrayal is so shocking.

The authorities caught up with Jesus in an area used for oil pressing, called *gat-shemanim*. The Bible calls it Gethsemane. There, Jesus was arrested.

Post-Arrest Proceedings

There was an established procedure for people accused of blasphemy, of disturbing the peace of the temple, which Jesus had done. That procedure is spelled out in the Mishnah and in the Acts of the Apostles, the book that follows the four Gospels in the New Testament. The accused would be locked up in the temple stockade until such time as a hearing could be scheduled by the full quorum of the Sanhedrin, the great Jewish council.

It seems likely that the prospect of facing the Sanhedrin and having an opportunity to present his kingdom ideology would not have fazed the historical Jesus in the least. In fact, he may have welcomed it; it's why he came to Jerusalem, and his calm demeanor during the arrest certainly seems to indicate as much.

However, the high priest Caiaphas knew that he could not control what the full Sanhedrin might do if Jesus were allowed to present his case. Therefore, Caiaphas decided that this had to be avoided at all costs. He was still furious over Jesus's accusation that he, the high priest, had made the temple a "den of thieves," so soon after the aqueduct affair.

Like Antipas before him, Caiaphas could not take the risk that this Jesus would initiate a revolt. He resolved to head the danger off by holding the indictment in his own home, in front of a group of hand-picked Sadducees who would do his bidding, so that he would be guaranteed of the outcome. If it's true that all of this happened during Passover, as the Gospels tell us, then that would have worked in his favor, for no full meeting of the Sanhedrin could have been convened during this holy festival.

Jesus versus Caiaphas

The description of everything that happens from this point on is based on one source, and that is the Gospel of Mark. The other evangelists merely follow his example, while adding some dialogue here and there.

Even in a meeting entirely controlled by the high priest, Jesus would have stood his ground. He knew that prophets like his great model, Jeremiah, had always run the gauntlet in Israel, walking a fine line between communicating the will of the Lord and pacifying the ruling powers.

Up to this point, there was absolutely no reason for Jesus to think that a death sentence was inevitable. According to the Mishnah, the Sanhedrin was known for its *middath r'ahzamim*, its "quality of mercy." Perhaps Jesus could expect a prison sentence, but this would be an acceptable price to pay if, by doing so, he could secure a hearing in front of the religious leadership of the nation.

But that's not what happened. With only a small group of Caiaphas's hand-picked chief priests, there was no way he could get a fair hearing. Jesus did what anyone would have done in his position: He largely stayed silent, lest he dignify these proceedings. Per Mark, "Many gave false testimony against him, and their testimony did not agree." Then, eventually, "the high priest stood up" and demanded of Jesus, "Have you no answer? What is it that they testify against you?" Still, Jesus was silent.

Then, the high priest, played his last card, asking, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?"

As a pious Sadducee, Caiaphas could not pronounce the word *God* but used the euphemism of *Blessed One*. Of course, that was a question that Jesus could not ignore. He pulled himself up and replied, "I am." And then he went on to quote the famous passage from Daniel that had inspired him throughout his ministry:

> "You will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven."

Jesus had just spoken the words that Caiaphas wanted to hear. The high priest faced a problem: According to the Mishnah, only the full quorum of all 71 members of the Sanhedrin could condemn a man to death. But the high priest didn't have that quorum; he only had a small group of Sadducees to back him up.

The only other authorities who could sentence a man to death were the Romans, but the Romans had given the Sanhedrin full autonomy in domestic and religious matters. They weren't interested in getting involved in religious disputes. Their interest was in keeping the peace and suppressing any hint of sedition or insurrection.

The challenge for Caiaphas, therefore, was to try to move the case of Jesus from the religious into the political domain. And Jesus had just spoken the words that would allow him to do so. A man "seated at the right hand of the Power, coming with the clouds of heaven" sounded very much like a man plotting the political overthrow of the Roman occupation. Thus, Caiaphas was able to refer the matter of Jesus of Nazareth to Roman jurisdiction.

