

ACCESS
THE BIBLE

a different way in...

by James Spanner ■

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Introduction

The Bible continues to hold fascination for 21st century people, despite its last pages having been written nearly 2000 years ago and its roots being in a land 2000 miles away and culturally remote too. Brave souls plunge in at page 1 with the words '*In the beginning...*', but many give up 'in the end' just a few pages later as they plough into the first of the genealogies and astonishing lifespan claims. Popular books claiming to 'crack the Bible code' seem to be a much less demanding read...

And so, to the vast majority, the Bible is known only through second-hand anecdotes and opinions, and the odd half-remembered, half-quoted snippets about 'the love of money' or 'rain falling on the righteous'.

A different way in

If you have found the Bible to be a 'closed book', then this booklet has been written with you in mind, to unlock a door through which you may gain access to the treasures within.

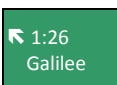
But first of all, it's important to understand that the Bible is actually not a *book* at all, but a library of books. To begin reading at *Genesis* (the first book) may not be the best place to start- any more than heading straight for the left hand end of the public library's top shelf.

So instead, we're going to begin with one of the four biographical books about Jesus Christ, the *Gospel according to Luke* (or simply *Luke*).

Accessing the Bible

This booklet is not intended to be read on its own (most of it would make a strange read!). Rather, it is to be kept on hand as a reference as you read from the Bible itself.

I have tried to anticipate the questions you might have as you read *Luke*, and placed 'road signs' there to (as it were) lead you off the main highway of Luke's narrative to explore the surrounding countryside of the Bible. This will often give you access to other books of the Bible- and this is one of the chief reasons I have written the way I have.



The precise wording on the 'road signs' comes from the NIV translation of the original languages. However, if you are using another translation, the equivalent wording, if different, should be obvious.

Just like a motorway, you may find a succession of 'slip roads' sometimes coming quite thick and fast, and then none for quite a while. This may make this booklet seem rather uneven, but the reason is to let you get on with reading the Bible unhindered when there is a stretch that doesn't require you to make a detour into its other books.

If you find that you are wanting 'road signs' in many more places than I have provided them, here are some suggestions:

1. I'd encourage you to simply try and make sense of what you're reading by spending a bit more time with it (in fact when Jesus told parables, that was *exactly* what he wanted his hearers to do- to tease them out like a riddle.) Countless millions have found the little prayer to God found in *Psalms 119 verse 18* to be a great help in this exercise.
2. There is a sketch map at the back which will help you get an idea of the 'lie of the land' and Jesus' itinerary.

3. Get a copy of the NIV Study Bible. This is an inexhaustible aid to reading the Bible, and provides a running commentary to almost every verse with cross-references to other parts of the Bible too (and much more detailed maps).

I hope by arranging things in this way that at the very least your interest will be maintained, and that you will begin to understand how people can find the Bible absorbing- even life-changing. (And more than that- I hope it changes *your* life, as it has mine, and continues to change me).

Chapter and verse

Luke's Gospel was originally written as unbroken text, but in time chapters and verses were added, to make pinpointing an event or phrase easier. So for example where I have written *Luke 15:31*, (or simply *15:31*) it means Luke chapter 15 verse 31.

Where a whole chapter needs to be read, it will simply appear as, for example, *Luke 15*.

Some books of the Bible are in more than one volume, like *Kings*. So the Second Book of Kings, chapter 2 verse 18 is shown as *II Kings 2:18*.

Where '*f*' or '*ff*' follow the reference, they mean, respectively, '*and the following verse*' and '*keep reading until you reach a natural break*'.

WHY?

I have children, and now grandchildren, so I am familiar with the question 'why?' being repeated again and again! For those who find themselves asking 'why' as they read this, I have tried to see the questions coming, and insert responses.

Occasionally there are other important topics that warrant a more immediate comment. Some are in boxes like this one in the main text, others that don't relate directly to the text you are reading refer you to an appendix. If you'd rather just get on with the main text, then ignore the boxes and appendices (or come back later).

WHY START WITH 'LUKE'?

There are several good reasons for starting here:

- The life of Jesus is absolutely pivotal in understanding the Bible- both what went before and what happened after. This is why books relating to times before the birth of Jesus are known collectively as the 'Old Testament' ('Old' not, emphatically not, meaning 'obsolete', but simply 'pre-Jesus'). Those relating to his birth onwards are known collectively as the 'New Testament'.
- Luke himself (a medical doctor by profession and therefore used to precision and careful investigation) declares at the outset that he is writing a thorough and historically verifiable account of the events of Jesus' life and the content of his teaching. He writes in a clear and orderly fashion. He wrote within a couple of generations of Jesus' life on earth, to dispel myths about him. Note the many historical 'anchors' that demonstrate that his Gospel was written as verifiable history (*eg Luke 1:5, 2:1-3, 3:1f*).
- Luke has a thorough understanding of the history of the Jewish people and Judaism, its significant personages and beliefs, and thus provides us with lots of keys that can help us unlock the older books of the Bible.
- Luke also wrote a follow-up volume, *The Acts of the Apostles*, or simply *Acts*, which takes us forward into the shared life of the first generation of followers of Jesus, the 'early Church'.

continued>>

- This provides us with a background for all the letters and prophecy which follow.
- Luke put pen to paper primarily for those who didn't share Jesus' Jewish culture and race (Gentiles), and thus, by extension, for most of us. *Acts* and the letters that follow it document the start of the spread of the Christian faith into the wider Roman Empire until the end of the lives of those whom Jesus actually mentored while he walked this earth. By then, it had certainly reached Italy and the countries known today as Albania and Serbia, and may have penetrated across the Mediterranean to Spain. This spread continued rapidly in the years that followed to include the British Isles.
- Luke wrote not just to satisfy intellectual curiosity or to provide a 'good read'. In his very opening paragraph he speaks of his subject matter being 'fulfilment' of ancient expectations (a theme of all four Gospel writers).

He therefore poses the question to each and every reader: 'so what do *you* make of Jesus? How will *you* respond to him?'

Jesus has been such a uniquely influential person in history, that his life is used by much of the world as the 'line in the sand' to point backwards and forwards in time: backwards to 'BC' (before Christ) and forwards to 'AD' (from the Latin meaning 'in the year of the Lord'). The Bible divides history the same way. The 'Old Testament' looks back deep into the 'BC' past of the Middle East in general, woven into the history of the Jewish people in particular. The 'New Testament' begins with the records of Jesus' life, and then records the early 'AD' history of the movement centred on his life that would spread throughout the known world.

WHY ARE THE BOOKS OF THE BIBLE ARRANGED AS THEY ARE?

See appendix 1

Jesus who?

The central figure of the Christian faith is, of course, Jesus Christ. 'Jesus' (an Anglicized Greek version of the Hebrew 'Yeshua') is his given, and deliberately meaningful, name (*Luke 1:31, 2:21*).

'Christ' is not a surname, but a title. It is the Greek equivalent of the original Hebrew word 'Messiah', meaning 'The Anointed One'.

WHY, IF JESUS WAS JEWISH, DO WE KNOW HIM BY THE GREEK VERSION OF HIS NAME AND TITLE- JESUS CHRIST?

Hebrew was the language of the Jewish people and the language of the Old Testament, the Jewish Scriptures.

But in Jesus' day, Greek was rapidly becoming a universal language (as English is today), and the land of Israel was an international trading crossroads between the continents of Europe, Asia and Africa. So it was the best vehicle for writing about Jesus, and what was to become a very fast-spreading faith in him, and the writers of the New Testament used it.

Unfortunately, over the centuries, while his Hebrew name 'Messiah' is still widely connected with the expectation of a unique person who will bring hope to the human race (in fact no less than God's Chosen One), the translation 'Christ' is often assumed to be a surname or just a 'tag' on the end of the name of Jesus.

You may have other immediate questions. But in order that you can get on with accessing the Bible without further delay, I've put my response to some frequently-raised ones in the appendices at the end.

So, dear reader, please open a Bible, turn now to *Luke 1:1*, and start reading...

↩ 1:3

Theophilus

Luke addresses his writings to 'Theophilus'. It might have been the name of an individual who commissioned him to write. On the other hand, Luke may be imagining all his future readers, and giving *you* the title 'Theophilus', which means 'Lover of God'. If you are reading with Luke's Gospel in one hand, and this booklet in the other, then you are at the very least *curious* about God, and who knows where that may take you as you keep reading?

↩ 1:5

Judaea

Aaron

Judaea was a territory covering a proportion of the modern land of Israel. The Jewish people still had their Temple in the capital, Jerusalem, and this was the focus of the religious life of Judaism.

(As Luke is here still setting the scene for Jesus' birth, Christianity is- obviously- not on the map just yet. Incidentally, to put events in historical perspective, Mohammed, the Quran and Islam will not appear on the Middle-Eastern scene for another 600 years.)

This chapter mentions the Temple and Zechariah, one of the priests who came in from the country to serve there on occasion. It will become apparent as you read on that the temple institution and those who had power and influence there have become corrupt- a tendency only too obvious in religion throughout history when human beings misuse power and distort the truth for their own ends. Zechariah himself though comes across as a man of integrity.

Many of the places- towns, villages and districts -mentioned in Luke's gospel are still on modern maps.

Aaron was the original priest, in the era when God revealed himself simply as 'The One who Is', and gave instructions for worship to the ancient Hebrew (Jewish) people, some 1300 years before the events recounted here. You can read about him in the book of *Exodus*, from *chapter 4* onwards. We will return to this time in Jewish history when we encounter Moses in the next chapter of *Luke*.

↩ 1:11
angel

The word signifies a messenger from God. Not many Westerners would claim or admit to having seen one, but then we are not as open to spiritual realities as people in some other parts of the world. Angels don't figure *that* frequently in the Bible, but when they do it's generally at moments of particular significance. They'll appear again more than once in the next few pages.

