

Legacy of Adam

Answering Questions From Islam

*We are all known by Him.
Search!*

Roger Gihlemon



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Introduction

This document provides apologetic reflections on *The Legacy of Adam*, an animated series created by Roger Gihlemon. The series retells key biblical narratives through a visual and cultural lens designed especially for East African audiences, presenting stories that are shared, debated, and understood differently across religious traditions.

The apologetic material in this document labeled with “Scholar” has been written by Peter S. Williams (MA, MPhil, PGCert), Adjunct Professor in Worldviews and Communication at NLA University College, Norway. His contributions aim to offer thoughtful, academically informed responses to questions that may arise when engaging with the series.

Purpose of this Document

The purpose of this document is to:

- Help viewers better understand the theological and historical background of the stories presented
- Address common questions from both Christian and Muslim perspectives
- Clarify where the series follows the biblical text closely, and where it includes elements drawn from tradition, interpretation, or artistic storytelling

For example, certain details in the series, such as Mary traveling to Bethlehem on a donkey, are widely known from tradition but are not explicitly described in the biblical text. These elements are included for narrative clarity and cultural familiarity, not as direct scriptural claims.

How to Use This Document

This material is designed to be used in two ways:

1. Alongside individual episodes – where selected questions and answers are presented in connection with specific scenes
2. As a complete resource – where the full document can be read as a structured apologetic overview

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Episode 1: Creation

Q1: Isn't it wrong to make artistic representations of Adam, or of God?

A1:

Short:

Both the Bible and the Qur'an condemn **idolatry**, not artistic storytelling. Islamic history itself contains many depictions of humans and even images of Muhammad. In *The Legacy of Adam*, such imagery is symbolic and not meant to portray God literally.

Summary:

Some Sunni scholars since the 9th century have interpreted certain hadith as banning artistic depictions of living beings. However, the Qur'an itself does **not explicitly forbid figurative art**. What it clearly condemns—like the Bible—is **idolatry**, the worship of images. Historical evidence shows that figurative art has existed throughout Islamic civilization. Umayyad palaces were decorated with frescoes of humans and animals, and Abbasid art included figurative ceramics, metalwork, and carvings. In the 13th century, Muslim artists even produced illustrated manuscripts showing scenes from the life of Muhammad. Descriptions in religious texts also naturally create images in the mind. The Qur'an itself describes God using expressions such as “hands,” which Muslim scholars traditionally understand as **symbolic language**, not literal physical descriptions.

In the same way, the visual portrayal of God in *The Legacy of Adam* is **not meant as a literal depiction**. It is a storytelling device intended to help audiences understand the narrative, not an object of worship.

For these reasons, many scholars argue that the real issue addressed in both the Bible and the Qur'an is **idolatry**, not the artistic representation of people or symbolic depictions used in teaching or storytelling.

Scholar:

Sunni scholars since the 9th century have interpreted some hadith as implying a general ban on art depicting living beings (figurative art). However, many artistic representations of living beings are found in Islamic history, including pictures of humans and animals that adorned palaces of the Umayyad era, and paintings of Muhammad by Muslim artists in the 13th century. Besides, written descriptions of humans or God's “hands” in the Qur'an inevitably produce figurative images in the minds of readers. Like the Bible, rather than condemning figurative art, the Qur'an condemns treating figurative art as an idol.

Like the Bible, the Qur'an condemns idolatry, but not the artistic depiction of human figures. As Malise Ruthven observes: “There is no explicit ban on figurative art in the Qur'an, but popular Muslim tradition became strongly iconophobic . . .”¹ The hadith against figurative art were (along with all hadith) written down more than a century after Mohammad's death, and are tied to particular events in such a way that they need interpreting in order to be applied in any general manner. From the 9th century onward, Sunni exegetes increasingly saw in them categorical prohibitions against the representation of living beings, but different branches of Islam disagree on this subject: “Aniconism is common among fundamentalist Sunni sects . . .

¹ Malise Ruthven, *Islam: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2012), 43.

and less prevalent among liberal movements within Islam. Shia and mystical orders also have less stringent views on aniconism.”²

Many artistic representations of living beings are found throughout Islamic history:

Frescos and reliefs of humans and animals adorned palaces of the Umayyad era . . . The ‘Abbasid Palaces at Samarra also contained figurative imagery. Ceramics, metal ware, and objects in ivory, rock crystal, and other media also bore figural imagery in the medieval era.³

In the 13th century, miniatures of Muhammad were commissioned from Muslim artists by rich patrons: “they show almost every episode of Muhammad’s life as recounted in the Qur’an and other texts, from birth to death and ascension into heaven.”⁴

In Islamic literature, Muhammad’s appearance is described in the traditions about his life and deeds known as *Sirah Rasul Allah*. Literary descriptions of humans in the Qur’an inevitably result in imaginative depictions of humans in the minds of readers. John Kaltner and Younus Mizra note that:

The reference of divine hands, as well as other anthropomorphisms that are used to describe God in the Qur’an, have been discussed frequently by Muslim commentators, and it is generally held that they are not meant to be taken literally.⁵

Likewise, the visual depiction of God in *The Legacy of Adam* is not meant to be taken literally.

Q2: Does episode 1 deny that God is “Creator of the heavens and the earth” (Surah 14:10) by depicting God as creating “Eden” and then a Garden of Eden on Earth, in which He creates plant and animal life, before creating Adam and Eve there?

A2:

Short:

No, episode 1 does not deny God as Creator of everything.

It combines Genesis 1 and 2 using artistic storytelling.

Eden is shown as part of the Earth, not separate from creation.

Summary:

Episode 1 does not deny that God is “Creator of the heavens and the earth.” Instead, it presents an **artistic synthesis** of the two creation accounts found in Genesis 1 and 2.

In Genesis 1:1–2:3, God creates the entire cosmos, “the heavens and the earth”, including humanity as male and female in His image. Then, in Genesis 2:4–24, the focus narrows: God forms a specific man (Adam), plants a garden in Eden, and places him there.

² “Aniconism in Islam” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aniconism_in_Islam.

³ “Aniconism in Islam” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aniconism_in_Islam.

⁴ Emma Graham-Harrison, “Drawing the prophet: Islam’s hidden history of Muhammad images”, *The Guardian*, 10th Jan 2015, www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/10/drawing-prophet-islam-muhammad-images.

⁵ John Kaltner & Younus Mizra, *The Bible and the Qur’an: Biblical Figures in the Islamic Tradition* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2018), 16.

These are not necessarily contradictory accounts but can be understood as **two perspectives**:

- Genesis 1 gives a broad, cosmic overview of creation.
- Genesis 2 zooms in on a particular location and moment within that creation.

Episode 1 reflects this by portraying Eden and the Garden as **specific places within the already created world**, not separate creations. The sequence is adjusted slightly for storytelling clarity, which is what is meant by “artistic license.”

There are also different interpretations of how these chapters relate: Some see them as overlapping descriptions of the same events, while others see Genesis 2 as a continuation after Genesis 1.

In either case, the core claim remains intact: **God is the Creator of everything**, and Eden is part of that creation.

Scholar:

Episode 1 takes some “artistic license” in portraying the creation. In Genesis 1:1-2:3 God creates “the heavens and the earth,” including mankind “in his own image . . . male and female . . .” (Genesis 1:27.) Genesis 2:4-24 describes God forming “the man of dust” before planting “a garden in Eden, in the east” where “he put the man whom he had formed.” (Genesis 2:8.) In the original Genesis account, Eden and the Garden are clearly parts of the Earth.

Episode 1 is an artistic representation of material from the first two sections of the Old Testament book of Genesis. As such, it takes some “artistic license.” Chapter 1:1-2:3 is about God creating “the heavens and the earth”, including His creation of “man”, i.e. mankind, “in his own image . . . male and female he created them.” (Genesis 1:27.) Chapter 2:4-24 is about God forming “the man of dust” before He planted “a garden in Eden, in the east” where “he put the man whom he had formed.” (Genesis 2:8.) It is clear that Eden and the Garden are specific parts of the Earth. Indeed:

The Persian Gulf Oasis seems to match the description of the Garden of Eden in Genesis. Till about twelve to ten thousand years ago, the seas were hundreds of feet lower. Surprisingly evocative of the Genesis account of the Garden, the Persian Gulf was dry land, irrigated by four rivers, without rain, but with fresh water springing up out of the ground. As seas rose globally, the Persian Gulf was submerged under the ocean . . .⁶

Some people think these two stories in Genesis offer different perspectives on the same events, such that that Adam and Eve either are, or are a part of, the humanity created by God in Genesis 1:27. Other people think Genesis 2:4-24 follows on in historical sequence from Genesis 1:1-2:3, in which case Adam and Eve are particular people created by God after His creation of humanity in general, an interpretive option excluded by Surah’s 4:1 and 7:11-27 of the Qur’an.

⁶ S. Joshua Swamidass, *The Genealogical Adam & Eve: The Surprising Science Of Universal Ancestry* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019), 167.

Q3: According to the Qur'an, God created "in six days", so why does the creation in episode 1 clearly take longer than six days (the trees are shown growing naturally, with a time-lapse effect of days and nights happening in the background)?

A3:

Short:

The "six days" are often understood symbolically or as long periods, not literal 24-hour days. Both the Bible and the Qur'an allow for a structured or gradual creation. Episode 1 reflects this by showing creation as a process.

Summary:

Episode 1 follows Genesis 1 and 2, presenting creation in an **artistic and visual way**, including processes like growth and development over time. This can seem longer than "six days," but that depends on how those "days" are understood.

Both the Bible and the Qur'an mention creation in six days (e.g., Surah 11:7, 50:38), but many scholars do not interpret these as literal 24-hour periods. Instead, the "days" are often seen as a **literary structure**, a way of organizing God's creative work, or as **longer epochs or ages**.

Even within Islamic scholarship, the Arabic word *yawm* (day) can refer to more than a single day, sometimes meaning an extended period of time. The Qur'an itself suggests that creation unfolds in stages (e.g., Surah 71:13–17), which aligns with a more **gradual process**.

Episode 1 reflects this broader understanding by showing creation dynamically, with growth and development, rather than compressing everything into six literal days.

So rather than contradicting the idea of "six days," the episode adopts a widely accepted interpretation that sees those "days" as **symbolic or expansive**, allowing for a more natural depiction of creation unfolding.

Scholar:

Episode 1 is an artistic representation of material in Genesis 1 and 2. The Qur'an gets its description of God creating "in six days" (Surah 11:7 & 50:38) from Genesis 1:1-2:3. While some people interpret this passage literalistically, most people recognize it isn't meant to be read this way, and that the "days" of creation should be understood as a literary framing device and/or an analogy for God's creative activity, or as representing extended periods of time.

Episode 1 presents an artistic representation of material taken from the first two sections of Genesis (i.e. Genesis 1:1-2:3 and Genesis 2:4 ff.), with a focus on the material in the second section. The Qur'an gets its description of God creating "in six days" (Surah 11:7 & 50:38) from Genesis 1:1-2:3. While some people interpret Genesis 1:1-2:3 in a literalistic manner that reads the six days as consecutive 24-hour time periods, most people recognize that it isn't meant to be read in a literalistic way, and that the "days" of creation should be understood as a literary framing device and/or as an analogy for God's creative activity, or as representing extended periods of time. Indeed, theologian Matthew Bennett observes that:

Many contemporary scholars of Islam contend that the Arabic word for day (*yom*) can refer to a literal twenty-four-hour period or a much larger time more aptly translated as "age."

Furthermore, Qur'an 71:13–17 indicates that God's created world has undergone a gradual process of development . . .⁷

Q4: Why does God say He will “make man in our image”?

A4:

Short:

“God's image” does not mean physical likeness, but a special role and dignity. It points to humans representing God and caring for creation. This is similar to the Qur'an's idea of humans as God's stewards (caliphs).

Summary:

When Genesis says that God will “make man in our image,” it is not referring to physical appearance, since God is not a material being. Instead, it points to a **unique status and role** given to humans.

In the Bible, being made in God's image means that humans are created to **represent God**, reflect aspects of His character, and exercise responsibility over creation. It gives humans a distinctive dignity and purpose compared to the rest of creation.

Although the Qur'an does not use the phrase “image of God,” it expresses a related idea by describing humans as God's **caliphs (khalifa)** on earth (Surah 2:30). This term implies **stewardship, responsibility, and representation** on behalf of the Creator.

However, there is a difference in emphasis. The biblical concept suggests that humans have an **intrinsic identity tied to God's image**, giving them deep, inherent value. In contrast, the Qur'anic language tends to emphasize humanity's role as **servants entrusted with a task**.

So, in Episode 1, the phrase “in our image” reflects this biblical idea: humans are not just created beings, but **representatives of God's authority and care within creation**, expressed through storytelling rather than literal form.