It so happened that the highest-ranking Roman official in Judea, the prefect Pontius Pilate, was in town. It was therefore he who would now sit in judgment of Jesus.

Jesus's Hearing before Pontius Pilate

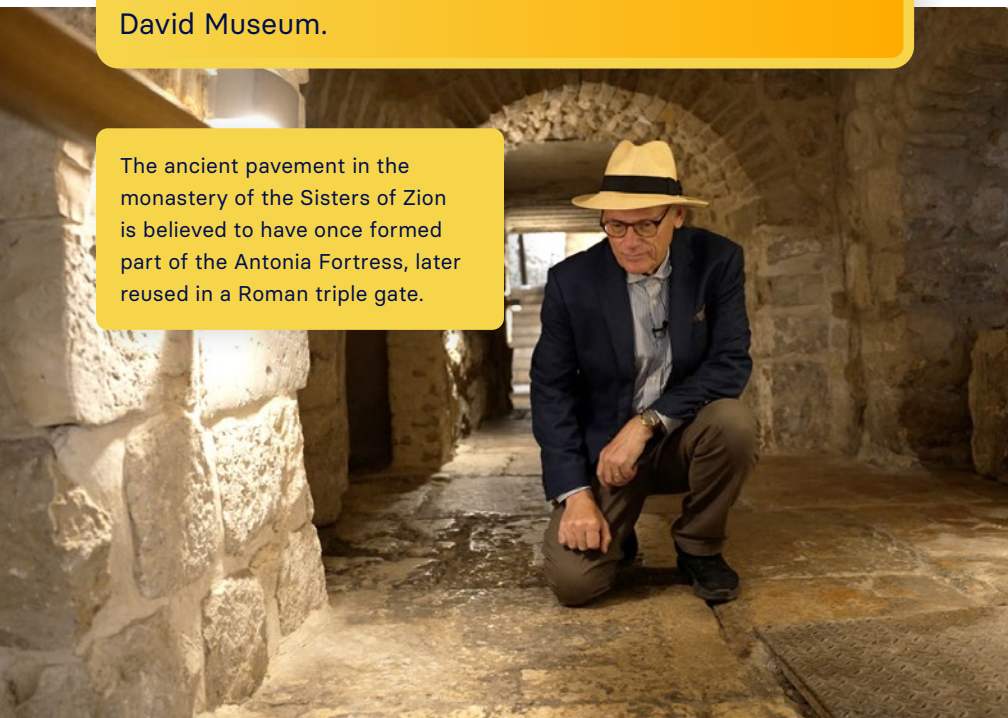
Jesus was not a Roman citizen but a colonial subject. That is why he could not claim a full Roman trial, as Paul was later able to do, because Paul was in fact a Roman citizen. Colonials like Jesus were judged according to a much more arbitrary law: the *ius gentium*, or "law for foreign nationals," which gave the local magistrate wide latitude in judging the offender as he saw fit. That is why the brief hearing described in the Gospel of Mark is probably closer to the truth than the trial described in the other Gospels.

According to Mark, Jesus was ushered before Pilate. The charge was read, indicating Jesus was accused of claiming to be the Messiah, the king of the Jews. Jesus's response, "You say so," was noted for the record. Pilate then asked if Jesus wanted to say something in his defense, but Jesus remained quiet. He understood that this hearing was a mere formality. Anyone accused of trying to become the king of the Jews was by definition a rebel. By Roman custom, that crime merited only one punishment: crucifixion.

The Site of the Pilate Hearing

For a long time, scholars have debated where the Pilate hearing could have taken place. One argument places it in the Antonia Fortress, the military barracks overlooking the temple.

Many other scholars believe that Pilate was staying in Herod's old palace, given that it was far more luxurious, with rooms for 100 guests and even a large swimming pool. For a long time, the location of this palace was a mystery, until Israeli archaeologist Amit Re'em announced in 2015 that he had located the remains of this palatial complex during the excavation of an old Ottoman building, the Kishle, right next to the Tower of David Museum.



