

### 3. The Birth of the King

**"Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?" (Matthew 2:1-2)**

His real name is not Jesus. That's a Greek version, *Iesous*, a transliteration of his name. His Aramaic birth name was Yeshua, a short version of the name Joshua (in Hebrew Yehoshua). His parents would have called him Yeshu – the shortened, Galilean version of Yeshua. This was a very common name – the sixth most popular name among Jews of the time. The name Jesus sounds strange to us. But it is Joshua. Or Josh. Yeshu, the son of Yehosef and Miriam.

The story of his birth is, of course, one of the most famous stories in the world and the foundation of our Christmas celebrations. The early church, however, didn't consider it quite as important: the story only occurs in Luke and Matthew, and both writers include different details. They agree that Jesus' parents were called Mary and Joseph, that he was born in Bethlehem during the reign of Herod I (a.k.a. Herod the Great), that he ended up living in Nazareth, and that the birth had a whiff of scandal. Matthew states it simply: "... but before they lived together, [Mary] was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 1:18). Luke has a



more elaborate account, with an angel appearing to Mary and telling her that "The Holy Spirit will come upon you" and that the child "will be holy; he will be called Son of God" (Luke 1:35).

This, according to the Gospel accounts, is no ordinary baby.

### INCARNATION

This is a key Christian idea about Jesus: that he was the incarnation of God. John wrote that "the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). Incarnation means to appear in person, in the flesh. Christians claim – based on the Gospels – that God took human form and lived among us in the shape of Jesus. And this is reflected in another name which is applied to Jesus: Emmanuel, which means "God with us".

Some of the most familiar elements of the Christmas story are not actually in the Gospel accounts. The stable is never mentioned, and there's no inn, either. The word in Luke's account which is traditionally translated as "inn" actually means guest room, or spare room, or anywhere you might put visitors. In peasant homes of the times, the animals were brought indoors at night and the manger was in the lower

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section of the house. So the scene of a crowded peasant home was not a place for a baby except for the animals.

Similarly, although we are told that three kings, the Bible never says that there were three of them, or that there were three of the wise men – the word is used for priests from the Persian empire.

We don't know the exact date of Jesus' birth. In the West we celebrate it on December 25, but this date was not agreed upon until the 4th century. Earlier writers suggested November 7. The year is uncertain. We know from the Gospel of Matthew that Jesus was born during the reign of Herod the Great, that it took place while Herod was alive, and that he was "about thirty" when he died (Luke 3:23).

The date of Herod's death is generally given as 4 BC. Jesus was born a little while before that, so it makes sense to assume that he was born in 5/early 4 BC. If Jesus' baptism was in AD 29, as some scholars have suggested, he would have been thirty-two at the time of his death, well with John's "about thirty". It is worth to notice Jesus was actually born before Christ! This is because the years BC and AD actually miscalculate the date.

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5/early 4 BC. If Jesus' baptism took place in the autumn  
of AD 29, as some scholars have suggested, then he  
would have been thirty-two at the time. This fits pretty  
well with John's "about thirty" description. (You'll  
notice Jesus was actually born several years BC –  
before Christ! This is because the monk who invented  
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Joseph and Mary were probably young: the usual  
age for a Jewish girl to be married was between  
thirteen and sixteen, and for boys not much older.



And they were poor. We know this because after Jesus' birth, they go to the Temple and sacrifice two pigeons. Pigeons were allowed as a sacrifice if you couldn't afford a lamb or a goat. Also, when Mary hears of his birth, she sings a song celebrating the triumph of the poor and the humble. Known as *The Magnificat*, the song celebrates the fact that God "has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty" (Luke 1:52–53). This song makes no sense at all unless Mary – and the man she was to marry – was "lowly", poor, and even hungry.

According to Matthew, when Herod the Great found out that there was a rumoured "prince" being born in Bethlehem, he sent soldiers to kill the children. Although some historians have questioned this event, from what we know of Herod, such a thing is entirely in fitting with his character. This was a man who murdered two of his sons and one of his wives, who ruled through terror, violence, and political cunning.

Matthew's Gospel records that Jesus escaped south, into Egypt, returning when Herod died. When Joseph and Mary returned, they discovered that Herod's son Archelaus had inherited the southern part of the kingdom. Archelaus was, if anything, more brutal than his father. So they went back to Nazareth.

The area would have been devastated. In the aftermath of Herod's death, his sons Archelaus and Antipater went to Rome to argue over the terms of their father's will. While they were away, disorder broke out

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in Judea and Galilee. The Romans were marching in and crushing the revolt. Many were taken as slaves in punishment. The city of Sepphoris – only three miles from Nazareth – was destroyed. In Judea, the legate Varus had some two thousand rebels

So Jesus must have grown up with memories of violence and death, of slavery. His life was lived, like those of the occupied countries, against a background

**"Is not this the carpenter, the brother of James and Joseph, and brother of Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" (Mark 6:3)**

We know two things about Jesus' parents. He was circumcised and he wore a prayer shawl. He was, in other words, Jewish.

His father, Joseph, is described as an upright or "righteous" man (Matthew 1:19). That Jesus went on pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the Passover (Luke 2:41) His parents had him named, and then, for his birth, they took him to the Temple for Mary's purification.

Nazareth was an insignificant village on a ridge above the surrounding plain, probably numbered not more than a few hundred. It was nothing that we would recognise as a market economy. Instead, each household



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in Judea and Galilee. The Romans restored order by marching in and crushing the revolt. Thousands of Jews were taken as slaves in punishment, and most of the city of Sepphoris – only three miles from Nazareth – was destroyed. In Judea, the legate of Syria, P. Quintilius Varus had some two thousand rebels crucified.

So Jesus must have grown up surrounded by memories of violence and death, of families sold into slavery. His life was lived, like those of all citizens of occupied countries, against a background hum of fear.

