Introduction and Purpose of This Book

Jesus of Nazareth, apparently a carpenter’s son, lived in the early decades of the first century CE; he became a freelance religious teacher and attracted a following. Eventually, while in his thirties, he was executed in Jerusalem by the Roman imperial authorities. His movement did not die with him but went on after his death, becoming the world religion it still is today. In 2015, it was estimated that Christianity had 2.3 billion adherents (out of 7.3 billion, i.e. 31.2 per cent, of the total world population) and that Islam, which also honours Jesus highly, had 1.8 billion adherents (i.e. 24.1 per cent of total world population).

It is clear that the impact of Jesus on world history has been extraordinary. In some parts of the world the number of Christians is still growing fast; in some traditionally Christian countries, particularly in the west, the church is declining numerically, but the ongoing legacy of Christianity in western culture can hardly be overestimated. The story of Jesus has shaped history and inspired art, heroism, music, social change and renewal, but also wars, divisions and intolerance. We even measure historical time in relation to Jesus; hence the traditional BC (Before Christ) and AD (Anno Domini, the year of the Lord).

So who was Jesus, really? What do we know about him? Why did he have such an impact?

1 ‘Christians remain world’s largest religious group, but they are declining in Europe’, Pew Research Center, 5 April 2017, www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/05.
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Introduction and Purpose of This Book

Part I of the book will address these questions by introducing Jesus’ context and examining the sources which any study of Jesus needs to use. Part II will go through the life of Jesus, looking at the evidence we have, seeking to make sense of it in its context and to evaluate its historical basis, noting as we go along the different answers that scholars have given.
PART I

SETTING THE SCENE
I

Sources for Our Knowledge of Jesus’ Context

People sometimes imagine that we know very little about the world of Jesus and his context, and would be surprised at the range of sources and at the quantity of information that we have, in addition to the Bible itself. It is far from being lost in the mists of antiquity: we have (1) evidence on the ground – geography and archaeology; (2) a wealth of information about the Roman Empire in the time of Jesus; and (3) a variety of important and relevant Jewish sources.

ON THE GROUND: GEOGRAPHY AND ARCHAEOLOGY

Go to modern Israel/Palestine today and the geography of the country is much as it was in Jesus’ day. It is a narrow country about 65 km wide, bounded on the one side by the Mediterranean and on the other by the River Jordan, and about 135 km from Galilee in the north to the Jerusalem/Bethlehem region in the south.

The River Jordan flows from the Sea of Galilee, a beautiful lake (approximately 21 km long x 13 km wide), to the salty landlocked Dead Sea in the south. The Jordan is not a large river, especially today as a result of large amounts of water being drawn off for agricultural and other purposes, but it was not impressive in biblical times. The OT has a story of the Assyrian commander Naaman speaking disparagingly of it: ‘Are not Abana and Pharpar the rivers of Damascus better than all the waters of Israel?’ The Dead Sea is in the Rift Valley (which extends into East Africa) and the shores are the lowest point on earth, 430 metres below sea level.

1 2 Kings 5:12.
Between the Jordan and the Mediterranean, the central highlands are around 600 metres above sea level, Jerusalem itself being around 800 metres above sea level.

Much of the terrain – near Jerusalem, for example – is steep and rocky; some of it, for instance, around the Dead Sea, is near desert; and some of it, notably near the Mediterranean coast and parts of Galilee, is very fertile. The climate is subtropical, hot and dry in summer, but cooler and with some rain, and even occasionally snow, in winter.