The ancient pavement in the monastery of the Sisters of Zion is believed to have once formed part of the Antonia Fortress, later reused in a Roman triple gate.

Mark's Addition

Mark then added something unusual to the story of the Pilate hearing. Because he most likely wrote in Rome for Roman followers, it would have been very difficult for him to put the blame for the death of his hero on the Roman authorities. The question, therefore, was who should take the blame for Jesus's murder. The answer was the chief priests of the temple.

That's why Mark added a scene in which Pilate offers the crowd attending the hearing a choice between releasing Jesus and releasing a notorious criminal called Barabbas. According to Mark, "The chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas." Pilate then asked what he should do with Jesus, to which the crowd replied by shouting, "Crucify him!"

However, there is no evidence of any amnesty during Passover—not in Roman records, nor in the Mishnah, nor in the works of Josephus, who would have liked to include such a show of mercy to underscore the essentially benign character of Roman rule. The Romans did not practice democracy in the colonies, and they were not about to give the rabble a say in how they maintained law and order.

They certainly would not have released a career criminal like Barabbas on the eve of the most volatile festival of the year. That is why the answer to the question of who killed Jesus is simple: the Roman prefect Pontius Pilate.

The Road of Sorrows

Pilgrims refer to the route of Jesus's Passion as the Via Dolorosa, the "Road of Sorrows." According to the tradition, it begins at St. Stephen's Gate and runs through the warren of the Old City to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Along the route are plaques that mark the 14 stations of the cross, each marking a spot in the Passion story. But the question is: Is this truly the road that Jesus walked to the place of his execution?

Unfortunately, the answer is no. The Jerusalem that Jesus knew was thoroughly destroyed by the Roman army after the Second Jewish Revolt, led by Bar Kokhba, around 135 AD. Much of what we see in the Old City today is, in fact, the Roman city of Aelia Capitolina, built on the ruins of Jerusalem in the 2nd century. That city was further expanded during the Mamluk period, when Jerusalem was one of the foremost cities of the Muslim empire.

Most paintings show Jesus carrying his cross. But that image is not accurate, either. Wood was expensive, so the Romans had set up permanent upright stakes in an execution area known as Skull Hill, or Golgotha in Aramaic. Jesus, like other condemned men, only carried the crossbeam, known as a *patibulum*. Carrying the entire cross would have been beyond the strength of any man. But the crossbeam was still heavy—at least 75 pounds, by some estimates.

Eventually, Jesus arrived at the place of execution. Today, that place is marked by the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. For a long time, though, some scholars believed it could have happened elsewhere.

14

The Jesus Movement in Crisis

Jesus's execution by crucifixion was a gruesome procedure, involving physical pain and insulting elements, such as the Romans' stripping of Jesus. This chapter opens amidst Jesus's crucifixion before looking at the topic of where it happened.

The Crucifixion

Mark tells us that far into the crucifixion process, Jesus cried out with all his might: "*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?*" Here, as in other places, the Gospel of Mark may be using the original Aramaic of the Cross Gospel, the Passion tradition underlying his story. A translation is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" This signals that the historical Jesus likely never imagined that going to Jerusalem would end like this.

The evangelists portray it differently. Under influence of the Pauline kerygma, the doctrine that says that the purpose of Jesus's life was to die on the cross to redeem humankind, they have Jesus predict his fate.

From a purely historical perspective, however, that was certainly not a given. Scores of prophets in the Hebrew Bible had predicted that the temple would be destroyed, or that the reign of God was coming, and none of them had ever been put to death for saying so.

A Group Execution

Mark tells us that Jesus was executed with at least two other condemned men. That may indicate that the execution had been scheduled in advance. For Pontius Pilate, having so many Jewish pilgrims in one place for Passover was a perfect opportunity to remind everyone who was in charge. Jesus happened to be in the wrong spot at the wrong time.

