MEANWHILE, IN GALILEE



Putting Jesus Back Into History

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Meanwhile, in Galilee: Putting Jesus Back Into History

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About the cover: The coin on the front is an illustration of a silver denarius of the Roman emperor Tiberius (ruled AD 14–37), very likely the kind of coin Jesus held up when he was asked whether to pay taxes to Caesar (Mark 12:13–17; see Chapters 8 and 14). The Latin around its edge, TI CAESAR DIVI AVG F AVGVSTVS, is short for "Tiberius Caesar Augustus, son of the divine Augustus."

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Before You Begin



Most of us learned about Jesus and about history in different rooms. Jesus belonged to church, Sunday school or Christmas. Julius Caesar, Cleopatra and the Roman emperors belonged to the classroom. Kept apart like that, Jesus can start to feel like a figure from a fairy-tale past, somewhere before "real" history began.

He wasn't. He was born a generation after Cleopatra died, grew up while Augustus ruled the world, and was executed under the emperor whose face was on the coins in his listeners' pockets. This book puts those two histories back together, one timeline at a time. Honestly, it's the book I wish someone had handed me years ago.

What This Book Is

- **A history book.** It tells the story of Jesus' life inside the world of his time, from the ancient past that shaped his people to the moment Roman historians started writing about his followers.
- **Side by side.** Every chapter sets events in Judea and Galilee next to what was happening in Rome and the wider world in the same years, from Herod's harbor to Han China.
- **Evidence first.** Each chapter ends by showing its work: the sources, the inscriptions, the excavations and the ancient writers behind what you have just read.
- **Written for anyone.** You don't need to believe anything, or know anything about the Bible, to read it. If you are a skeptic, you are exactly the reader this book was written for.

What This Book Is Not

- **It is not a sermon.** The chapters tell the history. They do not stop to preach.
- **It is not a proof of faith.** History can tell us a great deal about Jesus. It cannot, on its own, tell us whether he was the Son of God or whether he rose from the dead. This book will not pretend otherwise.
- **It is not an attack on faith, either.** Where history is silent or uncertain, the book says so, and leaves those questions to the reader.
- **It is not the last word.** It is an introduction for general readers, not a scholarly study. Specialists debate almost everything in it, and the sources section points to where those debates happen.

Three Labels

To keep things honest, every claim in the "How We Know" section at the end of each chapter carries one of three labels:

- **Agreed:** most historians accept it, whether they are believers or not.
- **Debated:** serious scholars disagree, and the book tells you why.
- **Faith:** it lies beyond what history can test. Each reader weighs it personally.

If you remember nothing else, remember the labels. They are this book's promise to you: it will never pass off a debate as a fact, or a matter of faith as a historical finding.

How Each Chapter Works

1. **A cold open:** a scene from the period, often somewhere you might not expect.
2. **The story:** the events of the chapter, told as narrative history.
3. **Meanwhile:** a cut to what was happening somewhere else in the same years. Before Jesus' public life, these cuts usually land in Galilee and Judea. Once his ministry begins and the story moves there, they go the other way: to Rome, to the emperor on Capri, and as far as China.

4. **How we know:** the evidence, with its labels.
5. **Side by side:** a table setting events in Judea next to events in Rome and the wider world.
6. **Questions to sit with:** a few prompts to think about, alone or with others. They have no right answers.

The chapters on the trial and the empty tomb keep their focus on Jerusalem, so their "meanwhile" lives in the side-by-side table. Chapter 19 and the Conclusion step back from the pattern to bring the whole story together.

A Note on the Bible

When this book quotes the Bible directly, it uses the **New International Version (NIV)**, one of the most widely read modern English translations, made from the original Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. When I retell a passage in my own words instead of quoting it, I give the reference so you can look it up for yourself. I also use the traditional names for the four Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Who actually wrote each one is debated among scholars, and nothing in this book depends on settling it. One thing does matter: the Gospels are not four separate reports. Most scholars think Mark was written first and that Matthew and Luke both used Mark, adding material of their own, while John probably wrote independently of them, though some scholars think he knew Mark. So when the first three Gospels agree, that is not three independent witnesses. Agreement between Mark and John, or with Paul's letters, counts for more.

