
D. B. RYEN

THE
STORY OF JESUS
ALL FOUR GOSPELS IN ONE

“He came to his own, but his own didn’t accept him.”

– *John, circa 85 AD*

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Who has believed our message? And who has been shown the LORD's arm?

He grew up before him like a sapling and like a root from dry land. He didn't have a form or honor that we'd look at him, nor an appearance that we'd want him.

He was hated and betrayed by men, a man of sadness, familiar with sickness. He was hated enough to hide one's face from him. And we didn't think much of him.

But he certainly carried our sickness and bore our pain, while we figured he was struck, beaten, and oppressed by God.

He was stabbed for our rebellion and broken for our guilt. The discipline for our good fell on him and we're healed by his bruises.

Like sheep, we've all wandered and each has turned his own way, but the LORD made all our depravity meet him.

He was oppressed and mistreated, but he didn't open his mouth. Like a lamb led to slaughter and like a sheep silent before shearers, he still didn't open his mouth.

He was taken by restraint and judgment. And who would've thought that he was cut off from the living land for my people's rebellion, his own generation, whose disease it was?

His grave was set among the wicked, but he was wealthy in death because he had done nothing violent, nor was deception in his mouth.

But the LORD was happy to crush him, to make him diseased. If he could make himself their guilt, then he'd see his seed, he'd lengthen his days, and the LORD's pleasure would flourish in his hand.

Because of his soul's trouble, he'll see it and be satisfied. By his knowledge, the righteous one, my servant, will justify many by carrying their guilt.

So I'll give him a part with the great, and he'll divide the plunder with the strong because of this: he poured himself out to death and was counted with the lawless, but he carried the sin of many and interceded for the lawless.

Isaiah 53

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Introduction

Disclaimer

Religious education isn't new. Scholars have been studying, interpreting, and teaching theology based on sacred writings for millennia. But the Scriptures are for everyone, not just the learned. In the same way, religion and faith are for everyone, regardless of education, scholarship, race, gender, or social status. The original Gospel writers weren't scholars themselves, at least not originally. They were a tax collector, a missionary's companion, a physician, and a fisherman; it's unknown whether they had any formal religious education. But it didn't matter – they penned the most popular biography in history.

Such is this account. *THE STORY OF JESUS* attempts to put the events of Jesus' life into chronological order. It draws primarily from the four books of the Bible that record his life, that is, the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. However, it also incorporates small sections of other New Testament books. These sources have been combined into one complete narrative as accurately as possible.

Efforts have been made to thoroughly research historical facts and language translations, but always from the perspective of an interested follower, not a certified biblical scholar, historian, or linguist. As such, there may be details that are less than accurate despite the best of intentions. For example, the order of events in this account may not be in the precise order they occurred in history, as established by teams of scholars with far greater expertise.

Similarly, it's always difficult to translate the Bible literally while still being readable. The translation used in *THE STORY OF JESUS* is original

text, based on various contemporary English translations and the original Greek, Aramaic, and Hebrew versions of the Bible. This applies both to the main text of Jesus' life story and the sidebars of various scriptural references. *THE STORY OF JESUS* attempts to be as faithful as possible to the original languages it was written in, even at the expense of being readable. Hopefully any discrepancies in fact or translation will be graciously overlooked, because this book's purpose isn't to be a historical textbook but the retelling of a story, one that has changed many lives.

THE STORY OF JESUS has various sidebars to help explain the context, differing translations, and biblical references of Jesus' story. Most sidebars that correspond to a particular topic are marked accordingly within the text (*), while sidebars for a biblical cross-reference are marked differently (†). Larger text boxes may have no specific reference to the text, but generally help to explain the world in which Jesus walked during the first century.

Everyone should study the Scriptures for themselves. That's how this account started. *THE STORY OF JESUS* is quite simply the full story of Jesus' time on earth.

Preface

First Century Judea

Israel's history all started with one man: Abram. The Bible records that God told him to leave his home, promising to give him his own land and make him into a great nation.[†] This promised land was Canaan, a fertile green belt bordered by the Mediterranean Sea to the West and the Jordan River to the East. After arriving there, Abram was renamed Abraham and had a son by his previously-barren wife, Sarah. His son, Isaac, fathered twins. The younger twin, Jacob, deceptively received the blessing and inheritance of the firstborn. Jacob was renamed Israel and had twelve sons, who, with their descendants, would become the twelve tribes of Israel. Jacob was forced to relocate away from Canaan to Egypt due to a seven-year famine. In Egypt, Jacob's family of 70 grew into a nation, and, over time, Israel's population became so large that the Egyptian Pharaoh feared revolt and subsequently oppressed them as slaves. Then, 400 years after arriving in Egypt, Moses[†] led the entire nation back to the land promised to them by God.

Under Joshua, Moses' successor, the people of Israel drove out the residents of Canaan and

The LORD told Abram, "Go from your country, your relatives, and your father's house, to the land I'll show you. I'll make you a great nation. I'll bless you and make your name great, and then you'll be a blessing. I'll bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you. And all the families on earth will be blessed through you."

Genesis 12:2-3

The LORD said to Moses, "Go to Pharaoh and tell him, 'The LORD says, "Let my people go, so they can serve me.'"

Exodus 8:1

were established as a kingdom of their own right. Successive judges ruled Israel after their settlement in Canaan, frequently rescuing them from neighboring nations, until Saul was established as Israel's first king. However, a shepherd-turned-warrior named David was the one to truly lead Israel, becoming Israel's second king after Saul's death.

During the reign of David[†] and his son Solomon, Israel reached the peak of its power, becoming the richest nation in the Middle East at the time, according to the Bible. But it didn't last long. Crumbling morality, heavy taxation, and labor conscription led to Israel's division. Around 950 BC, under David's grandson Rehoboam, the nation split into the southern kingdom of Judah, which maintained the Davidic dynasty, and the northern kingdom of Israel, which adopted a new king, Jeroboam. Various kings rose and fell in Israel and Judah as they warred with each other and with their neighbors for generations. Then around 720 BC, the Assyrians conquered Israel, taking much of its population into exile. Judah was also conquered, this time in two campaigns by the Babylonians in 597 and 587 BC, who captured Jerusalem[†] and similarly exiled many of the survivors. The Persians later conquered Babylon, taking over their massive empire, but they allowed groups of Jewish exiles to return to their homeland. In 333 BC, Alexander the Great conquered Persia, gaining control of Israel and the rest of the Middle East, and establishing Greek culture and language throughout. After his death, Alexander's generals divided his empire between themselves, but subsequent revolts re-established an independent Jewish nation in 164 BC under the Hasmonean dynasty. However, Jerusalem was again captured, with Judea becoming a province of the Roman Empire in

He raised David up to be their king, and he witnessed about him, saying, "I've found David, Jesse's son, to be a man after my heart, who'll do all I want."

Acts 13:22

How lonely sits the city that was full of people! She who was great among the nations has become a widow!

Lamentations 1:1

63 BC. Herod the Great ruled the Jews as a client-king under Rome and was the current ruler at the time of Jesus' birth in 4 BC.

Throughout Israel's tumultuous history, various prophets (messengers from God) encouraged the Jews and warned them to repent and return to God[†] and follow the laws given to them during their exodus from Egypt to Canaan. The prophets frequently stressed that Israel's rebellion away from God had led to their downfall, and that turning back to him would lead to freedom and blessing. However, any religious reformation soon reverted back to immorality and subsequent oppression.

Despite the dire circumstances of Israel's national identity, Jews lived in constant expectation of the Messiah,[†] which means "anointed one" in Hebrew. The Greek equivalent, *christos*, is where the term "Christ" comes from. The Jews understood the Messiah to be a powerful king who would defeat their enemies and bring prosperity and peace. Although many messiahs temporarily delivered Israel throughout its history, none fulfilled all the requirements, as detailed by various prophets' contributions to Scripture.

So this was the situation in Judea during the first century: Israel was living under Roman rule; revolts were common, but were swiftly and brutally subdued; religious reform had expanded Moses' Law into thousands of rules and rituals about cleanliness; and the Jews were waiting for their Messiah, a mighty king who would sit on David's throne and establish an empire.