↩ 1:17
Elijah

One of God's chief mouthpieces (prophets) in Israel's history, who courageously spoke out in God's name during a particularly corrupt period around 860BC. You can read his inspiring story in *1 Kings 17-19*. Zechariah and Elizabeth's son, John 'the Baptist' will have a similar role, calling people back to right living, and preparing the way for Jesus to come on the scene.

↩ 1:26
Galilee

This is the area to the west of Lake Galilee in northern Israel, quite distinct from Judaea in the south.

David was the greatest in the line of kings who had reigned over the 'United Kingdom' of Israel and Judah from around 1050 to 600 BC (though it only actually stayed united for a little over a century).

You can read David's story starting from *I Samuel 16*, through to the end of *II Samuel* (the book that covers his actual reign).

David's predecessor, Saul, the first of the line of kings, got delusions of grandeur leading to paranoia (as can happen when people are given power), and had to be replaced.

David was a man of faith, though again far from perfect: he committed adultery and murder, and brought great misery on himself and his family as a result. (One of the characteristics of the Bible narratives is the brutal honesty with which it portrays its heroes: there is no 'whitewashing'.)

David is responsible for many of the writings in the book of *Psalms*, including the most familiar of all, *Psalms 23*.

His plea for mercy after adultery led to murder (*Psalms 51*) is very moving—a model for anyone wanting to set their life on a better course.

Maybe *Psalms 32* was written after this: it's about the contrasted experiences of unresolved guilt and of God's forgiveness.

Many of David's other writings have found their home in the book of Psalms.

You may like to return to the following from time to time:

Psalm 3 (written in response to the events recorded in *II Samuel 15*)

Psalm 8 (a contemplation of the night sky)

Psalm 15 (about living an upright life)

Psalm 19 (the cosmos obeys God's laws with delight- will human beings do so too?)

Psalms 22 and 110 (key prophetic psalms looking to future fulfilment. We will return to these later)

Psalm 34 (a testimony to God's protection)

Psalm 37 (be patient: everyone will get their just deserts)

Psalm 65 (harvest thanksgiving)

Psalm 103 (a hymn to God's faithfulness and love to successive generations. Used in Jewish and Christian funerals to this day).

Psalm 131 (a good attitude for a powerful man!)

Psalm 133 (a hymn about good relationships)

Psalm 139 (God sees everything)

↩ 1:33
Jacob

Jacob, (also named Israel) was the grandson of Abraham, the ‘founding father’ of the Jewish race. His name is sometimes used as a shorthand for the whole race. We will encounter Abraham very shortly....

↩ 1:55
Abraham

The 'great grand-daddy' of the Jewish race. God chose him to be the ‘seed’ that would develop through his son Isaac, his grandson Jacob and his 12 great-grandsons, into the Jewish people. From one of the branches of this family tree (the tribe of Judah), Jesus would ultimately come.

After reading to the end of *Luke 1*, you may like to turn to *Genesis 12*, where Abra(ha)m’s story begins (around 2100 BC) with an instruction and a promise that Luke would have had in mind when he wrote the opening words of his Gospel.

Abraham’s story follows a pattern which will become a familiar refrain throughout the Bible: God calling people to leave the predictable status quo and embark on an adventure with him, an adventure in which they will have to trust him to know what he is doing even when events seem to take worrying turns. This is in essence what ‘faith’ is about.

Significantly for our day, *Genesis 21* tells of the parting of the ways between Abraham’s sons Isaac and Ishmael. This will also mark the parting of the ways between the teaching of Judaism and Christianity on the one hand, and of Islam on the other, as the Bible focuses on Isaac as the son whose family line will bring blessing to the world.

Abraham was a man of faith (though again far from perfect - and you will notice some real rogues among his descendants! But God

has never given up working out his good purposes through such imperfect material.)

You can continue reading right to the end of the book of *Genesis*, which draws to a close with the story of the adventures of Abraham's great grandson Joseph (of 'Technicolour Dreamcoat' fame). This narrative weaves around another theme which recurs again and again though the Bible: that God works for good even through the devious schemes of human beings (see for example *Genesis 50:20*).

Some will read these familiar stories in context for the first time!

↩ 2:1

Roman world

Judaea was under Roman occupation, and would remain so for centuries after these events. Jews worship one God; the Romans worshipped a whole pantheon of gods and goddesses, and the emperor himself demanded worship as 'Lord'.

Jewish culture generally set high standards of personal morality. Roman society was a mix of militarism, high taxes and massive civil engineering projects together with a highly sexualised culture, and a big emphasis on entertainment to keep the masses happy (not perhaps so very different from the 21st century AD...)

It can be imagined that this made for a very harsh and uncomfortable yoke on the Jewish people in their own homeland.

↩ 2:22

Moses

Between the time of Abraham and of the Kings, the Jewish people became slaves in Egypt. They had migrated there 4 centuries earlier (in the time of Joseph- see *Genesis 37-50*) with the blessing of the Egyptian king (Pharaoh) of the time. But as they flourished, resentment and fear grew among the native Egyptians, and they

were subjected to increasingly cruel treatment as slaves, and their male children were killed at birth.

One boy, Moses, escaped this infanticide. You can read about this at the beginning of the book of *Exodus*, which continues the narrative of the book of *Genesis*. Moses' portrait is painted (in typical Bible fashion) 'warts and all'.

A distinctive difference between the Jews (called here 'Israelites'- ie descendants of Israel/Jacob) and the Egyptians was their religion. The Jews believed in one God, the Creator, Ruler and Sustainer of all. The Egyptians (like the Romans much later) worshipped a multiplicity of gods and occult spirits.

In *Exodus 3*, God calls Moses to 'set my people free', and lead the Israelites out of Egypt. Once again, we see the themes of

- a) setting out on an adventure with God that depends heavily on faith and trust and
- b) God turning evil and injustice so that it contributes to the working out of his purposes.

The dramatic story of this deliverance may be read in the next eleven chapters of *Exodus*, ending with the dramatic words of *Exodus 14:31*.

The story has been made more familiar to many- in somewhat embellished form- through the film 'Prince of Egypt'.

God then gave the Israelites distinctive 'guidance for living right', beginning with, and summed up by, the 'Ten Commandments' (*Exodus 20*). These directions, with instructions for worship, fill much of the remainder of the book of *Exodus*, and the following book, *Leviticus*. They can be heavy going if you're new to the Bible! However the reference to the 'Law of Moses' in *Luke 2:22* harks back to *Leviticus 12*, which details the procedures for being ceremonially 'cleansed' after childbirth, including the Jewish practice of circumcising baby boys.

↶ 2:25
Simeon
the Holy Spirit

Luke puts repeated emphasis on the 'Holy Spirit'- the personal presence and power of God in the life of Jesus and events surrounding him (we have already encountered the Holy Spirit in *1: 15, 35, 41, 67*). This emphasis will continue later as Luke writes about the life of the early church in his follow-up volume '*The Acts of the Apostles*' (usually simply known as *Acts*.)

One of the roles of the Holy Spirit is to bring revelation (i.e. seeing what cannot otherwise be seen, along with the confidence that this 'seeing' is genuinely God-given, and not wishful thinking). Through Simeon's words in *2:29-32*, the stage (which has been focussed on the Jewish/Israelite/Hebrew people throughout the Old Testament) is now broadened to embrace 'all people'- the world of non-Jewish, or 'Gentile', people too. In fact Simeon's words pick up on a revelation given to the prophet Isaiah centuries earlier (*Isaiah 49:6*) which at the time was written about the indefinite future. (We'll return to Isaiah and the other Old Testament prophets in more detail shortly).

↶ 2:41ff
the Feast of the Passover

The annual celebration of the deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt (about 1450 BC)- see 'Moses' above. You can read about the institution of the Passover in *Exodus 12* (*12:13* makes it clear how it got its name, and *12:17-20* how it became an annual event, and got its alternative name, 'the Feast of Unleavened Bread'). Its celebration became a requirement along with two other annual festivals (*Exodus 23: 14-16*), which also make an appearance in the Gospels. Jewish people still celebrate them today.

While the Israelites were on their travels after escaping from Egypt, they had a portable centre of worship, a large tent called the Tabernacle (you can read about this if you are interested in *Exodus 25-31* and *35-40*). The Jerusalem Temple was the static successor to this, once they had settled in the land that became known as Israel.

↩ 3:1
Pilate
Herod

(Pontius) Pilate- his Roman title was 'prefect'- was responsible for keeping law and order in Judaea.

The Herod mentioned here was one of the sons of Herod the Great (whom Luke has mentioned in *1:5*), who had since died. He was something of a puppet king, presiding over Galilee and answerable to Caesar in Rome. Both Pilate and this Herod held their positions for the rest of Jesus' lifetime, and are key players later.

Note incidentally how Luke nails his narrative very specifically into verifiable history- not something that 'historical' fiction-writers tend to do!

↩ 3:3
baptism

Baptism had its roots in Jewish practice. Immersion in water signified a cleansing from an old lifestyle and a fresh commitment to realign personal attitudes, behaviour and outlook in a way that would honour God. John was fulfilling his role as the herald of Jesus, and the baptism he administered signified the arrival of a time of God's grace- a kind of 'amnesty'.

↩ 3:4-6
Isaiah

The longest book of prophecy in the Bible, written from about 740BC. Isaiah sees that the spiritual decline of the divided kingdoms of Judah and Israel will lead to deportation and exile for the peoples of both. This happened between 722 and 538 BC, though only the inhabitants of Judah, the southern kingdom, would ultimately return.

Isaiah also sees way beyond this tragic period to a time when God would bring restoration, not just for the Jewish race, but on a global scale. The words quoted here come from *Isaiah 40* (worth reading from start to finish), and are part of this message of hope, finding fulfilment here (around 30AD) through John ‘the Baptist’.