Like most readers, I read the Bible in English. Now and then the book explains an original Greek or Aramaic word, such as *tekton* (builder), *kataluma* (guest room) or *Abba* (Father), because the English can hide something the first listeners would have heard. For those, I've relied on the work of scholars who read the original languages.

Where I Stand

I'm a Christian. I recently came back to God after about eight years away, so I know what it is like to keep your distance from faith, and from the Bible.

I should be clear about something else, too: I'm not a historian, and I'm not a theologian. I'm an ordinary believer who got curious, read widely, and leaned on the work of people who have spent their lives studying this period.

Where those experts disagree, I've tried to tell you so rather than pick a side for you, and the sources behind every chapter are listed so you can check them yourself.

I wrote this book for anyone who doubts whether Jesus really existed, and for anyone who would rather not read the Bible but is still curious about him. My first aim is simple: to show, from history, that Jesus was a real person who walked the same earth we do, as real as the emperors and governors around him. My second aim I want to be upfront about. I hope that, having met him in history, you might want to meet him in his own words, in the Bible. To keep my faith out of the history, every chapter uses the three labels above, so you can see exactly where the evidence ends and belief begins.

One more thing, so there are no surprises: the Conclusion does more than summarize. It ends with an invitation to read one of the Gospels for yourself, with the history in this book as your guide. You are free to accept it or not. Either way, I hope you finish this book knowing Jesus belongs to history as surely as Caesar does, and that the question of who he was deserves a fair hearing.

And one last thing you should know. I wrote this book with the help of an AI assistant, which helped me research, organize and draft it. I've checked the facts against the sources listed at the back, and every page has been read, shaped and approved by me. The questions were mine, and so is the faith.

CHAPTER ONE

Ancient, but
NOT THAT ANCIENT

What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun.

ECCLESIASTES 1:9

The Tourists

Try something for me before we start. Picture Jesus for a moment. What century does your mind put him in? Sandals, dust, a donkey or two, somewhere so far back that history hadn't properly started yet? Hold on to that picture. We're going to come back to it.

Picture a man standing in the dark, holding an oil lamp up to a painted wall.

He is a traveler from somewhere in the Greek-speaking Mediterranean. He has paid a local guide, ridden up a dusty valley on the west bank of the Nile, and climbed down a long, sloping corridor into the tomb of a pharaoh. The colors on the walls are still bright: gods with the heads of birds, stars painted across a blue ceiling, columns of hieroglyphs that no one alive can read anymore.

He is impressed. He is also, being human, a little bored of being impressed. So he pulls out a sharp point and scratches a message into the plaster, something along the lines of *I saw this, and I was amazed.* Then he adds his name, so the next visitor will know he was here. Basically, the ancient version of a selfie.

Our traveler is imagined, but his graffiti is not. The royal tombs of Egypt's Valley of the Kings carry more than two thousand scratched and

painted messages left by Greek and Roman visitors. Some marvel. Some complain. (Yes, people were leaving bad reviews two thousand years ago.) Some just say, in effect, *I was here.* Together they span centuries, from before Cleopatra's time to long after Jesus.

Now, this is where it gets good. When those tourists were climbing down into those tombs, the pharaohs buried there had already been dead for more than a thousand years. The tourists were not living in the ancient world. They were **visiting** it.

Confession time. Until recently, I pictured the time of Jesus as the beginning of history, a dim and dusty dawn when the world was young and simple. It wasn't. By the time a baby was born in a small town in Judea, the world was already old, crowded, argumentative and full of ruins. People went sightseeing. They read history books about earlier empires. They complained that things were better in the good old days. Some things never change.

This book is about putting Jesus back into that world, the real one. And to do that, we have to start long before Bethlehem.