It was into this world that Jesus was born.

"Repent and turn from all of your rebelling, so that sin won't trip you up. Throw away all the rebelling you've done and make a new heart and a new spirit for yourselves. O Israel's house, why will you die? I'm not happy with anyone's death," says the LORD God. "So repent and live!"

Ezekiel 18:30-32

Look at my servant, whom I hold. He's my chosen, who pleases my soul. I've put my Spirit on him and he'll bring justice out to the nations. He won't get discouraged or crushed until he sets up justice on earth.

Isaiah 42:1,4a

Although it can vary in content and translation, the **Bible** is the primary text of multiple world religions, most notably Christianity and Judaism. In its most common form, the Bible is divided into two major sections, each containing multiple smaller books:

1. The Old Testament follows the history of Israel as a nation through its formation, settlement, exile, and restoration. It also includes books of songs, poetry, prophecy, and law.
2. The New Testament starts with four different accounts – written by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – that detail the life of a teacher named Jesus, who claimed to be God’s Son. It goes on to describe the beginning of the church, including letters addressed to various churches of the day.

This sacred text, particularly the Old Testament, is also simply called the **Scripture**.

Originally written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, the Bible has become the most widely reproduced book in the world. And despite having multiple authors and being written over centuries, the Bible claims to be the inspired words of God.

The first five books of the Bible, in the Old Testament, are collectively referred to as **Moses’ Law**. It’s also called the Pentateuch, the Torah, the “Book of the Law,” or simply “The Law.” This ancient Scripture records the development of Israel as a nation, as well as the laws God gave them for fulfilling their destiny as his people.

1. Genesis records the early history of the world and the establishment of Abraham’s descendants as the nation of God. It follows Israel’s first four generations, from Abraham to the twelve patriarchs of Israel, ending with their settlement in Egypt. It also includes accounts of creation, the first sin, the worldwide flood with Noah’s ark, and Babel’s tower to heaven.
2. Exodus records Israel’s flight from slavery under Pharaoh in Egypt. It also details God’s covenant with them as a nation.
3. Leviticus lays out instructions on holiness.
4. Numbers records 40 years of wandering in the desert and how Israel’s territory should be divided once they got there.
5. Deuteronomy records final commands to serve God as Israel prepared to enter their promised land.

These books served as the foundation for Jewish government, law, religion, and culture. Additionally, Moses’ Law dictated what was clean and unclean. God called Israel to be holy (set apart) for himself, and, as such, Israel’s rules about external purity were outward signs of that inward holiness. Specific uncleanliness was described in Moses’ Law.

- Eating or handling certain animals, such as ravens, vultures, eagles, owls, hares, pigs, camels, mice, bats, lizards, shellfish, and all insects except locusts. Other animals were implied based on general characteristics, such as alligators, cats, dogs, horses, squid, snakes, and turtles.
- People with certain physical conditions, such as menstrual periods, leprosy, open sores, post-childbirth, and having any discharge from the body.
- Touching the dead bodies of both people and animals. Even the tent that a dead body was found in was considered unclean.

Purification rituals were detailed for all unclean conditions, which typically involved a period of social isolation, sprinkling of water or blood, immersion in water, and/or offering sacrifices to become clean again. These regulations about **cleanliness** were the cornerstone of Israel’s religious rituals.

Chapter 1

Foreword to the Gospel

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, God's Son.

Greatest Theophilus,* even though many have set their hand to put together an account of the things done among us, as they were given to us by those who were eyewitnesses from the beginning and servants of the word, I thought it would be good for me also write it out chronologically, after carefully investigating everything from the beginning, so that you might know for sure about the word you've been taught.

Mark 1:1
Luke 1:1-4

Luke addressed his version of Jesus' life, as well as his history of the early church (the book of Acts), to "**greatest Theophilus.**" *Kratistos* is the Greek word that translates to "strongest," "greatest," or "most excellent." It was used as a title of respect when addressing someone important. Theophilus, on the other hand, translates to "God lover." Although this term could be applied to the church as a whole, it was likely the name of a specific person, possibly the one who commissioned the writing.



Logos is the Greek word for "speech" or "**word**," but John uses this term to refer specifically to God's word personified as Jesus. No other Gospel writer uses *logos* like this. However, since Heraclitus first used the term around 500 BC, ancient Greek philosophers used *logos* to mean wisdom in general, particularly pertaining to divine order and reasoning.

Many Bible translations capitalize "word" when referring to Jesus. Similarly, pronouns ("he" or "his") referring to God or Jesus are typically capitalized throughout Scripture. However, there was no concept of capitalization in the original languages of the Bible. Over time, church tradition has capitalized any titles or pronouns referring to God, but this practice isn't directly biblical. So to keep with a more literal translation of the original Scriptures, pronouns referring to Jesus or God are not capitalized here. Nor is "word" capitalized, despite being a reference to Jesus' divinity. However, "Father" and "Son" are capitalized when they're clear references to God.

In the beginning was the word* and the word was with God. The word was God. He was with God in the beginning. All things came to be through him, and apart from him nothing came to be that has come to be. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light is shining in the darkness and the darkness can't grasp it.

There was a man named John who was sent from God. He came as a witness to testify about the light, for all to believe through him. He wasn't the light, but a witness to the light. The true light coming into the world illuminates every man. He was in the world and the world was made through him, but the world didn't know him. He came to his own, but his own didn't accept him. But whoever accepted him, he gave the right to become God's children, to those who believed in his name, who weren't born of blood or of the body's will or of man's will, but born of God.

The word became a body and lived with us. We saw his glory, glory like the only one born of the Father, full of grace and truth. John testifies* about him. He cried out, "This is the one I spoke about: 'The one who comes after me is greater than I am, because he existed before I did.'"

Out of his abundance, we've all received grace for grace. The Law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God, but the only God who was born, who's at the Father's chest, has made him known.



The record of the genealogy of Jesus the Christ, David's son and Abraham's son:

John 1:1-18

Occasionally, Greek authors used the present tense of a verb to emphasize an action in the midst of a story told in the past tense. This literary feature occurs in the New Testament, which was originally written in Greek. However, English doesn't employ this method of emphasis, so a direct translation can seem awkward. In other Bible translations, the present tense Greek is often translated into past tense English and marked with an asterisk to note the emphasis. However, a more literal translation keeps those few words in the present tense, as it's rendered here. In this first occurrence, the original Gospel writer emphasized John's testifying by writing "**testifies**," contrary to the tense of the rest of the passage.

Matthew 1:1-17
Luke 3:23b-38

Both Matthew and Luke record Jesus' genealogy. Matthew's starts with Abraham, the patriarch of all Israel, and lists descendants forward to Jesus' father Joseph. Luke, on the other hand, begins with Jesus and records backward all the way to Adam, the first man. One explanation for Jesus' **two different genealogies** is that Matthew records only the heirs to David's throne, while Luke records the complete lineage. Ancient genealogies weren't necessarily exhaustive lists – ancestors were sometimes only included for a specific reason.

Another possibility is that Matthew records Joseph's line (Jesus' legal father), while Luke records Mary's (Jesus' biological mother). Reading closely in Luke's account (page 19), the text states Jesus was "**considered**" (Greek *nomizo*) to be Joseph's son, thereby making Joseph the son of Eli through marriage. Therefore, Jesus was possibly a descendant of David by both parents, fulfilling the prophet Jeremiah's words long before.

The LORD says, "David will never lack a man to sit on the throne of Israel's house."

Jeremiah 7:14

Abraham fathered Isaac, Isaac fathered Jacob, and Jacob fathered Judah and his brothers.

Judah fathered Perez and Zerah by Tamar,*
Perez fathered Hezron, and Hezron fathered Ram.

Ram fathered Amminadab, Amminadab fathered Nahshon, and Nahshon fathered Salmon.

Salmon fathered Boaz by Rahab,* Boaz fathered Obed by Ruth,* and Obed fathered Jesse.

Jesse fathered David the king.