Scholar:

The Biblical language about man being created in God's “image” doesn't mean we literally look like God, but is an even more exalted version of the Qur'an's description of humans as God's caliph on earth [Surah 2:30].

Although the Qur'an doesn't use the figurative language of humans being created in God's “image” (which does *not* mean being made to physically resemble God, because God is a spiritual being, but which means that God entrusts humans with the responsibility of stewardship), it does use a somewhat similar concept. As Chawkat Moucarray observes:

The creation of human beings in the image of God is not a concept found in the Qur'an. The Qur'an does, however, describe humanity as God's caliph on earth ([Surah] 2:30). The Arabic word *khalifa* is used to refer to the men who succeeded Muhammad at the head of the Muslim nation. When it is applied to people in general,

⁷ Matthew Bennett, *40 Questions About Islam* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2020), 121.

it indicates that the Creator has entrusted us with the responsibility of representation and of stewardship (cf. [Surah] 38:26).⁸

That said, Andy Bannister explains that: “For the Qur’an, humans are valuable and important, but just slaves of Allah. For the Bible, humans are far more than that: they are image bearers, people with intrinsic and fundamental value and dignity because of their very nature.”⁹

Q5: Why does episode 1 show Adam being created alone in the Garden of Eden and Eve being created later out of “one of Adam’s ribs”?

A5:

Short:

Episode 1 follows the Genesis account, where Eve is created from Adam. Both the Bible and Islamic tradition affirm that she comes from him. The “rib” may be symbolic, pointing to unity, not a literal procedure.

Summary:

Episode 1 follows the Genesis narrative, where Adam is created first and Eve is later formed from him. This sequence is not unique to the Bible; the Qur’an also states that humanity was created from a single person, and that his wife was created from him (Surah 4:1).

Although the Qur’an does not explain how Eve was created, many Islamic commentators and hadith traditions describe her as being formed from Adam, often mentioning a “rib.” This shows a shared underlying idea: **humanity begins from a unified origin.**

The biblical text in Genesis 2:21 is often translated as “rib,” but the original Hebrew word can also mean “**side.**” In other parts of the Old Testament, it is used for sides of structures or landscapes, not anatomy. This has led some scholars to argue that the passage is not describing a literal surgical act.

Additionally, the “deep sleep” mentioned in the text is often associated elsewhere with **visions or divine revelation**, suggesting that Adam may be receiving insight into the nature of human relationship rather than undergoing a physical operation.

In this reading, the creation of Eve from Adam’s “side” communicates a deeper meaning: **man and woman share the same essence and are designed for unity and partnership.**

Scholar:

The Qur’an interprets and retells the original Biblical story about Adam in a way that fits its own theology.

As Andy Bannister comments: “Whenever the Qur’an retells biblical stories and traditions, it adjusts and adapts them, reshaping them to fit its own theology and agenda.”¹⁰ According to Surah 4:1, God “created you from one person, and created from him his wife, and scattered

⁸ Chawkat Moucarry, *The Prophet and the Messiah* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2001), 86.

⁹ Andy Bannister, *Do Muslims And Christians Worship The Same God?* (IVP, 2021), 86.

¹⁰ Andy Bannister, *Do Muslims And Christians Worship The Same God?* (IVP, 2021), 83.

from the two of them many men and women.”¹¹ In other words, the Qur’an is clear that God created Hawwā (i.e. Eve) from Adam. Moreover, as John Kaltner and Younus Mizra point out: “while the Qu’ran does not detail how Eve/Hawwā’ was created, many commentators narrate that she was created from Adam’s rib.”¹² There is a hadith in which Mohammed says: “Treat women kindly. Woman has been created from a rib and the most bent part of the rib is the uppermost. If you try to turn it straight, you will break it.”¹³ However, this doesn’t appear to be a statement about Eve’s material origins, but a metaphor warning against a husband trying to reshape the character of his wife.

Some people think Genesis 2:21’s depiction of God creating Eve from one of Adam’s “ribs” whilst he sleeps is intended as a literal description of events. Other people think it is intended figuratively. Either way, the traditional reference to “one of his ribs” is probably the result of poor translation, as when the Hebrew word translated as “ribs” in Genesis 2:21 is used elsewhere in the Old Testament, it “is not as an anatomical term in any other passage.”¹⁴ In these other passages, the word refers to planks or beams, to this or that “side” of an architectural plan, or to the other “side” of a hill (2 Samuel 16:13). Hence Genesis 2:21 should probably be translated: “So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his sides and closed up its place with flesh.” Furthermore, when the phrase “deep sleep” is used in other Old Testament passages, including later in the book of Genesis (i.e. Genesis 15:12-16), when a person has a vision from God (see also Daniel 7:1 & 8:18). Hence theologian John Walton argues from an examination of the Hebrew text that:

Adam’s sleep has prepared him for a visionary experience rather than a surgical procedure. The description of himself being cut in half and the woman being built from the other half (Gen. 2:21-22) would refer not to something he physically experienced but to something that he saw in a vision. It would therefore not describe a material event but would give him an understanding of an important reality, which he expresses eloquently in Genesis 2:23.¹⁵

Recommended Resources for Episode 1

Peter S. Williams, “The Beginnings of History: Evidence from Genesis to Joseph.” (2025)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jKsilBIhjV4&t=1848s>

YouTube Playlist, “Genesis.”

<http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLQhh3qcvVEWhQcmE4OsKJWhznzA65up7t>

YouTube Playlist, “Human Origins.”

<http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLQhh3qcvVEWggUTIWUFS7jpMSdPFKyVUw>

YouTube Playlist, “Islam.”

<http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLQhh3qcvVEWjhD84EB0jEG5PswCOcDsmJ>

¹¹ Gordan D. Nickel & A.J. Droge (trans), *The Qur’an With Christian Commentary: A Guide to Understanding the Scripture of Islam* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 107.

¹² John Kaltner & Younus Mizra, *The Bible and the Qur’an: Biblical Figures in the Islamic Tradition* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2018), 43.

¹³ “Was Eve Created from Adam’s Spare Rib?”, <https://aboutislam.net/counseling/ask-about-islam/eve-adams-spare-rib/>.

¹⁴ John H. Walton, *The Lost World Of Adam And Eve* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), 78.

¹⁵ John H. Walton, *The Lost World Of Adam And Eve* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), 80.

- Emma Graham-Harrison, "Drawing the Prophet: Islam's hidden history of Muhammad images." *The Guardian*, 10th Jan 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/10/drawing-prophet-islam-muhammad-images>
- Gerhard F. Hasel, "The Meaning of "Let Us" in Genesis 1:26." <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1307&context=auss>
- Conrad Hyers, "The Narrative Form of Genesis 1: Cosmogonic, Yes; Scientific, No." www.asa3.org/ASA/PSCF/1984/JASA12-84Hyers.htmlLinks to an external site
- Douglas Jacoby, "How Long are the "Days" of Genesis 1?" <http://www.douglasjacoby.com/qa-1502-long-days-genesis-1/>Links to an external site
- Amna Khalid, "Most of All, I am Offended as a Muslim." (29th Dec, 2022) <https://banished.substack.com/p/most-of-all-i-am-offended-as-a-muslim>
- Paul Marston, "Understanding the Biblical Creation Passages." http://www.lifeway.net/understanding_the_biblical_creation_passages.htmlLinks to an external site.
- Todd Patterson, "How Can the Creation Account in Genesis 1 be Both History and Literature?" <http://www.toddjana.com/how-can-the-creation-account-in-genesis-1-be-both-history-and-literature/>
- Andy Bannister. *Do Muslims And Christians Worship The Same God?* (IVP, 2021)
- Matthew Barrett, et al. *Four Views On The Historical Adam* (Zondervan, 2013)
- J. Daryl Charles. ed. *Reading Genesis 1-2: An Evangelical Conversation* (Hendrickson, 2013)
- C. John Collins. *Science and Faith: Friends or Foes?* (Crossway, 2003)
- William Lane Craig. *In Quest of the Historical Adam: A Biblical and Scientific Exploration* (Eerdmans, 2021)
- Ann Gauger, et al. *Science and Human Origins* (Discovery Institute, 2012)
- John Garvey. *The Generations of Heaven and Earth: Adam, the Ancient World, and Biblical Theology* (Cascade, 2020)
- Kenneth D. Keathley, ed. *Perspectives On The Historical Adam And Eve: Four Views* (Lifeway, 2024)
- John Lennox. *Seven Days That Divide The World: The Beginning According to Genesis and Science*. 10th Anniversary edition (Zondervan, 2021)
- Andrew Ter Ern Loke. *The Origin of Humanity and Evolution: Science and Scripture in Conversation* (T&T Clark, 2023)
- S. Joshua Swamidass. *The Genealogical Adam & Eve: The Surprising Science Of Universal Ancestry* (IVP Academic, 2019)
- John H. Walton. *The Lost World Of Adam And Eve* (IVP Academic, 2015)
- John H. Walton. *Genesis: The NIV Application Commentary* (Zondervan, 2001)

Episode 2: Temptation

Q1: Given that Surah 18:50 teaches that Iblis “was one of the Jinn”, and that angels cannot disobey the will of God, why does episode 2 say Eve was tempted by “Satan” who was a “fallen angel”?

A1:

Short:

The Qur’an presents Iblis as both among the angels and as a jinn, which creates tension. Islamic scholars disagree on how to understand this. Episode 2 follows the biblical view of Satan as a fallen spiritual being.

Summary:

Episode 2 follows the biblical framework, where Satan is understood as a **fallen spiritual being** who opposes God and tempts humanity. In contrast, the Qur’an presents Iblis in a more complex way.

Surah 18:50 states that Iblis “was one of the jinn,” yet in the same passage he is included among those commanded with the angels to bow before Adam. This creates an interpretive tension: if angels cannot disobey, how could Iblis rebel unless he was something else?

Islamic scholars have long debated this. Some insist Iblis was never an angel but a jinn placed among them. Others acknowledge the ambiguity, noting that early sources sometimes blur the distinction. Reference works like Encyclopaedia Britannica highlight that traditions on this issue are **numerous and conflicting**.

The Bible, by contrast, does not include the category of jinn. Instead, it distinguishes between **faithful angels and fallen beings (demons)**, with Satan as their leader. Some Christian thinkers, like Thomas Aquinas, suggested that these beings originally had the ability to choose obedience or rebellion, after which their state became fixed. So when Episode 2 describes Satan as a “fallen angel,” it is not attempting to reflect Islamic categories, but rather presenting the **biblical understanding of a rebellious spiritual being** who tempts humanity.

Scholar:

While Surah 18:50 teaches that Iblis “was one of the Jinn,” it also says that when God told the angels to prostrate themselves before Adam “they prostrated themselves, except Iblis,” which entails that Iblis was one of the angels.

While the Qur’an calls the devil (Surah 35:6) “Iblis” (which is likely an Arabicization of the Greek *diablos* from which the English “devil” is derived), it also calls him “Shaytan” (translated in English as “Satan”). In the Qur’an “Shaytan” is both used generically of demons and specifically of the devil (Surah 2:36),¹⁶ whereas in the Bible, “Satan” is specifically used as a name for “the devil.” Surah 18:50 says:

¹⁶ “Shaitan” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <http://www.britannica.com/topic/shaitan>.

(Remember) when We said to the angels: “Prostrate yourselves before Adam,” and they prostrated themselves, except Iblis. He was one of the Jinn, and acted wickedly (against) the command of his Lord . . .¹⁷

Hence, according to the Qur’an, Iblis was one of “the angels” to whom God spoke the command about prostration, and Iblis “was one of the Jinn.” Qur’an translator J.M. Rodwell comments that: “Muhammad appears . . . to have considered Eblis not only as the father of the Djinn, but as one of their number.”¹⁸ The *Islam Question & Answer Website* affirms that: “Iblis was not an angel for a single day, not even for an instant. He is one of the jinn.”¹⁹ However, according to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*:

Iblīs has long been a figure of speculation among Muslim scholars, who have been trying to explain the ambiguous identification of Iblīs in the Qur’ān as either angel [S 38:71-76] or *jinnī* [S 18:50], a contradiction in terms, as angels are created of light (*nūr*) and are incapable of sin, while *jinn* are created of fire (*nār*) [Surah 7:12 & 15:27] and can sin. Traditions on this point are numerous and conflicting . . .²⁰

The term “angel”, which literally means “messenger”, is applied in the Bible to human messengers (e.g. Luke 7:24, James 2:25) and to demons as “messengers” of Satan (Revelation 12:7). The Bible also applies this term to those naturally unembodied spirits created by God (Biblical descriptions of these spirits as having wings etc. are figurative), who bring divine messages to humans, carry out various divine missions amongst humans (occasionally being given bodily form for this purpose), or are simply described as worshipping God (Revelation 5:11-12), all of whom are presented as having consistently good wills. In contrast with angels, evil spirits called demons also appear in the Bible, and the ruler of these demons is “the devil” called “Satan.”