The World Was Already Old

Here is a fact that tends to break people's brains a little: **Cleopatra lived closer in time to the Moon landing than to the building of the Great Pyramid.**

The Great Pyramid of Giza went up around 2560 BC. Cleopatra died in 30 BC, about 2,500 years later. Neil Armstrong stepped onto the Moon in 1969, about 2,000 years after her. Even in her day, the pyramids were already about 2,500 years old. She ruled in their shadow the way a modern Egyptian president does.

Now slide that same ruler forward a few decades. Jesus was born around 5 BC, roughly a generation after Cleopatra's death. That means the world he was born into already had:

- Writing that was about 3,200 years old
- Law codes, like Hammurabi's in Babylon, that were already around 1,700 years old
- Stonehenge, already standing for about 2,500 years
- A city of Rome that, by its own count, had been around for about 750 years

- Olympic Games that had been held every four years for nearly eight centuries

Try one more comparison. If the traditional dates are roughly right, **Abraham was about as far in the past for Jesus as Jesus is for us.** When Jesus read the stories of Abraham in the synagogue at Nazareth, he was reading about a man as distant from him as he is from you.

So when we picture Jesus, we should stop imagining the first page of history. He arrived somewhere in the middle of the book, and a lot had already happened. To see where he fits, let's walk through it.

The Bible's Own Deep Past

Part of the confusion is that the Bible itself covers an enormous stretch of time. Jesus' story sits at the end of a book that begins, from a historian's point of view, almost two thousand years earlier. The figures who really are ancient (Abraham, Moses, David) lend their antiquity to everything else in the book, including the Gospels.

So let's place them in world time.

Abraham (traditionally around 2000–1800 BC). If the traditional dating is close, Abraham's journey from Mesopotamia to Canaan happened in roughly the same era as Hammurabi's law code in Babylon. The Great Pyramid was already several centuries old. No archaeological find names Abraham, so historians treat his dates and details as uncertain.

Joseph in Egypt (traditionally around 1700–1600 BC). Genesis ends with Abraham's great-grandson Joseph, sold by his brothers as a slave, rising to become the second most powerful man in Egypt. Intriguingly, Egypt in roughly this era was partly ruled by the Hyksos, foreign kings from Canaan who took over the Nile Delta. Some writers see Joseph's story fitting that world of Semitic outsiders in high places. There is no direct evidence for Joseph himself, so this stays in the debated column.

Moses and the Exodus (traditionally around 1450 or 1250 BC). Here the debate gets lively. Among those who see the Exodus as a historical event, many connect it with the reign of Ramesses II, the great builder pharaoh of the 1200s BC. Others place it earlier. And many scholars doubt it happened the way the Bible describes at all. Meanwhile, the boy king Tutankhamun had been buried around 1323 BC. Around 1208 BC, a pharaoh named Merneptah

carved a victory monument that mentions a people called "Israel" living in Canaan. It is the oldest known mention of Israel outside the Bible.

Joshua, the Judges and the Philistines (around 1200–1050 BC). The books of Joshua and Judges describe Israel settling in Canaan, followed by a rough-and-tumble era of tribal heroes like Deborah, Gideon and Samson. Meanwhile, the whole eastern Mediterranean was falling apart. Around 1177 BC, the great Bronze Age powers (the Hittites, the Mycenaean Greeks, the trading cities of the coast) collapsed in a wave of war, drought and migration. This is the world later Greeks remembered in their legends of the Trojan War. Among the newcomers were sea raiders the Egyptians called the *Peleset*, carved in battle scenes on the temple walls of Pharaoh Ramesses III. Most historians identify them with the Philistines: Samson's enemies and Goliath's people. How Israel itself took shape in Canaan is still hotly debated, but archaeology does show hundreds of small new villages appearing in the hill country at exactly this time.

David (around 1000 BC). For a long time, skeptics wondered whether King David was a legend. Then, in 1993, archaeologists in northern Israel found a broken stone inscription from the 800s BC that mentions the "House of David," a royal dynasty. Debate continues about how large his kingdom was, but most historians now accept that a ruler named David founded a dynasty in Jerusalem. To put him in perspective: David is about as far from Jesus as the Vikings are from us.