David fathered Solomon by her of Uriah.*

Besides his mother Mary, four women are mentioned in Matthew's account of Jesus' genealogy. The first, **Tamar**, was originally Judah's daughter-in-law, being married to his two oldest sons. Genesis 38 records that after their deaths, with Tamar widowed twice, she was engaged to Judah's next son, but the marriage never occurred. So after disguising herself as a prostitute, Tamar slept with Judah. Upon becoming pregnant, Judah condemned his daughter-in-law to be burned for her sin, not knowing she was pregnant by him. But after confronting him with proof, she was allowed to live and subsequently gave birth to twin boys, Perez and Zerah.

Rahab was a prostitute in the city of Jericho during Israel's conquest of Canaan. She hid two Israelite spies and helped them escape the city by sending their pursuers in a different direction. For her service to Israel, Rahab's whole household was spared when Jericho was conquered, and she lived among Israel from then on. Her story is recorded in Joshua 2.

Ruth is one of only two women to have a book of the Bible named after her. After her husband died, Ruth committed herself to her mother-in-law, Naomi, and they travelled back to Naomi's homeland, Israel, even though Ruth herself was from Moab. Although widows in ancient Israel had nobody to provide for them, Ruth found favor with a man named Boaz, Naomi's relative. Boaz was so impressed with Ruth's character that he married her and took her and Naomi into his household.

Finally, Bathsheba was originally the wife of Uriah, a warrior in King David's army. However, while Uriah was away on campaign, David saw her bathing on a rooftop, sent for her,

and slept with her. Upon finding out she was pregnant, David commanded Uriah to be abandoned in battle, leading to his death. David then took Bathsheba as his wife, but was soon confronted about his sin. Although he quickly repented, their child became sick and died. However, Bathsheba later bore him four other children, one of which, Solomon, went on to rule Israel after David (see 2 Samuel 11). Her name isn't explicitly stated in Jesus' genealogy, but it's certainly implied as "**her of Uriah.**"

In such a patriarchal world, it's not insignificant that women were mentioned at all in a genealogy.

Solomon fathered Rehoboam, Rehoboam fathered Abijah, and Abijah fathered Asa.

Asa fathered Jehoshaphat, Jehoshaphat fathered Joram, and Joram fathered Uzziah.

Uzziah fathered Jotham, Jotham fathered Ahaz, and Ahaz fathered Hezekiah.

Hezekiah fathered Manasseh, Manasseh fathered Amon, and Amon fathered Josiah.

Josiah fathered Jeconiah and his brothers during the exile to Babylon.

After the exile to Babylon, Jeconiah fathered Shealtiel, and Shealtiel fathered Zerubbabel.

Zerubbabel fathered Abihud, Abihud fathered Eliakim, and Eliakim fathered Azor.

Azor fathered Zadok, Zadok fathered Achim, and Achim fathered Eliud.

Eliud fathered Eleazar, Eleazar fathered Matthan, and Matthan fathered Jacob.

Jacob fathered Joseph,* the husband of Mary, by whom Jesus was born, who is called the Christ.

Joseph is the name of many men in the Bible who lived long before Jesus' father Joseph. The most notable of them was the eleventh of Jacob's twelve sons. Joseph was favored by Jacob more than any of his brothers, being the only son of Jacob's favorite wife, Rachel. His name means "may God add," referring to Rachel's desire for more children after his birth. Upon receiving a colorful coat from his father and relating a dream of his lordship over his brothers, Joseph's ten brothers sold him in a fit of envy to slave traders travelling to Egypt.

Throughout years of slavery, promotion, jail, dream interpretation, and famine, Joseph eventually worked his way up to becoming the second most powerful man in Egypt, all the while maintaining his integrity and deferring praise to God. He ended up saving his entire

extended family from famine, and brought them down to live with him in Egypt. It was in Egypt that the family of Israel developed into a nation, became enslaved, and was finally delivered from slavery. Joseph was also the father of Ephraim and Manasseh, two future half-tribes of Israel.

So all the generations from Abraham to David are 14 generations; from David to the exile in Babylon, 14 generations; and from the exile in Babylon to the Christ, 14 generations.

Jesus was considered to be from* Joseph, from Eli, from Matthat, from Levi, from Melchi, from Jannai, from Joseph, from Mattathias, from Amos, from Nahum, from Hesli, from Naggi, from Maath, from Mattathias, from Semein, from Josech, from Joda, from Joanan, from Rhesa, from Zerubbabel, from Shealtiel, from Neri, from Melchi, from Addi, from Cosam, from Elmadam, from Er, from Joshua, from Eliezer, from Jorim, from Matthat, from Levi, from Simeon, from Judah, from Joseph, from Jonam, from Eliakim, from Melea, from Menna, from Mattatha, from Nathan, from David, from Jesse, from Obed, from Boaz, from Salmon, from Nahshon, from Amminadab, from Admin, from Ram, from Hezron, from Perez, from Judah, from Jacob, from Isaac, from Abraham, from Terah, from Nahor, from Serug, from Reu, from Peleg, from Heber, from Shelah, from Cainan, from Arphaxad, from Shem, from Noah, from Lamech, from Methuselah, from Enoch, from Jared, from Mahalaleel, from Cainan, from Enosh, from Seth, from Adam, from God.

Ho is a very common Greek article that can mean various things. *Ho* can be translated to many words in English, including (but not limited to) "the," "this," and "which." In the case of a genealogy, it means "son of" or simply "**from**."

A **priest** is a mediator between God and man. More specifically, Jewish priests were the official ministers of Israel and descendants of Moses' brother Aaron, from the tribe of Levi. Aaron was ordained as Israel's first High Priest as they journeyed from Egypt to Canaan, and his family subsequently became the official priestly line. The Greek term *archiereus* ("first priest") referred to the current or past priest who governed all the other priests as the religious head of Israel. This position is often translated "High Priest" or "Chief Priest."

A priest was to be set apart for service in all things, from appearance (no physical defects) to family life (wife must be a virgin from Israel). The High Priest's purification process involved a week-long ceremony of bathing, dressing in specially-made priestly clothes, and being anointed with oil. A priest's duties included burning incense, tending to ceremonial lamps, ensuring offerings were properly prepared, teaching the Law, and judging court cases. But most importantly, the High Priest would enter the innermost room of the Temple, the Holy of Holies, once each year and offer sacrifices for himself and the people.

The role of priests diminished somewhat over time as they were overshadowed by other religious groups, such as scribes and Pharisees. As well, the role of High Priest was no longer hereditary under Roman rule, but could be appointed or deposed as the current ruler desired.

[Aaron and his sons] will be anointed for an everlasting priesthood throughout their generations.

Exodus 40:15

Chapter 2

The Birth of John

During the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest* named Zacharias,* who belonged to the division of Abijah.* He had a wife from Aaron's daughters,* whose name was Elizabeth. They were both righteous in God's sight, walking blamelessly in all the Lord's commandments and regulations. However, they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren and they were both well along in days.

It happened that while [Zacharias] was acting as priest before God in the order of his division, he was chosen by lot, according to the priestly custom, to enter the Lord's Temple and burn incense. Meanwhile, the whole assembly of people prayed outside at the hour of incense.* An angel from the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the incense altar. Zacharias was alarmed when he saw it and fear seized him. But the angel told him, "Don't be afraid, Zacharias. Your request has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will birth you a son and you'll name him John. You'll have joy and happiness, and many will celebrate his birth, because he'll be great in the

Luke 1:5-25

The name **Zacharias**, which means "God has remembered," is the Greek version of Zechariah. Over 30 men in the Bible had the same name.

When David was king of Israel, he divided the priesthood into 24 divisions, of which **Abijah** was the eighth. Each division was responsible for the daily administration of the temple for a week at a time.

Similarly, Aaron was Moses' older brother and was ordained as the first High Priest of Israel. His male descendants carried on in this role throughout subsequent generations. Female descendants, however, did not serve as priests, but to be one of **Aaron's daughters** denoted priestly descent.