While the Sadducees may not have accepted the books of the prophets as divinely inspired scripture, the Pharisees most certainly did. Not even the prophet Jeremiah had been put to death after the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar conquered Jerusalem in 587 BC. Therefore, it seems natural that Jesus would experience a heartbreaking moment of despair.

Jesus's Death

Eventually, the exhausted Jesus died of asphyxiation. Crucifixion makes it difficult for a person to breathe unless they pull themselves up, and eventually, fatigue makes that impossible.

Under normal circumstances, the bodies of the executed would have been buried in a potter's field in unmarked graves. But one man wanted to spare Jesus this last indignity, and here we see more evidence that many Pharisees admired and supported Jesus's ministry. The man who would petition Pilate to release the body of Jesus was Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the Sanhedrin. According to John's Gospel, it was another Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin, Nicodemus, who brought the ointments and spices to anoint the body.

Mary Magdalene and other women would have used myrrh and frankincense to prepare the body for burial. But as they were doing so, time ran out. It was sundown, the beginning of Sabbath. Mary and the other women would need to return to complete the burial rites.

The Garden Tomb

Where did Jesus's crucifixion take place? Some people believe it was in a location called the Garden Tomb. It was located outside Jerusalem's city walls, as Roman execution sites had to be.

The Garden Tomb

For a long time, it was thought that this dated from the 1st century AD or the 1st century BC. But some recent research has indicated that this tomb is much older, possibly going back to the Hasmonean era.

While the Garden Tomb is no longer considered the tomb of Jesus, it does offer an excellent model of a Jewish tomb from the Second Temple Period.

The Church of the Holy Sepulchre

The official site of Jesus's crucifixion and tomb is the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. It has the greatest claim on authenticity because a church was built here as early as the 4th century AD, on top of a temple of Venus built by Emperor Hadrian.

This early church was destroyed and rebuilt several times. The version standing today is a 12th-century church built by the crusaders during their brief 90-year control of Jerusalem.

After the Muslim conqueror Saladin retook Jerusalem in 1187, he did not destroy the church but ordered that one of the two doors be bricked up to minimize its access. It has remained so to this day.

Inside, the church complex covers the site of the crucifixion on Golgotha hill, which is still accessible through a narrow stairway, and Jesus's tomb, covered by an impressive rotunda. The tomb structure itself, known as the aedicula, dates from the 19th century.

Some Western Christians have difficulty meditating on the Passion of Christ in a church that is often crowded. And six different Christian denominations lay claim to the site, which has sometimes led to conflict.

That is why so many Christians tend to return to the Garden Tomb. Historically, it may not be the proper place, but it certainly has peace and serenity that is conducive to meditation and prayer.

The Days after the Crucifixion

According to the Talmud, a collection of rabbinic teachings, for three days after death, the soul keeps returning to the grave. That is why relatives of the deceased would visit the tomb on the third day after their passing to ensure that the soul had truly departed and the person was truly dead.

In Jesus's case, Friday was the first day, and Saturday, the Sabbath, was the second day. Thus, on Sunday, the third day, Jesus's faithful disciple Mary Magdalene came to the tomb 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, leading to this exchange:

> Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni [Teacher]!" Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father."

The resurrection of Jesus cannot be determined with historical means. It is a leap of faith. A relevant phrase used by some Christians is "Jesus is risen." This means that for believers, the resurrection is not a thing of the past but of the present. Jesus is a living presence in their hearts.

A Crisis Begins

After his crucifixion, the fact that Jesus was no longer at the center of his following threw his movement into crisis. Subsequent events are described in the book of the Acts of the Apostles, which was most likely written by the evangelist Luke between the mid-70s and the mid-80s of the 1st century.

The book tells us that the disciples continued to preach and gain followers, which surprised Caiaphas and the Sadducees. They thought that by killing Jesus, they had also eliminated his movement.