**"Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" (Mark 6:3)**

We know two things about Jesus' physical appearance: he was circumcised and he wore a fringed Jewish prayer shawl. He was, in other words, Jewish.

His father, Joseph, is described as a devout Jew – an upright or "righteous" man (Matthew 1:19). We know that Jesus went on pilgrimage to Jerusalem to observe the Passover (Luke 2:41) His parents circumcised him and had him named, and then, forty days after his birth, they took him to the Temple to be dedicated and for Mary's purification.

Nazareth was an insignificant place. Perched on a ridge above the surrounding countryside, it probably numbered not more than 400 people. There was nothing that we would recognize as a modern market economy. Instead, each household grew and



consumed its own produce. In the shared family courtyard there would be an oven, a millstone for grinding wheat, and a cistern for storing water. The village provided a communal wine press and olive press. Families could be self-sufficient, owning a field, some sheep and goats, chickens, a donkey, and perhaps a cow. They would have olive and fruit trees: figs, pomegranates, and a vegetable garden for leeks, lentils, beans, peas, cucumbers, onions and garlic. Prosperity? Prosperity was owning your own vine.

Clothing was simple. Colours were a luxury. Most clothes were in muted colours, natural dyes. Men wore a *chiton* – a word which is often translated as “coat” but which is a basic undergarment, something nearer to what we would call a shirt. Later in life we know that Jesus had a tunic which was woven in one piece (John 19:23). On top of that they wore an oblong piece of cloth which served as a cloak in the daytime, and could be wrapped around as a blanket at night. For special occasions, or in richer families, you might wear a robe – a posher garment with sleeves. This was a sign of distinction. In Jesus’ story of the prodigal son, the father dresses his son in a robe. This was tied with a sash or a belt. And they wore sandals on their feet.

Jesus grew up in a Jewish village. He attended synagogue, learned Hebrew, read the Torah. He lived among ordinary people living ordinary lives. And the farmers, the builders, the workshops, vineyards, and fishermen of Galilee all gave him the images with which he was to fill his stories of the kingdom of God.

Jesus was not an only child and at least two sisters. His brothers were James, Joses, Simon and Judas (the name “James” is actually Jacob.) They had Jewish names.

We can’t be sure how much formal education was received throughout the ancient world. It is why you needed scribes. Very few could read, but even though Jesus was a “teacher” – he does not appear to have had formal training: later on, people were learning from his teaching. He would have learned the basics of the Jewish faith, to recite the Shema, to be a devout man, Joseph may have taken him to learn at the synagogue and to be with the local scribe. Gifted children from rich families might take their studies to a rabbinical school, to sit at the feet of the law. But Jesus never did. He became a man at thirteen years old and took up his father’s trade.

Although translated as “carpenter”, the word to describe Joseph, is *tekton*, which means a builder who was also a general builder of houses, including a stonemason and mason. The writer, Justin Martyr, claimed that Jesus made yokes (Justin was born in the region). It is likely, as well, that Jesus worked on the building sites in



produce. In the shared family could be an oven, a millstone for and a cistern for storing water. The communal wine press and olive could be self-sufficient, owning a and goats, chickens, a donkey, and they would have olive and fruit trees: s, and a vegetable garden for leeks, s, cucumbers, onions and garlic. Merit was owning your own vine. Temple. Colours were a luxury. Most dyed colours, natural dyes. Men a word which is often translated as a basic undergarment, something we would call a shirt. Later in life we had a tunic which was woven in one. On top of that they wore an oblong which served as a cloak in the daytime, wrapped around as a blanket at night. Sons, or in richer families, you might a finer garment with sleeves. This was common. In Jesus' story of the prodigal son, the son in a robe. This was tied with and they wore sandals on their feet. In a Jewish village. He attended and Hebrew, read the Torah. He lived people living ordinary lives. And the s, the workshops, vineyards, and we all gave him the images with his stories of the kingdom of God.

Jesus was not an only child. He had four brothers and at least two sisters. His brothers were called James, Joses, Simon and Judas. (The word we translate as "James" is actually Jacob.) These are good, solid, Jewish names.

We can't be sure how much formal learning Jesus had. Formal education was rare and literacy rates throughout the ancient world were very low – that is why you needed scribes. We know that Jesus could read, but even though he was called rabbi – "teacher" – he does not appear to have had any formal training: later on, people were surprised at his learning. He would have learned the foundations of the Jewish faith, to recite the traditional prayers. As a devout man, Joseph may have encouraged his sons to learn at the synagogue and to study the Torah with the local scribe. Gifted children from well-off families might take their studies further and go to a rabbinical school, to sit at the feet of the teachers of the law. But Jesus never did this. Instead, when he became a man at thirteen years and a day, he took up his father's trade.

Although translated as "carpenter", the word used to describe Joseph, is *tekton*, which means someone who was also a general builder, a construction worker, including a stonemason and metalworker. A later writer, Justin Martyr, claimed that Jesus made ploughs and yokes (Justin was born in Samaria, so knew the region). It is likely, as well, that he and his father worked on the building sites in Sepphoris, since the



city was being rebuilt by Antipas during those years.

The Roman Empire had ratified the will of Herod the Great and split the kingdom into four. Archelaus had control of Judea and Samaria, but proved so hideously inept that the Romans removed him from power and controlled the area through their own leader, a procurator, and the high priests in Jerusalem. Philip got Trachonitis and Batea; Antipas was called "tetrarch" – literally "ruler of one quarter of a kingdom" – and given the Perea and Galilee. The final part was known as the Decapolis: a federation of ten cities.

The fact that he was engaged in a manual trade, or even that he came from a poor background doesn't mean that Jesus was uneducated. Rabbis and sages of his day were not academics, but worked in a trade. Labour brought you some measure of independence. Shemaiah, a scribe from the generation before Jesus, said, "Love labour and hate mastery and seek not acquaintance with the ruling power."