In the Temple of Jerusalem, incense was burned on a golden altar every morning and evening. In the evening, the **hour of incense** was around the ninth hour of the day (3:00 pm), which was also known as the hour of prayer.

Lord's sight. He won't drink wine or liquor,* and he'll be filled with the Holy Spirit from within his mother's womb. He'll turn many of Israel's sons back to the Lord their God. And it's he who will go before him in the spirit and the power of Elijah† to turn the hearts of fathers back to their children and the disobedient to a righteous attitude, and to prepare a people equipped for the Lord."

"How will I know this?" Zacharias asked the angel. "I'm an old man and my wife is well along in days."

"I am Gabriel, who stands in God's presence," the angel answered. "I've been sent to speak to you and bring you this good news. Look, you'll be silent and unable to speak until the day this happens, because you didn't believe my words, which will be completed in their time."

The people were waiting for Zacharias, wondering about his delay in the Temple. But when he came out, he couldn't speak to them, so they realized that he'd seen a vision in the Temple. And although he kept signing to them, he stayed mute.

After the days of his service were done, he returned home. And after those days, his wife Elizabeth became pregnant, but she hid herself for five months, saying, "This is how the Lord has dealt with me in the days when he looked at me to remove my disgrace*† from among men."



In the sixth month, Gabriel the angel was sent from God to a city in Galilee called Nazareth,* to a virgin engaged to a man from David's house named Joseph. The virgin's name was

Anyone who **abstained from alcohol** was called a Nazirite, from the Hebrew word *nazir* ("separated"). Also included in the Nazirite vow was never cutting one's hair or touching a corpse. The Old Testament records that the hero Sampson and the prophet Samuel were both Nazirites.

Look, I'm going to send Elijah the prophet to you before the great and dreaded day of the LORD comes. He'll turn fathers' hearts to their children and children's hearts to their fathers, so that I won't come and strike the land with a curse.

Malachi 4:5-6

Ancient cultures valued children immensely as a means to continue one's legacy and a sign of God's blessing. Barrenness was therefore **disgraceful**, and even considered a curse by God.

He makes the barren live in the house like the joyful mother of children. Praise the LORD!

Psalms 113:9

Luke 1:26-38

Nazareth was a town in the Roman province of Galilee, somewhat secluded from the rest of the land. It sat in a high valley, surrounded by hills and apart from major highways. It may have had a reputation for being unimportant in Israel, as well as for immorality. It was not a place where the Messiah would have been expected to come from.

Mary. Coming in, he said, “Rejoice,* favored one! May the Lord be with you!”

She was troubled at these words and kept wondering what kind of a greeting this was. Then the angel told her, “Don’t be afraid, Mary, because you’ve found God’s favor! Look, you’ll conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you’ll name him Jesus. He’ll be great and will be called the Son of the Highest.* The Lord God will give him the throne of David his father. He’ll reign over Jacob’s house forever and his kingdom will have no end.”

Mary asked the angel, “How can this happen, since I haven’t known* a man?”

The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit* will come on you and the power of the Highest will overshadow you, which is why the Holy One born will be called God’s Son. Look, even your relative Elizabeth has conceived a son in her old age too, and the one who was called barren is now in her sixth month, because nothing will be impossible with God.”

In addition to meaning “rejoice,” “be glad,” or “be well,” the Greek word *chairo* could also be used as a salutation, meaning “hail” or “greetings.” It was particularly used at the beginning of written letters and was the standard greeting to Caesar (“Hail, Caesar!”).

In terms of the physical position of an object, “highest” could refer to being elevated above everything else. However, in reference to God, it referred to his being exalted above all.

The Greek verb *ginosko* means “know” or “understand.” It was also a euphemism for intercourse.

Holy Spirit comes from the Greek *hagios* (“holy,” “saintly”) and *pneuma* (“breath,” “wind,” “spirit”) and was understood to be the Spirit of God. It has also been translated “Holy Ghost,” from the Old English word for “spirit” (*gast*). “Holy Spirit” only occurs three times in the Old Testament, although the Hebrew word for “spirit” (*ruwach*) occurs many times alone or with other descriptors in reference to God. The New Testament, however, uses “Holy Spirit” 98 times, hinting at the Christian theology of the Trinitarian nature of God.

Christianity holds that God has three distinct entities making up the same one God: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Understandably confusing, and in sharp contrast to Judaism’s strict monotheism, this doctrine has been described in a variety of metaphors. The three parts of God are said to be like three pieces of the same pie. Or similar to each person having three distinct parts – a body, a mind, and a spirit – which are separate dimensions of oneself, yet intimately unified as one person. Another understanding is that God the Father produced God the Son and their relationship is the Spirit of God. However it’s understood, each entity of the Trinity is completely God. Like a cube exists in three dimensions, so God is three in one. Outside of the Gospels, one of the most explicit references to Trinitarian theology was made by Paul the Apostle: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the partnership of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” (2 Corinthians 13:14)

Trinitarian theology developed after Jesus’ time, but the understanding during the first century was that the Holy Spirit was God’s breath or essence, not a separate being.

Then Mary said, “Look, the Lord’s slave.
May it happen to me just as you’ve said.”
Then the angel left her.



In those days, Mary got up and went to the hills in a hurry, to a city in Judah. Then she entered Zacharias’ house and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the baby leaped in her womb and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. She cried out in a loud voice, “You’re blessed* among women! And the fruit of your womb is blessed! And why me, that the mother of my Lord would come to me? Because look, when the sound of your greeting entered my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy! Blessed is she who believed, because what the Lord has told her will be fulfilled.”

Then Mary said,

“My soul amplifies the Lord and my spirit is
overjoyed in God my savior!

Because he looked at the lowliness of his
slave, and look, all generations will call
me blessed from now on.

Because the Strong One has done something
great for me, and his name is Holy.†

His mercy is on generation after generation
toward those who fear him.†

He has done great things with his arm and he
has scattered those proud in the
thoughts of their hearts.

He took down rulers from their thrones and
lifted up the humble.

He filled the hungry with good things,† but

Luke 1:39-56

“**Blessed**” comes from the Greek word *makarios*, which can also mean “happy.” It represents the wishing of favor or goodness on another, with the hope that God will make it happen. God promised Israel blessings if they obeyed his Law. A father would often bless his children before his death, symbolically passing on God’s favor. The opposite of a blessing – a curse – is wishing injury, harm, or misfortune on another.

Look, I’m putting a blessing and a curse before you today: the blessing if you listen to the LORD your God’s commands, which I’m commanding you today; and the curse if you don’t listen to the LORD your God’s commands, but turn from the way I’m commanding you today by following other gods that you don’t know.

Deuteronomy 11:26-28

*Let them praise your
great and awesome
name – it is Holy.*

Psalm 99:3

*The LORD’s kindness is
from forever to forever
on those who fear him,
and his righteousness is
on the children’s children
of those who keep his
covenant and remember
and follow his rules.*

Psalm 103:17

*He satisfied the thirsty
soul and filled the hungry
soul with good things.*

Psalm 107:9

sent the rich away empty.

Reminded of his mercy, he helped his servant Israel as he spoke to our fathers, Abraham and his descendants forever.”

So Mary stayed with her about three months and then returned home.



The time came for Elizabeth to deliver and she gave birth to a son. Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had amplified his mercy toward her and they celebrated with her.

Then it happened that they came to circumcise* the child on the eighth day. They were going to call him Zacharias, after his father, but his mother said, “No! He’ll be called John.”

But they told her, “None of your relatives are called by that name.”

So they signed to his father as to what he wanted to call him. He asked for a tablet and wrote, “His name is John.” They were all amazed. Then immediately his mouth and his tongue were opened and he began to speak, praising God. Fear came on all those living around them, and all this talk was discussed throughout all the hill country of Judea. All who heard it kept it in mind, saying, “What will this child be?” because the hand of the Lord was with him too.

His father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Spirit, and prophesied, saying,

“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, because he has visited us and has made his people redeemed.

