

THE CHARACTERS

*“The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood.
We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory, like
Father, like Son, Generous inside and out, true from start to finish.”
John 1:14*





JESUS CHRIST

THE GOD-EXPRESSION

“Yet a grave of death could not restrain the Author of Life. At three days, Jesus was aised from the dead.”

The Beginning and the End. The Alpha and Omega. The First and the Last. The Creator and Upholder of all things. The Light of the world. The Redeemer and Saviour of humanity.

The essential tenet of Christianity is that Jesus was both fully God and fully man: one Person with two natures, united and without confusion. He existed before creation (John 1:1, 14) and was involved in the creation and preservation of all things (Colossians 1:16-17). As a part of God’s plan to redeem humanity, Jesus was born to Mary, a virgin, around 6-4 BC (Matthew 1:18-24). He grew and experienced a materially normal humanity: hunger, thirst, tiredness (Luke 2:40, 52; Matthew 4:2; John 11:25, 19:28), yet He maintained a perfectly sinless life (2 Corinthians 5:21). Around the age of 30 years, Jesus embarked on a three-year period of ministry, travelling and ministering to people throughout Israel and the neighbouring areas. He spent much of His time teaching about the Kingdom of God (often through parables), confronting religious leaders who distorted God’s laws, and showing His authority and compassion through many miracles. He gave the people a view of God that they had never seen before – this was God present in a physical body and walking on earth. The Word had put on flesh and now dwelt among them.

Jesus gathered a small band of disciples who would learn from Him and be equipped to carry on His message throughout the land. Often crowds would flock to Him and treat Him with esteem and honour, but on other occasions, He clashed with the leaders and teachers and many of His followers deserted Him.

In the space of just five days, Jesus went from being a heralded and adored King, riding triumphantly into Jerusalem (Matthew 21:1-11), to being betrayed, falsely arrested, tried before an illegal court and executed on a hill (Matthew 26-27). Yet, neither a grave nor death could not restrain the Author of Life. On the third day, Jesus was raised from the dead (Matthew 28:1-15), and later appeared to multitudes of people (Mark 16:14; John 21:1-14; 1 Corinthians 15:6) and finally ascended to Heaven (Luke 24:50).

At present, Jesus is seated at the right hand of God the Father (Colossians 3:1; Luke 22:69), but He is not absent. He is the Head of His Church (Ephesians 1:22-23), intercedes on behalf of believers (Hebrews 7:25) and advocates with God the Father on our behalf (1 John 2:1). At the end of this present time, Jesus will return again to reclaim His own (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17), judge the world (2 Corinthians 5:10; 2 Timothy 4:1) and return His Kingdom to God the Father (1 Corinthians 15:24-28).

SIMON PETER

CHURCH BUILDER

“He was called and appointed for ministry and witnessed many of Jesus most spectacular miracles. He was quick to declare his faith in Jesus being the Son of God (Matthew 16:16), and pronounced that he would never leave Him or deny Him (Matthew 26:35).”



A fiery fisherman who, though considered ignorant and unlearned by those in Jerusalem (Acts 4:13), became the de facto leader of the twelve disciples. Peter – who was originally called Simon, but was famously renamed by Jesus in Matthew 16:18 – was a mercurial character. He was called and appointed for ministry and witnessed many of Jesus’ most spectacular miracles. He was quick to declare that he believed Jesus was the Son of God (Matthew 16:16), and pronounced that he would never leave or deny Jesus (Matthew 26:35). Peter even walked on water (Matthew 14:29)! But true to human fallibility, Peter did deny Jesus. He denied even knowing Jesus, right at His hour of most need, as He was being tried (John 18:15-27). Peter had completely failed the One who he had so doggedly committed his life to serving.