The idea that Jesus had been resurrected from the dead was a further provocation, because the Sadducees, unlike the Pharisees, rejected the immortality of the soul, let alone the possibility of a physical resurrection. Thus, Peter and the other apostles were repeatedly arrested, thrown in prison, and interrogated by Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin.

Fragmentation, Persecution, and Ideological Pressure

Eventually, the movement split into various factions. One of these was a group of Jews in Jerusalem that the book of Acts calls the Hellenists, most likely Jews from Egypt and other areas who spoke Greek. Tensions rose when these followers claimed that the widows in their group did not receive their fair share of food from the apostolic community.

Another source of contention was that the apostles continued to worship at the temple, whereas these Greek followers did not have much regard for temple ritual. Their liturgical life revolved around the synagogue. One of these men, known as Stephen, claimed aloud that "the Most High does not dwell in houses made with human hands." A local mob became so angry that they dragged him off and stoned him.

There then occurred an all-out persecution of the Jesus movement, led in part by a man from Tarsus called Saul. As a result, many followers scattered and settled in the far corners of Judea and beyond.

The movement was under ideological pressure as well. How could they convince fellow Jews that Jesus was the Messiah? He had not liberated the land from foreign occupation and instead had been crucified as a common criminal. It would take an intellectual to tackle that difficult question, and indeed, Saul—later known as Paul—would eventually be that man.

Ostracization and Preservation

In the meantime, the original Jewish Jesus movement began to crack. As the century wore on, Jews who embraced the teachings of Jesus were ostracized from their synagogues and community life.

That development inspired the so-called Eschatological Discourse in the Gospels—certain prophecies attributed to Jesus that were probably written by the evangelists, who may have experienced prejudice in their own communities. According to this segment, Jesus told his apostles on the Mount of Olives:

> "As for yourselves, beware; for they will hand you over to councils; and you will be beaten in synagogues; and you will stand before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them."

The Jesus movement in Judea itself came under assault, too. James, the brother of Jesus and the leader of the Jerusalem Church, was put to death in 62 AD. The outbreak of the First Jewish Revolt in 66 AD marginalized the movement even further. According to the church historian Eusebius, the Christian community of Jerusalem found refuge in the city of Pella, in today's Jordan near its border with Syria.

In this town, the core group of Jewish followers lived as the last outpost of the original movement. If word of Jesus had remained in Roman Palestine, Jesus would have been lost to history.

However, by then, word of Jesus's life and deeds had spread from Judea to the far corners of the Roman Empire, including Greece and Asia Minor—today's Turkey. According to the book of Acts, it was primarily due to the evangelizing efforts of Paul that Jesus was introduced to the people of the Roman Empire.

The fact that Paul, the man who had begun by persecuting the Jesus movement, now became a leading protagonist of that movement had several consequences. On the one hand, Paul was a tireless preacher who traveled extensively.

On the other hand, Paul had never met Jesus. He had never been witness to Jesus's incredibly powerful sermons or seen his healings with his own eyes. And after his conversion on the road to Damascus, he avoided contact with most of the apostles. Instead, he decided to go his own way, with far-reaching consequences for the ministry of the historical Jesus.

15

The Rise of Christianity

Saul, or Sha'ul in Hebrew, was born in the city of Tarsus in Cilicia, which meant that he was a Roman citizen. He was educated by Pharisees and became worldly, fluent in Greek, and steeped in scripture and Greek philosophy and ethics. He was present in Jerusalem as a mob stoned Stephen, the Greek disciple who had been accused of blasphemy. The killing launched an all-out persecution that forced Jesus's apostles to scatter. Saul decided to boost his career by pursuing the remaining disciples of Jesus. But after Saul left for Damascus, where a number of followers had fled, he had a major change of heart.

Saul's Conversion and Early Efforts

Saul experienced a conversion and tried to join the very following that he had worked so hard to eradicate. But most of the apostles avoided him; they couldn't believe that their sworn enemy had suddenly turned into a friend.