Or, as the Jewish scholar Jacob Neusner's translation has it: "Love work, hate authority, don't get friendly with the government."

## 4. The Kingdom of C

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## INSTANT EXPERT: JESUS

by Antipas during those years. Herod had ratified the will of Herod the Great, dividing the kingdom into four. Archelaus had been chosen for Judaea, but proved so hideously incompetent that he was removed from power and replaced by a puppet ruler through their own leader, a high priest in Jerusalem. Philip got the Galilee region. Antipas was called "tetrarch" – ruler of a quarter of a kingdom – and Galilee. The final part was known as the Decapolis, a collection of ten cities. He was engaged in a manual trade, or at least a poor background doesn't suggest a highly educated. Rabbis and sages were respected, but worked in a trade. It was a measure of independence. In the generation before Jesus, there was a hatred of mastery and a seek not for ruling power." Scholar Jacob Neusner's translation of the Talmud, authority, don't get friendly

## 4. The Kingdom of God

**"John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." (Mark 1:4)**

Mark's Gospel begins not with the birth of Jesus, but with John the Baptist – or John the Baptizer as he is sometimes known.

He is a fiery, Old Testament figure who dressed like the Old Testament prophet Elijah and baptized people in the wilderness. The key to John is what he wasn't. His father was a priest, he came from a priestly family, but John wasn't a priest. Instead he worked outside the religious structures, away from the Temple, calling people into the wilderness to repent. Only by repentance could Israel escape the coming wrath of the Lord.

John's disregard for the religious authorities becomes clear when we see that he baptized people who, in other fields, were beyond the pale. Prostitutes came to him. Tax collectors. Soldiers (and since Jews were exempt from military duty, these must have been Gentiles). We know as well that at one point he was baptizing in Samaritan country.



John was a truly radical figure who sometimes gets sidelined in Christian history. He prepared the way for Jesus, but we should not see him purely as some kind of warm-up act. John had a strong, urgent message of his own: repent. He called for repentance not only from ordinary people, but also from the ruling elite. Herod Antipas had eloped with the wife of one of his many stepbrothers. In John's eyes this constituted incest and thus made the ruler of Galilee impure.

Not, perhaps, the kind of thing a ruler wants to hear...

Sometime in AD 29, Jesus was baptized by John. This is one of the events in Jesus' life which all scholars agree to be genuine. Since his followers came to believe Jesus was without sin, the fact that he was baptized – an act of repentance for sin – would never have been invented by Christians.

So why was he baptized? Some see it as an act of solidarity with ordinary people. Others see it as signalling a new movement, a new period in his life. Baptism, after all, came to symbolize death and rebirth for Christians. Perhaps this was the death of Jesus' old life, with all its duties and obligations, and the beginning of something new. Others see it as confirmation: at Jesus' baptism, "... he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased'" (Mark 1:10–11). It was a confirmation of who he was and what his purpose was.

#### 4. THE KINGDOM OF GOD

After the baptism, though, Jesus went into the wilderness. The Spirit led him there for forty days, during which time he was tempted by Satan.

Satan means tester, accuser. A tempter. He tempted Jesus in three specific ways. First he says to Jesus, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread" (Luke 4:3); then he promises that if Jesus worships him, he will hand Jesus authority over all the kingdoms of the world; finally he tries to tempt Jesus to throw himself from the high point of the Temple to save him. Jesus is offered food, then he is offered worldly power; and finally he is offered to show everyone who he really was by rejecting all of the temptations of the devil's use of Scripture with Scripture. Jesus rejects all of the temptations. And he returns from the wilderness, having faced down the accuser.

Even then he does not set straight his own mission. Instead he seems to have followed John the Baptist for a while, baptizing in the Jordan while John moved into territory up north.

This came to an end when Herod Antipas, tired of John's invective against him, had him imprisoned, and eventually beheaded. John's death seems to have been the trigger for Jesus to go to Galilee and start his main mission.



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Jesus rejects all of the temptations, countering the devil's use of Scripture with Scriptures quotations of his own. And he returns from the wilderness having faced down the accuser.

Even then he does not set straight off into his mission. Instead he seems to have worked with John the Baptist for a while, baptizing in the southern Jordan while John moved into territory upstream.

This came to an end when Herod Antipas finally tired of John's invective against him. John was arrested, imprisoned, and eventually beheaded. The arrest seems to have been the trigger for Jesus to move back to Galilee and start his main mission.



**"Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news'" (Mark 1:14-15).**

Jesus was not a politically neutral figure. He did not just go around "doing good". He was opposed by virtually every power group he met: Pharisees, Sadducees, Herodians, Temple authorities, scribes, and, of course, the Romans. Why would they do that, if all he was doing was "good deeds"?

The reason is that he was actually proclaiming something far more radical, more dangerous. He believed that his purpose was to bring in a new kingdom: the kingdom of God.

The arrival of the kingdom of God is the key message of Jesus' mission. The phrase "kingdom of God" (or Matthew's preferred alternative of "kingdom of heaven") occurs eighty-five times in the Gospels: thirty-seven in Matthew, fourteen in Mark, and thirty-two in Luke. John only uses the phrase twice, which might lead us to think that he was omitting something, but he uses an alternative phrase: "eternal life". (Actually Jesus uses this phrase in the other Gospels as well.) In John's Gospel, Jesus says, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). Abundant life is a hallmark of the kingdom of God.

This thread actually runs through the entire Bible. Although the phrase is never explicitly used in the

#### 4 THE KINGDOM OF GOD

Old Testament, it frequently speaks of God reigning not only over Israel but over the whole world. It has been suggested that an alternative way of reading the whole Bible could be "the story of the kingdom of God".

Jesus wanted everyone to have a share in the kingdom of God. To live in the kingdom of God was to live in the will of the king. Jesus taught his disciples to pray: "Your kingdom come. Your will be done, as in heaven" (Matthew 6:10).

The kingdom of God on earth is not yet done.