Yet Jesus, in His mercy, restored Peter to a place of leadership in the church (John 21:15-17). Peter became a prominent preacher of the Gospel, particularly to the Jews (Acts 2:1-42, 3:1-4:22, 10:34-44, 15:7-11). As the apostle charged by Jesus to ‘feed my sheep’, Peter lived and acted faithfully to his duty. His two letters (1, 2 Peter), written in the latter half of the first century, encouraged Christian faithfulness and behaviour during times of state-sponsored persecution from Rome (trials from outside of the church), and warned believers about the dangers of a number of false teachers rising among them (trials from inside of the church).

Peter, John (the Apostle) and James (the latter two being brothers) seemed to be part of the “inner circle” of disciples who were with Jesus during some of His most important moments: raising Jairus’s daughter from the dead (Mark 5:37-43); the Transfiguration, where Jesus shone gloriously bright and Moses and Elijah appeared before them (Matthew 17:1-9); and the time of solitary prayer with Jesus in Gethsemane (Mark 14:32-35).



THE TWELVE DISCIPLES

“Typically, a teacher would only accept the best learners as disciples, yet Jesus defied common wisdom by selecting those already passed over. Jesus’ confidence in their discipleship was not in their ability as learners, but in His ability as the master Teacher.”

A disparate and very ordinary crew of fisherman, tax collectors, pessimists and violent nationalists – who went on to achieve extraordinary feats and eventually change world history... At the beginning of His ministry, Jesus set about selecting people, or students, who would follow Him, learn from Him and eventually speak and teach on His behalf. In this practice, which was common throughout Israel, those who disciplined themselves to follow and learn would be called ‘disciples’. Typically, a teacher would only accept the best learners as disciples, yet Jesus defied common wisdom by selecting those already passed over. Jesus’ confidence in their discipleship was not in their ability as learners but in His ability as the master Teacher.

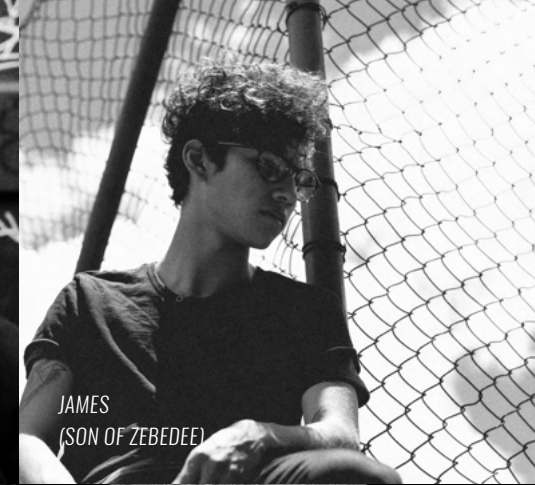
Though the Bible speaks of many people who followed Jesus (see Luke 10:1-24), the title ‘disciple’ is usually given to one of the twelve men who were prominently listed in Mark and Luke’s gospels (Mark 3:13-19, Luke 6:12-16)

Contrary to traditional custom, Jesus chose these disciples. When He arrived in Galilee, He spied Simon and his brother, Andrew, casting their net into the sea. He called out to them, ‘Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men’ (Matthew 4:18-22). Immediately, they drop their nets and followed Him. Other men left John the Baptist in order to follow Jesus (John 1:35-51), while some were called away from their trades (Luke 5:27-28).

Despite, their absence of formal training, frequent confusion and repeated lack of understanding during His lifetime, the Disciples became powerful witnesses to Jesus’ resurrection, built the early church, carried His message around the Mediterranean, and wrote many of the letters that became the New Testament.



PETER
(AKA SIMON)



JAMES
(SON OF ZEBEDEE)



ANDREW
(PETERS BROTHER)



THOMAS



NATHAN
(AKA BARTHOLOMEW)



THADDEUS



PHILIP



MATTHEW
(TAX COLLECTOR)



JOHN
(JAMES BROTHER)



SIMON
(THE ZEALOT)



JAMES
(SON OF APLHEUS)



JUDAS ISCARIOT



PAUL **THE APOSTLE**

“The vast majority of Christians would hold Paul to be the single-most significant figure in history when it comes to the interpretation of the Person and Work of Jesus Christ.”