The Bible doesn’t share the Qur’anic concept of *Jinn*, i.e. non-human beings who are presently able to choose between serving and rejecting God (Surah 72:11). However, influential theologian-philosopher Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) argued that angels and demons were originally beings with a capacity for such choice (for or against serving God) granted a probationary period in which to choose irrevocably one way or the other, thereby becoming “angelic” or “demonic” in nature.²¹

From the second century, Christian thinking about angels and demons was heavily influenced by “the antecedent Greek view that regarded the *daimon* as an ontologically intermediate subject composed of an aerial substance.”²² This view appears to be reflected in the Islamic description of angels as made out of light and of *Jinn* as made out of fire.

¹⁷ Gordan D. Nickel & A.J. Droge (trans), *The Qur’an With Christian Commentary: A Guide to Understanding the Scripture of Islam* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 304.

¹⁸ J.M. Rodwell trans, *The Koran* (London: Everyman’s Library, 1994), quoted in Rick Richter, *Comparing The Qur’an And The Bible: What They Really Say About Jesus, Jihad, And More* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2011), 86.

¹⁹ “Was Iblis an Angel?”, *Islam Question & Answer Website*, <https://islamqa.info/en/answers/8976/was-iblis-an-angel>.

²⁰ “Iblis”, *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <http://www.britannica.com/topic/Iblis>.

²¹ Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologica* 1a. Questions 62 & 63, <https://sacred-texts.com/chr/aquinas/summa/sum070.htm> & <https://sacred-texts.com/chr/aquinas/summa/sum071.htm>.

²² Shandon L. Guthrie, *Gods of this World: A Philosophical Discussion and Defence of Christian Demonology* (Pickwick, 2018), 63-64.

However, since the medieval period, Christian thinkers have overwhelmingly returned to a non-physical understanding of personal spirits, including angels and demons.²³

Q2: According to Surah 18:50, the devil was ejected from heaven for refusing to prostrate himself before Adam, so why does Episode 2 say that the devil was in the Garden of Eden when he “got very jealous of the creator’s love for Adam and Eve”?

A2:

Short:

The Bible does not explain exactly why Satan rebelled.

Episode 2 suggests jealousy as a possible motive.

The Qur’an adds a later tradition about refusing to bow, which comes from earlier Jewish writings.

Summary:

Episode 2 suggests that Satan became jealous of God’s love for humans, but this is presented as a **possible motive**, not a definitive explanation of his fall.

In the Bible, Satan’s rebellion is mentioned but not explained in detail. There is no clear narrative describing why or how he fell. Later interpretations sometimes connect passages like Isaiah 14 or Ezekiel 28 to Satan, but in context these refer to earthly kings, not explicitly to the devil.

The Qur’an provides a more detailed story, describing Iblis refusing to bow to Adam and being cast out (Surah 18:50). However, this account closely resembles earlier **apocryphal Jewish texts**, such as the *Life of Adam and Eve*, where a similar story appears. This suggests the Qur’anic version builds on traditions that developed after the biblical texts. At the same time, the Qur’an’s description raises internal questions, since Iblis is described both as being among the angels and as a jinn, categories that are usually distinct. Episode 2 stays closer to the biblical framework, where Satan is already a **rebellious being present in the Garden**, and offers jealousy as a reasonable narrative explanation for his opposition to humanity.

So rather than contradicting the Qur’an, the episode avoids later traditions and instead fills in the biblical silence with a **plausible but non-dogmatic motive**.

Scholar:

The Qur’an elaborates the Biblical information about Satan by drawing upon apocryphal Jewish literature from the 1st-4th centuries A.D.

While episode 2’s statement that Satan “got very jealous of the creator’s love for Adam and Eve” is speculative, it isn’t offered as an explanation of Satan’s original rebellion against God. Christian tradition sees Satan and his demons as angels who rebelled against God (one reading of 2 Peter 2:4), but the Bible doesn’t describe the why’s and how’s of such a rebellion. The Qur’an fills this Biblical silence with an apocryphal story about Satan refusing to bow before Adam and being ejected from heaven, but in so-doing it raises questions about

²³ See: Peter S. Williams, “Do Angels (and Demons) Really Exist?” <http://www.bethinking.org/christian-beliefs/do-angels-really-exist>.

the coherence of it's portrait of the devil, by describing Iblis both as one of the angels and as a *Jinn* (Surah 18:50). The story of Satan refusing to prostrate himself before Adam:

is found in the apocryphal "Life of Adam and Eve," a first to fourth century Jewish Hellenistic work . . . The Qur'anic story of Satan refusing to worship or prostrate before Adam has distinct antecedents in pre-Islamic Jewish and Christian sources including elements that were added in stages over the centuries. It would appear that this post-biblical legend has been extensively incorporated into the Islamic scriptures, without an apparent understanding of its origin.²⁴

Although many ancient commentators read the lament over the King of Tyre in Ezekiel 28:11-19 as an allegory of Satan's "fall":

the actual reference is to the king of Tyre. The king's arrogance and self-understood greatness is described in mythological terms, drawn from the Bible and the surrounding culture. These mythological attributes emphasize in striking visual symbols the greatness of his fall from the heights of power. The symbolism draws from the fall of Adam and other sources, and not from the fall of Satan, which comes much later in Jewish religion. Compare 31:8-9, which describe the pharaoh of Egypt in terms of Eden also.²⁵

Likewise, although some interpret Isaiah 14:12-15 as being about the fall of Satan, its actually about the King of Babylon (Isaiah 14:4).

Q3: Surah 2:36 says that "Satan caused them [i.e. Adam and Eve] both to slip,"²⁶ and Surah 7:20 says that "Satan whispered to them both," so why does Episode 2 say that Satan "being sly and coward, got another creature to carry out the dirty work for him"?

A3:

Short:

The Qur'an says Satan deceived them, but not exactly how. Episode 2 shows this happening through the serpent as an intermediary. Both views are compatible ways of understanding the same event.

Summary:

The Qur'an states that Satan caused Adam and Eve to fall and "whispered" to them, but it does not explain **how** this happened in detail. This leaves room for interpretation. Episode 2 chooses to portray Satan as working **through the serpent**, rather than being identical with it. This is one of several ways the Genesis account has been understood. Some

²⁴ "Parallelism: Satan and His Refusal to Prostrate."

https://wikiislam.net/wiki/Parallelism:_Satan_and_His_Refusal_to_Prostrate.

²⁵ "Ezekiel 28:11-19 – Lament over the King of Tyre or Fall of Satan?", *Enter the Bible*, <https://enterthebible.org/passage/ezekiel-2811-19-lament-over-the-king-of-tyre-or-fall-of-satan> & <https://sacred-texts.com/chr/aquinas/summa/sum071.htm>.

²⁶ Gordan D. Nickel & A.J. Droge (trans), *The Qur'an With Christian Commentary: A Guide to Understanding the Scripture of Islam* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 39.

interpret the serpent as Satan himself, while others see it as a creature influenced or used by him.

Because the Qur'an does not specify the mechanism, depicting Satan acting through an intermediary is **not in conflict** with its description. It is simply a different interpretive choice about how the temptation took place.

Scholar:

Episode 2 makes a particular interpretive choice in depicting Satan as acting through the snake an intermediary, rather than seeing the snake as a figurative depiction of Satan himself.

Surah 2 doesn't say exactly *how* "Satan caused them both to slip from there . . .,"²⁷ so it is compatible with Satan achieving this through an intermediary. Surah 7:20 says that: "Satan whispered to them both . . ." Again, one might interpret this as an action carried out via an intermediary, even an intermediary that was possessed by Satan. The figure of the talking snake from Genesis can be understood in a number of different ways.²⁸ For example, the snake can be understood as a figurative description of Satan himself.²⁹ Hence, there is no contradiction here between the Qur'an and the Bible.

Recommended Resources for Episode 2

YouTube Playlist, "Angelology."

http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLQhh3qcvVEWjxHf8HUnl7sI_cvYnoRyyZ

YouTube Playlists, "Genesis."

<http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLQhh3qcvVEWhQcmE4OsKJWhtnzA65up7t>

YouTube Playlist, "Islam."

<http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLQhh3qcvVEWjhD84EB0jEG5PswCOcDsmJ>

Paul Marston, "Understanding the Biblical Creation Passages"

http://www.lifeway.net/understanding_the_biblical_creation_passages.html Links to an external site.

Peter S. Williams, "Do Angels (and Demons) Really Exist?" <http://www.bethinking.org/christian-beliefs/do-angels-really-exist>

Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologica* 1a. Questions 62 & 63, <https://sacred-texts.com/chr/aquinas/summa/sum070.htm> & <https://sacred-texts.com/chr/aquinas/summa/sum071.htm>

Matthew Barrett, *et al.* *Four Views On The Historical Adam* (Zondervan, 2013)

J. Daryl Charles, ed. *Reading Genesis 1-2: An Evangelical Conversation* (Hendrickson, 2013)

Shandon L. Guthrie. *Gods of this World: A Philosophical Discussion and Defence of Christian Demonology* (Pickwick, 2018)

Kenneth D. Keathley, ed. *Perspectives On The Historical Adam And Eve: Four Views.* (Lifeway, 2024)

Peter Townsend. *Questioning Islam: Tough Questions & Honest Answers About the Muslim Religion* (2014), 82-90.

John H. Walton. *Genesis: The NIV Application Commentary* (Zondervan, 2001)

²⁷ Gordan D. Nickel & A.J. Droge (trans), *The Qur'an With Christian Commentary: A Guide to Understanding the Scripture of Islam* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 39.

²⁸ See: Shandon L. Guthrie, *Gods of this World: A Philosophical Discussion and Defence of Christian Demonology* (Pickwick, 2018), 223-226.

²⁹ See: Shandon L. Guthrie, *Gods of this World: A Philosophical Discussion and Defence of Christian Demonology* (Pickwick, 2018), 224-226.

Episode 3: Fall

Q1: Is the Garden of Eden on Earth, as depicted in Episodes 1-3, or is it a heavenly paradise from which Adam and Eve are sent to Earth? According to Surah 2:36: “Then Satan caused them both to slip from there, and go out from where they were. And We said, ‘Go down, some of you an enemy to others! The earth is a dwelling place for you, and enjoyment (of life) for a time.’”³⁰

A1:

Short:

The Qur’an presents Eden as a heavenly place before humans are sent to Earth. The Bible describes Eden as a location on Earth from the beginning. Episodes 1–3 follow the biblical view.

Summary:

The difference comes from how the Qur’an and the Bible describe Eden. In the Qur’an, the Garden is often understood as a **heavenly paradise**, from which Adam and Eve are later sent down to Earth (Surah 2:36). Earth then becomes a temporary place of testing before final judgment.

In the Bible, however, Eden is clearly described as a **place on Earth** from the start. Genesis 2:8 says that God planted a garden “in Eden, in the east,” and places Adam there. The surrounding details, like rivers and geography, reinforce that this is an earthly location. Episodes 1–3 follow this biblical framework, portraying Eden as part of the created world rather than a separate heavenly realm.

Scholar:

While the Qur’an describes the Garden of Eden as a heavenly paradise from which Adam and Eve are sent down to earth, in the original Biblical story Eden and its garden are both places on the earth.

The Qur’an depicts “the Earth” as the place to which Adam and Eve and Satan “go down” after Satan “caused” Adam and Eve “to slip” (Surah 2:36). Moreover, theologian Matthew Bennett observes that: “In the Qur’an, the earth is a temporary place of testing. Once the test is completed, humanity will reside in the fires of hell or in the pleasures of the heavenly garden [Surah 29:57-59].”³¹ Hence: “In Islam . . . humans first inhabited a heavenly garden from which they and their adversary were cast down.”³² In the Bible, it is clear that the garden of Eden is on the Earth (Genesis 2:8).

³⁰ Gordan D. Nickel & A.J. Droge (trans), *The Qur’an With Christian Commentary: A Guide to Understanding the Scripture of Islam* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 39.

³¹ Matthew Bennett, *40 Questions About Islam* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2020), 126.

³² Matthew Bennett, *40 Questions About Islam* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2020), 122.

Q2: What is “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil?”

A2:

Short:

The tree represents the choice to define good and evil apart from God. It may be a real tree with symbolic meaning, or purely symbolic. Eating from it means choosing independence over trust in the Creator.

Summary:

In Genesis, the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil” represents a **moral boundary** set by God. It is not just about gaining information, but about choosing whether humans will trust God’s wisdom or define good and evil for themselves.