Much of the country is now highly developed. In Jesus’ time the economy was largely agrarian; hence, all the sheep and farming allusions in New Testament (NT) stories. There were plenty of very small farms, but also, especially in Judea around Jerusalem, rich landowners with big estates and vineyards relying on servant labour. Transport was on foot, and populations were low, with Jerusalem having a resident population of maybe 60,000, contrasted with one million today (estimates of populations of ancient places vary widely), though quite possibly five times that number of visitors would flood into the city for a festival like Passover.
1 Sources for Our Knowledge of Jesus’ Context

Archaeology in Palestine has been important for many years, and has gained huge momentum in the modern Israeli period, with excavations taking place throughout the area using sophisticated modern techniques and adding to our understanding, not least of the ancient city of Jerusalem and of Galilee, where Jesus lived and taught. Exciting finds keep being reported: the inscription referring to Pontius Pilate found in 1961 at Caesarea (on the Mediterranean coast, the capital of Roman Judea), the first-century fishing boat found in Galilee in 1986, the synagogue with its mosaic flooring in Magdala in Galilee, the claimed finding of the bones of Caiaphas the high priest in 1990 and, more recently, in 2019, the impressive paved street in Jerusalem, quite possibly laid down by Pilate.

THE ROMAN EMPIRE AND ROMAN SOURCES

World superpowers rise and fall, and in the first century CE it was the Roman Empire which ruled the Mediterranean world. We know a great deal about the Romans in this period, with much surviving Latin literature giving us insight into the culture and history and organization of the Empire.

Notable histories include famously the writings of Julius Caesar. But most important for the time of Jesus are the *Annals* of Tacitus (56–120 CE), a highly regarded historian writing about Rome in the first century, and also the historical writings of Suetonius (approximately 75–120 CE), including his account of the Roman emperors in the NT period. Tacitus certainly, and Suetonius probably, refer to the Christian church, though only in passing (see Chapter 4). Other writings include the letters of Pliny, a Roman provincial governor at the beginning of the second century CE, which give great insight into how the Empire worked; this is highly relevant to the study of the story of Jesus, who lived and worked in the shadow of the Roman Empire. Again, archaeology supplements our knowledge of the Empire, with all sorts of informative inscriptions (e.g. one referring to Pilate) as well as other remains.

JEWSH SOURCES

The most important Jewish sources for our study are the works of Flavius Josephus (37–c. 100 CE). He was an educated Jew who lived in Palestine until he moved to Rome during the Jewish War of 66–70 CE. His two major works, *Antiquities of the Jews* and *Jewish War*, have a definite agenda, following his defection from the Jewish side in the war to the
Roman side, but are still a mine of information about the period: he refers to people who also feature in the NT, such as John the Baptist, Pontius Pilate and Caiaphas, not to mention different religious groups such as the Pharisees and Sadducees. He mentions Jesus at one point, though there is reason to think that his comments have been edited and ‘improved’ by Christian copyists.

Other Jewish sources include the Dead Sea Scrolls which were discovered in 1947 by a Bedouin shepherd looking for a lost sheep. They were in eleven caves at Qumran near the Dead Sea, where they had been undisturbed since the first century CE. The scrolls include copies of books from the OT, commentaries, books of psalms/hymns and scrolls relating directly to the life of the semi-monastic Jewish community that lived at Qumran; it seems to have been an Essene community, the Essenes being a group with some similarities to the better-known Pharisees.

The scrolls appear to have been written a century or so before the time of Jesus, and do not have a direct bearing on his story, despite the speculative attempts of some scholars to find links. What may be true is that John the Baptist, who preceded and baptized Jesus, had links with the community (see Chapter 8).

There are other Jewish sources of indirect relevance, including the writings of Philo, from Alexandria in Egypt (20 BCE–c. 50 CE). Alexandria was one of the most notable academic cities of the Roman Empire, a focus of Greek culture, but also home to a vibrant Jewish community. It was in Alexandria that the Greek translation of the OT known as the Septuagint (or LXX, from the Latin ‘seventy’, because it was supposedly produced by seventy translators) was produced in the centuries before Jesus. Philo was a leader of that community in the first century, and wrote a variety of books that sought to bring together the traditions of Judaism with the wisdom of the Greeks. Philo’s work Embassy is especially interesting because of his comments about Pontius Pilate, many of them disparaging.