Exceptional student. Highly trained teacher. Fluent in Greek and Hebrew. Profound expounder of the Christian faith. Most prolific contributing author to the best-selling book in world history. Considered the second most influential person in Christianity (behind Jesus) and one of the top 100 most influential people in world history. This is Paul, the Apostle.

Though it’s difficult to say with complete confidence, most Bible scholars agree that Paul – originally known as Saul – was born at around the same time as Jesus. We do know with some certainty that he grew up in a devout Jewish family in the city of Tarsus – a large and influential city on the south-east coast of modern Turkey. Paul himself identified as being both a thoroughly Jewish man (Philippians 3:5) and a rightful Roman citizen (Acts 16:37). He studied under the Rabbi Gamaleil (Acts 22:3), a highly respected teacher who would have given Paul an extensive education in literature, philosophy and ethics.

Paul, as a zealous and ardent Jew, was a supportive witness to the execution of Stephen and an early leader in the persecution of the Christians (Acts 7:58 - 8:1-3). Seeking to arrest and imprison Christians, Paul made his way to the synagogues in Damascus. His life, however, was to undergo a dramatic 180-degree turn in his mid-thirties, when he was confronted on the road to Damascus by the very Person of the risen Jesus (Acts 9:1-19). Following his conversion, he immediately begins preaching about Jesus in the synagogues of Damascus. Between the mid-

30s and the mid-50s AD, Paul embarked on three significant missionary journeys around the north-eastern Mediterranean coast to spread the Gospel (Acts 13:4-14:28, 15:40-18:22, 18:23-21:17), starting at least a dozen churches (the exact number is difficult to ascertain) and writing thirteen letters to churches and church leaders which were to become part of the Holy Bible. Paul was arrested in Jerusalem by the Jewish religious leaders (Acts 21:27-36). He faced a series of trials and tribulations, and was ultimately sent to Rome for imprisonment (Acts 21-28). It is likely that he was released for a period of time, but by the time of writing his final letter, penned to his younger friend and mentee, Timothy, around 66-67 AD, it seems probable that he was imprisoned once again. According to tradition, Paul remained in Roman custody until he suffered the martyrdom that he had foreseen to be his near fate (2 Timothy 4:6).

The vast majority of Christians hold Paul to be the single-most significant figure in history when it comes to the interpretation of the Person and work of Jesus Christ. His insight into the meaning and application of salvation – available to all by grace and through faith – is as profound as it is pervasive. His theological and doctrinal writings, as found in his epistles, tower above anything else that Christian thought has offered in the last two thousand years. His leadership, influence and legacy continue to influence churches worldwide even today. Paul, even as a mere human, was truly in a league of his own.

HEROD ANTIPAS THE MURDERER

“he was responsible for beheading John the Baptist; he was called ‘that fox’ by Jesus ; and he mocked Jesus before handing Him back to Pilate during His trial”

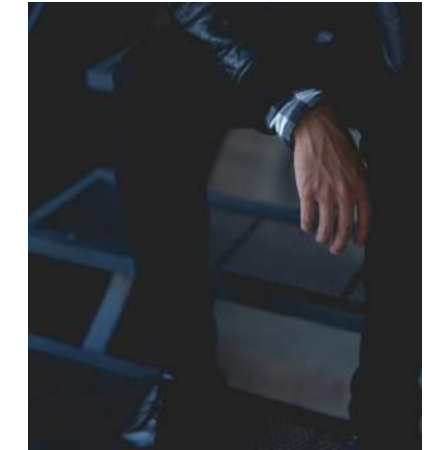
Murderer of children, mocker of Jesus, ruler over Paul’s imprisonment, and eventually eaten to death by worms – that was the life of Herod. Actually, it was the lives of four different ‘Herods’ – four generations of less-than-noble kings – who all make an appearance in the Gospels and Acts.