The tree may have been a real object in Eden, but its importance is clearly **symbolic**. It represents the decision to live either under God’s authority or independently from Him. This is reinforced by its contrast with the “tree of life,” which represents ongoing life with God. To eat from the forbidden tree is to reject that relationship and pursue autonomy. The Qur’an also refers to a forbidden tree (Surah 7:19–20), though it is not named. In that account, Adam and his wife are deceived into thinking the tree will grant immortality or angelic status.

So, the tree ultimately represents a deeper reality: the human choice to **seek wisdom apart from God**, which leads to self-rule rather than trust and separation rather than life.

Scholar:

In Genesis, the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil” represents the sinful choice to live as if the creature can flourish without abiding by the wisdom of the Creator. Like the “tree of life”, this “tree” may be a real tree in the garden of Eden that was imbued with a symbolic significance by God’s commands to Adam, or it may be a figurative symbol.

In the original story told in the book of *Genesis*, Adam and Eve are exiled from the garden of Eden after they eat from “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (Genesis 2:9, 16-17), so that they cannot eat from the “tree of life” (Genesis 3:22-23). The tree of life is also mentioned three times in the New Testament book of Revelation (in chapter 22:2, 14 & 19), where it represents the culmination of the eternal life that flows from God to forgiven humans. In Genesis 2-3, these two “trees” may be real trees imbued with a symbolic significance by God’s commands, or they may be figurative symbols. Either way:

The *tree of life* represents being a part of the kingdom of God – choosing to live in his presence and living a life that reflected the image of God. The *tree of the knowledge of good and evil* represents the opposite – following the wisdom of men and living for oneself.³³

Although it goes un-named in the Qur’an, it would seem that “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” is the assumed reference of the warning said to be issued by God to Adam in Surah 7:19: “Adam, inhabit the Garden, you and your wife, and eat freely of

³³ Tom Croucher, *Adam The First Human?* (Menangle, NSW: Albatross, 2019), 271.

whatever you please, but do not go near this tree, or you will both be among the evildoers.”³⁴ In which case, the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil” is the assumed subject of Surah 7:20: “Then Satan whispered to them both . . . ‘Your Lord has only forbidden you both from this tree to keep you both from becoming two angels, or from becoming two of the immortals.’”³⁵ Thus the Qur’an portrays Adam and his wife as tasting “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” after being deceived by Satan into mistakenly thinking it is the tree of life and that eating it will turn them into immortals. In Genesis, Adam and Eve eat of “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” precisely because they recognize it as “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.”

Q3: When episode 3 says that “Little by little, the Creator will reveal his plan from the prophets, God’s great messengers here on the Earth”, is it suggesting Adam was *not* one of the prophets?

A3:

Short:

No, it does not exclude Adam. The Bible does not call him a prophet explicitly. But he functions in a prophetic role.

Summary:

The statement about God revealing his plan “through the prophets” does not imply that Adam is excluded, but reflects later, more formal prophetic language. Although Adam is never explicitly called a “prophet” in the Bible, he clearly receives direct revelation from God and communicates it, which are core prophetic functions. In Genesis, Adam is given commands, entrusted with responsibility, and passes on God’s words, at least to Eve, indicating a mediating role between God and humanity. Some theologians therefore describe Adam as functioning in a threefold role: prophet (receiving and conveying revelation), priest (serving in God’s presence), and king (ruling over creation). The later biblical category of “prophet” becomes more defined with figures like Moses, but the underlying function already appears in Adam.

Scholar:

While the Bible doesn’t *call* Adam a prophet, it *describes* him as a prophet, in the sense that he received and passed along God’s revelation.

The Bible certainly describes Adam as someone who both received revelation from God and passed it along (to Eve). Indeed, although Adam isn’t referred to as “a prophet” in the Bible, he is clearly described there as filling roles associated with the titles of prophet, priest and king.³⁶

³⁴ Gordan D. Nickel & A.J. Droge (trans), *The Qur’an With Christian Commentary: A Guide to Understanding the Scripture of Islam* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 175.

³⁵ Gordan D. Nickel & A.J. Droge (trans), *The Qur’an With Christian Commentary: A Guide to Understanding the Scripture of Islam* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 175.

³⁶ DAVIDSSCHROCK, “Adam as Prophet, Priest and King, and the Bible as the Story of “Three Sons”” <https://davidschrock.com/2018/03/22/adam-as-prophet-priest-and-king-and-the-bible-as-the-story-of-three-sons/>.

Q4: Why does God ask Adam and Eve to sacrifice animals to him as “an offering of innocence to the Creator to make up for the mistake of the guilty”?

A4:

Short:

This is an artistic addition pointing to a biblical theme of sacrifice. In Christianity, sacrifice highlights that forgiveness comes from God, not human effort. It ultimately points forward to Jesus’ sacrifice.

Summary:

The scene of animal sacrifice in Episode 2 is an **artistic interpretation**, not a direct retelling of a specific Genesis passage. It is included to highlight a broader biblical theme: how sin is dealt with.

In Christianity, sin is not just a mistake but something that **damages the relationship** between humans and God. Because of this, restoration requires more than simply knowing God’s will. It requires **forgiveness initiated by God**. Throughout the Bible, sacrifice becomes a way of expressing this reality. It symbolizes that dealing with sin carries a cost, and that restoration comes through God’s provision rather than human merit. Christians understand this theme as ultimately fulfilled in **Jesus’ death**, seen as a once-for-all act of atonement. However, there is not complete agreement on exactly how this works, only that forgiveness is a **gift**, not something earned. In contrast, Islam typically understands sin more as failure or forgetfulness, where the solution is guidance and submission to God’s commands rather than atonement through sacrifice. So in Episode 2, the sacrifice scene serves as a **visual bridge**, helping viewers understand a key biblical idea: that restoration comes through God’s initiative, not human effort.

Scholar:

This is another instance of artistic interpretation in the Legacy of Adam series. Christians see the focal point of this biblical theme in Jesus’ (historical³⁷) death by crucifixion as a sacrifice for sin. There is no agreed understanding of offering a sacrifice for sin in Christian theology. However, Christians accept forgiveness for sin as a divine gift, rather than something that can be earned by human effort or merit.

Islam views human sin as a failure to live in accordance with God’s commands that is caused by natural human forgetfulness, or liability to deception. Hence the appropriate response to human sin, according to Islam, is for God to make his will known (via prophetic revelation) so that humans might submit to it. Christianity sees human sin as the relationship-disrupting result of an inner tendency to pursue what they desire even when they recognize the desire and/or its pursuit as wrong (a tendency Christians call “original sin”). Hence the appropriate response to human sin, according to the Bible, is not merely the revelation of God’s will, but God’s love that forgives repentant humans by self-sacrificially bearing the burden of their sins, an expression of divine love that then motivates humans to follow God’s will out of

³⁷ See: James Bishop, “Historical Problems With Islam’s View Of Jesus’ Crucifixion” <https://reasonsforjesus.com/historical-problems-with-islams-view-of-jesus-crucifixion/>; Norman L. Geisler & Abdul Saleeb, *Answering Islam: The Crescent in Light of the Cross* (Baker, 2002); Peter S. Williams, *Getting at Jesus: A Comprehensive Critique of Neo-Atheist Nonsense About the Jesus of History* (Wipf and Stock, 2019).

reciprocal love rather than mere duty or self-interest. In the words of the apostle John: “love consists in this: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.” (1 John 4:10-11) As theologian Matthew Bennett explains:

Within Islam . . . the relationship between God and humanity is not so intimate that it would require God to provide anything beyond knowledge of his law. The human-divine relationship is one of master and servant, lord and slave . . . Salvation or redemption, then, is not an issue of being restored into relationship, but rather functioning properly in light of one’s status as servant.³⁸

However:

Christian theology views humans as creatures designed for an intimate, personal relationship with God. Human sins make this relationship untenable apart from God’s provision of a means of atonement. In other words, the solution to this estrangement must be a divine act in which God redeems humanity, taking away their sin and impurity, and restoring them to a state of righteousness.³⁹

While Christians understand the biblical concepts of sacrifice and atonement in a number of different ways,⁴⁰ they agree that forgiveness for sin is a divine gift to be gratefully received rather than something that can be earned by sufficient human effort or merit; and they agree in seeing the focal point of this biblical theme in Jesus’ (historically established⁴¹) death by crucifixion.

Recommended Resources for Episode 3

Peter S. Williams, “The Beginnings of History: Evidence from Genesis to Joseph.” (2025)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jKsilBIhjV4&t=1848s>

YouTube Playlist, “Atonement.”
<http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLQhh3qcvVEWimeGJ4DsEDI3QvpKNbIgf5f>

YouTube Playlist, “Jesus Died on the Cross.”
<http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLQhh3qcvVEWjXGICNq08jcoNAXYnyDNoa>

YouTube Playlists, “Genesis.”
<http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLQhh3qcvVEWhQcmE4OsKJWhtnzA65up7t>

YouTube Playlist, “Islam.”
<http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLQhh3qcvVEWjhD84EB0jEG5PswCOcDsmJ>

Nabeel Qureshi, “What are historical facts of Jesus and crucifixion.”
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9JNbd2mZ5E>

³⁸ Matthew Bennett, *40 Questions About Islam* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2020), 140.

³⁹ Matthew Bennett, *40 Questions About Islam* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2020), 139.

⁴⁰ See: YouTube Playlist, “Atonement” www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLQhh3qcvVEWimeGJ4DsEDI3QvpKNbIgf5f; Mark D. Baker and Joel B. Green, *Recovering The Scandal Of The Cross: Atonement In New Testament And Contemporary Contexts*. Second edition (IVP Academic, 2011); Alister McGrath, *Making Sense of the Cross* (IVP, 1992); Richard Swinburne, *Was Jesus God?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁴¹ See: James Bishop, “Historical Problems With Islam’s View Of Jesus’ Crucifixion” <https://reasonsforjesus.com/historical-problems-with-islams-view-of-jesus-crucifixion/>; Norman L. Geisler & Abdul Saleeb, *Answering Islam: The Crescent in Light of the Cross* (Baker, 2002); Peter S. Williams. *Getting at Jesus: A Comprehensive Critique of Neo-Atheist Nonsense About the Jesus of History* (Wipf and Stock, 2019).

- Apologetics Roadshow, “Muslim Scholar SHOCKS Christians, Says Jesus Was Crucified and Resurrected!”
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oYYmAOxjaQc>
- Paul Marston, “Understanding the Biblical Creation Passages.”
http://www.lifesway.net/understanding_the_biblical_creation_passages.htmlLinks to an external site.
- James Bishop, “Historical Problems With Islam’s View Of Jesus” Crucifixion.”
<https://reasonsforjesus.com/historical-problems-with-islams-view-of-jesus-crucifixion/>
- Mark D. Baker and Joel B. Green. *Recovering The Scandal Of The Cross: Atonement In New Testament And Contemporary Contexts*. Second edition (IVP Academic, 2011)
- Andy Bannister. *Do Muslims And Christians Worship The Same God?* (IVP, 2021)
- Matthew Barrett *et al.* *Four Views On The Historical Adam* (Zondervan, 2013)
- J. Daryl Charles, ed. *Reading Genesis 1-2: An Evangelical Conversation* (Hendrickson, 2013)
- Norman L. Geisler & Abdul Saleeb. *Answering Islam: The Crescent in Light of the Cross* (Baker, 2002)
- Kenneth D. Keathley, ed. *Perspectives On The Historical Adam And Eve: Four Views*. (Lifeway, 2024)
- Andreas J. Kostenberger & Justin Taylor. *The Final Days of Jesus* (Crossway, 2014)
- Michael R. Licona. *Paul Meets Muhammad: A Christian-Muslim Debate On The Resurrection* (Baker, 2006)
- Alister McGrath. *Making Sense of the Cross* (IVP, 1992)
- Lee Strobel. *The Case for Christ*, second edition (Zondervan, 2016)
- Lee Strobel. *In Defence of Jesus* (Zondervan, 2016)
- Richard Swinburne. *Was Jesus God?* (Oxford, 2008)
- John H. Walton. *Genesis: The NIV Application Commentary* (Zondervan, 2001)
- Peter S. Williams. *Getting at Jesus: A Comprehensive Critique of Neo-Atheist Nonsense About the Jesus of History* (Wipf and Stock, 2019)

Episode 4: Count the Stars

Q1: Why is Abraham (i.e. Ibraheem/Ibrahaam) called Abram in episode 4?

A1:

Short:

Abram is Abraham's original name in Genesis. God later changes it to Abraham to reflect his future role. Episode 4 uses the earlier name because it fits that stage of the story.