#### THE LORD'S PRAYER

It is known as the Lord's Prayer, although the name was not given to it until the 16th century AD. It is really the disciples' prayer. It appears in two forms in the Gospels: a longer one in Matthew and a shorter one in Luke. It was also in an early church discipleship manual called the Didache (which means teaching). The prayer was adopted as a significant, specific part of early church life very early on. Tertullian, an early church writer, called it "the epitome of the whole gospel".

Jews believed in the kingdom of God. They believed it would only come when the messiah expelled the Romans from the land.



When Jesus was arrested, Jesus came to proclaiming the good news of God, the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and the good news" (Mark 1:14-15).

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Jesus was actually proclaiming a radical, more dangerous. His purpose was to bring in a new kingdom of God.

The kingdom of God is the key message. The phrase "kingdom of God" (or "kingdom of heaven") occurs eighty-five times in the New Testament: seven in Matthew, fourteen in Mark, and five in Luke. John only uses the word "kingdom" once. This might lead us to think that he was not interested, but he uses an alternative phrase: "eternal life". (Actually Jesus uses this phrase as well.) In John's Gospel, Jesus says that if you believe in him, you may have life, and have it abundantly (John 1:10). Abundant life is a hallmark of the kingdom of God.

The kingdom of God runs through the entire Bible. The phrase is never explicitly used in the

Old Testament, it frequently speaks of God as a king, reigning not only over Israel but over the whole world. It has been suggested that an alternative title for the whole Bible could be "the story of the coming of the kingdom of God".

Jesus wanted everyone to have access to God. To live in the kingdom of God was to accept the rule of God: the essence of a kingdom is that people there do the will of the king. Jesus taught his disciples to pray: "Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10).

The kingdom of God on earth is where God's will is done.

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and inaugurated a new golden age on the day of the Lord. But Jesus said that the kingdom was not only coming, it had already arrived. It was here, now, and open to everyone. No one was excluded. In fact, the lowest rungs of society were specifically welcomed in. Beggars feature heavily in the Gospels. Widows as well, and children. Then there are the lepers, the demon-possessed. These are low status, powerless, often outcast and marginalized individuals. Though members of the aristocracy and the elite appear in the Gospels, most of the cast is made up from the lowest levels of society. The good news of Jesus was, above all, good news for the poor. Jesus told them that God cared for them and knew all about them. God, he said, even knew the number of hairs on their heads.

The great Jewish story told how God chose his people, rescued them, loved them, and would, through them, eventually become the God of all the nations. Jesus proclaimed himself the climax of that story. The kingdom was here, the kingdom was active, the kingdom was personal, and the kingdom had room for everyone.

And that made the kingdom dangerous. In a world ruled by the Romans and their client kings, to advocate joining another kingdom was subversive and seditious. Only the Romans could make someone a king. It is worth noting that, when the Romans came to execute Jesus, the charge sheet pinned above his cross was the single title: King of the Jews.

**"Now when Jesus heard that he was arrested, he withdrew to Galilee and made his home by the lake..." (Matthew 4:12)**

After John's arrest, Jesus went north and made his home in the fishing town of Capernaum on the north shore of Lake Galilee. There he called his first disciples, Simon and Andrew. Jesus finds them fishing in Lake Galilee and calls them from their nets to become his disciples. He tells them that from now on they will catch more than fish. This was not the first time Jesus had called people to follow him. According to John's Gospel, Jesus had called his first disciples when he was with John the Baptist. They left their nets and followed him.

### DISCIPLES

Jesus called many people into discipleship – the Greek word is *mathetes* – meaning learner. Rabbis had disciples, smart students who learned by observing and imitating him, and by discussing his teachings with him. Jesus adopts the same approach. His disciples were – and are – expected to imitate him. Christlike. Discipleship was an active process. Jesus called people to movement, to follow him. Fishermen left their nets. A tax collector came out from his toll booth.



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itle: King of the Jews.

**"Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the lake..." (Matthew 4:12-13)**

After John's arrest, Jesus went north to Galilee. He made his home in the fishing town of Capernaum, on the north shore of Lake Galilee. There he called his first disciples, Simon and Andrew, James and John. Jesus finds them fishing in Lake Galilee and calls them from their nets to become his disciples, promising them that from now on they will catch people, rather than fish. This was not the first time he had met them: according to John's Gospel, Jesus met them in Judea, when he was with John the Baptist. But now they left their nets and followed him.

### DISCIPLES

Jesus called many people into discipleship. Disciple – the Greek word is *mathetes* – means apprentice, learner. Rabbis had disciples, small groups of students who learned by observing the rabbi and imitating him, and by discussing the Torah with him. Jesus adopts the same approach: his disciples were – and are – expected to imitate him, to be Christlike. Discipleship was an active commitment. Jesus called people to movement, to literally follow him. Fishermen left their nets; Levi the tax collector came out from his toll booth.



Jesus chose twelve core disciples. The number is symbolic, reminding Jews of the twelve tribes of Israel – Jesus' mission was for all Israel. The twelve included four fishermen, a tax collector, a zealot – a political radical. Some of them were relatives of Jesus (James and John were very likely his cousins). Some were married men. There was an inner circle of three: Peter, James, and John, who saw Jesus during some of his most crucial moments.

Along with them there was a much wider group of disciples. Jesus sent seventy of these on missions throughout Galilee. There were also "hidden" disciples, including Nicodemus in Jerusalem, and women – Mary Magdalene, and Joanna, wife of a high-ranking official at the court of Herod Antipas. Although they are never called "disciple", they did many of the same things that the men did. In one famous story, another Mary sits at Jesus' feet while he is speaking, much to the annoyance of her sister, Martha. This is often seen as a contrast between the contemplative life (Mary) and the active life (Martha), but Mary is actually adopting the classic pose of a rabbinic disciple and sitting at the feet of her rabbi. She is staking her claim to be a disciple. Mary, Martha, and their brother, Lazarus, also offered Jesus a place to stay. Jesus stayed with them at Bethany during the last week of his life, and may have made other visits there as well.