Herod ‘the Great’ reigned over Israel on behalf of Rome from 37-4 BC, and spent most of his time paranoid that a family member would usurp his throne. He had many of his close family and associates executed, and upon hearing of the birth of Jesus, the ‘king of the Jews’, he ordered the death of all male children under the age of two, forcing Mary and Joseph to flee with Jesus to Egypt (Matthew 2:1-16).

Following Herod the Great’s death, his land was divided among three of his sons. Herod Antipas ruled the Galilean area, home to Jesus, from 4 BC – 39 AD. It was this Herod that we see agitated against Jesus through his life: he was responsible for beheading John the Baptist; he was called ‘that fox’ by Jesus (Luke 13:31-33); and he mocked Jesus before handing Him back to Pilate during His trial (Luke 23:8-12).

Herod the Great’s grandson, Herod Agrippa I, became the next ruler of Galilee. He continued with his predecessor’s general despicability by executing James, one of Jesus’ disciples (Acts 12:1-2), and seeing that it pleased the crowds, arresting Peter (12:3). He let his power go to his head, however. Refusing to give God the glory when his people began to worship him, God enacted one of the more unusual punishments in the Bible: he had him struck down and eaten to death by worms... (Acts 12:20-23).

Herod Agrippa II, son of Agrippa I and great-grandson of Herod the Great, is the last and perhaps the least of this loathsome and abhorrent family of rulers. He heard Paul’s defence case while he was imprisoned in Caesarea and concluded that Paul had done nothing worthy of imprisonment or death (Acts 25:13-26:32).




JOHN THE APOSTLE

“John had a wonderfully personal relationship with Jesus, and even referred to himself as ‘the disciple who Jesus loved’.”

Another spirited fisherman who became one of Jesus’ closest friends and the author of five New Testament books, John the Apostle wrote perhaps the most famous verse in the Bible: ‘For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life’ (John 3:16).

John had a wonderfully personal relationship with Jesus, and even referred to himself as ‘the disciple who Jesus loved’ (John 21:24). He longed for people to understand the Jesus that he had known, heard and touched. His Gospel was written specifically so that people would know Jesus was the Son of God – a special theme throughout John’s writing – believe in Him, and receive eternal life (John 20:30-31). In the later days of the first century AD, he wrote three letters to churches (1, 2, 3 John), all of which particularly emphasize the love of God and how we should love each other. John also penned for us the final book of the Bible, the ‘Revelation of Jesus Christ’, which – despite the references to evil world leaders, horrific natural disasters and a plethora of strange creatures – is really an assurance to us that Jesus and His Kingdom will one day return in spectacular power and glory.

John was possibly the last surviving apostle – an esteemed and honoured statesman of the church in his latter days – and it is likely that he died in Ephesus at the turn of the century.



MARY
**MOTHER
OF JESUS**

“She holds the exclusive position of being the one person in all of history to conceive supernaturally: it was God Himself who chose Mary and placed a Child in her womb.”



An extraordinary woman who was lovingly devoted to Jesus during His life, death and resurrection. At times, Mary Magdalene (not to be confused with Mary, mother of Jesus, or Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha and Lazarus) has been portrayed as a penitent prostitute or even a lascivious lady-friend of Jesus; however, the New Testament suggests no such thing.

We do know that at one point, Jesus cast seven demons out of Mary (Mark 16:9), yet the remainder of her life is remarkably devout. Mary (it is unknown whether ‘Magdalene’ was her last name, or if it represented the town she was from, Magdala) had followed Jesus throughout His ministry and cared for His needs (Matthew 27:55-56). She was present during His trials and sufferings (Matthew 27:45-56) and was near Him in His death (John 19:25). When the other disciples had fled for fear of the Jews, Mary stayed to watch His burial (Matthew 25:57-61). On the third day after His crucifixion, Mary returned with other women to anoint His body with spices. However, the resurrected Jesus met with Mary at the entrance to the tomb, making her the first one to behold Him after His resurrection (John 20:11-18). This was an apt response to honour a remarkable woman who had consistently and devotedly honoured Him.