Luke 1:57-80

Starting with Abraham, Genesis records that God commanded all males to be circumcised as a sign of God’s covenant with his people. **Circumcision** is the surgical removal of the foreskin on the penis. It was also practiced in other ancient cultures, such as Egypt and Canaan, as a rite of passage into adulthood, often occurring during puberty. However, Israel traditionally circumcised a newborn male at eight days old, in conjunction with naming him. Over time, the Jews took great pride in circumcision, often degrading foreigners as “the uncircumcised.”

You’ll circumcise the flesh of your foreskin to be the sign of the covenant between me and you.

Leviticus 17:11

Animal **horns** served multiple purposes in Israel. As musical instruments (*shofar*), they called the nation together for festivals or battles. Horns were also oil containers, which could be used to anoint a new king. And since an animal's horns were its weapons, they became a symbol of strength and courage.

The LORD is my cliff, my fortress, my savior, my God, my rock, and my shelter. He's my shield, the horn of my salvation, and my high place.

Psalm 18:2

He has raised up a horn* of salvation for us in the house of David his servant, as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets ages ago:

'For salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us;†

To show our fathers mercy and remember his holy covenant, the promise he swore to our father Abraham;*

To let us serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days, being rescued from our enemies' hands.'

And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Highest, because you'll go on ahead of the Lord to prepare his ways,†

To give his people knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, Because of the tender mercy of our God, which the sunrise from the heights will visit us with,

To shine on those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death,†

To guide our feet into the way of peace."

So the child kept growing and getting strong in his spirit, and he lived in the deserts until the day of his presentation to Israel.

He saved them from the hand of those who hated them and redeemed them from the enemy's hand.

Psalm 106:10

Genesis records that **God's covenant with Abraham** was to give him land, bless him, and bless others through him. The covenant was confirmed with his name being changed from Abram and all of his male descendants being circumcised as a sign of the covenant throughout subsequent generations.

"Look, I'm going to send my messenger to clear the way ahead of me. Then the Lord you seek will suddenly come to his Temple. Look, the covenant's messenger, the one you enjoy, he's coming!" says the LORD of armies.

Malachi 3:1

The people walking in darkness will see an intense light, and the light will shine on those living in a dark land.

Isaiah 9:2

Chapter 3

The Birth of Jesus

The birth of Jesus the Christ was like this: when his mother Mary was engaged to Joseph, she was found to be pregnant by the Holy Spirit before they had come together.* Her fiancé, Joseph, being a righteous man and not wanting to disgrace her, planned to send her away secretly. But when he thought about this, look, an angel from the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, David’s son, don’t be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because this pregnancy is from the Holy Spirit. She’ll give birth to a son and you’ll call his name Jesus,* because he’ll save his people from their sins.”

This all happened to fulfill what the Lord said through the prophet: “Look, the virgin will

Matthew 1:18-25

By law, the penalty for **sex outside marriage** (having an affair, adultery) was death.

If a virgin girl is engaged to a man and another man finds her in the city and lies with her, then bring the two of them to the city gate and stone them to death – the girl because she didn’t cry out in the city and the man because he humiliated his neighbor’s wife. So you’ll burn the evil from among you.

Deuteronomy 22:23-24

The name **Jesus** (Greek *iesous*) is the Greek form of the Hebrew name Joshua, which means “the LORD saves.” It was a common name at that time. In the Old Testament, Joshua was the name of Moses’ right hand man and successor. He’s first mentioned in the Bible as a Hebrew spy in the promised land before Israel entered it. He was only one of two spies that reported back favorably to Israel, but his report was widely disregarded and Israel failed to enter their land. As a result, God banished them into the wilderness for 40 years. During this time, Joshua acted as Moses’ assistant, and, after a faithless act by Moses, he led Israel on their second attempt at entering Canaan. This time they were successful and Joshua took the army on a virtually unstoppable military campaign through their new land to eradicate the current residents, the account of which is recorded in the biblical book that bears his name.

be pregnant and will give birth to a son, and they'll call his name *Immanuel*,[†] which translates to "God with us."

Joseph got up from his sleep and did what the angel of the Lord commanded and took her as his wife, but he didn't know her until she gave birth to a son. He named him Jesus.

The Lord himself will give you a sign: look, a virgin will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and she'll call his name Immanuel.

Isaiah 7:14



Caesar Augustus (also called Gaius Julius Caesar Augustus) was the first and arguably the greatest Roman emperor, ruling from 27 BC to 14 AD. He expanded his rule throughout the Mediterranean world and established *Pax Romana* ("Roman Peace"), which was two centuries of peace throughout the empire. Like other Roman rulers, he periodically imposed a census to be taken of the entire empire to assess for taxation and military service.

During a **census**, everyone had to return to their hometown to declare to the censor their name, age, family, and property (land, slaves, livestock). Single women and orphans were represented by their guardians. A person who deliberately missed the census was subject to severe punishment, including property seizure, imprisonment, and/or death.

When **Quirinius** took over the reign of Syria from Herod Archelaus in 6 AD, one of his first tasks was to conduct a census in Syria and Judea. However, Matthew's Gospel states Jesus' birth was during the reign of Herod the Great, who died ten years earlier in 4 BC. Thus there is some discrepancy as to what Quirinius' role was at that time, since he didn't take power until a decade later. Most scholars agree that Jesus was born around 4 BC.

Eight kilometers south of Jerusalem in the fertile hill country of Judah was a city called **Bethlehem**. Its name means "house of bread," but it was also called David's City in the New Testament, since that was where David was born, raised, and anointed king (Jerusalem is also called David's City for other reasons). Bethlehem is first mentioned in Genesis as the burial place of Jacob's wife Rachel after she died following the birth to her second son Benjamin. It's later recorded as where Ruth and Naomi, David's ancestors, returned after their husbands' deaths. Finally, the prophet Micah prophesied the Messiah would be born there, hundreds of years before Jesus' arrival.

As for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, too small to be among the thousands from Judah, someone will go out from you to be the ruler of Israel. His origins are ancient, from the days of eternity.

Micah 5:2

In those days an order went out from Caesar Augustus* for a census* to be taken of the whole world. This was the first census while Quirinius* was governor of Syria. So everyone went to be registered, each to his own city. Joseph went up too, from the city of Nazareth in Galilee to David's City in Judea, which is called Bethlehem,* because he was from David's house and family.

Luke 2:1-20

He went to register with Mary, who was en-

gaged to him and was pregnant.

While they were there, the days were fulfilled for her to give birth, and she delivered her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and laid him in a manger,* because there wasn't any room for them at the lodge.

That night, in the same area, there were shepherds camping* and guarding their flocks. Suddenly, an angel from the Lord stood in front of them and the Lord's glory shone around them, and they were terribly scared. But the angel told them, "Don't be afraid! Look, I bring you good news* of great joy that'll be for all people! A savior has been born today in David's City. He is Christ the Lord. This is your sign: you'll find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

Suddenly a multitude of heaven's armies appeared with the angel, praising God, saying, "Glory to God in the highest! Peace on earth among men that please him!"

After the angels left them for heaven, the shepherds said to each other, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see what has happened, about these words that the Lord has let us know!"

So they came quickly and found Mary and Joseph, with the baby lying in a manger. When they saw him, they let them know about the speech they had been told regarding this child. All who heard it wondered about what the shepherds had told them. But Mary treasured all of this speech, thinking about it in her heart. Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had seen and heard, just as it had been told to them.

A box or trough used to hold food for animals was called a **manger** (*phatne* in Greek). In Judea, they were often made of clay mixed with straw or stones. Mangers could also be carved into a rock wall within a stable.

Agrauleo is a Greek verb derived from *agros* ("field" or "land") and *aule* ("courtyard"). It refers to a shepherd's practice of sleeping out in the fields, under the open sky. It's translated here as "**camping**."