Isaiah contains many prophecies of a coming Messiah (Christ), and we will encounter him again in the next chapter.

↩ 3:16
baptise with the Holy Spirit

This theme will return in Luke’s second volume ‘Acts’. Where John baptised in water people who wanted to ‘turn over a new leaf’, the baptism with the Holy Spirit would be a powerful ‘spiritual immersion’ in the presence and power of God, which would enable people to really change profoundly, progressively and permanently.

↩ 3:23-37
Oh no! a genealogy!

Don’t worry, we can skip this for now. Though if you skim through, you will spot some of the Old Testament names we’ve already dwelt on.

WHY ARE GENEALOGIES A FEATURE OF THE BIBLE?

See Appendix 5

↩ 4:2ff
the devil

Evil is described as emanating from a personal malevolent source. Other names (Lucifer, Beelzebub, 'the enemy', Satan (meaning 'the accuser'), 'Prince of this world') are found elsewhere in the Bible. He is first encountered as a snake in *Genesis 3*, successfully leading the first human beings astray. Here he attempts to do the same to Jesus- this time without success.

It is worth reading *Genesis 2:4- 3:24*. The opening chapters of the Bible must rank as one of the most outstanding works of literature ever (though sadly often ridiculed and misquoted). This passage describes in a few poignant paragraphs humanity's fall from innocence and fellowship with our Creator. There is layer upon layer of truth to be unearthed from these two chapters.

Remember though it is the very 'meaning of life' that is in mind here, not our narrower scientific 'how'-type questions. It is this basic misunderstanding that has led many to reject the Bible almost before they've started reading.

Note that even the devil quotes the Bible: *4:10,11* is a quote from *Psalms 91*. This is a classic case of 'the Bible can be made to mean whatever you want it to mean'. The safeguard is always to read it in context!

Jesus parries his temptations by affirming God's law from the book of *Deuteronomy 8:3, 6:13 and 6:16*. (See p 22).

WHY SHOULD I TAKE ANYTHING IN THE BIBLE SERIOUSLY WHEN IT STARTS BY SAYING THE WORLD WAS CREATED IN SEVEN DAYS?

Creation- a major stumbling block for some in our modern scientific age. Did God really create the world in a week? And if not, how can we accept the rest of the Bible as 'true' in any meaningful sense? Libraries have been written about this, and there's only room for a paragraph or two here.

There are many types of literature- history, novel, poetry, biography, allegory etc etc. *All* worthwhile literature, of whatever category, speaks 'truth' in one way or another. For example C S Lewis' '*Chronicles of Narnia*' are clearly fictional novels. And yet they speak profound truth about human nature and the triumph of sacrificial love over evil in a way that even children can grasp. In a real sense they are *true*.

Once we are freed from our modern obsession with scientific 'how' questions, we are freed to ask the equally valid, and even more significant questions about *meaning*: the 'why' questions. The creation stories of Genesis are responding to that search for meaning, not just for answers to 'merely' astronomical or biological questions. So they are not *less* 'true' than Luke's works (which might be filed under 'biography' and 'history'), just 'differently true'.

Consider the story of Adam and Eve (*Genesis 2:4 onwards*), not least the section about the roots of humanity's lost relationship with its Creator. (*Genesis 3*). Instead of getting stuck on 'did Adam and Eve really exist? ', 'What colour were they?' and so on, try some other questions, like...

'How do human beings (from childhood onwards) react when they're given great freedom but are told there is one line they mustn't cross?' Is this reflected in verses 1-7?

'Have I experienced that sense, after the initial frisson of 'eating forbidden fruit', that there is no way back to my previous innocence? Is this reflected in verses 6-10?

'What is our common first reaction to feelings of guilt?' Is it reflected in verses 11-13?

So is the story of Adam and Eve true to our experience of what human beings are really like?

A FOOTNOTE ABOUT *DEUTERONOMY*

Speaking of 'context', a word of explanation about the book of *Deuteronomy* might be needed here...

After Moses led the Israelites to freedom from slavery in Egypt, they spent 40 years travelling as nomads in the rocky Sinai desert before they entered the 'Promised Land' of Israel. It was at the beginning of those 40 years that the Ten Commandments and detailed instruction were given them by God (see above under 'Moses'), as documented in *Exodus 20-34*. *Deuteronomy* relates the end of that 40-year period (the word *Deuteronomy* means 'a recap of the instructions')- Moses' reminder of what they have learnt and been through in the desert, before he hands leadership on to his successor, Joshua. *Deuteronomy 6:16* refers back to the incident recounted in *Exodus 17: 1-7*.

Many editions of the Bible have footnotes which enable you to trace some of these connections and quotations. A 'chain reference' or 'study' edition of the Bible will do this much more comprehensively, and is a good investment if you're finding this little book is increasing your appetite for exploring the Bible!

↖ 4:15
synagogue

During the period of national exile (see note on *Luke 3: 4-6*), the Jewish people had no temple. And so synagogues sprang up- meeting-places where they could study the Scriptures, pray and worship. it was quite normal practice for a visiting itinerant teacher to be invited to speak in the synagogue.

Synagogues have remained a central feature of Jewish communal life to this day.

↩ 4:17
Isaiah

The section begins at 4:14. As stated above, Isaiah contains many prophecies of a coming Messiah (Christ). Here Jesus reads *Isaiah 61: 1,2* and- startlingly- declares that he himself is the fulfilment of this prophecy. (Another similar prophecy is found in *Isaiah 42: 1-9*).

The reaction is favourable, to start with...

↩ 4:25-28
Elijah
Elisha

Like *Isaiah*, Elijah (whom we have already briefly encountered) and Elisha were also prophets- though they did not write books. Their life stories span *I Kings 17 – II Kings 13*. The events Jesus alludes to here can be found in *I Kings 17* and *II Kings 5*.

The synagogue congregation's fury was in response to Jesus' suggestion that foreigners (from what are now Lebanon and Syria) were more responsive to God than Jesus' own race, the Jews. Their anger was no doubt fuelled by the fact that Aram (Syria) had been a troublesome enemy throughout much of their national history.

Elijah will reappear later in *Luke*. Both of these Old Testament prophets had been unafraid of confronting the authorities of their day, and their life's work had been remarkable for the supernatural events- miraculous healings and other signs of God's powerful involvement- that accompanied them. The same will prove to be consistently true of Jesus.

↩ 4:33

demon, evil spirit

As God has spirit-servants (the angels), so does the devil. They are variously referred to as evil spirits, unclean spirits or demons. If such an idea seems quaint and antiquated in our 'developed' culture, don't be too quick to reject the reality of such an unseen world of beings that can influence us. Jesus (as we will see) had great success in actually freeing people from evil influence, where the modern secular approach can often only offer lifelong treatments that *suppress* the effects to an extent.

We will see as we read on that these spirits often have insight into spiritual truth (not least the understanding of who Jesus is- not just a good religious teacher, but God's promised Messiah). It's an insight that many of the intellectual people of the religious establishment remained blind to. We see evil spirits reacting with terror, quailing before Jesus' authority, knowing that (to quote *1 John 3:8*) he has come to 'destroy the devil's work'.

↩ 4:43

the kingdom of God

Not a geographical territory, but a phrase meaning 'the realm where God's rule is effective' ('kingdom' derives from '**king's domain**'). It is *the* overarching theme of the Bible: if you want to stop and explore how it develops, now is a good time.

THE KINGDOM OF GOD: HOW THE THEME DEVELOPS THROUGH THE BIBLE

In the beginning (the very opening words of the Bible, *Genesis 1:1*) God created the heavens and the earth. Then, the opening chapter speaks of his creating progressively higher orders of life on earth, culminating in the creation of human beings 'made in his image and likeness' to rule over and look after the planet (*Genesis 1:26ff, 2:15*).

He gave them huge but not entirely unrestricted freedom, and he called for obedience (*Genesis 2: 8-17*).

Soon after though, the human race rejects God's 'right to rule' by rebelling: human beings are seduced by the prospect of 'playing God' themselves- and of being kings and queens, as it were, answerable to nobody above themselves (see *Genesis 3:6*, reading the context too).

The result is not liberty and happiness, but the start of misery and struggle for human beings. God himself is soon described as 'grieved' and his heart as being 'filled with pain' (*Genesis 6:8*).

Noah, however, is a man who lives his life under God's rule, and a new beginning is inaugurated through the dramatic story of The Flood (*Genesis 6:5- 9:17*).

Unsurprisingly (given our own experience of human nature) this new beginning doesn't result in a 'happy ever after story' either –and once again a fresh start is made with Abraham (whose name we have already encountered in *Luke*), another man whose heart is set on obedience to God (see *Genesis 12 onwards*). The Jewish race, of which he is the founding father, will have a unique calling to be a 'model nation', distinctive from others, without a human monarch, obeying God's pattern for living and trusting Him as their divine King to protect them from their enemies.

(It needs saying, perhaps, that these stories are not given to us to depict a hopelessly optimistic God who keeps believing that somehow, after just one more try on his part, his children will turn out all right in the end. Rather, they are given us so that we will be shaken out of *our* hopeless optimism, and come to accept that rescue from our fallen state is going to depend entirely on our turning for help to God, and his power and goodwill towards us. This emphasis reaches its climax in the gospel accounts of Jesus- and we will be returning to the *Gospel according to Luke* very shortly.)

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Moses, under whose leadership the Jewish people are set free from captivity in Egypt, foresaw that the demand for a human king would eventually inevitably come, and he gave strong advice as the end of his life approached (see *Deuteronomy 17: 14-20*).