SATAN

THE PRINCE OF LIES

“His primary tools are actually not physical, but psychological: like a cat arching her back or a cobra spreading his hood, he continually lies, cheats and steals in an attempt to make himself look more powerful than he truly is.”

Every story has a bad guy, and in Satan, the Bible has the worst of them all. But unlike many popular villains who have something that we can connect with – maybe a broken childhood or avenging a past wrong – Satan has nothing to desire. He is pure evil. He is pure selfishness.

The name ‘Satan’ means ‘adversary’ or ‘accuser’ and appears often in the New Testament, though sometimes the name ‘Devil’ is used. He can also be referred to by description: ‘the god of this age’ (2 Corinthians 4:4); ‘the prince of demons’ (Matthew 12:24); ‘the ruler of the kingdom of the air’ (Ephesians 2:2); ‘the ruler of darkness’ (Ephesians 6:12); ‘the tempter’ (Matthew 4:3); ‘the evil one’ (Matthew 13:19). Jesus calls him ‘a murderer from the beginning’ and a ‘liar and the father of lies’ (John 8:44).

Despite popular depiction, Satan is neither the equal of God nor the ruler of hell. The Bible describes him as a created angel who led a rebellion against God, was cast from heaven, and now wages a rebellious war against God and His creation. His primary tools are actually not physical, but psychological: like a cat arching her back or a cobra spreading his hood, he

continually lies, cheats and steals in an attempt to make himself look more powerful than he truly is.

Matthew, Mark and Luke all record the famous ‘showdown in the Desert’ (more properly known as ‘The Temptation of Christ’), where Satan came face-to-face with Jesus and attempted to persuade Him to abandon God. Though Satan twisted and distorted God’s Word in a desperate effort to gain Christ’s allegiance, Jesus remained true and obedient to God – the best way to avoid Satan’s wiles.

Though he might be a menace now, the Bible is very clear about Satan’s future: complete and utter defeat. When God chooses to wrap up this current age, Satan and his demons will be completely conquered – and it won’t even be a close fight, as they will be simply consumed with fire from Heaven (Revelation 20:7-10). They will then be cast into hell – not to reign, as commonly assumed – but to be eternally punished by God for causing such fear and terror among humanity for so many millennia. For this despicable villain, there will be no sequel.





JOHN THE BAPTIST

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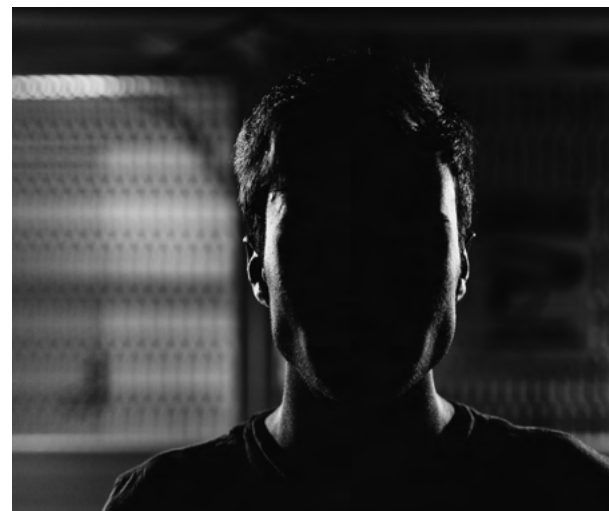
A fearless preacher and proclaimer of the ministry of Jesus, John the Baptist is in essence the first main character of the New Testament. He was born approximately six months before the birth of Jesus, to Elizabeth and Zechariah. Luke 1:14-16 tells us he was ‘filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb’. He would probably have been known to his friends as John bar Zechariah, or John son of Zechariah. (“The Baptist” comes from what he was best known for – baptising people – and not his surname... just to clarify). John’s name means ‘Yahweh is gracious’, and he is one of five Johns in the New Testament. The life of John can be found at the beginning of all four gospels (Matthew 3:1-17; Mark 1:4-11; Luke 1:5-25, 57-80, 3:1-20; John 1:6-13, 19-34). Don’t confuse John ‘the Baptist’ with John ‘the Apostle’, who wrote the fourth Gospel, the three letters bearing the name John, the book of Revelation, and who was one of Jesus’ closest disciples.