There are signs that the number of disciples declined in the latter part of his life. It was clear that he wasn't the type they thought he was going to be because the cost was too great.

Jesus' home in Capernaum was probably the home of Simon and Andrew. In the ruins of the town, archaeologists have found what they call "household dwellings", consisting of a central room surrounded by a number of houses. The courtyards allowed access to the rooms. The walls were made of beams, covered with mud – in one famous incident, the crowd of people Jesus were so intense that some men went up on the roof, hacked through the mud, and lowered an invalid friend on a stretcher for Jesus. One of these houses was later converted into a church. It is a very good candidate for the house where Jesus lived in Galilee and the place which Jesus called his home.



twelve core disciples. The number of Jewish Jews of the twelve tribes of Israel was for all Israel. The twelve included a tax collector, a zealot – and a Pharisee. Some of them were relatives of Jesus (James and John were very likely his cousins). There was an inner circle of three – Peter, James, and John, who saw Jesus at his most crucial moments. Outside them there was a much wider circle. Jesus sent seventy of these disciples throughout Galilee. There were also twelve apostles, including Nicodemus in Jerusalem – Mary Magdalene, and a high-ranking official at the court. Although they are never called apostles, they did many of the same things that Jesus did. In one famous story, another Mary came while he is speaking, much to the surprise of her sister, Martha. This is often contrasted between the contemplative life of Martha, but Mary is in the classic pose of a rabbinic student sitting at the feet of her rabbi. She is the first to be a disciple. Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, also offered Jesus a home. He stayed with them at Bethany in the last week of his life, and may have died there as well.

There are signs that the number of disciples declined in the latter part of his mission, when it was clear that he wasn't the type of messiah they thought he was going to be. Some fell away because the cost was too great.

Jesus' home in Capernaum was probably in the house of Simon and Andrew. In the ruins of Capernaum, archaeologists have found what they call "clan-dwellings", consisting of a central courtyard surrounded by a number of houses. Stairs within the courtyards allowed access to the roofs. The roofs were made of beams, covered with layers of packed mud – in one famous incident, the crowds around Jesus were so intense that some men climbed up to the roof, hacked through the mud, and lowered their invalid friend on a stretcher for Jesus to heal him. One of these houses was later converted into a church. It's a very good candidate for the house of Simon Peter in Galilee and the place which Jesus called home.



## 5. A Day in the Life of the King

There is an account in the first chapter of Mark's Gospel – echoed in Matthew and Luke – which shows a kind of "day in the life". This is the first time that Jesus comes to public notice, and it is a kind of microcosm of all his work. It contains many of the elements that were to make him famous: teaching, exorcisms, healing, sharing meals, the adulation of the crowds, and his blatant disregard for religious convention. It gives an insight into why people found him so compelling, so intriguing, so attractive, so irresponsible, and even so infuriating.

**"They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes." (Mark 1:22)**

It starts on the Sabbath. Jesus goes to the synagogue in Capernaum where he begins teaching. People are amazed by the power and authority of his words.

Jesus was a brilliant – and highly unorthodox – teacher. He had no formal training and, although some of his teaching took place in synagogues, Jesus often taught on the move: walking around Galilee. A lot of teaching happened in fields, in a boat, on the side of a hill, in houses – wherever he found himself. And



everywhere, people were astonished at the power and authority of his words.

The authority of Jesus' teaching is a recurrent theme in the Gospels. There was something about the way in which he taught that was different. Typically, teaching of the time drew attention to previous teachers and "authorities", piling up references and quotations, or rabbinic teaching, which dissected the Torah in forensic detail through question and answer. Jesus both asked and answered questions, and he did provoke debate. But he did not teach in this kind of detailed manner, nor did he bother much about precedent, or even scriptural authority. His teaching seems to claim a power and authority of its own.

In one way, though, Jesus' teaching echoes that of the rabbis: he expects people to copy him. During John's account of the Last Supper, Jesus strips and washes the disciples' feet as a demonstration of how they should serve one another. He says: "So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you" (John 13:14-15).

A lot of Jesus' teaching involves provocative statements, or questions. He encourages questions. He uses clever forms of speech: metaphors, analogies, stories. He uses paradox: "...those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it"; "Whoever wants to be first must be last" (Mark 8:35; 9:35).

## 5. A DAY IN THE LIFE OF THE KING

He uses humour and exaggeration. He gives people nicknames which sum up their personalities. Most of all he fills his teaching with stories from everyday life. And many of these stories, which are in Jesus' most characteristic form, were the sharp, disturbing, disruptive, and often-called parables.

**"With many such parables he taught them, as they were able to hear. But he did not speak to them except in parables. He explained everything in parables to his disciples." (Mark 4:33-34)**

There are some forty parables in the Gospels. The difficulty in being precise is because it's hard to define what is a parable. Some are little more than one-liners, while others are longer, more complex narratives. They were to be memorable as hardly anyone could read. Everything was heard and remembered.

These were not fairy stories or myths. They were stories intended to make the kingdom of God real, to ground the kingdom of God in the world of the listeners. They were in the language of the audience – and at times to enrage the audience. Sometimes they were simple and sometimes baffling and provocative. But they were effective.

Jesus was not unique in telling parables. The rabbis did the same. But Jesus' parables were different.



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He uses humour and exaggeration. He gives  
 people nicknames which sum up their characteristics.  
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 everyday life. And many of these examples turn up  
 in Jesus' most characteristic form of teaching, which  
 were the sharp, disturbing, disruptive stories that we  
 call parables.

**"With many such parables he spoke the word  
 to them, as they were able to hear it; he did  
 not speak to them except in parables, but  
 he explained everything in private to his  
 disciples." (Mark 4:33-34)**

There are some forty parables in the Gospels (the  
 difficulty in being precise is because sometimes  
 it's hard to define what is a parable and what isn't).  
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 to be memorable as hardly anyone in his audience  
 could read. Everything was heard and carefully  
 remembered.