Saul eventually embarked on the first of three major international campaigns to convert the people of Asia Minor and Greece. On his first journey, he traveled to Cyprus with two disciples, Barnabas and John Mark, where he preached in the synagogue of Paphos, the capital. At this point he changed his name from the Hebrew Sha'ul to its Roman version, Paulus, which shows his willingness to adapt his message to a Greco-Roman audience.

But as soon as Paul reached the mainland of Asia Minor, he was in for a shock. Local Jewish communities firmly rejected the idea that Jesus could be the Messiah. Some even tried to stone him.

Changing Tactics

Paul found himself at a crossroads. One route was to continue to do what the apostles were doing in Judea and focus on ministering to Jews or those who agreed to become Jews. Another route was to adapt his preaching to appeal to Gentiles.

It was a difficult decision, but Paul chose the latter. He would now minister to the Gentiles, which meant that the story had to change to some degree. As a Pharisee, schooled in debating the issues of the Torah, he was uniquely qualified for the task. Additionally, he felt guided by Jesus's spirit; as he later wrote, "We have the mind of Christ."

But he faced some obstacles. For example, no one among the Gentiles knew or cared what a messiah was. Nor were the Gentiles of Asia Minor prepared to become Jews, eat kosher food, and be circumcised.

Back in Judea, Peter and the other apostles were also converting Gentiles, but on the condition that they also became Jewish, or at least respected some aspects of the Jewish law. That was not going to happen in Asia Minor. However, these Gentiles did feel a strong attraction to the idea of a single, truly merciful and compassionate God who cared for his people, unlike the fickle gods of Roman mythology.

The Roman Empire was a society with huge gaps between rich and poor and between free people and the enslaved. There were thousands of men and women who yearned for an end to these social divisions and who were struck by the joyous teachings of a man who said that the righteous would find salvation—and performed miracles to prove it.

The Roman world was ripe for a new spirituality, rather than the imperial cult by which every emperor became a god upon his death. Thus, in Paul's words, Jesus the Messiah, or "Jesus the Christ," to use the Greek version, became simply "Jesus Christ," as if *Christos* were his last name.

In the process, this new movement became a religion. It was uncoupled from the tradition of Jesus as a practicing rabbi among Jews.

Paul defended these rather stunning decisions by the fact that, as he wrote, "a person is justified not by the works of the Law but through faith in Jesus Christ." He also wrote to the Romans that "real circumcision is a matter of the heart—it is spiritual and not literal."

Paul's New Journey

Word of Paul's activity among the uncircumcised of Asia Minor caused considerable distress among the apostles back in Judea, who were now led by Jesus's brother James. During a meeting in Jerusalem that Paul attended, they argued that "unless you are circumcised, you cannot be saved."

But Paul disagreed. As he wrote in his letter to the Romans, "Is [God] not the God of Gentiles also?" Eventually, the Jerusalem gathering ended in a compromise: Paul could minister to the Gentiles if he so wished, but James and his followers would continue to preach among the Jews, among the circumcised.

Now free of any constraints, Paul embarked on a second journey, targeting the more affluent and cosmopolitan cities of western Asia Minor. Along the way, he met a young man named Timothy who would become one of his most devoted assistants. When he reached the northern tip of Asia Minor, Paul had a vision: He would cross the Hellespont and bring the news of Jesus to the heartland of Greece.

At this point, the narrative of the book of Acts changes from the third to the first person. Scholars believe is the moment that Luke, the author of the book of Acts as well as the Gospel of Luke, joined Paul on his journey.

Once in Greece, Paul and his companions took the Via Egnatia, one of the main military highways then being built by imperial Rome. From the city of Philippi, where Paul made his first convert—a woman called Lydia—he reached Thessalonica, where he was denounced by a crowd of Jews.