The term "gospel" comes from the Old English for "**good news**" or "glad tidings." It's the direct translation of the Greek word *euangelion*, which literally means "good message." Although it has come to refer to the story of Jesus' life, its meaning during the first century was much broader. The gospel represented good news for a kingdom or empire in a variety of ways: a new king had been crowned, the king had defeated his enemies, or a new heir to the throne had been born. In any of these occurrences, messengers would be dispatched throughout the kingdom to proclaim the gospel, that is, the good news. It was also common practice for messengers to be dispatched following a battle to relay news of victory to an expectant king and country back home. In keeping with Christian tradition, the Gospel (capital "G") refers to Jesus' story, as recorded in the New Testament books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who announces peace and brings good news of happiness, who announces salvation, saying in Zion, "Your God reigns!"

Isaiah 52:7



According to Moses' Law, a mother was considered unclean for 40 days after giving birth to a son. However, if she gave birth to a daughter, she was unclean for 73 days (see Leviticus 12). After the **days of her purification**, she would bring a one-year-old lamb and a dove to the priest as an offering, and then she would be clean again. However, if she couldn't afford a lamb, she could offer two doves instead.

The **doves** (*peristera*) mentioned in the Bible were similar to modern-day pigeons. **Turtle-doves** (*trygon*), however, were migrants to Palestine, living there from April to October and filling the air with their soft cooing. Because they were relatively common, doves and turtle-doves were often used as food and inexpensive sacrifices.

If she can't find enough for a lamb, she'll take two turtledoves or two young doves, one for a burnt offering and the other for sin. The priest will cover her and she'll be clean.

Leviticus 12:8

When the eight days were fulfilled before his circumcision, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he was conceived in the womb. And when the days for [Mary's] purification* were complete, according to Moses' Law, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it's written in the Lord's Law, "Every male that opens the womb will be called holy to the Lord"),† and to offer a sacrifice according to the Lord's Law, a pair of turtledoves or two young doves.

There was a man in Jerusalem named Simeon, who was righteous and devoted. He was looking for Israel to be comforted, and the Holy Spirit was on him. The Holy Spirit had told him that he wouldn't see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. He came into the Temple in the Spirit and when Jesus' parents brought in the child to do the Law's custom, he took him into his arms and blessed God, saying,

"Master, now you're setting your slave free in peace, just as you've said.

My eyes have seen your salvation, which you've prepared in front of everyone, A light for revelation to the Gentiles* and the glory of your people Israel!"†

Luke 2:21-39

Dedicate every firstborn to me, the first offspring of every womb among Israel's sons, of both man and animals. It belongs to me.... The males belong to the LORD.

Exodus 13:2,12b

The Jews called any non-Jews **Gentiles**, from *ethnos*, the Greek word for "nations." Segregation between Jews and Gentiles was extreme under Roman rule, and Jews wouldn't normally eat with or associate with any foreigners.

I'll make you a light to the nations, so my salvation can reach to the end of the earth.

Isaiah 49:6

His father and mother were amazed at what was said about him. Simeon blessed them and told his mother Mary, “Look, even though a sword will pierce your soul, this one is laid down for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and as a sign to be opposed, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed.”

A **prophet** is God’s mouthpiece and, accordingly, a prophecy is a message relayed from God. Although the Greek term *prophitis* translates to “foreteller,” which is where the English term comes from, the equivalent Hebrew word (*nabiy*) translates to “spokesman.” The understanding of a prophet in first century Judea wasn’t necessarily someone who could predict the future, but someone who simply acted as God’s messenger. In fact, the majority of prophecies in the Bible didn’t foretell future events but rather instructed, warned, encouraged, or corrected the people they were intended for. Such messages were received by prophets in all sorts of ways (through angels, in dreams, by seeing visions), just as prophets in the Bible came from all walks of life (shepherds, farmers, princes, kings, priests, women), and they could be called to lifelong or temporary service. Yet however they spoke, the Bible states that prophets carried the authority of God himself as they spoke his words, not their own. A prophet speaking apart from God was considered a great sin and was harshly denounced. When a prophet did foretell future events, the Bible records that his words should be used to verify or falsify his status as a prophet. Unfortunately, the role of being a prophet was not particularly pleasant in ancient times – many of the prophets in the Bible faced abuse when their messages were not well-received.

I’ll raise up a prophet like [Moses] from among his brothers. I’ll put my words in his mouth and he’ll tell them all that I command him.

Deuteronomy 18:18

There was also a prophetess,* Anna, Phanael’s daughter, from the tribe of Asher.* She was well along in days and had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and then as a widow until the age of 84. She never left the Temple, serving night and day with fasting and prayer. At that hour, she came up and thanked God, and she spoke about him to all who were looking for Jerusalem’s deliverance.

When Joshua divided the promised land among Israel’s tribes, the land of western Galilee was given to the tribe of **Asher**. Despite its rich soil and thick forests, its distance from the rest of Israel made it somewhat isolated. Much of its territory was taken over by the ancient nation of Phoenicia. Asher, the patriarch of the tribe, was Jacob’s eighth son, the second of two sons born to Leah’s maid-servant Zilpah.

Then, when they had done everything according to the Lord’s Law, they returned to their city, Nazareth in Galilee.



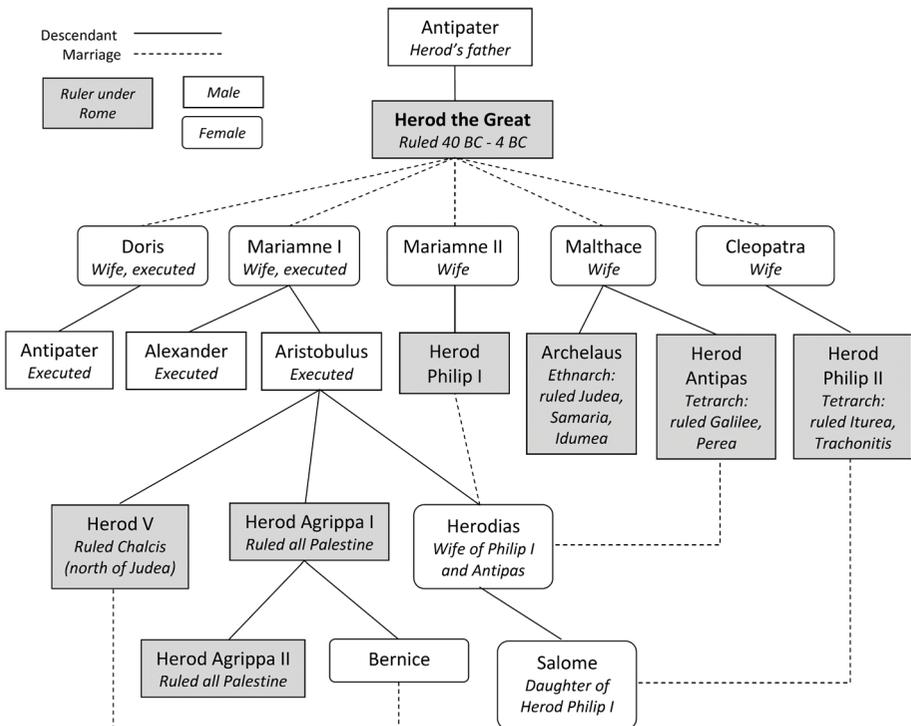
Herod was the name of various rulers in and around Judea, the first of which was **Herod the Great**. He was appointed king of the Roman province of Judea in 36 BC, ruling until 4 BC, around the time of Jesus' birth. Herod the Great remained loyal to Rome throughout his reign, maintaining favor and peace with generous gifts. He also sought to please the Jews, claiming to be a convert to Judaism himself, and undertook various building projects across Judea, particularly the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem. But despite this, Herod was a harsh, violent ruler. He presumably suffered from depression and paranoia, which prompted him to have three of his sons – and the mother of two of them – killed. During his final days, he made plans for an extravagant funeral. He died after a long bout of agonizing illness.

After Herod's death, his kingdom was divided into three regions, each ruled by one of his sons:

- Herod Archelaus ruled Judea and Samaria briefly, until 6 AD. He was deposed after complaints of his brutality reached Rome.
- Herod Antipas ruled Galilee and Perea until 39 AD. He became infatuated with his half-brother's wife Herodias, and he married her despite both of them being married to others at the time.
- Herod Philip II ruled the northern part of his father's kingdom until 30 AD. He also had many building projects, most notably rebuilding the city of Caesarea Philippi, which he named after himself.