Solomon (around 970–930 BC). David's son built the first Temple in Jerusalem and became a byword for wisdom, and, according to 1 Kings, for having 700 wives. The Bible describes him trading with Hiram, king of the Phoenician city of Tyre, who sent cedar wood and craftsmen for the Temple. The Phoenicians are worth meeting: they were the great sailors of the age, and their alphabet is the ancestor of the Hebrew and Greek alphabets and, eventually, of the letters you are reading now. No inscription from his reign names Solomon, and how grand his kingdom really was remains debated.

If your head is starting to spin with unfamiliar names, don't worry. There's no test at the end, and you don't need to remember them all. The point is simply this: long before Jesus was born, the story of his people was already tangled up with the superpowers of the ancient world.

When the Bible Meets the Headlines

After Solomon, something changes. The Bible's story starts showing up in other nations' records. Kings of Israel and Judah appear on Egyptian temple walls, Assyrian monuments and Babylonian tablets, usually because someone was conquering them.

The kingdom splits (around 930 BC). After Solomon's death, the ten northern tribes broke away as the kingdom of Israel, and Judah in the south kept Jerusalem. Within a few years, according to 1 Kings, the Egyptian pharaoh Shishak marched in and carried off the Temple's treasures. In Egypt, at the great temple of Karnak, Pharaoh Sheshonq I carved a victory list of the towns he conquered in this very region. Most historians think the two are the same man and the same campaign.

Elijah versus Ahab (around 870–850 BC). The Bible remembers King Ahab of Israel and his Phoenician queen Jezebel mainly as villains, the targets of the fiery prophet Elijah. The Assyrians remembered Ahab differently. An Assyrian monument records that at the Battle of Qarqar in 853 BC, "Ahab the Israelite" brought 2,000 chariots to a coalition against them, one of the largest forces on the field. Meanwhile, Jezebel's Phoenician relatives were busy too: by tradition, the city of Carthage was founded by Phoenicians from Tyre around 814 BC.

The only picture of an Israelite king (around 841 BC). In the British Museum stands a black stone pillar from the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III. On it, a figure kneels with his face to the ground, bringing tribute. The caption names him as Jehu, the Israelite king who, according to 2 Kings, overthrew Ahab's dynasty. It is usually called the oldest known image of a king of Israel or Judah, though some scholars think the kneeling man is Jehu's envoy rather than the king himself.

Jonah's Nineveh and Isaiah's century (around 800–700 BC). The book of Jonah sends a reluctant prophet to Nineveh, a great city of the Assyrians, the most feared empire of the age. Whether Jonah's story is history, parable or something in between is debated, but Nineveh was very real. Meanwhile, this was a busy century everywhere: the first recorded Olympic Games were held in 776 BC, Rome was founded (by its own legend) in 753 BC, and the Greek epics of Homer were taking shape. The prophets Amos, Hosea and Isaiah were preaching in the same century.

Hezekiah's tunnel (701 BC). Assyria destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BC; its people were scattered, the origin of the "ten lost tribes." Two decades later, the Assyrian king Sennacherib came for Jerusalem. King Hezekiah prepared by having workers carve a tunnel through solid rock to bring spring water inside the city walls. You can still wade through it today. An inscription found inside describes the dramatic moment when two crews digging from opposite ends broke through and met. Sennacherib's own records boast that he shut Hezekiah up "like a bird in a cage," but notably never claim he captured the city. The Bible says the Assyrian army was struck down and withdrew.

Babylon, Daniel and the fall of Jerusalem (around 605–539 BC). In 587 BC (some count it as 586), the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem and Solomon's Temple and carried much of Judah into exile. Clay tablets dug up in Babylon list food rations for "Jehoiachin, king of Judah," the exiled king mentioned at the end of 2 Kings. The book of Daniel is set in this court. For a long time, critics pointed to its King Belshazzar as an error, because Babylonian king lists did not include him. Then cuneiform texts turned up naming Belshazzar as the son of the last king, ruling in Babylon while his father was away. When the book of Daniel was finally written down is still debated.