Summary:

In Genesis, Abraham is first called **Abram**, and only later does God change his name to **Abraham** (Genesis 17:5). This name change marks a turning point, where God gives him the promise of becoming "the father of many nations."

Episode 4 uses the name "Abram" because it reflects the **earlier phase of his life**, before this covenant and renaming take place. It is therefore historically and narratively accurate within the biblical framework.

The meanings of the names are debated, but they are often understood along these lines:

- *Abram* may mean something like "exalted father" or "beloved father."
 - *Abraham* is linked to the idea of being a **father of many**, aligning with God's promise.
- In the Qur'an, he is consistently called *Ibrahim*, and the name change is not mentioned. This means the biblical detail is neither confirmed nor denied in Islamic tradition.

Scholar:

Later on in the book of Genesis, God changes Abram's name to Abraham: "No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations." (Genesis 17:5, ESV.) The meaning of both names is much debated. Christopher Eames of the Armstrong Institute of Biblical Archaeology argues that: "*Abram* as an East Semitic, Akkadian-Babylonian name meaning 'Beloved Father'" while *Abraham* is "a West Semitic, *Aramaic*-inclined name meaning 'Exalted Father.'"⁴²

Islamic writer Imam Mufti comments that:

In the Qur'an, the only name given to Abraham is "Ibraheem" and "Ibrahaam", all sharing the original root, b-r-h-m. Although in the Bible Abraham is known as Abram at first, and then God is said to change his name to Abraham, the Qur'an has kept silent on this subject, neither affirming nor negating it.⁴³

The meaning of the names "Abram" and "Abraham" is a much debated issue. In a 2022 paper, Christopher Eames of the Armstrong Institute of Biblical Archaeology argues that:

⁴² Christopher Eames, "What does the name Abraham really mean?" (December 1st, 2022)

<https://armstronginstitute.org/806-what-does-the-name-abraham-really-mean>.

⁴³ Imam Mufti, "The Story of Abraham (Part 1 of 7)" <https://www.islamreligion.com/articles/293/story-of-abraham-part-1/>.

Abraham's family was a West (or Northwest) Semitic family, essentially falling under the "Amorite" umbrella (at least linguistically and geographically), in native association. They were native speakers of a West Semitic language, from which was derived Aramaic, Hebrew, Arabic, etc. Abraham's family was - as with many other "Amorites" during this specific period [2000–1600 B.C.E.] - living in the East Semitic, Akkadian-speaking Babylonian Empire initially. And Abraham's original name, Abram, was an *Akkadian* name meaning something like "Beloved Father." Following Abram's migration west, part of the family stayed put in or around Haran . . . among fellow Aramaic-speaking, West Semitic countrymen. . . . Then, following Abram's commanded further migration south into Canaan . . . and following his obedience to God and fulfilment of certain tests and trials, he was renamed with the West Semitic, more Aramaic-oriented name *Abraham*, meaning "Exalted Father," with the promise that this patriarch would become exalted as a "father of a multitude of nations" (Genesis 17:5).⁴⁴

Q2: Is the Bible's account about Abram/Abraham historically credible?

A2:

Short:

There is no direct archaeological proof of Abraham. But the biblical account fits well with what we know of the ancient Near East. Most scholars see it as rooted in real second-millennium traditions.

Summary:

There is no direct archaeological evidence that explicitly confirms Abraham as an individual. However, this is not surprising, since he is described as a **semi-nomadic figure** living nearly 3800 years ago, a type of person unlikely to leave clear archaeological traces. Instead, historians evaluate the **credibility of the narrative** by comparing it with what we know about the ancient Near East. In this regard, the Genesis account aligns well with its supposed time period.

For example, social customs in the Abraham stories, such as treaties, family structures, and the value of slaves, match what is known from the early second millennium B.C. This suggests the material reflects **authentic historical context**, not a later invention. Another point is the absence of later religious elements, such as the dominance of the god Baal, which became prominent after 1500 B.C. This absence supports the idea that the traditions may preserve **older material**.

Scholars also believe that Genesis likely draws on **earlier oral and written traditions**, rather than being created from scratch at a later date.

So while Abraham cannot be directly proven archaeologically, the surrounding evidence suggests that the biblical account is **historically plausible and grounded in its time**.

⁴⁴ Christopher Eames, "What does the name Abraham really mean?" (December 1st, 2022) <https://armstronginstitute.org/806-what-does-the-name-abraham-really-mean>.

Scholar:

While there's no direct ancient evidence for Abraham, it's unreasonable to expect the existence of such evidence from c. 3800 years ago. However, the traditions about Abraham do appear to date from the second millennium B.C., and our evidence about the ancient Near-East suggests that the Bible's account about Abram/Abraham is historically credible.

There's no direct ancient evidence for Abraham, but it's unreasonable to expect commoners living an intermittently nomadic lifestyle some 3800 years ago to have left any archaeological evidence we should expect to have discovered (although Egyptologist K.A. Kitchen mentions a possible reference to "The Enclosure of Abram" in an Egyptian topographical list of Shoshenq I of Egypt in 925 B.C.).⁴⁵ The biblical narrative is itself historical evidence that can be critically assessed.

Theologian Gordon Wenham argues that the absence of references to the god known as "Baal" from the patriarchal tradition suggests its antiquity:

In the second half of the second millennium BC Baal took over from El as the leading god in the west Semitic pantheon, yet he is never mentioned in Genesis. This is intelligible if the patriarchal tradition originated before about 1500 BC, but not if it comes from later times.⁴⁶

Moreover, as historian Paul L. Maier observes:

details in the biblical account regarding Abraham, such as the treaties he made with neighboring rulers and even the price of slaves, mesh well with what is known elsewhere in the history of the ancient Near East.⁴⁷

The symbolic rather than numerological use of numbers in the patriarchal narratives also indicates their ancient origin.⁴⁸

Kitchen concludes that "the patriarchal narratives do retain much data faithfully preserved from the early second millennium."⁴⁹ According to theologian Clare Amos: "it is almost certain that the final author(s) of this part of Genesis made use of earlier oral and written sources in compiling their work . . ."⁵⁰

⁴⁵ K.A. Kitchen, *On The Reliability Of The Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 313.

⁴⁶ Gordon Wenham, "The religion of the patriarchs" in A.R. Millard and D.J. Wiseman, ed.'s, *Essays on the Patriarchal Narratives* (Leicester, IVP, 1980), 185.

⁴⁷ Paul L. Maier, "Biblical History: The Faulty Criticism of Biblical Historicity", www.equip.org/article/biblical-history-the-faulty-criticism-of-biblical-historicity/.

⁴⁸ See: Carol A. Hill, "Making Sense of the Numbers in Genesis," *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 55, no. 4 (2003) <https://www.asa3.org/ASA/PSCF/2003/PSCF12-03Hill.pdf>; Craig Olsen, "How Old was Father Abraham? Re-examining the Patriarchal Lifespans in Light of Archaeology"

www.academia.edu/33972456/How_Old_was_Father_Abraham_Re-examining_the_Patriarchal_Lifespans_in_Light_of_Archaeology; Craig Olsen, "How Old was Father Abraham? Part 2 A Symbolic Interpretation of the Patriarchal Lifespans" file:///Users/peterwilliams/Downloads/How_Old_was_Father_Abraham_Part_2_A_Symb.pdf

⁴⁹ K.A. Kitchen, *On The Reliability Of The Old Testament* (Eerdmans, 2003), 370.

⁵⁰ Clare Amos, *Epworth Commentaries: The Book Of Genesis*. Epworth, Peterborough: 2004, 72.

Q3: The Qur'an doesn't mention Ur or Haran, where they real places?

A3:

Short:

Yes, Ur and Haran were real ancient places. They are well attested in archaeology and historical records. The Qur'an simply does not mention them.

Summary:

Yes, both Ur and Haran were real locations in the ancient Near East.

Ur is widely identified with a major Sumerian city in southern Mesopotamia (modern Iraq), known from extensive archaeological discoveries. However, some scholars suggest there may have been other places named "Ur," possibly closer to Haran, so the exact identification is debated.

Haran, on the other hand, is well established. It was an important city in northern Mesopotamia (near today's Turkey-Syria border) and is mentioned in multiple ancient sources, including Akkadian texts going back to the 3rd millennium B.C.

The phrase "Ur of the Chaldees" in Genesis may reflect a **later editorial clarification**, helping later readers identify which "Ur" is meant. This kind of updating of place names is common in ancient texts.

So while the Qur'an does not mention these locations, the biblical references fit well within what we know from archaeology and ancient history.

Scholar:

Ur and Harran were real places in the ancient Near East of the second millennium B.C.

The Qur'an doesn't mention Ur or Haran, but these were real places in the ancient Near East of the second millennium B.C.E. However, as theologian Josph Coleson explains:

The issue here is whether this Ur where [Abram's brother] Haran died is the famous Sumerian Ur of southern Mesopotamia or a lesser-known Ur in northern Mesopotamia, not far from the city of [Harran].⁵¹

According to archaeologist Alan R. Millard:

the case for identifying the Ur (of the Chaldees) in Genesis 11:28, 31 (compare Nehemiah 9:7) with Ur, now Tell el-Muqayyar, in southern Babylonia, remains strong, although available information precludes certainty. . . . A number of cuneiform texts mention several places named Ur, or something like it, but most can be dismissed so far as Genesis is concerned.⁵²

⁵¹ Josph Coleson, *New Beacon Bible Commentary, Genesis 1-11: A Commentary In The Wesleyan Tradition* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 2012), 300.

⁵² Alan Millard, "Where Was Abraham's Ur? The Case For The Babylonian City" in *Biblical Archaeology Review*, May/June 2001, <https://library.biblicalarchaeology.org/article/where-was-abrahams-ur-the-case-for-the-babylonian-city/>.

If the Sumerian Ur of southern Mesopotamia is indeed intended, the designation “of the Chaldees” is a later editorial addition to the text specifying, in (then) contemporary terms, which “Ur” was being talked about.⁵³ As Coleson explains:

Insertions of place names or gentile designations from later times (anachronistic names) into the biblical text are quite common., for the sake of later readers who would not recognize or know the locations by their earlier names.⁵⁴

Harran, a city 16 kilometers north of what is now the Turkish-Syrian border, is still known by that name today: “The city is well known from cuneiform sources, in both Eblaite and Akkadian, reaching back to the 3rd millennium B.C.E., and continuing through the 2nd and 1st millennia B.C.E. as well.”⁵⁵

Q4: What was Abram’s religious background?

A4:

Short:

Abram likely grew up in a polytheistic family. His culture probably included worship of the moon-god. According to the Bible, he later turned to worship one God.

Summary:

According to the Bible, Abram came from a **polytheistic background**. Joshua 24:2 states that his father Terah and his family “served other gods,” suggesting they were part of the common religious culture of their time.

Historically, this fits well. Abram is linked to places like Ur and Haran, which were major centers for worship of the moon-god Sin (also called Nanna). Some scholars even suggest that names in his family may reflect connections to this cult. This means Abram likely grew up in an environment shaped by **pagan religious practices**, not in a purely monotheistic setting.

The Qur’an, however, presents Abraham as a consistent monotheist who did not worship idols (Surah 16:120–123). This aligns with later Jewish traditions that portray him as rejecting idolatry early on.

The Bible does not describe exactly how Abram came to know God, but Genesis 12 presents God’s call as a **turning point**, where Abram leaves his old life and begins to follow one God.

So historically and biblically, Abram appears as someone who was **called out of a polytheistic culture into a new relationship with God**, rather than starting there from the beginning.

⁵³ See: Joseph Coleson, *New Beacon Bible Commentary, Genesis 1-11: A Commentary In The Wesleyan Tradition* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 2012), 300; Alan Millard, “Where Was Abraham’s Ur? The Case For The Babylonian City” in *Biblical Archaeology Review*, May/June 2001,

<https://library.biblicalarchaeology.org/article/where-was-abrahams-ur-the-case-for-the-babylonian-city/>; Iain Provan, V. Phillips Long and Tremper Longman III, *A Biblical History Of Israel*, second edition (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2015), 166-167.

⁵⁴ Joseph Coleson, *New Beacon Bible Commentary, Genesis 1-11: A Commentary In The Wesleyan Tradition* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill), 2012, 300.

⁵⁵ Gary Rendsburg, “Ur Kasdim: Where Is Abraham’s Birthplace?” <https://www.thetorah.com/article/ur-kasdim-where-is-abrahams-birthplace>.

Scholar:

Abram's family were originally pagan polytheists, and likely worshipped the Moon-god "Sin" (also called "Nanna").