Moving through Greece

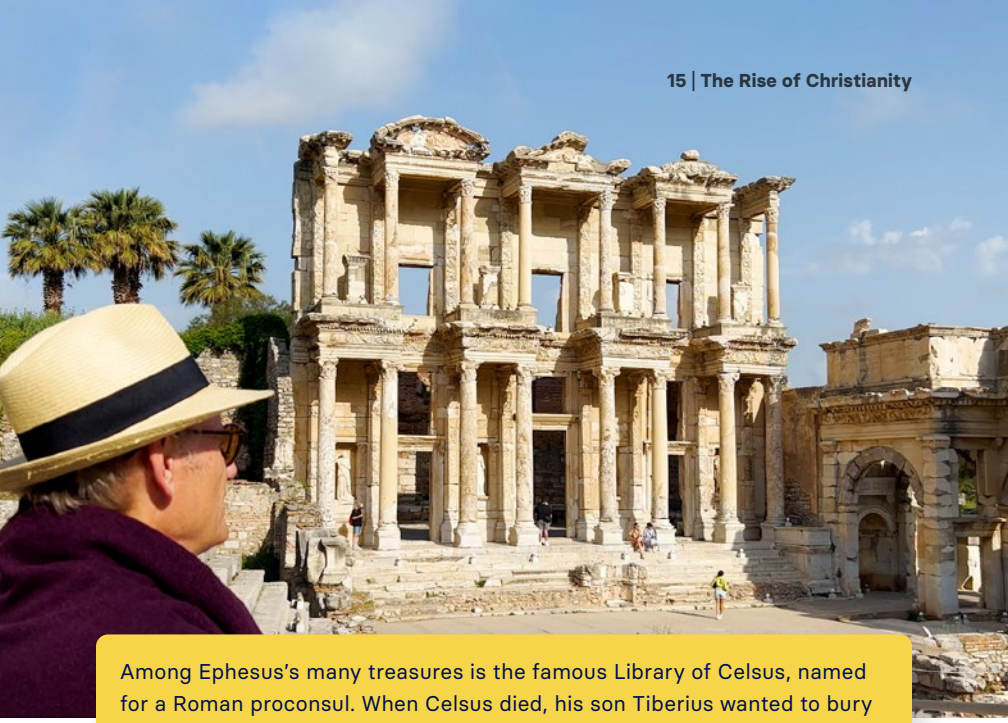
Eventually, Paul made his way down to Athens and then on to Corinth, the capital of Roman Greece. Here, he founded a highly diverse Christian congregation whom he would later address in his letters to the Corinthians. But the local Jewish community filed a suit in a Roman court, accusing him of "persuading people to worship God in ways that are contrary to the law."

The presiding judge was a proconsul named Gallio, who dismissed the suit. Archaeologists have discovered a stone with a reference to a proconsul named L. Iunius Gallio from 52 AD, which allows us to date Paul's journey to the early 50s.

Events in Ephesus

Paul eventually made his way back to Asia Minor and settled in one of the leading cities at the time, the town of Ephesus. First discovered by archaeologists in the 19th century, Ephesus is one of the best-preserved Roman cities in the world today. It was dedicated to the worship of Artemis. This was a local deity, different from the Greek goddess of the hunt, who was venerated as a goddess of fertility.

However, local craftsmen who produced miniatures of the Temple of Artemis as souvenirs for tourists and pilgrims were afraid that Paul's sermons about Jesus Christ were going to hurt their business. They staged a protest in Ephesus's theater, which forced Paul to leave the city.



Among Ephesus's many treasures is the famous Library of Celsus, named for a Roman proconsul. When Celsus died, his son Tiberius wanted to bury him in a magnificent tomb, but Roman law prohibited the burial of the deceased within the city walls. Tiberius therefore called this great building a library and hid the tomb of his father under the apse.

An Evolving Theology

Paul continued to evolve the memory of Jesus into a new theology uniquely suited to the tastes and expectations of his Gentile audience. One persistent problem was the fact that Jesus had been crucified by the Romans as a common criminal. But Paul explained that this was part of God's plan. Jesus was crucified, he taught, so that all of humankind could be redeemed.