Cyrus sets them free (539 BC). About fifty years after the destruction, the Persian king Cyrus the Great conquered Babylon and allowed exiled peoples to return home. The Jews rebuilt a smaller Temple in Jerusalem, finished around 515 BC.

That rebuilt Temple, later lavishly expanded by Herod, is the one Jesus walked into. By his lifetime it had stood, in one form or another, for about five hundred years.

A Queen, a Wall and the 300

The last stories of the Old Testament play out inside the Persian Empire, which stretched from Egypt to India. And they overlap with some of the most famous moments in Western history.

Esther and Xerxes (around 480 BC). The book of Esther tells of a Jewish orphan who becomes queen of Persia and foils a plot to destroy her people, the story behind the festival of Purim. The king in the story, Ahasuerus, is generally identified as **Xerxes I**. Yes, that Xerxes: the Persian king who

invaded Greece in 480 BC and met the 300 Spartans at Thermopylae, then lost his fleet at Salamis. No Persian record mentions a Jewish queen, and Greek historians name a different wife, so scholars debate whether Esther is history or a historical novel. Either way, the story is set in the same palace, in the same reign, as one of the most famous battles in history.

Ezra and Nehemiah rebuild (around 458–430 BC). A generation later, the priest Ezra led a group home from Persia to teach the law, and Nehemiah, the Persian king's cupbearer, got permission to rebuild Jerusalem's ruined walls. Nehemiah's book names his local enemies, including Sanballat, governor of Samaria. Papyrus letters from a Jewish community in Egypt, written around 407 BC, mention the sons of Sanballat, governor of Samaria: the same name in the same job. Meanwhile, in Athens, the statesman Pericles was building the Parthenon. Its construction began in 447 BC, within a few years of Nehemiah's walls going up.

Malachi (around 450–430 BC). The prophet Malachi delivered the last book of the Christian Old Testament in roughly these same decades, ending with a promise that God would send a messenger to prepare the way. Hold on to that promise. In Chapter 10, a wild prophet by the Jordan will be greeted as that messenger. Then, for about four hundred years, the Bible goes quiet.

Meanwhile, Everywhere Else

While the people of Judea were going into exile and coming home, the rest of the world was having a remarkable few centuries. Historians sometimes call the period from about 800 to 200 BC the "Axial Age," because so many of the world's great traditions of thought took shape in it, in places with no contact with each other.

Consider who was alive within a century or so of the return from exile:

Jesus was not the first great teacher in history.
He arrived in a world full of them.

- **In India:** Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, taught somewhere in the 500s or 400s BC. His exact dates are debated.
- **In China:** Confucius taught about family, duty and good government, and died in 479 BC.

- **In Greece:** Athens was experimenting with democracy. A stonemason's son named Socrates asked so many uncomfortable questions that the city executed him in 399 BC.

In other words, by the time of Jesus, the Buddha and Confucius had been dead for four or five hundred years. Their teachings were already old traditions with schools, commentaries and followers. Jesus was not the first great teacher in history. He arrived in a world full of them. Of everything I learned while writing this book, that surprised me most.

Then came Alexander. **Alexander the Great** (356–323 BC) conquered the Persian Empire in about a decade, from Egypt to the edge of India. In 332 BC, his army passed through the land of Judea. He died at 32, and his generals carved up his empire. But he left behind something that shaped the story of Jesus more than almost anything else: **the Greek language.** For the next several centuries, educated people from Spain to Afghanistan could communicate in Greek. That is why the New Testament was written in Greek, not Hebrew or Latin.

Meanwhile, the other giants of the Jesus-era world were rising:

- **China** was unified in 221 BC by its first emperor, Qin Shi Huang, the man buried with the Terracotta Army. Soon after, the Han dynasty began a reign of four centuries and opened trade routes that would become the Silk Road.
- **Rome** fought Carthage for control of the Mediterranean. Hannibal famously marched his elephants over the Alps in 218 BC. By 146 BC, Rome had destroyed Carthage completely.