Archelaus was called an *ethnarch* ("ruler of the people"), taking over half of his father's kingdom and ruling over the descendants of Abraham (Jews, Samaritans, Idumeans). Antipas and Philip II were called *tetrarchs* ("ruler of a quarter"), dividing the other half of the kingdom between them.

One of Herod the Great's grandsons also became a ruler. After Herod had his son Aristobulus executed, his grandson – Herod Agrippa – was raised in the imperial court of Rome. By winning the favor of successive emperors, Agrippa was granted his uncles' territories one at a time, beginning in 37 AD, eventually acquiring his grandfather's entire kingdom.



The term *magus* referred to someone who divined future events from the stars. The practice was rooted in the teaching of Zoroaster, an ancient sorcerer and astrologist who was considered the founder of the **Magi**. However, their role in ancient times may have also included advising rulers, acting as priests, studying science, and/or practicing sorcery. The Greek word *magus* is where the English “magician” originates.

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the days of King Herod,* **Magi*** from the East arrived in Jerusalem, saying, “Where’s the one born as the king of the Jews? We saw his star in the East and have come to worship him.”

When King Herod heard this, he was troubled, along with all of Jerusalem. So gathering together all the High Priests and the scribes from the people, he asked them where the Christ would be born. They told him, “Bethlehem in Judea, because the prophet wrote this:

‘And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, aren’t at all least among the leaders of Judah. A ruler will come out of you, who’ll shepherd Israel, my people.’”†

So Herod called the **Magi** secretly and figured out the time the star had appeared to them. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and ask about the child thoroughly, and report back to me when you find him, so I can come and worship him too.”

Then after hearing the king, they left. The star they had seen in the East led them until it came and stood over where the child was. When they saw the star, they celebrated exceedingly with great happiness. Coming into the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they fell down and worshipped him. They opened their treasuries and brought him gifts of gold,* frankincense,* and myrrh.* Then, having

Matthew 2:1-23
Luke 2:40

And as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, too small to be among the thousands from Judah, someone will go out from you to be the ruler of Israel for me. His origins are ancient, from the days of eternity... He’ll rise up and shepherd in the LORD’s strength and in the pride of the LORD’s name... And he’ll be peace.

Micah 5:2, 4-5

As a soft, yellow metal that doesn’t tarnish, **gold** was ideal for jewelry and currency in ancient times, as it is today. It was a common gift for royalty, such as when the Queen of Sheba visited Solomon to witness his splendor firsthand. It also decorated the Temple in Jerusalem. *Boswellia* trees are exceptionally hardy plants, able to grow in the harsh arid climate of the

Middle East and northern Africa. They can survive in mountainous conditions too dry and rocky for most other plants. **Frankincense** is the scented, dried resin of the *Boswellia* tree, harvested by “milking” the trees of their sap. The milky sap is where the Aramaic name for frankincense comes from (*olibanum*, “the result of milking”). Frankincense was used in various anointing oils, incense, perfumes, and religious offerings throughout the Middle East and Northern Africa. Certain sacrifices mandated by Moses’ Law were to be made along with pure frankincense.

Similar to frankincense, **myrrh** (from the Aramaic for “bitter”) was a fragrant blend of oil and resin from the small, thorny *Commiphora* bush. It was used in incense, perfumes, anointing oils, and as an embalming agent to prepare a corpse for burial. It may also have been used as a primitive anesthetic. Its value in ancient times was so great that it was typically worth its weight in gold.

been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Now after they left, look, an angel of the Lord appears to Joseph in a dream. “Get up!” he told him. “Take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt, and stay there until I tell you. Herod’s going to look for the child to destroy him.”

So he got up, took the child and his mother at night, and left for Egypt. He was there until the death of Herod, to fulfill what the Lord spoke through the prophet: “I called my son out of Egypt.”†

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the Magi, he got very angry and ordered all the boys in Bethlehem and its territory to be killed, from two years old and under, according to the time he figured from the Magi. Then what was said through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled: “A voice was heard in Ramah,* crying and much mourning. Rachel* is weeping for her children, but she won’t be comforted, because they are no more.”†

When Israel was a boy, I loved him, and I called my son out of Egypt.

Hosea 11:1

The LORD says, “A voice is heard in Ramah, mourning and bitter crying. Rachel is crying for her children, but she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they’re no more.”

Jeremiah 31:15

When Isaac’s son Jacob ran away from home out of fear of his brother, he lived with his uncle Laban for 14 years. During that time, he fell in love with and married Laban’s daughter (Jacob’s cousin) **Rachel**. She was unable to conceive after her marriage and considered herself dead without children. Although she competed fiercely with her older sister Leah (Jacob’s other wife who bore him seven children), Rachel was Jacob’s favorite and eventually gave birth to two of his twelve sons. She was buried near Bethlehem after dying following the birth of her second son, Benjamin.

Ramah was the name of various cities in the Bible, but the one most likely referred to here

is in the territory of Benjamin, within the northern kingdom of Israel, 8 kilometers north of Jerusalem. It may have been the same town as Ramoth-Gilead, the birthplace of Samuel the prophet.

But look, after Herod died, an angel from the Lord appears to Joseph in a dream in Egypt. “Get up,” he told him. “Take the child and his mother, and go into the land of Israel, because those who sought the child’s life are dead.”

So he got up, took the child and his mother, and came to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling Judea instead of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. So after being warned in a dream, he left for the area of Galilee and came to live in a city called Nazareth. This fulfilled what the prophets spoke: “He’ll be called a Nazarene.”*

The child grew up, becoming strong and full of wisdom. And the grace of God was on him.

The prophecy of Jesus being a **Nazarene** is not recorded in the Bible. It may have been an oral tradition.



Exodus records that God sent ten plagues against the Egyptians because Pharaoh repeatedly didn’t allow Moses to lead the nation of Israel out of slavery. First, the Nile River turned to blood (1), then frogs covered the land (2), followed by infestations of lice (3) and flies (4). Disease then struck livestock (5), with boils breaking out on people as well (6). Severe hailstorms (7) led to swarms of locusts that devastated crops (8), followed by three days of darkness (9). The final plague was the death of every firstborn male in Egypt (10). During each plague, only the Egyptians and their property were affected, not Israel. But to prevent the last and most severe plague from striking Israel’s sons, Moses instructed the entire nation to sacrifice a lamb and wipe its blood on their doorposts the night before the angel of death was to come. The blood would be a sign for the angel to pass over the house, sparing the firstborn sons of Israel. That night, after finding dead sons in every Egyptian house, Pharaoh finally let Israel go.

Thus the tradition of celebrating the **Passover Feast** began, to commemorate when the angel of death passed over Israel’s homes. It was celebrated in the spring, and all of Israel’s men were required to gather in Jerusalem to feast and rest for a week. On the first night, a flawless lamb was sacrificed and eaten, and for the rest of the week, all bread had to be flat and unleavened. In fact, any form of yeast or leavening agent was prohibited during the feast, since, in their haste to leave Egypt centuries prior, Israel had no time to include yeast in their bread and wait for it to rise. The Passover was therefore also called the Feast of the Unleavened.