Though John’s dress and habits were certainly rare (he wore clothes of camel hair and ate a diet of locusts and honey, see Matthew 3:4), he had only one mission in life – to announce the coming of Jesus. With relentless vigour and gritty audacity, John preached his message to an ever-increasing number of

listeners: ‘prepare the way for the Lord’ (John 1:23). This phrase would have been well understood by his Israelite audience: it was customary for a monarch embarking on a journey to send forerunners who would check the roads to be taken and ensure that they were suitably ready for a royal visitor. If necessary, he would even level the ground, level off any high places and smooth over the rough patches. His primary goal was to remove any obstacles that would hinder the king’s journey. It was a grueling and demanding job, but the forerunner was committed to the success of the one who was to follow.

Despite great success as a preacher, John accepted his role as a forerunner to the coming Jesus – someone so great that John did not even consider himself worthy of untying His sandal (John 1:27). Nevertheless, John’s fearless preaching became his undoing: he was put in prison and eventually beheaded (Matthew 14:3-12).

John’s attitude towards Jesus is a tremendous encouragement, and challenge, to all of us: ‘He must increase, but I must decrease’ (John 3:30).



PONTIUS PILOT THE GOVERNOR

Pontius Pilate was a ruthless, yet gutless, ruler who ruled as Roman governor over Judea from 26-36 AD. The Jewish leaders brought Jesus to Pilate hoping for an execution, but Pilate could find no guilt in Him (Luke 23:4, 13-16, 22). At one point Pilate tried to free Jesus (Mark 15:6-14), while at another, he tried to pawn off the problem to Herod Antipas (Luke 23:6-7); ultimately he succumbed to crowd pressure, washed his hands ‘of this man’s blood’ (Matthew 27:24) and delivered Jesus to death by crucifixion (Luke 23:23-24). Pilate was regarded by the early church as the decisive human contributor to Jesus’ death (Acts 3:13, 4:27, 13:28).

MARY MAGDALENE THE REDEEMED

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THE LOCATIONS

“Jerusalem, well-built city, built as a place for worship! The city to which the tribes ascend, all God’s tribes go up to worship, To give thanks to the name of God— this is what it means to be Israel. Thrones for righteous judgment are set there, famous David-thrones.” Psalm 122:3-5



THE PRINCIPAL CITY OF ISRAEL JERUSALEM

Jerusalem, in the region on Judea, was once an isolated hillside fortress captured by King David in the tenth century BC. Between 966 and 959 BC, David’s son, King Solomon, built a splendid Temple on the site, transforming Jerusalem into the political, spiritual, social and economic capital of Israel (this Temple was destroyed in 586 BC; a second Temple was built from 538 BC, and was fully restored by Herod the Great around 20 BC). Herod the Great also extended Jerusalem’s splendour by embarking on a building program that included palaces and citadels, a theatre and an amphitheatre, viaducts and elaborate public monuments. In Jesus’ time, it is likely that Jerusalem had a population somewhere between 30,000 – 80,000 people, but this number swelled many times over during the festive celebrations.