Joshua (who famously 'fit the battle of Jericho') takes over from Moses as a military leader, committed to obedience to God as the Jewish people enter the 'Promised Land', conquering the pagan nations who are resident there. (Their success proves proportional to their willingness to obey God). The story is told in the book of *Joshua*. Joshua set the people a personal example of living under God's rule, and gave them a stark choice (see *Joshua 24:15* and context).

After the death of Joshua, there comes an often lawless era during which a succession of judges oversee the people. The overarching theme of the Kingdom of God seems almost lost to view during this period. A recurring refrain of the book of *Judges* is the anarchic phrase 'everyone did what was right in their own eyes'. Gideon and Samson (of Delilah fame) are two key figures in this book (*Judges 6ff* and *Judges 13ff*).

The time eventually arrived when the insistent demand for a king did indeed come, and the people are warned (in *I Samuel 8: 10-18*) of the downside of living under human government- advice which we can still recognise as all too true today (human nature doesn't change!).

Instead of the Jewish people being a living demonstration to the rest of the world of 'the kingdom of God' (the domain where God's perfect rule is effective and obeyed), they became like the other nations, and a great swathe of the rest of the Old Testament is given over to this theme. The process of providing them with a monarchy begins in *I Samuel 9* and the narrative continues all the way through to the end of *II Kings*, telling us the history of good kings who (however imperfectly) wanted their own lives, and the nation's life, to be a demonstration of the kingdom of God. But it also tells the story of the many kings (a much larger proportion) who led God's people astray into pagan practices and seeking security through political alliances as a substitute for trusting in God.

During the time of the monarchy God commissioned many prophets as his 'mouthpieces' to call his people back to him and to warn the surrounding pagan nations of impending divine judgment. As stated

continued>>

above, the Jewish people divided into two separate kingdoms, and in due course both were invaded by the superpowers of the day, the northern kingdom of Israel being taken into exile by Assyria, and the southern kingdom of Judah by Babylon. Only the southern kingdom ultimately returned, and for them a special retelling of their national ancestry and years under monarchy was written. This is contained in the twin volumes of *I & II Chronicles*.

The writings of several of the prophets, spanning the years of the monarchy, the exiles and the return of the people of Judah, were incorporated in the Jewish Scriptures (the 'Old Testament' of the Christian Bible), and they are grouped together, beginning with *Isaiah*, and ending with *Malachi*.

At last we come to the New Testament- the start of the 'AD' epoch recounted in the Gospels- and we enter a new era of God's kingdom evident in the life and work of Jesus. The nation of Israel has failed to be a 'light to the nations' – a distinctive nation under God's direct rule. But now Jesus has come, and he will fulfil *personally* the calling of his people by living in faithful obedience to God, and complete harmony with his purposes.

The phrase 'the kingdom of God is here (or near)' is often on Jesus' lips, and the records of physical healings, release from dark influences, even release from death itself, give us glimpses of what happens when God's kingdom confronts the 'status quo'.

The accounts of the Passion of Jesus Christ (his trial and crucifixion) in all four accounts of the Gospel demonstrate supremely that God's way of ruling, and of defeating evil is quite unique (and often quite counter-intuitive to human wisdom).

In the closing pages of the Bible, the last book, usually simply known as *Revelation*, foresees the ultimate restoration of God's kingdom (11:15), the permanent destruction of the powers of evil (20:10), and the creation of a new unspoilt universe (21:1-5)- all events that are still to come.

The records of physical healings and release from dark influences in the chapters that follow will give us glimpses of what happens when God's kingdom confronts the status quo. They are especially noteworthy here, given that Luke, a respected medical doctor, is the one recording them!

The question the Bible continually poses is ‘Which do you long for?’

a) Everything under God’s good rule as was intended at the beginning, and will be at the end, with God and human beings in a relationship of harmony, security and love, and resistance to his rule eradicated (compare *Genesis 3:8* and *Revelation 21: 3-8*)?

or

b) the status quo, with God sidelined, and self-centredness and self-determination governing individuals and societies? (see, for example *Psalms 14* and *II Timothy 3: 1f*).’

A FOOTNOTE ABOUT REVELATION

The book of *Revelation* is written in a unique style, and it is wise to get some insight into the less figurative books of the Bible before attempting to interpret it in detail! A cardinal principle of interpretation is to try and understand the meaning of the *more obscure* writings of the Bible in the light of the writings that are *simpler* to understand- not vice versa. Many cults and distorted offshoots of Christianity come off the rails by reversing this key principle.

↩ 5:1
Gennesaret

Lake Galilee has many names. It is very large (over 10 times as big as Lake Windermere, for instance), and sometimes called ‘Sea’ rather than ‘Lake’. Here it is called Gennesaret (meaning ‘harp-shaped’), elsewhere Tiberias (the chief town on its shores).

‘Galilee’ can also refer to the Jewish region to the west of the lake, as mentioned earlier.

↩ 5:14
sacrifices

Sacrifice was an integral feature of Jewish worship from the time of Moses until the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD. The stipulations are laid down in the book of *Leviticus* (I don't suggest you read this in detail just now!). Following recovery from skin disease, there was a complex fortnight-long process detailed in *Leviticus 14: 1-32*, and the priest acted as 'GP', confirming the healing.

↩ 5:17
Pharisees
Teachers of the Law

Most of us are more aware today of hard-line religious teachers who call for the application of, for example, Sharia law, sometimes interpreting it in draconian ways. The Jewish 'Teachers of the Law' were for the most part a 'subset' of the Pharisees, who interpreted the 'Law of Moses' in great detail to apply to every circumstance of life. They were seen as very strictly religious, though- true to human nature when dominated by rules and regulations- they also had a tendency to be hypercritical, unmerciful and 'holier than thou' (see *Luke 5:30*).

The unspoken questions here are not *necessarily* hostile. It is perfectly legitimate to check out the credentials of a teacher, and mutual questioning was the way Jewish teaching was done. In fact our phrase 'iron sharpens iron' comes from the Old Testament (see *Proverbs 27:17*). Jesus knew that the Pharisees were questioning his authority to 'speak for God'- of course they would. But instead of arguing, he went on to *demonstrate* his authority.

With increasing regularity as time goes on, however, the Pharisees will 'cross swords' with Jesus, eventually making an unholy alliance with the secular authorities (see especially *John 19:12-16*). Watch for this theme intensifying.

Twenty centuries later, Jesus still challenges both secular mindsets and religious institutions- even ones set up in his name.

↩ 5:24
Son of Man

The title 'Son of Man' echoes a vision in the book of the prophet Daniel (see *Daniel 7: 13,14*). Both there and here it signifies someone who has been delegated unique authority by God, the expected Messiah. It's a title Jesus often uses for himself, and here that authority is vividly demonstrated.

A FOOTNOTE ABOUT DANIEL

Daniel chapters 7-12 is written in a similar style to *Revelation* (see the note about that book above- the same cautions apply). In *chapter 7*, Daniel, who writes about the period of the Babylonian empire, sees in a vision a succession of empire-superpowers, all ultimately quite nightmarish.

Then (*Daniel 7:9*), Daniel is shown behind the scenes, into the realm of the true 'Ruler of all'- God himself- who alone has the right to pass judgment on human history. We are next introduced (*v13*) to someone 'like a son of man'. The description is of someone human- and yet more than human. The fact that Jesus used the phrase 'the Son of Man' of himself would have rung bells with anyone among his hearers who was familiar with the Hebrew Scriptures (and that would certainly have included the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law.)

↶ 5:27-31
tax collectors

Because they were Jews working for the occupying Roman power, and setting their own levels of 'commission' at their own countrymen's expense, they were seen as among the most traitorous of people.

↶ 5:30
disciples

Jesus' 'apprentices'. Simon Peter (5: 4-11) was among the first.

↶ 5:36
parable

Often defined as 'an earthly story with a heavenly meaning'. It was one of the chief ways that Jewish rabbis taught, and Jesus was no exception. He taught this way so that those who were interested would take the trouble to puzzle out his analogies (hence Jesus' comment after telling the 'parable of the sower' in 8: 8-10. This contains a quote from *Isaiah 6: 9f*, and carries the warning that if people don't take the trouble to engage with the truth contained in the story, they are actually in danger of becoming progressively more deaf and blind to that truth.)

Some of Jesus' shortest and simplest sayings seem to have inexhaustible hidden depths that repay a lifetime's revisiting, pondering and teasing out the personal implications for the reader.

Of course, stories and analogies don't always travel well from culture to culture -or millennium to millennium! This is where a good commentary written by a scholar with (as it were) one foot in Jesus' time and place, and the other in ours, can help us access meanings.

However, reading *verses 31-38* here, we can puzzle out that Jesus is responding to the serious and self-denying religious leaders who are objecting to his own followers' behaviour. Surely if they were *really*

religious, they wouldn't be *enjoying* themselves? (We can still make this association between the killjoy and certain manifestations of religion today!)

Jesus' analogies here are all to do with celebration- a wedding, a new coat (rather more significant than in our consumer society) and bubbly wine. Something new and radical is happening wherever Jesus goes, and celebratory behaviour is appropriate! However his final remark seems to be close to our modern saying 'nobody likes change'.

6:1-5 the Sabbath

Jesus frequently got into trouble with the Pharisees because he did things that they considered to contravene the law about the Sabbath 'day of rest'. One of the Ten Commandments given via Moses (*Exodus 20:8-11*) relates to the Sabbath. The commandment refers back to God's acts of creation with which the Bible begins (*Genesis 1:1 – 2:3*). The reference to David (whom we have already encountered) relates to the event of *1 Samuel 21: 1-6*.

It is worth pondering on the additional comment Jesus makes, that Luke omits, but Mark records (*Mark 2:27*), that '*the Sabbath was made for man*' and not vice versa. The Ten Commandments were not given as rules-for-the-sake-of-rules, but were given as a gift for our benefit. We are much the poorer today since secular society's rejection of the God-given pattern of a weekly shared public rest-day.