By the century before Jesus, Rome was the superpower of the West, and Han China the superpower of the East. They knew of each other only dimly, through traders and rumors of silk. Jesus would be born on the edge of the western one, in a small land that every passing empire seemed to want.

The Four Hundred Quiet Years

If you flip from the last page of the Old Testament to the first page of the New, you skip about four hundred years. Malachi signs off around 430 BC; Matthew's Gospel opens with the birth of Jesus. In between, as far as most Bible readers know, nothing happens.

Spoiler alert: those centuries were anything but quiet. They are the years that built the world Jesus grew up in.

The Greeks move in. After Alexander's death, Judea was passed back and forth between two of his successor kingdoms: the Ptolemies of Egypt and the Seleucids of Syria. Greek cities, Greek theaters and Greek gymnasiums appeared across the region. In Alexandria, Jewish scholars began translating the Hebrew scriptures into Greek. That translation, the Septuagint, became the Bible most of the early Christians would quote.

A king tries to erase a religion. In 167 BC, the Seleucid king Antiochus IV banned Jewish practices, including circumcision and Sabbath-keeping, and set up an altar to Zeus in the Jerusalem Temple. A family of priests called the Maccabees led a guerrilla revolt. Against the odds, they won. In 164 BC they rededicated the Temple, the event Jewish families still celebrate every year as **Hanukkah**. John's Gospel shows Jesus himself in Jerusalem during this festival, which it calls the Festival of Dedication. That's worth pausing on. Hanukkah isn't one of the ancient festivals from the time of Moses. When Jesus stood in the Temple for it, the event it celebrated was about 190 years old, roughly as far back for him as Queen Victoria's coronation is for us. For about a century afterward, Judea was an independent kingdom ruled by the Maccabees' descendants.

The parties form. These centuries also produced the groups that fill the pages of the Gospels. The Pharisees focused on careful keeping of the law in everyday life. The Sadducees were the priestly aristocracy around the Temple. The Essenes withdrew to the desert to wait for God to act; they are probably the community behind the Dead Sea Scrolls. And across all of them, a hope was growing for an anointed king, a *messiah*, who would free Israel for good.

Then Rome knocks. Around 67 BC, two royal brothers went to war over the throne, and both appealed to the most powerful general in the region: the Roman commander **Pompey**. Judea's independence was about to end.

In 63 BC, the year Pompey arrived at Jerusalem's walls, a baby boy was born in Rome to a well-connected family. His name was Gaius Octavius. The world would come to know him as Caesar Augustus, the emperor under whom Jesus would be born.

The pieces were moving into place.

SIDE BY SIDE

Here is the whole chapter on one page. Dates before about 1000 BC are traditional or approximate.

Date	The wider world	In the Bible
c. 2000–1800 BC	Hammurabi's law code in Babylon	Abraham leaves Mesopotamia
c. 1700–1600 BC	Hyksos kings take over the Nile Delta (c. 1650 BC)	Joseph in Egypt
c. 1250 BC (one view)	Ramesses II rules Egypt	Moses and the Exodus
c. 1177 BC	Bronze Age collapse; age of the Trojan War legends	Philistines settle the coast
c. 1000 BC	Zhou dynasty rules China	David makes Jerusalem his capital
c. 925 BC	Sheshonq I carves his victory list at Karnak	Shishak raids Jerusalem
853 BC	Ahab's chariots fight Assyria at Qarqar	Ahab and Elijah
776–753 BC	First Olympic Games; Rome founded (by legend)	Amos and Hosea preach (c. 760–720 BC)
701 BC	Sennacherib besieges Jerusalem	Hezekiah's tunnel; Isaiah
587 BC	Nebuchadnezzar rebuilds Babylon	Jerusalem destroyed; exile
539 BC	Persia becomes the largest empire yet	Cyrus frees the exiles; Daniel's era ends
c. 480 BC	Thermopylae and Salamis	Esther's story set in Xerxes' court
c. 430 BC	Socrates teaching in Athens	Malachi, the last prophet
332 BC	Alexander conquers Persia	Alexander's army reaches Judea
164 BC	Rome rising across the Mediterranean	Maccabees rededicate the Temple (Hanukkah)
c. 7–4 BC	Augustus rules Rome	Jesus is born

HOW WE KNOW

Every chapter of this book ends by showing its work. Each claim gets one of three labels: **Agreed** (most historians accept it, believers or not), **Debated** (serious scholars disagree), or **Faith** (beyond what history can test).