Many of the most important events in Jesus’ life happened in and around Jerusalem, including the final week of His life: the Last Supper (Luke 22:14-30); His betrayal and arrest (Luke 22:47-53); His trial before Pilate and Herod (Luke 23:1-12); His crucifixion (Luke 23:26-49); His resurrection (Luke 24:1-11); and His appearances before the ascension (Luke 24:44-49).



JESUS’ BIRTHPLACE BETHLEHEM

Caesar’s decree for a census of the entire Roman Empire made it necessary for Joseph and Mary to leave their home town, Nazareth, and journey the 70 miles to the Judean village of Bethlehem. Luke 2:1-7



A SHUNNED REGION SAMARIA

The Samaritan region was an area shunned by most Jewish people, stemming from an ethnic and racial divide caused when the region was captured by the Assyrians in the eighth century BC. Centuries of intentional people-mixing led to different cultural and religious practices, and the Samaritan people of Jesus' time were vehemently eschewed as only "half-Jews".

Contrary to common protocol, particularly among religious leaders, Jesus did not avoid Samaria. Rather, He travelled there in His early ministry, speaking with a woman at the well (John 4:4-26) and receiving many who believed in Him (John 4:38-42). He also used the despised Samaritan as the hero in His much-loved Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37).



JESUS BAPTISM RIVER JORDAN

As John stood in the waters of the Jordan River before the crowds awaiting baptism, Jesus approached him and requested to be baptized. Despite John's protests, Jesus insisted, and he obediently agreed. As Jesus came up out of the water, we read that the heavens were opened, the Spirit of God descended like a dove, and the voice of the Father declared: 'This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased.' Mathew 3:13-17

"As Jesus came up out of the water, we read that the heavens were opened, the Spirit of God descended like a dove"