↩ 6:13f
apostles

A title meaning ‘sent with a special commission’. There were twelve in this ‘inner circle’ of disciples who would be Jesus’ constant companions, hence they are sometimes referred to as ‘the Twelve’.

Note that (as nowadays) many names were common: John, James, Simon, Judas- and for that matter Joseph, Mary, and even Jesus (the Greek form of the Hebrew ‘Joshua’). This can get confusing!

‘John’ named here would be the writer of the Gospel according to *John*, the three letters in the Bible named *I, II* and *III John*, and probably the book of *Revelation* (see *Revelation 1:1*). He is not, however John ‘the Baptist’ (see *Luke 1:13, 1:57, 3:2, 7:18, 9:7, 16:16*).

James named here is not the writer of the letter entitled *James* (who was probably one of Jesus’ brothers, though- in the manner of brothers- sceptical about Jesus until later in life).

To complicate matters further, people were often known by more than one name- hence Simon Peter, Bartholomew Nathanael and Levi Matthew, whom we met in chapter 5.

The Zealots (6:15) were a Jewish revolutionary group violently opposed to the Roman occupation. Jesus certainly didn’t have stereotypical ‘religious types’ as his apprentices!

↩ 6:17
Tyre
Sidon

Still-inhabited seaside towns in modern Lebanon, and often in the news. It’s significant here because the people who’ve travelled from

these towns are ‘responsive outsiders’, such as Jesus had commended in *Luke 4: 24-27*.

(My hope is that many who read this booklet will be people who consider themselves ‘responsive outsiders’ to the Bible and Jesus.)

↶ 7:36-50
reclined
the woman

Remember you’re reading this Middle-Eastern ‘library’ with Western eyes. We sit to eat and do not entertain gatecrashers. Middle Eastern hospitality is very different!

It’s often important to keep in mind the cultural differences between the writer and his first readers, and ourselves, so that we can ‘build a bridge’ between the two.

↶ 8:26
the region of the Gerasenes

The non-Jewish area on the east side of the lake (see note on *5:1*), on the slopes of the Golan Heights (also often still in the news).

↶ 9:20f
The Christ of God

These verses are like the fulcrum or hinge about which *Luke* turns- the moment Peter is asked the crucial question which causes the penny to drop for him- when Peter ‘sees’ who Jesus is, and Jesus reveals where his life is leading.

Through *Luke’s* gospel, Jesus also poses the same question to every reader. It is a crucial question that can’t be dismissed.

Many centuries later, the Oxford professor C S Lewis (famous for his 'Narnia' stories) would write: "Christianity is a statement which, if false, is of no importance, and if true, of infinite importance. The one thing it cannot be is moderately important."

↩ 9:22ff

The Son of Man

We have already seen Jesus use this title, referring back to *Daniel 7: 13f*. But here, Jesus introduces a new and apparently contradictory note: before the Son of Man is universally recognised as Messiah, suffering and death has to come.

Daniel 7 is a passage about God's kingdom ultimately and permanently superseding all the corrupt and temporary kingdoms of the world, foreshadowing the words of *Revelation 11:15*.

Daniel, like *Revelation*, is a book that contains strange visions, and, it is again wise to get some insight into the less figurative books of the Bible before attempting to interpret it in detail.

Having said that, when Jesus quotes a few words from the Old Testament, it is *always* an invitation to ponder the whole context that they come from. 'Soundbites' plucked out of context, whether from the Bible or a 21st century speech, can be (and have often been) used to twist the truth out of all recognition.

↩ 9: 28ff

The 'transfiguration'

In this extraordinary and unique event, Moses and Elijah (both living in different centuries and long-dead) are together alongside Jesus. Both had confronted kings who resisted God's authority over them- the Kingdom of God. (see *Exodus 1-14* and *I Kings 16:29- II Kings 2:18*).

Moses' great work had been twofold: to lead God's people out of slavery, and to show them the right way to live (*Exodus 12* and *20*).

Elijah is here as a representative of the Prophets- those who 'see' from God's perspective, understand what's going on 'behind the scenes', and reveal it to the people.

Jesus will fulfil both these roles.

↩ 9: 52
Samaritan

The Samaritans were people of mixed race and religion, and there was mutual hostility between Jews and Samaritans.

The background to this is found in the events of the forced exile of the people of the northern kingdom of Israel to Assyria around 720 BC, and their replacement by people of other races subjugated by Assyria (who would come to be known as Samaritans). They imported with them a mixture of religions, introducing occult practices forbidden to the Jews. This is written about in *II Kings 17*.

The Jews from the northern kingdom were never to return. But a little over a century later, the southern kingdom of Judah, with its capital Jerusalem, was overthrown by the Babylonians (see *Daniel 1* and *Jeremiah 39*), and its inhabitants exiled. These Jews were ultimately allowed to return to their homeland (the topic of the historical books of *Ezra* and *Nehemiah*).

The continuing religious and racial hostility makes sense of Jesus' most famous parable, in the next chapter, often known as 'The Good Samaritan'.

↩ 10:21
the wise and the learned
little children

Jesus is not being anti-intellectual here. A whole book of the Bible, *Proverbs*, is devoted to wise sayings, and Wisdom itself is praised in *Proverbs 1-9*. But great learning can also destroy virtues like obedient trust and humility, and complicate what is actually simple. The phrase we sometimes use today 'out of the mouths of babes...' when a child puts adults to shame by saying something of breathtaking insight, is itself from the Bible (*Psalm 8:2*).

However, even learned adults, now as then, can choose to cultivate the openness, faith and obedience that make good disciples.

↩ 10:22
Son,
Father

This is the first occasion on which Jesus speaks of himself as the Son of the Father (a name for God- *Isaiah 63:16*, *Malachi 2:10*), though right from his conception angels have recognised him as such (*Luke 1: 30ff*), and his Father declared it publicly (*Luke 3:22, 9:35*).

↩ 11:1
teach us to pray

We have no record of what John 'the Baptist' taught about prayer. Beautifully constructed prayers in church, or the eloquent prayers that punctuate the Bible (see, for example, *1 Kings 8: 22-54* or *Daniel 9: 4-19*) may intimidate us and cause us to feel 'I could never pray like that!'

Without doubt Jesus' disciples were moved by the straightforward and natural way Jesus spoke with his Father. The pattern Jesus gives

his followers is very enabling for us in its simplicity. A fuller version, the basis of the familiar 'Lord's Prayer', is recorded in *Matthew 6: 9-13*. But this version here says it all. It can be prayed as it stands, or each phrase can be used as a 'heading' or a 'prayer bead', a focus for pondering on, and conversing with God.

It may be helpful to dwell on the content of the prayer very briefly:

'*Father*', '*our Father*', may seem routine to us in the light of the familiarity of the Lord's Prayer. But to Jesus' disciples it was an invitation, or permission, to approach God and to address Him in the same childlike way that Jesus himself did. And the same invitation extends to us. Jesus expands on this in *John 14: 22-27*.

'*Hallowed be your name*': a rich phrase (as each of these phrases is, the prayer being so condensed). On a personal level, it means 'I honour you, I respect you, for all you are and do'. Many of the Psalms are an amplification of this prayer- eg *Psalms 29, 65-68, 138*.

The phrase also looks outwards with longing to the response of the nations to God- not least a society like ours with its mixture of religions (including fundamentalist secularism), and its frequent casual blaspheming.

In the same way, the remaining phrases can also be applied at all levels between the personal and the international, again following a pattern often seen in the *Psalms*.

In the phrase '*forgive...for we forgive*', we become the answer to our own prayer.

It is a truly comprehensive 'prayer in a nutshell'. As we pray it, it aligns us with the values of God's kingdom.

↶ 11:29-32

Jonah

Nineveh

the Queen of the South

Solomon

Jonah- the prophet who was famously swallowed by a 'whale'. The book of *Jonah* tells the whole story. Nineveh is still a significant town in modern Iraq.

Solomon was King David's son and succeeded him on the throne of Israel. He was famous for his wealth and wisdom, and for the magnificence of the Temple and Palace he had built. He had a big hand in the compilation of the book of *Proverbs*. Some associate him with the writing of *Ecclesiastes* and *Song of Songs* too.

The events of his life are found in *I Kings 1-11*, and the narrative about the Queen of the South (the Queen of Sheba) in *I Kings 10*.

↶ 11:50ff

Abel

Zechariah

Abel was Adam and Eve's second son, and the first murder victim (see *Genesis 4*).

Zechariah was a very common name in Bible times: it was the name of John the Baptist's father, and one of the prophetic books is written by a *Zechariah*. Neither are the one mentioned here, however.

Zechariah's murder (see *II Chronicles 24: 17-22*) was clearly a scandal that had lived on in the collective memory through the intervening centuries.

Both men were murdered because they stood for behaviour that pleased God.

In the Hebrew Bible, where the books are arranged differently, // *Chronicles* is the final book. So when Jesus says 'from Abel to Zechariah', he is saying, literally, 'from A to Z'.

↩ 12.51ff
Not peace, but division

This seems a very strange and unexpected thing for Jesus to say. However, the inevitable result of some choosing to live lives that honour God, but others turning their back on this call, is conflict- as seen in the lives and deaths of Abel and Zechariah (see notes above).

Jesus' ultimate mission is still peace, as God's kingdom grows to completion. This is prophesied, for example in *Isaiah 9: 2-7*.

↩ 13:1
Pilate

We encountered Pilate in *Luke 3:1*. He had a reputation for 'exemplary sentencing' to keep the Jews in fearful submission. He would soon be trying Jesus himself.

↩ 13:25
the owner...closes the door

A word of commentary here, as this seems merciless, and initially out of keeping with much else that Jesus teaches.