The idea that Jesus's death on the cross was ordained by God led to two key articles of the Pauline kerygma, or Paul's belief system. One was that the kingdom of God that Jesus had talked about was actually the kingdom of heaven, an eternal life open to all the righteous who put their faith in Christ. For those believers, Paul said, death no longer had any dominion; they would be granted eternal life.

At the same time, Paul argued that Jesus was not just a son of God in a Jewish sense—that is, a man favored by God and anointed by his divine Spirit—but actually a divine being himself. In other words, he was of the same divine substance as the Father. This is where the story of the historical Jesus ends and the story of Christ begins.

Splitting Paths

There are other differences between the historical Jesus and Paul's Jesus. Women played a major role in Jesus's ministry; indeed, Mary Magdalene and two other women helped to fund the movement. But Paul, the traditional Pharisee, saw the role of women differently. They should be silent and not speak up in community meetings, he wrote. Even though some early chapels accepted women as deacons, they would become increasingly marginalized in the growing church—quite in contrast to their prominent role in some Gnostic Christian communities.

But there is one important thing that Paul did retain from Jesus's ministry, and that is Jesus's emphasis on *agapè*, on selfless love and compassion. Paul developed this idea in one of his famous letters: "[Love] does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful. … Love never ends."

In many ways, it was Paul and his followers who founded the Christian movement that would grow and spread throughout the empire. But the paradox of Christ as both man and god, human and divine, would continue to vex the Greek mind. In the centuries to come, it would lead to many different traditions that would split the mother church.

Egypt

Egypt was another country that became very important in the spread of early Christianity, as illustrated by the existence of the famous Hanging Church of Cairo, a Coptic church that is generally believed to be one of the oldest churches in Egypt. There were multiple types of Christianity coursing through the Mediterranean world. Many Christians, whom scholars refer to as Gnostic Christians, did not adhere to the belief propagated by Paul that Jesus's ministry was essentially anchored in the importance of his crucifixion and resurrection for the repentance of mankind. There were other ways to look at Jesus, and one of these was to look at his teachings.

Gnostic Christians believed that faith in Jesus could unlock the secret knowledge of the divine spirit within oneself. As such, it had much in common with Platonic thought.

In 1945, an Egyptian farmer discovered a large vessel with 13 separate codices of Gnostic Christian texts in Nag Hammadi, close to Luxor in Egypt. The books, written in Coptic, include numerous Gospels that were not included in the New Testament, including the Gospel of Thomas. A notable quote from that work is: "Love your brother like your soul, guard him like the pupil of your eye."

The End of Paul's Story

Meanwhile, in 57 AD, Paul's preaching came to an end. After his return to Jerusalem, he was seized by an angry mob as he entered the temple. They decried him as someone who had "brought Greeks in the temple," thus defiling it, and who had taught "against our people [and] our law."

Paul was a Roman citizen, and so he successfully appealed to his right to be tried by a Roman court in Rome. He was put on a ship, but on the way, as it approached the island of Malta, the ship ran aground. All made it to the shore and were saved.

Eventually, Paul did make his way to Rome and was put under house arrest. What happened next is lost in the mists of time, though church tradition claims he was put to death by the sword during the persecutions under Emperor Nero.

Two Centuries Onward

For the next two centuries, Christianity spread in fits and starts, beset by occasional persecution from the Romans as well as local communities. At times, the faith had to go underground. But a turning point came in 259, when Emperor Gallienus issued the first decree of tolerance, giving Christians the right to worship and to build churches. That edict was affirmed by Emperor Constantine some 50 years later, after he moved the imperial capital from Rome to Byzantium, which was renamed Constantinople.

Christianity now became an officially tolerated religion. It became more than that in 380, when Emperor Theodosius I ordered his subjects to convert to Christianity.

Conclusion

In the end, the young rabbi from Nazareth did triumph. But Jesus triumphed as the Christ of faith, the son of God who had come down to redeem all of humankind, rather than as the rabbi from Nazareth who had set out to end the suffering of his fellow Jews by building a kingdom of God on earth.

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