NORTHERN ISRAEL GALILEE

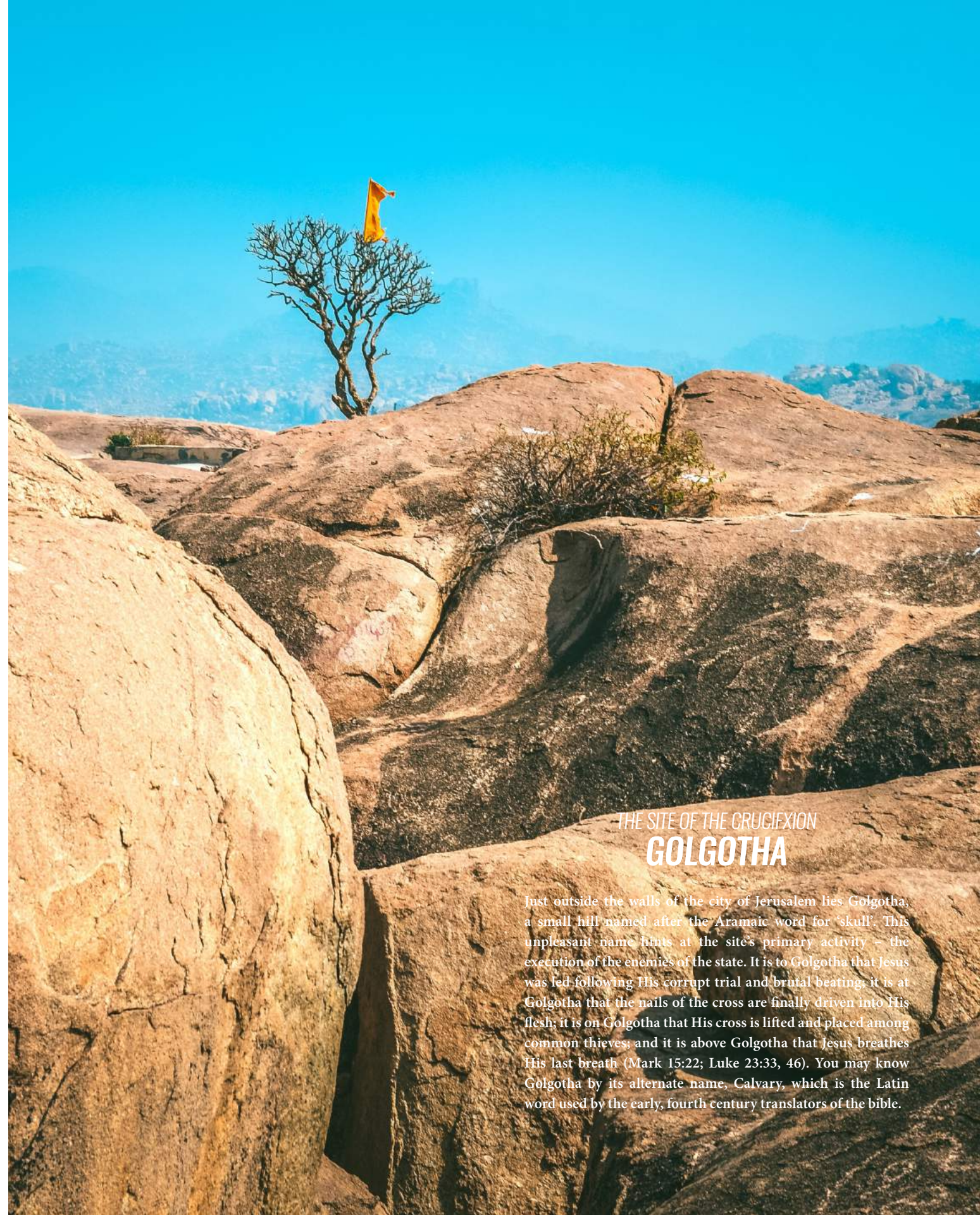
Home to an assortment of Jewish, non-Jewish and Roman military personnel, Galilee (and Galileans) were often looked down upon by their Judean counterparts for being "simple country folk" religiously, culturally and linguistically. However, Galilee is where Jesus spent most of His time travelling and ministering, and was the site of many significant events in Jesus' life: Peter (Simon), Andrew, James and John were called from their fishing location on the Sea of Galilee to follow Him (Matthew 4:18-22); the Mount of Beatitudes, where He delivered His Sermon on the Mount, is believed to be Galilee; the Roman Centurion, who was described as having greater faith than anyone in Israel, was in Capernaum, on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee (Matthew 8:1-13); He calmed a storm that was raging over the Sea of Galilee (Matthew 8:23-27); He fed five thousand hungry people (Matthew 14:13-21); He walked on water (Matthew 14:22-33); and He raised a widow's son from the dead (Luke 7:11-17).



SERMON ON THE MOUNT MOUNT OF BEATITUDES

'Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth.' 'Salt of the earth.' 'An eye for an eye.' 'Ask and you will receive.' 'Wolves in sheep's clothing.' These are just some of the now-popular phrases that were first given to us by Jesus during His 'Sermon on the Mount' – perhaps the most famous sermon of all time. In this message, Jesus presented His longest single teaching, focused on Christian morals and ethical living, and instructed us with the Lord's Prayer. The Sermon on the Mount is widely known the quintessential Christian teaching and is generally esteemed by both Christian and non-Christians alike. Matthew 5:1-7:29

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THE SITE OF THE CRUCIFIXION GOLGOTHA

Just outside the walls of the city of Jerusalem lies Golgotha, a small hill named after the Aramaic word for 'skull'. This unpleasant name hints at the site's primary activity – the execution of the enemies of the state. It is to Golgotha that Jesus was led following His corrupt trial and brutal beating; it is at Golgotha that the nails of the cross are finally driven into His flesh; it is on Golgotha that His cross is lifted and placed among common thieves; and it is above Golgotha that Jesus breathes His last breath (Mark 15:22; Luke 23:33, 46). You may know Golgotha by its alternate name, Calvary, which is the Latin word used by the early, fourth century translators of the bible.