People often think in terms of 'how long can I leave it before I get right with God?', as though procrastinating to the last possible moment is the smartest thing to do: 'I will be ruler over my own life

as long as possible before surrendering to the rule of God's kingdom'. Jesus' parable in the previous chapter (12: 13-20) has something to say here. The Bible always treats our response to God as a matter of urgency. See for example *II Corinthians 5:17- 6:2*, *Psalms 95:7ff* (quoted also in *Hebrews 3: 7-13*).

Examples of people who responded with urgency and with procrastination can be found in *Acts 16 and 17*.

↩ 13:28f
from east and west, north and south

We have already read Simeon's prophecy (*Luke 2: 31f*). Here now from Jesus' own lips comes a similar prophecy that his ministry would start the movement of non-Jewish people from around the globe to be numbered among 'God's people'.

↩ 13:34f
Jesus' lament

Jesus foresees that the Jews, having rejected him, will soon lose the focal point of their faith, the Temple. (In fact the Romans brutally sacked Jerusalem and set fire to the Temple in AD 70).

To this day Judaism does not recognise Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah. Jesus however picks up a theme of the prophet Zechariah (*Zechariah 12: 10- 13:1*). These prophecies seem to be saying that such a time of recognition and acceptance of Jesus as Messiah will come one day.

↩ 14:26
hate

This is a typically Hebrew figure of speech- startling exaggeration to make a point. Jesus would not overturn the fifth Commandment (*Exodus 20:12*). He is saying that choosing to follow him has to be the number one consideration, whatever your family think.

↩ 16:29
Moses and the Prophets

A 'shorthand' way of referring to the Hebrew Scriptures (the Old Testament).

The theme of justice and compassion for the poor runs right through the Old Testament, particularly the prophetic books; see for example *Jeremiah 5: 26ff* , *Amos 8: 4-7*.

↩ 17:24ff
The Son of Man in his day...

Jesus refers back to something he said earlier (9:26) about a still-future day of reckoning.

↩ 17:26f
Noah

His story is told in *Genesis 6-9*. It marked the near-total annihilation of the human race (see 6: 5-8)- a destruction by flood for all who ignored the warnings of impending catastrophe.

↶ 17:28ff
Lot, Sodom

Lot was Abraham's nephew. His story is found in *Genesis 12* onwards, intertwined with Abraham's. He settled in Sodom, a city whose name is still a byword for immorality. Jesus refers here to events in *Genesis 18:16- 19:29*, which also explain the reference to Lot's wife in v32.

These two prophecies of Jesus (*Luke 17: 26- 35*) relate to the time still in the future when he will return to judge the world. They stand as a warning to people of every era who believe that the status quo will carry on indefinitely. There have been many times when this complacent kind of shared belief has been disastrous (and we may be seeing something of this today in our inertia regarding debt and the environment).

Here, however, we are reading about something unique: not an invasion or a natural disaster, but a decision by God himself that 'the time has come'. Among the first generations of Jesus' followers, there was widespread expectation that this intervention would come in their lifetime, and it's a topic taken up by other writers who followed Jesus, like Paul (*I Thessalonians 5: 1-11*) and Peter (*II Peter 3: 1-15*).

↶ 17:37
vultures

A Hebrew proverb. We say something similar about those who cluster round the scene of a serious road accident. There will be nothing secret about these events.

↩ 18:31ff
“everything...will be fulfilled”

Prophecies about the Messiah’s death can be found in *Psalm 22*, *Isaiah 52:13- 53:12* (which also hints at his resurrection *53:10-12*), and *Zechariah 13:7*.

↩ 19:29
Bethany

A village close to Jerusalem, on the ridge called the Mount of Olives which overlooks the city. We will encounter it again at the very end of Luke’s Gospel.

↩ 19:38
“Blessed is the king...”

The followers of Jesus call out in the words of *Psalm 118: 26*, a song written for a celebratory procession like this. This event is remembered each year by the church on ‘Palm Sunday’.

↩ 19:46
“ My house will be a house of prayer...”

Jesus quotes here from *Isaiah 56:7* and *Jeremiah 7:11* (where Jeremiah is speaking against desecration of the temple in his own day. Because history has a tendency to repeat itself, prophecies often relate to two or more events separated by periods of time).

↩ 20:9ff
A vineyard

The vineyard was an ancient picture of the nation of Israel (see *Isaiah 5: 1-7*)

↩ 20:17
“The stone the builders rejected...”

Jesus quotes *Psalms 118:22*, the same Psalm that was being sung a couple of days before as he entered Jerusalem (see note above).

↩ 20:27
Sadducees

Another religious group within Judaism, quite distinct from the Pharisees. They believed that ‘when you’re dead, you’re dead’- no afterlife. At the time of Jesus they controlled the high priesthood in the temple, and were the ‘temple politicians’.

Both Pharisees and Sadducees try to back Jesus into a corner with trick questions. (It is still a common tactic among those who want to avoid responding to the claims of Jesus.)

↩ 20:42f
“The Lord said to my Lord...”

Jesus quotes from *Psalms 110:1*, setting a riddle for the teachers of the law.

↩ 21:22ff

“the time of punishment in fulfilment...”

In *Luke 19:41ff*, Jesus weeps over the city that has rejected him: judgment is inevitable (and in fact the Romans brutally destroyed Jerusalem by fire about 40 years later).

However the words that follow have a much more global scale. Prophecy here, as often, has a succession of fulfilments increasing in scope. Ultimately the whole world will be held to account for its response to Jesus the Messiah.

↩ 21:27

The Son of Man coming in a cloud

Once again, Jesus refers back to something he has said earlier (see notes on *5:24*, *9:26*, *17:24ff*), with a direct quote from *Daniel 7:13*. This is a prophecy ultimately relating to the end of time. It brought great strength to the early Christian leaders during persecution by the Roman Empire (see for example John writing in exile perhaps 60 years later in *Revelation 1: 4-8*).

↩ 22:3

Satan

We have encountered Satan before as the embodiment of evil (see *4:22ff* above). Here Judas Iscariot allows himself to be taken over, and turned from being a disciple (or a disciple at least to outward appearance- there is an interesting comment in *John 12: 4-6*) to a traitor.

↖ 22:15
“...this Passover...”

We have encountered the Passover festival before (see notes on 2:41ff). Originally the Passover had been the means by which the enslaved Jews in Egypt identified themselves as being ‘God’s people’ by placing themselves under the sign of a lamb’s blood on the door frames of their houses. By so doing, the judgment of God would ‘pass over’ them, and they would be brought from slavery to freedom.

Now Jesus will become the ‘Lamb of God’ himself (see *John 1:29*) freeing everyone who will believe in him, Jew and Gentile alike, from the slavery of evil and all its effects. This time the prospect will truly be the unchallenged and eternal Kingdom of God at the close of world history, unspoil by the failures and dashed hopes of the past.

The New Testament writers have much to say about this; see for example *1 Peter 1*, *Revelation 5: 6-13*, *7: 9-17* (remembering that *Revelation* contains strange imagery).

↖ 22:20
New Covenant

These words are a significant reference to God’s promise given to the prophet Jeremiah (see *Jeremiah 31: 31-34*).

↖ 22:37
“It is written...”

Jesus quotes from a passage we have already visited- *Isaiah 53:12*.

↩ 23:1ff
Pilate

Up until this point, the arrest and ‘trial’ of Jesus has been in the hands of the Jewish religious hierarchy. Now the Gentile Roman occupiers become involved too.

↩ 23:7ff
Herod

Both Pilate and Herod were in Jerusalem because it was Passover festival time. Many Jews under their jurisdiction would have descended on the city, and there was increased risk of civil unrest.

↩ 23:26
Simon

Not the apostle Simon Peter, but a bystander from the African city of Cyrene (in modern Libya).

↩ 23:45
The curtain of the temple

I will revert to something more like commentary here.

This strange phenomenon inside the Temple, happening as extraordinary events took place simultaneously just outside the city wall, is key to understanding not only the mission of Jesus, but the coherence of the Bible and ultimately the whole sweep of history from *Genesis* to *Revelation*.

The curtain in the Temple screened the 'Holy of Holies'- the area in the Temple that symbolised God's presence among his people, his 'throne room'. Since the days of the Tabernacle, after the Israelites had been released from slavery in Egypt, nobody had been allowed to pass through this curtain except the priest- and even he was only permitted to go into the 'Holy of Holies' once a year, on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). On that day, he went through the curtain to offer a sacrifice for the wrongdoing of the people to God. (The regulations for this are set out in *Leviticus 16*). The regulations made it clear to the Jewish people that breaking God's law was a very serious matter, and that they needed (besides an admission of their own guilt and a turning away from their wrongdoing) an intermediary, a priest, to approach God on their behalf, to restore their broken relationship with God. (The old English word 'atonement' means, literally, 'at-one-ment').

The ripping open of this curtain (from top to bottom as it were by an unseen hand) at the moment of Jesus' death was therefore a shocking event- terrifying to any Jew who witnessed it happening, to the point that they would be in fear of their lives. However, the significance of the event was both profound and very wonderful: it signified that Jesus was himself acting as both priest and sacrifice in his death, fulfilling and rendering obsolete once and for all the annual ritual of atonement practices since the time of Moses. It also signified that, because of his self-giving, human beings needed, from now on, no other intermediary besides Jesus himself, in order to be reconciled with God. This is explained brilliantly by the writer of the letter to the *Hebrews* (see especially *Hebrews 10: 1-25*). Do not worry if this chapter has details that puzzle you: it's the general thrust of what it says that matters.