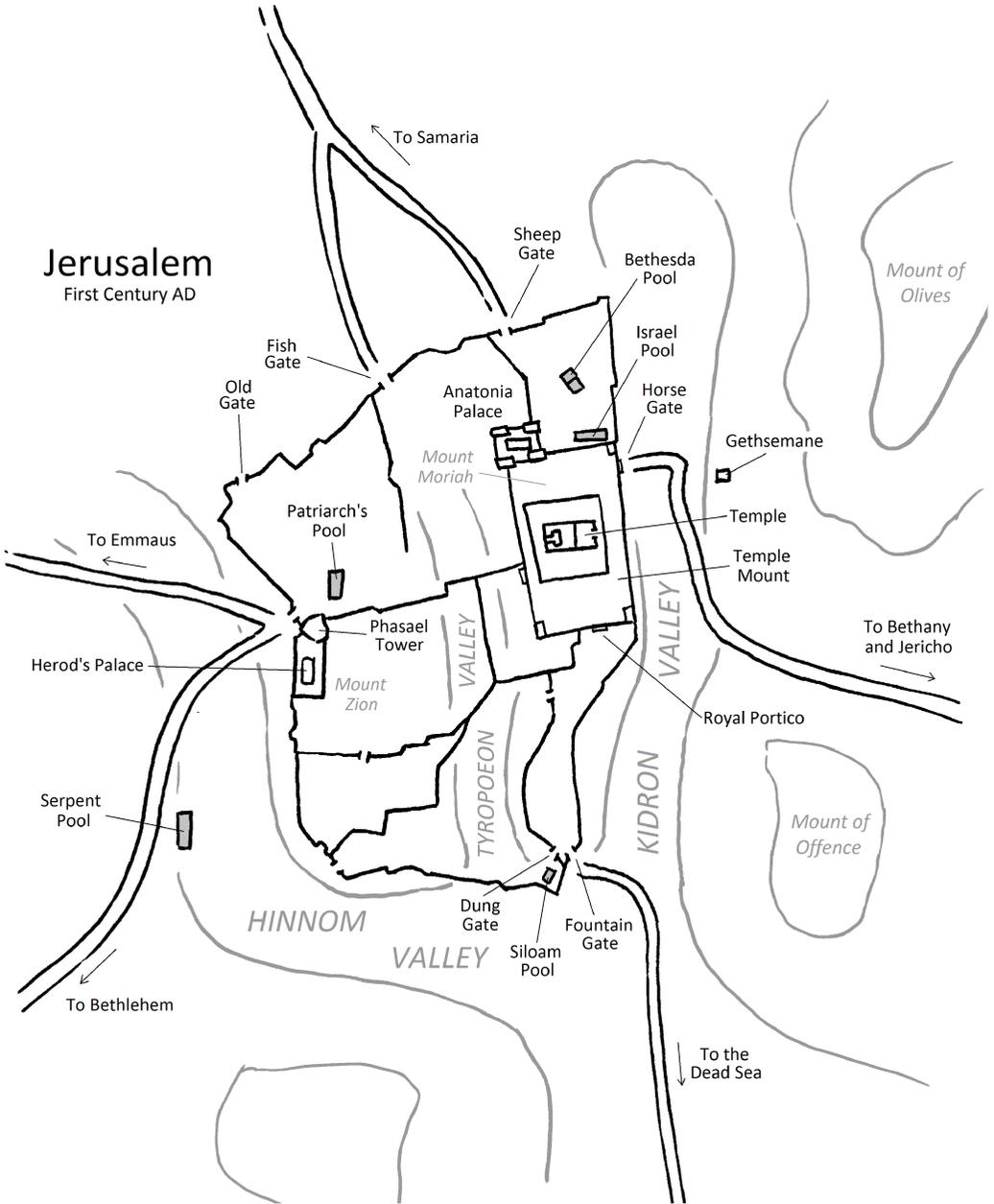
Now his parents went to Jerusalem every year for the Passover Feast. So when he was 12 years old, they went up, according to the feast’s

Luke 2:41-52

The Jewish capital of **Jerusalem** was (and still is) a prominent city in the Middle East, but it has a tumultuous history of repeated conquest, glory, rebellion, war, destruction, and restoration. Unlike other ancient capitals that were well-positioned around natural resources and trade routes, Jerusalem was located far inland, between the Mediterranean Sea and the Dead Sea, away from major trade routes and waterways. It also lacked an adequate water supply, until an underground spring was diverted within its walls. The city sat on the southern spur of a plateau in the Judean mountains. Two steep valleys flanked Jerusalem east and west, while another shallow one ran through it. The Hinnom Valley, also called the Gehenna Valley, lay south and west of Jerusalem's walls, wrapping around the base of the city's highest point, Mount Zion, where Herod's palace was built; the Kidron Valley was east of the city, separating the Mount of Olives from Jerusalem's temple mount, also called Mount Moriah; and through the middle of the city, the shallow Tyropoeon Valley ran southward to join with the Kidron and Hinnom outside the walls. But despite its apparent geographic impracticality, Jerusalem's hostile location made it a strong fortress, easily defended against attack. However, Jerusalem's walls and gates have been built, destroyed, rebuilt, and expanded so many times that little of what stood in the first century remains to this day.

The name Jerusalem has various proposed meanings: the first half of the word can mean "foundation," "cornerstone," "house," or "instruction," while the second half can mean "peace," "safety" or refer to Shalim, the Canaanite god of the setting sun. Similarly, Jerusalem has various pseudonyms. The city is first mentioned in the Bible as Salem (1), which was ruled by a Canaanite priest named Melchizedek during the time of Abraham. Hundreds of years later, Jerusalem is again mentioned in the Bible during Joshua's campaign to conquer Canaan. The city was then inhabited by the Jebusites, and was therefore called Jebus (2). Although Israel attacked and invaded the city, they couldn't drive the Jebusites out until the reign of King David. Despite the city's strong defense atop steep slopes, David's army conquered the city around 1003 BC through a secret underground water tunnel. David then expanded the city walls and made Jerusalem his capital. Jerusalem helped to unite Israel because it sat, ideally, near the border of Judah (southern kingdom) and Benjamin (northern kingdom). Thus Jerusalem was also known as the City of David (3). Finally, David's son Solomon built the first Temple in Jerusalem on the second-highest point in the city, Mount Moriah, which may be the same location as where Abraham tied up and nearly sacrificed his son Isaac in an act of faith centuries earlier. However, the Temple mount (and Jerusalem itself) was thereafter called Zion (4), after Mount Zion, the highest point within the city, located across the Tyropoeon Valley just west of Mount Moriah.

After construction of the Jewish Temple, Jerusalem became the center of religion and culture for Israel. It was during Solomon's reign that Jerusalem reached the pinnacle of its splendor, with envoys from all over the world visiting to admire and pay tribute to Israel. However, civil strife and widespread immorality soon led to its downfall. Twenty years after the northern kingdom of Israel fell to Assyria, Jerusalem (the capital of the southern kingdom of Judah) miraculously survived a siege in 701 BC by the Assyrians after a plague supposedly decimated their army. However, Babylon succeeded where Assyria could not, capturing Jerusalem in 597 and again in 587 BC, and taking exiles back east on both occasions. Seventy years later, Jewish exiles were allowed to return to their homeland under the Persians to rebuild the Temple, which was completed in 516 BC, but paled in comparison to the original Temple. Judah existed as a vassal state in the Persian Empire, and as a territory in the Greek Empire after Alexander the Great conquered Persia. But Jerusalem revolted against the Greeks in 167 BC and established an independent Hebrew nation. However, the city was recaptured in 37 BC, this time by Herod the Great, who ruled Judea and the surrounding nations as a client-king under Rome. During Herod's rule, Jerusalem's Temple and walls were renovated and expanded. The Jews again rebelled in 66 AD, leading to a Roman-Jewish war and the subsequent destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD under the Roman commander Titus.



custom. But when they returned, after completing the days, Jesus the boy stayed back in Jerusalem. His parents didn't know of it and went a day's journey, thinking he was in the caravan. But they didn't find him when they looked among their relatives and friends, so they returned to Jerusalem to look for him there. After three days, they found him in the Temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking questions, and everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers. When they saw him, they were blown away.* Then his mother said, "Son, why have you treated us like this?! Look, your father and I have been in agony searching for you!"

"Why were you looking for me?" he answered. "Didn't you know I'd be at my Father's?"

But they didn't understand the words he said. Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and he submitted to them. His mother kept all these words in her heart.

Jesus kept increasing in wisdom and age, and in favor with God and men.

The Greek *ekplesso* is typically translated in the Bible as "astonished" or "amazed." It's derived from *ek* ("away") and *plesso* ("strike"), and literally translates to "strike off," "drive out," or "**blow away**." When used figuratively, *ekplesso* describes being struck with amazement or being dumbfounded. All of the Gospel writers except John use this term.