According to the Qur'an, "Abraham was indeed an exemplary vanguard in his submission to GOD, a monotheist who never worshiped idols." (see 16:120–123.) This portrait of Abraham is similar to that found in extra-biblical Jewish midrash.⁵⁶ Although one might think from Episode 4 that Abraham's family were not amongst "most people" who "had forgotten about God," according to the Old Testament book of Joshua 24:2:

Joshua said to all the people, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'Your fathers lived of old time beyond the River, even Terah, the father of Abraham, and the father of Nahor: and they served other gods.'" (New Heart English Bible)⁵⁷

In his commentary on the book of Joshua, Dale Ralph Davis writes that: "We should not run around the plain implication of the text – that Abraham was plunged into pagan worship just as the rest . . ." ⁵⁸ As theologian David G. Firth comments:

even though Abraham and his family were worshippers of other gods, Yahweh still chose to work with them . . . he and his family were entirely typical of the culture of which they were a part.⁵⁹

Moreover, as Firth observes, "The Old Testament never tells us how it was that Abraham came to know Yahweh and so to worship him rather than other gods."⁶⁰

As archaeologist Alan R. Millard explains:

Ur and Harran were the two main centers for worship of the Moon-god, Sin [also called Nanna]. The names Terah (Abraham's father) and Laban, and possibly Milcah and Sarah, may be linked to the moon cult. Terah may well have been associated with the worship of the moon (see Joshua 24:2).⁶¹

Historically speaking:

Ur of the Chaldees was an ancient city that flourished until about 300 BC. The great ziggurat of Ur was built by Ur-Nammu around 2100 BC and was dedicated to Nanna, the moon god. The moon was worshiped as the power that controlled the heavens and the life cycle on earth. To the Chaldeans, the phases of the moon represented the natural cycle of birth, growth, decay, and death and also set the measurement of their

⁵⁶ My Jewish Learning, "Midrash Aggadah" <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/midrash-aggadah/>; "Genesis Rabbah", https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Genesis_Rabbah.

⁵⁷ See: <https://biblehub.com/joshua/24-2.htm>.

⁵⁸ Dale Ralph Davis, *Joshua: No Falling Words* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2016), 194.

⁵⁹ David G. Firth, *The Message Of Joshua* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), 218.

⁶⁰ David G. Firth, *The Message Of Joshua* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), 218.

⁶¹ Alan Millard, "Where Was Abraham's Ur? The Case For The Babylonian City" in *Biblical Archaeology Review*, May/June 2001, <https://library.biblicalarchaeology.org/article/where-was-abrahams-ur-the-case-for-the-babylonian-city/>.

yearly calendar. Among the pantheon of Mesopotamian gods, Nanna was supreme, because he was the source of fertility for crops, herds, and families.⁶²

We don't know what Abraham knew about God before he and his family followed God's call to leave Ur.⁶³ As Zachary Garris writes:

Abraham was a polytheist prior to Genesis 12, and he likely was aware of Yahweh. But it is not clear if Abraham worshipped Yahweh along with other false gods prior to his conversion. What is clear is that Yahweh's call of Abraham in Genesis 12 was *a conversion story*, as Abraham . . . came to reject other gods and worship Yahweh alone.⁶⁴

Q5: What is the meaning of Abram's animal sacrifice in this episode?

A5:

Short:

The sacrifice symbolizes a covenant, a binding agreement. In ancient culture, animals were cut to confirm such promises. It shows that God commits Himself to Abram.

Summary:

Abram's animal sacrifice reflects an **ancient Near Eastern covenant ritual**. In Genesis 15, God makes a covenant with Abram, and the word used literally means "to cut," referring to the cutting of animals. In this type of ceremony, animals were divided, and the parties would pass between them as a way of saying: "*May this happen to me if I break this agreement.*" It was a serious and binding form of commitment. What is striking in Genesis is that **God alone passes between the pieces**, not Abram. This shows that the covenant is not based on Abram's performance, but on **God's promise and faithfulness**. So the sacrifice is not about payment for sin in this moment, but about **confirming a relationship and promise**. In Episode 4, this scene visually communicates that God is entering into a binding agreement with Abram, using a form that people of that time would clearly understand. It highlights a key idea: the covenant depends on **God's initiative**, not human effort.

Scholar:

The animal sacrifice is part of a traditional ancient near eastern ceremony symbolizing the making of a binding agreement or "covenant."

According to Genesis 15:18 "the LORD made a covenant with Abram . . ." The literal sense of the term translated here as "made" is "cut". In the words of the Jamieson-Fausset-Brown Bible Commentary:

⁶² "What was Abraham's religion before God called him?" <https://www.gotquestions.org/Abraham-religion.html>.

⁶³ See: Darrell Bock, "Acts" in *The Holman Apologetic Commentary On The Bible: The Gospels And Acts*. Nashville, Tennessee: Holman Reference, 2013, 680.

⁶⁴ Zachary Garris, "Did Abraham Worship Yahweh Before His Call In Genesis 12?" <https://knowingscripture.com/articles/did-abraham-worship-yahweh-before-his-call-in-genesis-12>.

On occasions of great importance, when two or more parties join in a compact, they either observe precisely the same rites as Abram did, or, where they do not, they invoke the lamp as their witness. According to these ideas, which have been from time immemorial engraven on the minds of Eastern people, the Lord Himself condescended to enter into covenant with Abram. The patriarch did not pass between the sacrifice and the reason was that in this transaction he was bound to nothing. He asked a sign, and God was pleased to give him a sign, by which, according to Eastern ideas, He bound Himself.⁶⁵

Q6: Should we understand what the Bible says about Abraham's age literally?

A6:

Short:

Some take Abraham's age literally, others see it as symbolic. Ancient cultures often used numbers figuratively. So the ages may reflect meaning, not exact years.

Summary:

Christians differ on whether Abraham's age should be read literally or symbolically. While some take the numbers at face value, many scholars argue that they reflect **ancient literary conventions**, not precise chronology.

In the ancient Near East, numbers were often used **symbolically or rhetorically**, especially in stories about important figures. Other ancient texts, like the Sumerian King List, also use exaggerated or structured numbers to convey honor and significance rather than exact data.

Archaeological evidence suggests that typical lifespans were much shorter, often around 60–70 years. This creates tension if the biblical ages are read strictly literally.

There are also internal challenges. For example, if all ages are taken at face value, some biblical figures would have lived at the same time without any mention of interaction, which seems unlikely.

Because of this, many scholars believe these numbers function as **schematic or symbolic**, fitting the storytelling style and worldview of the time. However, others still maintain a literal reading, so this remains a debated issue.

In Episode 4, the focus is not on the exact number of years, but on the **role and significance of Abraham** within the story.

Scholar:

While many Christians take what the Bible says about Abraham's age literally, given the cultural context of the ancient near east, it is likely that "the ancient audiences all understood these to be schematic, not arithmetic numbers."⁶⁶ In other words, the numbers used for character ages in the patriarchal stories are figurative rather than literal.

⁶⁵ Jamieson-Fausset-Brown Bible Commentary, "Genesis 15:9" <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/genesis/15-9.htm>.

⁶⁶ Craig Olsen, "How Old was Father Abraham? Part 2 A Symbolic Interpretation of the Patriarchal Lifespans" file:///Users/peterwilliams/Downloads/How_Old_was_Father_Abraham_Part_2_A_Symb.pdf

As Egyptologist Kenneth Kitchen notes:

External evidence from burials of all periods all over the biblical world and beyond would indicate that most people died in their sixties or seventies at the latest (and most often, much younger).⁶⁷

Theologian Craig Olsen observes that:

Not only do the lifespans themselves and a chronology based those lifespans create conflicts [with archaeological evidence] outside the Bible, but they create conflicts inside the Bible as well. . . . the face value interpretation of the patriarchal lifespans cannot be maintained consistently. . . . Isaac's birth is not much of a miracle if both Abraham's father and grandson fathered children older than 100. It seems unlikely that Abimelech would have taken Sarah for his harem if she were 89 or 90 years old as the face value reading implies. And Jacob volunteering to work for seven years for Rachel's hand in marriage is ludicrous if he really was 77 years old.⁶⁸

As Carol A. Hill points out:

If the genealogies in Genesis 5 and 11 are both literal and complete, then the death of Adam has to be dated to the generation of Noah's father Lamech. Shem, Arphaxad, Shelah, and Eber would have outlived all of the generations following as far and including Terah. Noah would have been the contemporary of Abraham for 58 years and Shem (Noah's son) would have survived Abraham by 35 years. But where does the Bible indicate that any of these men were coeval? They are spoken of as respected ancestors, not as contemporaries that interacted with them or who were to be cared for in their old age.⁶⁹

However, as Olsen also observes:

There is also no evidence of any ancient culture recording lifespans or reigns of ancient ancestors as accurate face value numbers. All the evidence discovered to date shows that ancient cultures either did not record the lifespans of their ancestors, or they exaggerated their lifespan or reign using symbolic numbers as a way to bestow honor. . . . Ancient texts, like the Sumerian King List, the Gilgamesh Epic, the Lagaš King List, and Egyptian writings use numbers for rhetorical effect. They do exhibit use of multiplication and fractions; not for accurate record keeping, but hyperbolically to exaggerate and glorify their gods, kings or ancestors. They also use round numbers (10, 20, 30, 40, 60, 100, 200), sacred numbers (e.g., repeated use of the number seven), and graded numbers. All of these are also common biblical rhetorical devices .
..⁷⁰

⁶⁷ K.A. Kitchen, *On The Reliability Of The Old Testament* (Eerdmans, 2003), 444.

⁶⁸ Craig Olsen, "How Old was Father Abraham? Part 2 A Symbolic Interpretation of the Patriarchal Lifespans" file:///Users/peterwilliams/Downloads/How_Old_was_Father_Abraham_Part_2_A_Symb.pdf.

⁶⁹ Carol A. Hill, "Making Sense of the Numbers in Genesis," *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 55, no. 4 (2003) <https://www.asa3.org/ASA/PSCF/2003/PSCF12-03Hill.pdf>.

⁷⁰ Craig Olsen, "How Old was Father Abraham? Part 2 A Symbolic Interpretation of the Patriarchal Lifespans" file:///Users/peterwilliams/Downloads/How_Old_was_Father_Abraham_Part_2_A_Symb.pdf.

Likewise, Hill explains that:

the purpose of numbers in ancient religious texts could be numerological rather than numerical. Numerologically, a number's symbolic value was the basis and purpose for its use, not its secular value in a system of counting. One of the religious considerations of the ancients involved in numbers was to make certain that any numbering scheme worked out numerologically; i.e., that it used, and added up to, the right numbers symbolically. This is distinctively different from a secular use of numbers in which the overriding concern is that numbers add up to the correct total arithmetically. Another way of looking at it is that the sacred numbers used by the Mesopotamians gave a type of religious dignity or respect to important persons or to a literary text. . . . Figurative numbers are used throughout the Old Testament, and also (but less frequently) in the New Testament.⁷¹

Olsen adds that: "A symbolic understanding of the patriarchal lifespans supports the antiquity of their origin, and it allows them to speak in the idiom of their day."⁷²

Recommended Resources for Episode 4

Peter S. Williams, "The Beginnings of History: Evidence from Genesis to Joseph." (2025)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jKsilBIhjV4&t=1848s>

Peter S. Williams, "Abraham In Historical Context." https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qZ-QnBk9L_U

Peter S. Williams, "ELF 2021: 'Old Testament Historicity: From Abraham's Ur to Daniel's Babylon'"
<http://podcast.peterswilliams.com/e/elf-2021-old-testament-historicity-from-abrahams-ur-to-daniels-babylon/>

Christopher Eames, "What does the name Abraham really mean?" (December 1st, 2022)
<https://armstronginstitute.org/806-what-does-the-name-abraham-really-mean>

Zachary Garris, "Did Abraham Worship Yahweh Before His Call In Genesis 12?"
<https://knowingscripture.com/articles/did-abraham-worship-yahweh-before-his-call-in-genesis-12>.

Phil Gons, "When Was Abraham Justified?" <https://philgons.com/2007/04/when-was-abraham-justified-part-1/>

Carol A. Hill, "Making Sense of the Numbers in Genesis." *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 55, no. 4 (2003), <https://www.asa3.org/ASA/PSCF/2003/PSCF12-03Hill.pdf>.

Alan Millard, "Where Was Abraham's Ur? The Case For The Babylonian City" in *Biblical Archaeology Review*, May/June 2001, <https://library.biblicalarchaeology.org/article/where-was-abrahams-ur-the-case-for-the-babylonian-city/>.