This event, and the astonishing events of the next chapter, form the fulcrum of the entire Bible- the climax of God's dealings with the human race. In Luke's description of the events of Jesus' crucifixion, a theme which stands out is the reaction of those around him as he dies. The name 'Jesus' means 'God saves', and Jesus has often spoken of his mission to save people. His healing ministry has been a

sign of this (in the language of the day, the same word is used for 'heal' and 'save'). Sometimes today mockery of the Christian faith centres round phrases like 'Jesus saves'. And so it did at the very time he was being killed. First we see the Jewish people and their leaders mocking him (v35), then the Gentiles mock him in similar terms (v36), and then one of the criminals crucified alongside him adds his voice (v39).

However, there is a reaction from the other criminal crucified alongside which cuts through all this abuse like a knife (v40). He recognises with startling clarity that this mockery amounts to blasphemy, for

- a) their punishment fits their crime, while Jesus is an innocent man (v41).
- b) more than this- Jesus is more than an innocent man: he truly is a king-in-waiting (v42), and his impending death on the cross will not be the end of the story.
- c) the appropriate response is not mockery, but a humble plea for mercy (v42).

Jesus' immediate response is more than he could have hoped for: a king's pardon (v43).

The Roman military commander responsible for overseeing the crucifixions (he would have been a hardened, unsentimental man) was profoundly affected by what he saw and heard (v47).

The implication of what Luke records is that if a man justly condemned to death for his crimes can find pardon before God, then there is hope for anyone, however they have lived their life.

It is vital to note three things here:

- a) the personal pardon Jesus pronounced followed an acknowledgement of guilt with no self-justification whatsoever (v41). In court, a defendant may 'plead mitigating circumstances' or simply 'throw themselves on the mercy of the court'. This man threw himself on God's mercy.
- b) The man, dying and spreadeagled on a cross, had no opportunity for restitution. There was no way he could begin to atone for the crimes he had committed. God's mercy was not dependent on this, or he would have been without hope.
- c) The many law-abiding, respectable, (even religious) people who witnessed Jesus' death, Jew and Gentile alike, who arrived and left the scene as spectators, had no such assurance of God's mercy- of 'being saved', to use that much-mocked phrase.

When the implications of the crucifixion of Jesus, and what followed, sink in, then the whole sweep of the Bible narrative from Genesis to Revelation begins to make much more sense. This is the key that unlocks the whole epic.

↖ 23:46

"Father, into your hands..."

As he dies, Jesus quotes *Psalms 31:5*. The psalm had been written by King David at a time when he was victim of a conspiracy, and all his friends had left him. So he turns to God as the only one he can trust. His experience then was a shadow of what Jesus is going through at this point.

Other Gospel writers record that he also cried out words from the first verse of David's *Psalms 22* (*Matthew 27:46, Mark 15:34*) and, as he died, the final verse of the same Psalm (*John 19:30*).

↩ 23:48
beat their breasts

Note the cultural expression of grief that is still distinctively Middle-Eastern today, and different from Western patterns of behaviour. The same is true of the burial customs in this and the next chapter.

↩ 23:50
Joseph

We have not encountered this Joseph before.

↩ 23:54- 24:1
Preparation Day,
Sabbath,
first day of the week

Preparation Day signifies the daylight hours of Friday- time to get ready for the Sabbath. By Jewish reckoning, a day runs from sunset to sunset. The Sabbath (rest) day begins on Friday evening, and is the last day of the week. This is explained in the Ten Commandments, and rooted in God's work of Creation (*Exodus 20: 8-11* ; see also *Genesis 2: 1-3*). Hence the 'first day of the week, early in the morning' signifies dawn on Sunday.

↩ 24:1ff
tomb

People were buried in caves rather than dug graves, with a stone blocking the entrance.

↩ 24:9
the Eleven

By this time, Judas Iscariot had committed suicide, as Matthew's gospel narrative tells us. (*Matthew 27: 1-5*).

↩ 24:27
Moses and all the Prophets

We have already encountered this 'shorthand' way of referring to the Hebrew Scriptures (the Old Testament). See also *v44f*.

We may regret that Jesus' explanations as they walked were not recorded. However, these two disciples of his will have remembered them and disseminated them among the growing community of believers in Jesus (Christians). Luke (in his second volume, *Acts*), and the other writers of what would come to be the 'New Testament' have preserved these insights.

In the light of the unique events of Jesus' birth, life, death and resurrection, it is becoming clearer that the Hebrew Scriptures have been looking forward to this very time, that God's promises are finding fulfilment, and that the ancient heartfelt cry 'How long, Lord?', often uttered in worship through the Psalms, is being answered. (See *Psalms 4, 13, 74, 79, 82, 94, 130*).

↩ 24:34
Simon

I.e. Simon Peter. It is highly significant that after Simon Peter had publicly disowned Jesus at his trial (*22: 54-62*), Jesus should have a special one-to-one meeting with him before he was seen by the other male disciples. A discreet veil is drawn over their conversation, but it is clear from the last chapter of the gospel account of *John*

that they were fully reconciled, and that Jesus conferred major responsibility on him for the future, as is borne out in Luke's second book, 'Acts'.

↩ 24:44ff

"Everything must be fulfilled..."

Jesus reiterates what he explained to the two disciples in 24:27, for the benefit of them all. We have seen that his death and resurrection were prophesied by Isaiah.

Psalm 16: 9f is seen as immediately applicable to the author, King David, but also in a greater way to the Messiah.

Isaiah also prophesied the worldwide preaching of repentance and forgiveness flowing from the Messiah's death and resurrection in *Isaiah 49: 5ff*.

↩ 24:49

what my Father has promised

This is a reference to the pouring out of the Holy Spirit (see earlier note), whose presence had filled Jesus' own life on earth.

This 'new beginning' had been foretold centuries earlier by the prophet Joel (*Joel 2:28f*).

The gospel account of *John* records Jesus' teaching about the Holy Spirit in much greater detail (*John 14: 15-27*, to be read in the context of the whole chapter, and *John 16: 5-15*).

(The narrative of what was to happen as a result of this event is taken up by Luke in *Acts 2*).

And so we've reached the end of the *'Gospel according to Luke'*. I hope it has begun to whet your appetite for delving deeper into this amazing and unique library. (Actually, if you've taken the recommended detours down all the 'slip roads' off the main highway of Luke's narrative, you have delved into no less than half the books of the Old Testament!)

I hope, too, that you've engaged with the question 'so what do I make of Jesus? How will I respond to him?'

If you want to pursue Accessing the Bible in this way, I intend to produce 'Access the Bible' Part II, taking a similar journey through Luke's second book, the *Acts of the Apostles*. 'Acts' makes many connections with the books of the New Testament too.

The appendices that follow explore some of the other questions you may have.

Appendix 1

Why are the books of the Bible arranged in the order they are?

Imagine for a moment that you are in the travel section of a bookshop. Someone has had to lay out the books there in a coherent order- but consider the possibilities this raises...

Should the books be laid out in alphabetical order of countries (but where then do you put Burma/Myanmar?) If so, where do you put books about cities? Alongside their countries, or simply following the alphabetical scheme? Or would it be more sensible to group books by continent, or publisher, or style (comprehensive and learned books in one place, books which tell you the main sights plus how to say 'is the tap water drinkable?' in another)?

A similar dilemma faced those who assembled the books of the Bible within two covers over the centuries, and the result is (like most bookshop travel sections!) a mixture of approaches. Here is one way of looking at it (If you have a Bible, having the contents page open in front of you will be helpful):

Some books that go to make up the Bible follow each other chronologically (like books 1-2-3 of a trilogy).

Genesis (which begins with the dawn of time) through to *Judges* and then *I Samuel* to *II Kings*.

Ruth is a little family story set in the time of *Judges*, so is inserted after that book.

Most of *I and II Chronicles* cover the same ground as *II Samuel* to *II Kings*, but from a different perspective, and so follow these books.

The chronological arrangement then continues with *Ezra* and *Nehemiah*.

The events of *Esther* take place during the time of *Nehemiah*, but in a different country, so the book is slotted in here.

We are then finished with chronology for a while, with a series of individual books of poetry and wise sayings.

Job is a book about suffering.

Psalms is a hymn and prayer book compiled over centuries, and used to this day the world over in synagogues and churches.

Proverbs is a kind of 'book of quotable quotes'.

Ecclesiastes is a book about 'the meaning of life'.

Song of Songs is a collection of love songs.

We then move on to another 'classification'- the prophets. These books, *Isaiah* to *Malachi*, were written over a period of 300 years or so. The prophets were God's spokesmen, delivering messages from him to Israel and Judah and surrounding Middle-Eastern nations- messages about the present and the future (both imminent and distant), from the last days of *Kings* onwards.

We then come to the 'fulcrum' of the Bible, those four biographical books about Jesus, the Gospel according to *Matthew*, *Mark*, *Luke* and *John*. Luke then wrote a chronological continuation of his Gospel entitled '*the Acts of the Apostles*' (usually abbreviated simply to *Acts*), telling the story of how the church founded by Jesus began to spread geographically in the next 30 years or so.

All the remaining books bar the last (*Romans* to *Jude*) are letters, written mostly to first-generation churches or local church leaders.

The final book, *Revelation*, is a book of prophecy (again, messages from God about the present and the imminent and distant future), beginning with a series of letters to local churches, and coming to a close with vivid pictorial language about the end of time that echoes the opening pages of the book of *Genesis*. As a result, *Genesis* and *Revelation* form, as it were, historical 'bookends' around the whole varied contents of the Bible-library.

Appendix 2

What is the significance of the title 'Holy Bible'?

The word 'bible' is also used popularly (as in 'The Gardener's Bible') to mean an encyclopaedic book that contains all you could possibly need to know on the subject. This is not so far from the Christian understanding of the library that makes up the Holy Bible, as a revelation of the ultimate meaning of 'life, the universe and everything'. Note, though, that it isn't a scientific treatise: it is concerned with the 'why' questions (meaning) rather than the 'how' (the mechanics).