These were not fairy stories or children's tales.  
 They were stories intended to make the abstract  
 real, to ground the kingdom of God in the everyday  
 world of the listeners. They were intended to engage  
 the audience – and at times to enrage them as well.  
 Sometimes they were simple and clear, at other times  
 baffling and provocative. But they all made people think.

Jesus was not unique in telling parables: other  
 rabbis did the same. But Jesus' parables were earthier.



God appears in many guises: landowner, father, obstinate judge; whereas in rabbinic parables God is nearly always a royal figure.

Indeed, that's what parables are: they are stories about the kingdom of God. They are not direct comparisons or allegories. The king in the story of the talents might represent God, but that doesn't mean that God necessarily behaves like the king in that story. Everything depends on the point that Jesus is trying to make.

### MAJOR PARABLES OF JESUS

Parable	Matthew	Mark	Luke
The Sower	13:1-9, 18-23	4:1-9, 13-20	8:4-8, 11-15
The Weeds	13:24-30, 36-43	4:26-29	
The Mustard Seed	13:31-32	4:30-32	13:18-19
The Yeast	13:33		13:20-21
The Hidden Treasure	13:44		
The Valuable Pearl	13:45-46		

### 5. A DAY IN THE LIFE OF THE KING

Parable	Matthew
The Net	13:47-50
The Lost Sheep	18:10-14
The Unforgiving Servant	18:23-35
The Two Sons	21:28-32
The Tenants	21:33-44
The Wedding Feast	22:1-14
The Ten Bridesmaids	25:1-13
The Talents	25:14-30
The Good Samaritan	
The Rich Fool	
The Barren Fig Tree	
The Wedding Feast	
The Lost Coin	
The Prodigal Son	



many guises: landowner, father, whereas in rabbinic parables God is royal figure. What parables are: they are stories of God. They are not direct allegories. The king in the story of the present God, but that doesn't mean that he behaves like the king in that story. Ends on the point that Jesus is trying to

# PARABLES OF JESUS

Matthew	Mark	Luke
13:1-9, 18-23	4:1-9, 13-20	8:4-8, 11-15
13:24-30, 36-43	4:26-29	
13:31-32	4:30-32	13:18-19
13:33		13:20-21
13:44		
13:45-46		

Parable	Matthew	Mark	Luke
The Net	13:47-50		
The Lost Sheep	18:10-14		15:3-7
The Unforgiving Servant	18:23-35		
The Two Sons	21:28-32		
The Tenants	21:33-44	12:1-11	20:9-18
The Wedding Feast	22:1-14		14:16-24
The Ten Bridesmaids	25:1-13		
The Talents	25:14-30		19:11-27
The Good Samaritan			10:29-37
The Rich Fool			12:16-21
The Barren Fig Tree			13:6-9
The Wedding Feast			14:7-11
The Lost Coin			15:8-10
The Prodigal Son			15:11-32



Parable	Matthew	Mark	Luke
The Dishonest Manager			16:1-9
The Rich Man and Lazarus			16:19-31
The Persistent Widow			18:1-8
The Pharisee and the Tax Collector			18:9-14

**"He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." (Mark 1:27)**

Back to that Sabbath in Capernaum. In the synagogue is a man possessed by a spirit. His presence is a surprise: from a Jewish point of view, demons defiled a person, which is why this man is described as having an "unclean spirit". Such people were ostracized and certainly not admitted to the synagogue. Nevertheless, there he is: perhaps he is an intruder, an interloper. Whatever the case, the spirit in him cries out against Jesus. Jesus replies: "Be silent, and come out of him!" The unclean spirit leaves the man, throwing him into convulsions "and crying with a loud voice" (Mark 1:25-26).

**5. A DAY IN THE LIFE OF THE KING**

Our modern world finds the idea of demons baffling and even abhorrent. It appears in horror movies. And, indeed, in the Bible there is something horrible about the idea. The Gospels is sometimes very violent. For instance, the account of the man who was harming (Mark 9:22), or the man who was violent behaviour would be considered psychotic behaviour. At the same time, the supernatural, such as the presence of many demons that inhabit the world (Mark 5:1-20). Demon possesses people, and others as inherently evil: the power of something that is evil.

Ancient cultures took the idea of demons very seriously. They could inhabit people, and they could be driven out in many ways: through spells, remedies, special rings, and so on. These were common, and pagans used them for "services" through charms. The Gospels differed in a number of ways.

First, he performed the exorcisms. No charms. No incantations. He commanded the demon to shut up and go away. Often used is *ekballo*, from the verb *ekballō*, literally "to throw out".

Secondly, he restored people. Exorcisms were acts of liberation. A demon was to be unclean and driven to the margins, living outside the community.



Matthew	Mark	Luke
		16:1-9
		16:19-31
		18:1-8
		18:9-14

the unclean spirits, and  
1:27)  
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n intruder, an interloper.  
it in him cries out against  
nt, and come out of him!"  
e man, throwing him  
g with a loud voice"

Our modern world finds demon possession baffling and even abhorrent. It is the stuff of horror movies. And, indeed, in the Gospels there is something horrible about it. What is portrayed in the Gospels is sometimes very close to mental illness: for instance, the account of the boy repeatedly self-harming (Mark 9:22), or people chained because of violent behaviour would fit with certain diagnoses of psychotic behaviour. At other times it is more clearly supernatural, such as the casting out of Legion – the many demons that inhabited the man in Gerasa (Mark 5:1-20). Demon possessed people were not viewed by others as inherently evil: they were innocent victims, in the power of something that they could not control.