The rabbinic writings of the Mishnah (compiled around 200 CE) and the Talmud (compiled around 400 CE) include references to rabbis and events contemporary with Jesus and the early Christians, including one probable reference to the crucifixion of Jesus. But there is considerable

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2 The scrolls are identified by scholars with the number of the cave, for example, 1Q = Qumran cave 1, and the title of the scrolls. So the commentary (pesher in Hebrew) on the OT book of Habakkuk is IQpHab.
3 For a useful guide to the scrolls, see VanderKam, 2010.
uncertainty about the reliability of some of the earliest traditions, not least because of the massive changes that Judaism experienced in the first centuries CE. But they are still a source of real interest, even if to be used with caution.

The most important ‘Jewish’ sources of information about the time of Jesus are of course the NT documents themselves, which we will be examining in some detail later in this book. But before that, we must ask: In what sort of world did Jesus live and work?
The Historical and Social Contexts

BEFORE THE CHRISTIAN ERA: TRADITION AND HISTORY

Beginnings

The Jews have always been, and continue to be, a people for whom national history is hugely important. The story, as told in the OT Scriptures,¹ stretches back to Abraham, who was regarded as the father of the nation. He responded to a divine call to migrate from Mesopotamia and came finally to ‘the promised land’, in what we would call Israel today, living there semi-nomadically with his family. He, along with his son Isaac and grandson Jacob, are known as the divinely chosen ‘patriarchs’ of the Jewish people.

Several generations passed, before famine led to a further migration into Egypt, where there was food. They were there for 400 years, but ended up being slaves to the ruling pharaohs (famous for building the pyramids). Their final escape from slavery to the Egyptian superpower was a miraculous deliverance, as they saw it, under the leadership of Moses.

That ‘Exodus’ has remained, throughout Jewish history, one of the most celebrated events, remembered most notably at the annual Passover: the story is recalled and a festal meal of roast lamb eaten by families.

¹ There is much scholarly debate about the historical reliability of the OT accounts, but they were assumed to be true by Jesus and his Jewish contemporaries. We can only sketch out the story, noting some of the most important ingredients.
In the Wilderness

After their escape from Egypt they travelled as nomads in the hostile Sinai desert for forty spiritually and physically frustrating years. But they were guided by ‘YHWH’, their God.

YHWH is described as meeting with Moses on Mount Sinai, and giving him the ‘Ten Commandments’ which were to become so central in the Jewish and later the Christian traditions, and also many other laws for their social and religious life, found principally in the OT books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy.

YHWH is said to have gone with the people of Israel, his presence being focussed in ‘the tabernacle’, a tent shrine, and in particular in the most holy part of the tabernacle, the ‘Holy of Holies’. Inside the 'Holy of Holies' was the sacred ‘ark’, a carved wooden box which contained tablets inscribed with the words of the Ten Commandments.

The name of God

There are various debates about the name YHWH, and even about its pronunciation, since in ancient Hebrew script the consonants were written down, but not the vowels; most think it was pronounced ‘Yahweh’. As for its origin and meaning, in Exodus chapter 3 God is said to have responded to a question about his name: ‘I am who I am’, the Hebrew consonants of ‘I am’ being the same as those of Yahweh.

The warning against misusing the name came to be taken so seriously and literally that Jews increasingly avoided using it at all even when reading the Hebrew text. They substituted ‘the Lord’, Adonai in Hebrew, Kyrios in Greek. This practice has carried over into modern Bible translations, with the modern reader often oblivious to the fact that ‘the LORD’ is not what the Hebrew says, but a pious substitute for the personal name (this is indicated in some versions by the use of capital letters). The old English translation of the divine name as Jehovah reflects a mixing-up of the consonants of YHWH and the vowels of Adonai (lord).

In the Promised Land

Eventually the people arrived back in Palestine, crossing the river Jordan, and the conquest and settlement of the land began under the leadership of