You may have been to a memorable film or concert or read a book and said 'Well I've seen/heard/read some things in my time, but this was *something else!*' Those words 'something else' are close to the meaning of the word 'holy': this collection of books within one set of covers is unlike anything else ever written. The more you get into it, the more you will find qualities of coherence and integrity about it (remarkable, considering the dozens of authors that have contributed to it over many centuries).

These have contributed to the conviction of untold millions that the Holy Bible tells the unfolding story of a loving Creator's plan for restoring his broken creation- and at the centre of that creation, for restoring the human race that has both been responsible for so much of the breaking and has itself been broken.

Appendix 3

Why are there so many versions of the Bible? (By contrast, there's only one Quran).

For hundreds of years the only English translation widely available was the 'Authorised' or 'King James' Version (AV/ KJV), published during William Shakespeare's lifetime. While beautiful and faithful to the ancient manuscripts then available, it adds another layer of difficulty to today's reader, as it effectively requires further translation into modern English.

But since the mid-twentieth century, there has been an outpouring of translations in modern English. Among the most accurate and readable are the New International Version (NIV), the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), the English Standard Version (ESV), the New Living Translation- 2nd edition (NLT) and the Contemporary English Version (CEV). (Whether you get a cheap one in paperback form, or an expensive leather and gilt-edged edition, the text will be exactly the same.)

If you visit www.biblegateway.com you can very quickly compare different versions.

There are a number of reasons for the great choice of translations available today. 'Exact translation' is not as simple as it sounds. For example the French 'S'il vous plait' translates to 'If it pleases you'- rather pedantic and archaic in English despite it's 'accuracy'. Similarly the French idiom 'he's friendly as a prison door' needs translating to something like 'he's a bit of a cold fish' in English! Some translators have set out to put the original languages in the most literal English possible (even if it doesn't read very well). Others have tried to translate in such a way as to overcome the misunderstandings that can result from Westerners reading ancient Middle-Eastern writings with all their cultural and idiomatic differences. Still others have set out to convey the essential meaning for those (not least children) with a limited vocabulary.

But underlying every new translation project is the fact that there is something quite unique about the Bible: it has a universal timeless message for men, women and children of every culture, race, social class and era. There is also something about the Bible that seems to compel many who have the skills to translate to do so. As J B Phillips (who created a much-quoted paraphrase of the New Testament) once said, translating from its original language 'felt rather like an electrician rewiring an ancient house without being able to turn the mains off'.

One could add that it only compares with the excitement many have felt reading it and finding that 'a light switches on' for them.

Appendix 4

But after all these centuries, the Bible must now be full of mistakes?

It is commonly said by the Bible's detractors that it has been changed so many times over the centuries that it now bears little relation to the original. In fact the opposite is true: since Shakespeare's day many more ancient manuscripts (laboriously hand-written and proof-read before the invention of printing) have come to light which agree with each other with only the most inconsequential discrepancies (usually highlighted in footnotes).

When you consider the process they have gone through- copies of copies of copies being disseminated around the world over hundreds of years, and then gathered and compared by modern scholars- this means that we can today be far more confident than the 17th century translators that we have the original wording.

Appendix 5

So, back where we started! Why the genealogies?

Those lists of names that crop up from time to time, starting with *Genesis 5* at the beginning of the Old Testament, and then at the very opening of the New Testament in *Matthew 1:1ff*, have often been the stumbling block that has caused a Bible-reader to give up.

But we are rediscovering in our day the importance and fascination of family trees. In a very fast-moving individualistic culture like ours, we are becoming newly aware that we need to know our roots.

This has always been of huge importance to Jewish people.

One way of looking at the Bible-library is as the national story of the Jewish people, and a record of God's steady faithfulness to them, despite the often ambivalent relationship they have had with him. (in fact the very name 'Israel' means 'struggles with God'). Genealogies such as those in *Genesis 5* and *Numbers 26* create a sense of 'belonging' as God's people, a reminder that family history always has both its heroes and 'black sheep'.

But they are also a reminder that however often human history has been a story of destruction and self-destruction, God has remained in charge, and kept the line unbroken. These are also the pattern for the genealogies in *Matthew 1* and *Luke 3: 23ff* that link Jesus with his ancestry.

This national history broadens out, like a river flowing into the sea, to the nations of the world in the life of Jesus and the early church. Luke is writing at the very time this is happening.

Appendix 6

Some other books to help you read the Bible and engage with Jesus in more depth

- The '**...for Everyone**' series **Tom Wright**

Guides to each of the books of the New Testament, including 'Luke for Everyone'. Each book is divided into short sections, usually beginning with a modern analogy that helps explain something of the meaning of the passage.

- **NIV Study Bible**

This uses the NIV translation, but supplements it with easy-to-use cross-referencing, and detailed running notes on the text. It also has introductions to every book, and several indexes, appendices and maps.

- **God's Big Picture** **Vaughan Roberts**

This book shows clearly how the 66 books of the Bible contribute to the 'big picture' of the kingdom of God.

- **Thinking Clearly series: The Bible** **Derek Tidball**

A very clear introduction and overview of the whole Bible, how it came to be written and how to read it sensibly. It introduces questions of the Bible's authority and inspiration, and contains chapter by chapter summaries and time charts.

- **How to read the Bible for all its worth** *Gordon Fee, Douglas Stuart*

The books of the Bible fall into different categories: poetry, history, prophecy, letters and so on. And within them are true events and stories. All these need reading differently. This classic book is a great help in understanding how to read the Bible intelligently.

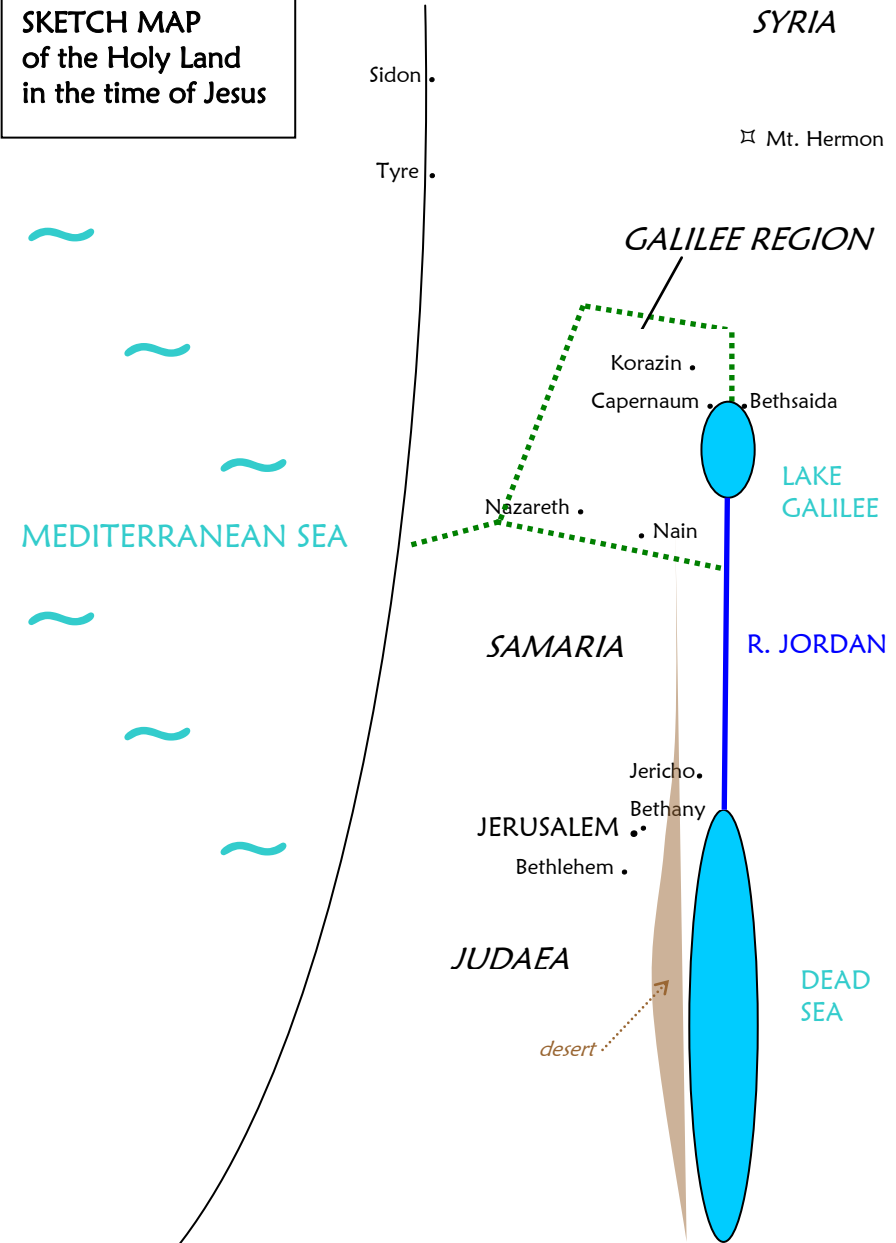
- **Poet and Peasant,
Through Peasant Eyes,
Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes** *Kenneth Bailey*

We read the Bible through the lens of our Western culture, which can lead to misunderstandings. Kenneth Bailey can be a demanding read, but he has a quite unique understanding of Middle Eastern culture then and now that can often be quite revelatory to people who have been reading the Bible for years.

- **Simply Christian** *Tom Wright*

The author expresses the heart of the Christian faith and the transformation it offers to every area of personal and social life. Essential reading for anyone who wants to consider the real fundamentals of Christianity or is intrigued by its claims about the place of justice, beauty and love in our daily lives.

**SKETCH MAP
of the Holy Land
in the time of Jesus**



This is a sketch map, so distances are not represented very accurately. But to give an idea of scale, Nazareth to Jerusalem 'as the crow flies' is about 65 miles/100km