Craig Olsen, "How Old was Father Abraham? Re-examining the Patriarchal Lifespans in Light of Archaeology"
www.academia.edu/33972456/How_Old_was_Father_Abraham_Re-examining_the_Patriarchal_Lifespans_in_Light_of_Archaeology

Craig Olsen, "How Old was Father Abraham? Part 2 A Symbolic Interpretation of the Patriarchal Lifespans"
file:///Users/peterwilliams/Downloads/How_Old_was_Father_Abraham_Part_2_A_Symb.pdf

Bryan Windle, "Top Ten Discoveries Related to Abraham." <https://biblearchaeologyreport.com/2021/07/16/top-ten-discoveries-related-to-abraham/>

David E. Graves. *The Archaeology Of The Old Testament: 115 Discoveries That Support The Reliability Of The Bible* (ECM, 2019)

⁷¹ Carol A. Hill, "Making Sense of the Numbers in Genesis." *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 55, no. 4 (2003) <https://www.asa3.org/ASA/PSCF/2003/PSCF12-03Hill.pdf>.

⁷² Craig Olsen, "How Old was Father Abraham? Part 2 A Symbolic Interpretation of the Patriarchal Lifespans"
file:///Users/peterwilliams/Downloads/How_Old_was_Father_Abraham_Part_2_A_Symb.pdf.

James K. Hoffmeir. *The Archaeology Of The Bible* (Lion Scholar, 2019), 42-50.

K.A. Kitchen. *On The Reliability Of The Old Testament* (Eerdmans, 2003), Chapter 7.

A.R. Millard and D.J. Wiseman, ed.'s. *Essays on the Patriarchal Narratives* (Leicester, IVP, 1980)

Iain Provan, V. Phillips Long and Tremper Longman III. *A Biblical History Of Israel*, second edition.
(Westminster John Knox, 2015)

Bruce K. Waltke. *Genesis: A Commentary* (Zondervan, 2001)

Episode 5: Envy

Q1: Hagar isn't in the Qur'an, who is she?

A1:

Short:

Hagar is a servant of Abraham's wife Sarah in the Bible.

She becomes the mother of Ishmael.

She is not named in the Qur'an, but appears in later Islamic tradition.

Summary:

Hagar is a figure from the book of Genesis. She is described as an **Egyptian servant** of Abram's wife, Sarai (later called Sarah). When Sarah is unable to have children, she gives Hagar to Abram so that she can bear a child on her behalf.

Hagar then gives birth to **Ishmael**, Abram's first son. This makes her an important figure in the shared heritage of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Although Hagar is not mentioned by name in the Qur'an, she appears in later Islamic tradition (hadith) as the mother of Ishmael. Some of these traditions also include additional details, such as the idea that she may have been given to Abraham's household during their time in Egypt.

In the biblical account, Hagar is more than just a background character. She has a direct encounter with God and even gives Him a name, highlighting her personal significance.

So while Episode 5 draws primarily from the biblical narrative, the core elements of Hagar's story, especially her role as Ishmael's mother, are **recognized across traditions**, even if the details differ.

Scholar:

Hagar was the Egyptian maidservant to Abram's wife Sarai (Genesis 16:1). At Sarai's suggestion, Hagar became Abram's "second wife" in order to be a surrogate to bear a child for Abram on Sarai's behalf (Genesis 16:4). Hagar gave birth to Abram's first son, Ishmael (Genesis 16:15). Hagar isn't mentioned in the Qur'an, but is mentioned as the mother of Ishmael by a later Hadith that follows a Jewish commentary on Genesis that suggested she might have been a daughter of the Egyptian Pharaoh.

Hagar was the Egyptian maidservant to Abram's wife Sarai (Genesis 16:1), and had likely been obtained when Abram's company stayed in Egypt in order to escape a famine (Genesis 12:10 & 16). As theologian John Goldingay points out:

It is misleading to think of such servants as "slaves" in the Euro-American sense. . . . In that culture. . . . You or your family might hit hard times and no longer be able to survive independently; thus you might need to enter service, and you might then be bought by a different master.⁷³

⁷³ John Goldingay, *Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Pentateuch: Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020), 261. On slavery in the Bible, see: Paul Copan, *Is God A Moral Monster?* (Baker, 2011).

Nothing in the Bible suggests that Hagar was the daughter of Pharaoh, but later Jewish interpretations of Genesis (collected in the Midrash Rabbah) include speculation that “Hagar was among the gifts Pharaoh gave to Sarah after when she and her husband had been sojourning in Egypt. . . . One rabbi speculated that Hagar might be a daughter of Pharaoh himself (Gen. R. 45).”⁷⁴ This speculation from a Jewish rabbi worked its way into the Hadith about Hagar: “The *hadith* of Abu Huraira follows a similar line to the rabbinical tradition that Hagar (Hajar) became Sarah's slave as a gift from the king with whom Sarah stayed temporarily as Abraham's ‘sister.’ . . . (Sahih Bukhari 4.577-578; Sahih Bukhari 7.21).”⁷⁵

Hagar’s encounter with the angel of the Lord is the first of several “annunciation” narratives concerning births in the Bible, and Hagar is the only person in the Old Testament to “name” God (Genesis 16:13), a name Goldingay translates as “God of seeing”, “which nicely covers both ‘God who sees’ and ‘God whom I see’.”⁷⁶

Q2: Are there any particular historical reasons to believe this narrative is reliable?

A2:

Short:

Yes, the story fits well with known ancient customs.

It includes realistic details like surrogacy practices and naming patterns.

It also portrays key figures with flaws, which supports authenticity.

Summary:

There are several reasons scholars see this narrative as historically credible, even without direct archaeological proof.

First, it includes what historians call the “**criterion of embarrassment.**” Key figures like Abram and Sarah are portrayed with flaws and poor decisions, which is unlikely if the story were invented simply to glorify them.

Second, the names used in the story, such as Ishmael, Isaac, and Jacob, match naming patterns common in the **early second millennium B.C.** These types of names become much less common later, suggesting the tradition reflects an **authentic time period.**

Third, the story aligns closely with **ancient Near Eastern customs.** Surrogacy through a servant was a known and legally recognized practice, especially for couples struggling with infertility. Laws from the time, like the Code of Hammurabi, even describe similar situations and tensions.

The reactions of the characters, including conflict between Sarah and Hagar, also fit well with known cultural expectations and social dynamics.

Finally, the geography mentioned, such as the road to Shur toward Egypt, is accurate and realistic.

Taken together, these details suggest the narrative is not random or invented, but **deeply rooted in its historical and cultural setting.**

⁷⁴ “Hagar” <https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Hagar>.

⁷⁵ “Hagar” <https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Hagar>.

⁷⁶ John Goldingay, *Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Pentateuch: Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020), 269.

Scholar:

The story of Ismael's birth by surrogacy bears several hallmarks of historical reliability, including its presentation of revered ancestral protagonists as flawed people, and its accurate use of ancient naming practices.

A major hallmark of historical reliability is the account's presentation of its revered ancestral protagonists as flawed people, something that passes the historical "criteria of embarrassment." Another important indication of historical reliability is that fact that names beginning with the sound i/j (the Hebrew letter *y*), like Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob or Joseph, "are extremely common in archaeological texts from the ancient near east of the early second millennium B.C." but "diminish in frequency sharply after that time."⁷⁷ Consequently, if the Genesis accounts were not reliable, but had been invented at a later date (e.g. during the Babylonian exile), the narrative's accurate use of such names would be very unlikely.

The narrative displays a cultural verisimilitude in its protagonist's attitudes towards surrogate motherhood. In the culture of the Ancient Near East "It was a well-known and accepted practice of couples, particularly but not exclusively those that were unable to produce children on their own, to use a surrogate, or concubine, to produce children."⁷⁸ As theologian John E. Hartley comments:

In the ancient Near East barrenness was a disgrace for a wife. . . . Marriage contracts from Mesopotamia had a clause that obligated an infertile wife to provide her husband a surrogate so that he might have a family. In responding to the great social pressure on her to deal with her barrenness, Sarai might have been following this custom.⁷⁹

Interestingly, a law in the 18th century B.C.E. Code of Hammurabi stated that a maid who bears a child for her lord and elevates herself above the head wife was on that account to be punished by being lowered to the status of a slave.⁸⁰ This sort of cultural background may be reflected in Abram's response to Sarai's complaint that the pregnant Hagar was looking down on her. Hartley calls Abram's response "a legal pronouncement by which he returned Hagar to her former status as a maidservant under Sarai's authority."⁸¹ In any case, Hagar's initial response to becoming pregnant, and the reactions of Sarai and Abram to her response, are culturally plausible (see Proverbs 30:21-23). As theologian Tremper Longman III comments: "Hagar's pregnancy leads her to make a fundamental mistake in her relationship with Sarai. She believes her pregnancy makes her superior . . ."⁸²

The account in Genesis 16 also passes the test of geographical verisimilitude, mentioning "the 'road of Shur,' which is the southernmost route from Canaan to Egypt."⁸³

⁷⁷ Ted Cabel, ed. *The Apologetics Study Bible* (Nashville, Tennessee: Holman, 2007), 28.

⁷⁸ Tremper Longman III, *Genesis (The Story of God Bible Commentary Book 1)* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2016) [Kindle Android version], 211.

⁷⁹ John E. Hartley, *New International Bible Commentary: Genesis* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000), 164.

⁸⁰ See: John E. Hartley, *New International Bible Commentary: Genesis* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000), 168. For a more detailed and nuanced discussion of the legal and cultural background here, see: Tammy J. Schneider, *Sarah: Mother of Nations* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 55-53.

⁸¹ John E. Hartley, *New International Bible Commentary: Genesis* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000), 165.

⁸² Tremper Longman III, *Genesis (The Story of God Bible Commentary Book 1)* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2016) [Kindle Android version], 211.

⁸³ Tremper Longman III, *Genesis (The Story of God Bible Commentary Book 1)* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2016) [Kindle Android version], 211. See also: John Goldingay, *Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Pentateuch: Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020), 266.

Q3: Does this biblical narrative endorse polygamy?

A3:

Short:

No, the Bible reports polygamy but does not endorse it.
It reflects the culture people lived in at the time.
The ideal presented is still one man and one woman.

Summary:

The biblical narrative describes polygamy as something that **happened**, not something that is **commanded or approved**.

In the ancient Near East, polygamy and surrogate arrangements were common and socially accepted. Abram taking Hagar reflects this cultural context rather than a divine instruction.

At the same time, the Bible presents a clear **ideal of marriage** earlier in Genesis: one man and one woman becoming one (Genesis 2:24). This suggests that monogamy is the intended pattern.

Importantly, the story itself highlights the **problems** that arise from this arrangement. Conflict, jealousy, and tension between Sarah and Hagar are central to the narrative, which signals that this situation is not being portrayed positively.

Some scholars even note that the story parallels earlier human failures, reinforcing the idea that this is a **misstep**, not a model to follow.

So while the Bible records polygamy as part of real historical situations, it does not endorse it. Instead, it shows how human choices within cultural norms can still lead to **broken relationships and consequences**.

Scholar:

This narrative is *reporting* the actions of people within a cultural context where polygamy was an accepted legal practice, but this doesn't mean the narrative *endorses* these actions.

As theologian J. McKeown observes: "in the OT, reflecting the customs of the ancient world, the ideal of monogamy was not always practiced."⁸⁴ God's intention for marriage to be a monogamous union of one man and one woman is expressed in the story of Adam and Eve (see Genesis 2:24). However, as John C. Lennox explains:

In her desperation for a child [Sarai] suggested to Abram that he take her maidservant Hagar as concubine/wife so that she could perform the duty of a surrogate mother, a practice not uncommon among the customs of the time Professor of Old Testament R. K. Harrison writes that what Sarai did was "in full accord with the prevailing local customs in northern Mesopotamia".⁸⁵

⁸⁴ J. McKeown, *Genesis (Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary)*. (2008) [Kindle Android version], 95.

⁸⁵ John C. Lennox, *Friend of God: The Inspiration of Abraham in an Age of Doubt* (London: SPCK, 2024) [Kindle Android version], 220.

Theologian John Goldingay notes that “We learn nothing about Hagar having any say in what happens”⁸⁶ with respect to this surrogacy marriage, but that doesn’t mean she didn’t have any say (which may be culturally assumed).⁸⁷ Goldingay notes that “a servant girl might regard such a marriage as a great step up in the world in terms of status and economic security.”⁸⁸

The Bible *reports* many marriages that fall short of God’s ideal, but this does not mean that the Bible *endorses* these less than ideal marriages. Indeed, as theologian A. E. Steinmann observes: “any reader of Genesis is immediately confronted by the problems in the families of Abraham and Jacob caused by friction among their multiple wives.”⁸⁹

Theologian Tremper Longman III points out that: “Sarai’s act of giving Hagar to Abraham is presented in a way parallel to Eve giving the fruit to Adam and by thus connecting the two [the narrative] indicates the negative nature of Sarai’s act . . .”⁹⁰

Concerning polygamy in the Bible, W. G. Williams writes that:

When the people of God’s covenant had advanced further in faith, having more adequately assimilated God’s truth, the practice became taboo. This situation helps us to realize that God does not create cultural practices; people do, and His preferred way of handling such situations is to change people so they will then change cultural practices. Sometimes that may be the best way to permanent learning.⁹¹

Q4: Who is “the angel of the Lord”? Did Hagar talk with an angel or with God?