Ancient cultures took it for granted that evil powers could inhabit people, and they tried to combat this in many ways: through spells, incantations, herbal remedies, special rings, and amulets. Jewish exorcists were common, and pagan magicians offered similar "services" through charms and amulets. But Jesus differed in a number of ways.

First, he performed these deeds in his own power. No charms. No incantations. No amulets. He just told the demon to shut up and get out. The Greek word often used is *ekballo*, from *ballo* – to throw. Jesus literally chucked them out.

Secondly, he restored people to wholeness. Jesus' exorcisms were acts of liberation and release. To have a demon was to be unclean. These people were exiled to the margins, living outside the towns or even in



graveyards. So, in casting out their demon, Jesus brought them back into their community. Released from this terrible powerless slavery, they were now free to live their lives as they wished, and to rejoin their community.

Thirdly, Jesus explicitly linked the exorcism with the arrival of the kingdom. For Jesus, defeating these powers was a sign of the kingdom of God: "If it is by the finger of God that I cast out the demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you" (Luke 11:20).

The casting out of demons was a crucial part of Jesus' ministry, and exorcisms make up the single biggest category of healing in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Even his enemies acknowledged Jesus performed such miracles, although they claimed that he did it because he was in league with the devil.

We are not comfortable in our rational, scientific age with the idea of miracles, but the Gospel stories about Jesus give us no choice. There are too many stories for them all to be invented, and they are woven too closely into the account of his life. Jesus – the historical Jesus – performed miracles. That is why he was remembered. It has been popular, in certain circles, to "de-mythologize" Jesus, to remove the miraculous with the hope that it will leave us the historical Jesus. What it actually leaves us with is the forgettable Jesus. Without the miraculous there is no reason why Jesus should have been remembered by his followers.

Certainly the miraculous exorcism in the Capernaum synagogue makes Jesus famous. News starts to spread throughout Galilee. But he wasn't

doing it for effect. It was done. And as a result the man is made just to his full faculties, but to

**"And all in the crowd were amazed at him, for power came out of him, and he was healing all of them." (Luke 6:19)**

This is followed by another, done in the house where he heals Simon's brother Andrew of a fever.

So, after the first exorcism and healing. And this act brings them to Jesus' door. Mark tells us that this marks the beginning of the day when people bring their sick and pained for healing and exorcism (Mark 1:32).

Like the exorcisms, the healing is a restoration. There is more to it than "making someone well". The lame, the blind, reduced to begging: that was their life. So when Jesus healed them, he restored their dignity and ability to support themselves and their families.

Jesus healed those who were suffering from classic examples of this were Hansen's disease – it is a chronic disease, skin rashes, blemishes, disfigurements. While not fatal



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And as a result the man is made whole, restored, not  
just to his full faculties, but to the whole community.

**"And all in the crowd were trying to touch  
him, for power came out from him and healed  
all of them." (Luke 6:19)**

This is followed by another, different kind of healing.  
From the synagogue meeting, Jesus goes to Simon's  
house where he heals Simon's mother-in-law, sick with  
a fever.

So, after the first exorcism comes the first physical  
healing. And this act brings the crowds flocking to  
Jesus' door. Mark tells us that at sundown – which  
marks the beginning of the day after the Sabbath –  
people bring their sick and possessed to Jesus for  
healing and exorcism (Mark 1:32–34).

Like the exorcisms, the healing miracles are acts of  
restoration. There is more to them than simply "making  
someone well". The lame, the blind, the deaf were  
reduced to begging: that was the only work they could  
do. So when Jesus healed them it was like a whole new  
life: he restored their dignity and their capacity to earn  
and to support themselves and a family.

Jesus healed those who were excluded. The  
classic examples of this were people with leprosy.  
This is not what the modern world calls leprosy –  
which is Hansen's disease – it covers a range of skin  
diseases, skin rashes, blemishes or other kinds of  
disfigurements. While not fatal, these diseases were



seen as rendering the sufferer impure. Even being under the same roof as a leper made you impure; lying or eating within the house would necessitate a complete change of clothes (Leviticus 14:33–47).

Lepers were therefore kept in a state of near-permanent quarantine and excluded from towns and communities. The lepers Jesus encounters on the edge of a village in Samaria shout at him from a distance (Luke 17:12). These people were barred from the Temple: the place most connected with the earthly presence of God. Recovered lepers could enter, but even then there was a special place in the Temple – the House of Lepers – where they would have to undergo various purification rituals. It didn't mean that God did not care for them. But it did mean that they could never fully engage with the worshipping community. Jesus changed all that.

Jesus is recorded as touching lepers *before* they were cured (Matthew 8:3; Mark 1:41; Luke 5:13). This touch makes Jesus himself impure, but it doesn't seem to worry him. So when Jesus heals a leper he is doing more than ridding someone of a skin disease. He is making the impure, pure. The exiled, the forgotten, the "dead" are brought back to life.

The healings are acts of restoration. But they are also, sometimes, acts of deliberate provocation. Strictly speaking, healing was one of the thirty-nine categories of prohibited work in the rabbinical teachings on the Sabbath. Jesus was always getting into trouble for breaking the Sabbath rules in one

way or another, or for contravening and purity rules. On the Sabbath he was of serious, but not fatal, conditions. enough, permitted to heal or rescue a life-threatening condition on the Sabbath. conditions could wait until the next day. true of his disciples who plucked grain and walked through a field on the Sabbath. starving to death, they could have been of plucking grain, but they didn't. Jesus was a plea to put things into proper perspective. Sabbath was a gift to people, not a way to imprison them (Matthew 12:1–8).

The healings, then, say something about Jesus and the authority that he has. The proclamations of the arrival of the Messiah and the messianic status of Jesus. For Jesus sends disciples to find out whether John thought he was. Jesus replies, "I tell you, what you hear and see: the blind receive sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the dead are raised, and the poor have been brought to them" (Matthew 11:2–5).