Claim in this chapter	Label	Main evidence
Greek and Roman tourists left graffiti in the royal tombs	Agreed	The inscriptions themselves, still on the walls in the Valley of the Kings
The Great Pyramid dates to around 2560 BC	Agreed	Egyptian king lists, archaeology, radiocarbon dating
A people called Israel lived in Canaan by about 1208 BC	Agreed	The Merneptah Stele, in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo
The Philistines arrived with the Sea Peoples around 1177 BC	Agreed	Ramesses III's temple reliefs; Philistine pottery and towns
A royal "House of David" existed	Agreed	The Tel Dan inscription, found in 1993
Pharaoh Sheshonq I campaigned in the region around 925 BC	Agreed	His victory list at Karnak; matching him to Shishak is the majority view
Ahab fought Assyria at Qarqar in 853 BC	Agreed	The Kurkh Monolith, in the British Museum
Jehu paid tribute to Shalmaneser III	Agreed	The Black Obelisk, in the British Museum
Hezekiah's tunnel and Sennacherib's siege of 701 BC	Agreed	The tunnel and its inscription, the Lachish reliefs, Sennacherib's own records
King Jehoiachin was held in Babylon	Agreed	Babylonian ration tablets naming him
Belshazzar governed Babylon for his father	Agreed	Babylonian cuneiform texts naming him as the king's son
Babylon destroyed Jerusalem in 587 BC	Agreed	The Bible, Babylonian records, burn layers in Jerusalem
Cyrus let exiled peoples return home	Agreed	The Bible; the Cyrus Cylinder (British Museum) shows the policy, though it does not name the Jews
Sanballat governed Samaria in Nehemiah's era	Agreed	The Elephantine papyri from Egypt

Claim in this chapter	Label	Main evidence
The Maccabean revolt and Pompey's capture of Jerusalem	Agreed	The books of Maccabees, Josephus, Roman historians
Whether, when and how Abraham, Joseph and Moses lived	Debated	The Bible; no direct archaeological evidence names them
How Israel emerged in Canaan	Debated	New hill-country villages fit several theories
The size and wealth of David's and Solomon's kingdom	Debated	Archaeologists disagree on how to read the finds
Jonah and Esther as history or as story	Debated	No outside record of either; the settings are real
When the book of Daniel was written	Debated	Many scholars favor around 165 BC; others an earlier date
The Buddha's exact dates	Debated	Later Buddhist tradition, read in different ways
The Essenes wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls	Debated	The majority view, but not a unanimous one
Elijah's miracles, Jerusalem's rescue in 701 BC, God at work in Israel's history	Faith	Each reader has to weigh these personally

QUESTIONS TO SIT WITH

1. Before reading this chapter, where in history did you picture Jesus? What gave you that picture?
2. Jesus was born into a world that already had the Buddha's and Confucius' teachings, Greek philosophy and Roman law. Does that make his story seem more ordinary to you, or more surprising?
3. The Tel Dan inscription changed how many scholars viewed King David. What kind of evidence would it take to change your mind about something you believe?

Next chapter: Rome Arrives. A general walks into the Holy of Holies, a dictator is stabbed in the Senate, a queen loses everything, and a teenager named Octavius begins his climb to becoming the most powerful man in the world.

END OF SAMPLE

Meanwhile, in Galilee

That was Chapter One of nineteen. The rest of the book follows the story from Pompey's Rome and Herod's building sites to Galilee, the cross, the empty tomb, and the first time Roman historians wrote about Christians.

Every chapter ends the same way: the evidence, sorted into what historians agree on, what they debate, and what is a matter of faith.

ELTONRENDA.COM/GALILEE

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