### JOHN'S SIGNS

In John's Gospel, Jesus performs miracles. John calls "signs". These are miracles that identify who Jesus really is. The miracles that Jesus explicitly identifies as signs are:



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of serious, but not fatal, conditions. It was, reasonably  
enough, permitted to heal or rescue someone in a  
life-threatening condition on the Sabbath, but lesser  
conditions could wait until the next day. The same is  
true of his disciples who plucked grain to eat as they  
walked through a field on the Sabbath. They were not  
starving to death, they could have avoided the “work”  
of plucking grain, but they didn't. Jesus' response  
was a plea to put things into proper perspective. The  
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sends disciples to find out whether Jesus really is who  
John thought he was. Jesus replies, “Go and tell John  
what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight,  
the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear,  
the dead are raised, and the poor have good news  
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### JOHN'S SIGNS

In John's Gospel, Jesus performs a series of what  
John calls “signs”. These are miracles which show  
who Jesus really is. The miracles which John  
explicitly identifies as signs are:



- Changing water into wine in Cana (John 2:1–11)
- Healing the royal official's son in Capernaum (John 4:46–54)
- Healing the paralytic at Bethesda (John 5:1–18)
- Feeding the 5,000 (John 6:5–14)
- Healing the blind man (John 9:1–7)
- Raising Lazarus from the dead (John 11:1–45)



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 c at Bethesda (John 5:1-18)  
 (John 6:5-14)  
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 n the dead (John 11:1-45)  
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miracles first and foremost  
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 ountered. When he sees the  
 ound, when he meets a leper  
 when he is greeted by blind  
 ain and meets a widow who  
 en he drives out the demon  
 in, the Gospels use the  
 word *splanchnizomai*. This is  
 ty" or "feel sympathy", but the  
 from *splanchnon* which meant  
 uts of an animal or human.  
 mach-wrenchingly moved.

He feels this especially in Bethany, when he arrives to find his friend Lazarus has died. Jesus is so upset, he weeps. Why? It's not because of loss – he raises Lazarus from the dead. He's weeping because the pain and the grief are just so wrong. He feels it deeply. And he calls Lazarus out of the tomb.

Along with the healings and the exorcisms, there are other miracles which are hard to quantify. Jesus feeds thousands of people with just a few loaves and some fish. He walks on water. He calms a storm. The important thing about these miracles is not their extent. Raising someone from the dead seems more impressive than healing a blind man, but both are extraordinary, unexpected acts of power. The important thing about these miracles is that they, once again, point to who Jesus is. "Your way was through the sea, your path, through the mighty waters," wrote the psalmist (Psalm 77:19). In the Old Testament it was God who walked on water. In the Old Testament it is God who brings resurrection of the dead. And now Jesus is doing it.

You don't think...

**"And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray."  
 (Matthew 14:23)**

After the events in Capernaum, we are told that "In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed" (Mark 1:35). Throughout his mission, the pressure was



on Jesus. He was faced with unremitting pressure from the authorities – who opposed what he was doing; from people who brought him endless questions; and from people who were always wanting to be healed. In such circumstances Jesus' personal practice was to seek what solitude he could. At key moments in his life he retreated, escaping into the wilderness.

Everything that Jesus did was fuelled by his relationship with God and, in particular, with his deep, radical, and persistent prayer. Jesus spoke a lot about prayer. He told stories which showed the need to persist, and to pray with faith and belief. "I tell you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed," he said, "you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there', and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you" (Matthew 17:20).

And the most startling aspect of his prayer life was that it portrayed a closer, much more personal God. The Jews did not use the name of God: they substituted it with other words, such as "the Lord". But when Jesus talked about God, he used the Aramaic word *abba* – the deeply personal, Aramaic name for father.

We should not think necessarily of modern fathers. The father in the ancient world was an authoritarian figure who had control over his family. So this is not some completely indulgent father, but neither is it a father to be scared of. Instead it is someone who combines both love and authority.

This is a unique aspect of Jesus' teaching. In hardly any other sources from this period is God addressed

in this way. The Aramaic word is important to the early church though even though they all spoke Greek, the Lord's Prayer preserves the original: "When you pray, say: Father,

If God was their father, then his family. At one point, Jesus' mother arrived to take him home – they were out of control. He rejected them, lost the crowd and saying, "Here are my brothers! Whoever does the will of my Father is my brother and sister and mother" (Mark 3:35). A shockingly radical statement in a culture where your kin, your family, was everything. Jesus' followers went on to adopt this radical view. They talked of each other as brothers. Jesus was the elder brother; they were the younger.

Jesus goes out “throughout the country and through all the villages, preaching the good message in their synagogues and winning many followers” (Mark 1:39). Matthew’s version of the good news of the kingdom of God is the good news of the kingdom of God for the poor, the oppressed, the sick, and every sickness and disease (Matthew 4:23). This, then, was the good news of the kingdom of God, casting out demons, and telling of the kingdom.



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important to the early church that they adopted it,  
even though they all spoke Greek. Luke's version of  
the Lord's Prayer preserves the Aramaic feel of the  
original: "When you pray, say: Father..." (Luke 11:2).

If God was their father, then they were all part of  
his family. At one point, Jesus' mother and brothers  
arrived to take him home – they thought he was out  
of control. He rejected them, looking around at the  
crowd and saying, "Here are my mother and my  
brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother  
and sister and mother" (Mark 3:34–35). This was a  
shockingly radical statement in the first-century world,  
where your kin, your family, was everything. But Jesus'  
followers went on to adopt this vocabulary themselves.  
They talked of each other as brother and sister. Jesus  
was the elder brother; they were a new family.

Jesus goes out "throughout Galilee, proclaiming the  
message in their synagogues and casting out demons"  
(Mark 1:39). Matthew's version has Jesus "proclaiming  
the good news of the kingdom and curing every  
disease and every sickness among the people"  
(Matthew 4:23). This, then, was the message: healing,  
casting out demons, and telling people the good news  
of the kingdom.