A4:

Short:

Scholars disagree on this.

It may be God appearing directly or a messenger speaking for Him.

Either way, Hagar encounters God’s care and receives His message.

Summary:

The identity of “the angel of the Lord” is debated among scholars.

Some understand this figure as a **direct appearance of God** (a theophany), or even as a special manifestation of God in visible form. In these cases, the angel is not separate from God, but a way God reveals Himself.

Others see the angel as a **messenger representing God**, speaking in the first person because he carries God’s authority. This was a known practice in the ancient Near East, where messengers could speak as if they were the sender.

In Hagar’s story, both interpretations fit the text. The angel speaks with divine authority, and Hagar responds as if she has encountered God Himself.

What is clear, regardless of interpretation, is the **message**: God sees Hagar, cares for her, and makes promises about her child.

⁸⁶ John Goldingay, *Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Pentateuch: Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020), 261.

⁸⁷ See: David J. Zucher and Rebecca Gates Brinton, “‘The Other Woman’: A Collaborative Jewish-Christian Study of Hagar” in *Perspectives on Our Father Abraham: Essays in Honor of Marvin R. Wilson*; edited by Steven A. Hunt (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 341.

⁸⁸ John Goldingay, *Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Pentateuch: Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020), 261.

⁸⁹ A. E. Steinmann, *Genesis: An Introduction And Commentary* (IVP, 2019) [Kindle Android version], 176.

⁹⁰ Tremper Longman III, *Genesis (The Story of God Bible Commentary Book 1)* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2016) [Kindle Android version], 211.

⁹¹ W. G. Williams, *Genesis: A Commentary for Bible Students* (2000) [Kindle Android version, Location 2504].

So whether Hagar spoke directly with God or through His messenger, the encounter shows that **God is personally attentive even to those on the margins.**

Scholar:

Commentators disagree about the answer to this question. Either way, God reveals His care for Hagar and gives her the same message.

Commentators disagree about how best to interpret the Old Testament figure of “the angel of the Lord.” On the one hand, many commentators see “the angel of the Lord” as a re-occurring *theophany* (i.e. a divinely caused audio and/or visual “display to human beings that expresses the presence and character of God”⁹²); or even an appearance of the second person of the Trinity (a so-called *Christophany*⁹³). On the other hand, it is possible that this angel is a messenger from God who speaks God’s words in the first person because they are acting as God’s official representative/ambassador. As theologian John H. Walton points out: “in Ugaritic literature, when Baal sends messengers to Mot, the messengers use first person forms of speech.”⁹⁴ Either way, Hagar had a very special encounter in which God revealed His care for Hagar and for her unborn child, and in which she received the same divine message.

Q5: What is the meaning and significance of the angel of the Lord’s meeting with Hagar?

A5:

Short:

God meets Hagar in her distress and redirects her to safety.
He promises her protection and many descendants.
It shows that God sees and cares for the overlooked.

Summary:

The meeting between Hagar and the angel of the Lord highlights a key theme: **God sees and cares for those in distress**, even outsiders.

Hagar is fleeing a difficult situation and heading into the desert, likely toward Egypt. This would have been dangerous, especially for a pregnant woman alone. The angel redirects her back, not to endorse her mistreatment, but because returning offers **protection and survival**.

At the same time, God gives her a promise: she will bear a son, and her descendants will become numerous. The name “Ishmael” means “**God hears**,” emphasizing that God has heard her suffering.

⁹² Vern S. Poythress, “10 Things You Should Know about Theophanies” <https://www.crossway.org/articles/10-things-you-should-know-about-theophanies/>. See also: Vern Poythress, “Theophany” <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/theophany/>.

⁹³ GotQuestions, “What is a theophany? What is a Christophany?” <https://www.gotquestions.org/theophany-Christophany.html>.

⁹⁴ John H. Walton, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), 88.

Some scholars note that her story mirrors Israel's later experience in Egypt, reinforcing a broader pattern of oppression and deliverance.

So the meaning of this moment is not just guidance, but revelation: God is not distant or selective in His care, but **actively attentive to the vulnerable**, guiding, protecting, and promising a future even in difficult circumstances.

Scholar:

The angel of the Lord turns Hagar back from a desperate and dangerous attempt to return to Egypt via the desert caravan route. The angel encourages Hagar to make the first move to heal her broken relationship with Sarai, and assures her that returning to Abram's company means she will give birth to her son in safety and will be blessed with many descendants.

The fact that "the angel of the Lord" (Genesis 16:7) visits Hagar, and is the only character in the narrative to use her name, shows that "God is concerned about oppression no matter who suffers it. A downtrodden foreigner has God's attention as much as a parent of the chosen Israelites."⁹⁵ Theologian A.E. Steinmann notes that Sarai's mistreatment of Hagar and Hagar's subsequent flight from her is a mirror image of Israel's later exodus from Egypt:

Here the Hebrew mistreats the Egyptian and the Egyptian flees. In the exodus the Egyptians mistreat the Hebrews and the Hebrews flee. The words for mistreat and flee used in verse 6 are used in Exodus to describe Israel's situation (Exod. 1:12; 14:5; 22:21; 23:9).⁹⁶

The content of the angel of the Lord's message for Hagar also shows God's concern for her and for her unborn son. As theologian J. McKeown explains:

Hagar is told by the angel to return to Sarai and submit to her. This is wise advice. When the angel meets Hagar she is on her way to Shur, which was on the caravan route to Egypt. Apparently, she is attempting to return to her native land, but it was an impossible journey for a pregnant woman on her own. Therefore the angel sends her back to the family of Abram and Sarai, where she . . . will receive protection until the baby is born. The angel's instruction to return to Sarai does not condone the harsh treatment meted out to the Egyptian but is in Hagar's best interests.⁹⁷

Indeed, God's concern for Hagar and her unborn child is expressed in the angel of the Lord's instruction that she should name her child "Ishmael," since this name means "God hears"⁹⁸ and thus indicates that "the LORD has heard your cry of affliction." (Genesis 16:11, CSB.)

⁹⁵ W. G. Williams, *Genesis: A Commentary for Bible Students* (2000) [Kindle Android version, Location 2552].

⁹⁶ A. E. Steinmann, *Genesis: An Introduction And Commentary* (IVP, 2019) [Kindle Android version], 174.

⁹⁷ J. McKeown, *Genesis (Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary)*. (2008) [Kindle Android version], 96. As W. G. Williams explains, the life of Hagar and of her unborn child "might be threatened over the more difficult part of the desert ahead." - *Genesis: A Commentary for Bible Students* (2000) [Kindle Android version, Location 2529].

⁹⁸ J.C. Lennox, *Friend of God: The Inspiration of Abraham in an Age of Doubt*. (2024) [Kindle Android version], 225.

As theologian John Goldingay suggests: “it is better to be a foreigner in this family through which Yahweh is at work than to be at home in Egypt . . .”⁹⁹ Hence, as theologian Tremper Longman III observes: “God asks Hagar to endure in a hard situation for his purposes, but also to bless her and her future son.”¹⁰⁰ Indeed, as Longman explains:

The angel of the Lord then tells her to return and submit to Sarai. This command is not necessarily a requirement to go back to an abusive relationship. Since the abuse was because Hagar lorded it over Sarai, the hope was that the former’s submission to the latter would also alleviate the abuse. But even further her return would be rewarded with a blessing that she (like Sarai) would have innumerable descendants. Further, God delivers an oracle concerning her and her future offspring (vv. 11 – 12). She will give birth to a son, and he will be called Ishmael. This name is formed from the root “to hear” and is explained as referring to God who has heard of Hagar’s misery.¹⁰¹

The angel of the Lord’s oracle concerning Ishmael may not sound particularly comforting to modern ears, but as Dennis Prager observes: “Hagar was probably pleased to learn that she . . . would give birth to a strong, virile man who would fight others and emerge victorious enough to father many descendants.”¹⁰² As the famous nineteenth century German Bible commentators Karl Keil and Franz Delitzsch observed: “in contrast with the oppression which has had endured and still would endure, she received the promise that her son would endure no such oppression.”¹⁰³ Theologian John Goldingay suggests that the description of Ishmael as:

not someone you can mess with . . . like the wild donkeys of the wilderness. . . . as aggressive and determined may suggest that he will be a true son of his father, as Abraham was portrayed in Gen. 14.¹⁰⁴

While the second half of Genesis 16:12 can be translated as a prophecy that Ishmael “will live in hostility toward all his brothers” (NIV), other translators offer a meaning like “he will settle near all his relatives” (CSB) or “He will live apart from all his relatives.” (GNB.) Theologians David J. Zucher and Rebecca Gates Brinton write that Genesis 16:12 “hardly suggests a relationship of continuous conflict.”¹⁰⁵ Moreover, theologian John E. Hartley points out that “There are no records of any conflict between the descendants of Ishmael and the children of Israel . . . [King] David’s administrators include Obil the Ishmaelite . . . and his sister married an Ishmaelite (1 Chron. 2:13-17).”¹⁰⁶

⁹⁹ John Goldingay, *Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Pentateuch: Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020), 261.

¹⁰⁰ Tremper Longman III, *Genesis (The Story of God Bible Commentary Book 1)* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2016) [Kindle Android version], 212.

¹⁰¹ Tremper Longman III, *Genesis (The Story of God Bible Commentary Book 1)* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2016) [Kindle Android version], 212.

¹⁰² Dennis Prager, *The Rational Bible: Genesis* (Washington, DC: Regnery Faith, 2019), 191.

¹⁰³ Karl Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament*, <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/genesis/16-12.htm>.

¹⁰⁴ John Goldingay, *Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Pentateuch: Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020), 268.

¹⁰⁵ David J. Zucher and Rebecca Gates Brinton, “‘The Other Woman’: A Collaborative Jewish-Christian Study of Hagar” in *Perspectives on Our Father Abraham: Essays in Honor of Marvin R. Wilson*; edited by Steven A. Hunt (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 344.

¹⁰⁶ John E. Hartley, *New International Bible Commentary: Genesis*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000, 168.

Hagar names God the “God of seeing” (Genesis 16:13), and as Longman explains: “God’s seeing implies his care here. He is not simply observing her from afar, but taking action in order to save her.”¹⁰⁷ Hartley notes that the fact that Abram is recorded as giving Ishmael his name after he is born: “meant he received the boy as his own with all the privileges that attended such a position.”¹⁰⁸

Recommended Resources for Episode 5

Peter S. Williams, “The Beginnings of History: Evidence from Genesis to Joseph.” (2025)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jKsilBIhjV4&t=1848s>

“Hagar” <https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Hagar>

GotQuestions, “What is a theophany? What is a Christophany?” <https://www.gotquestions.org/theophany-Christophany.html>

Vern Poythress, “Theophany” <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/theophany/>

Vern S. Poythress, “10 Things You Should Know about Theophanies” <https://www.crossway.org/articles/10-things-you-should-know-about-theophanies/>

Paul Copan. *Is God A Moral Monster?* (Baker, 2011)

John Goldingay. *Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Pentateuch: Genesis* (Baker Academic, 2020)

John E. Hartley. *New International Bible Commentary: Genesis* (Baker, 2012)

David T. Lamb. *Prostitutes And Polygamists: A Look at Love, Old Testament Style* (Zondervan, 2015)

Tremper Longman III. *Genesis (The Story of God Bible Commentary Book 1)* (Zondervan Academic, 2016)

Tammy J. Schneider. *Sarah: Mother of Nations* (Continuum, 2004)

David J. Zucher and Rebecca Gates Brinton. “‘The Other Woman’: A Collaborative Jewish-Christian Study of Hagar” in *Perspectives on Our Father Abraham: Essays in Honor of Marvin R. Wilson*; edited by Steven A. Hunt. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010).

¹⁰⁷ Tremper Longman III, *Genesis (The Story of God Bible Commentary Book 1)* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2016) [Kindle Android version], 212.

¹⁰⁸ John E. Hartley, *New International Bible Commentary: Genesis*, 167.

Episode 6: A Son

Q1: Did Hagar see an angel, or did she see God?

A1:

Short:

It's debated whether Hagar saw God or an angel.

Both views are possible in the text.

In either case, God personally meets her and speaks to her.

Summary:

Scholars disagree on whether Hagar encountered **God directly** or an **angel acting on His behalf**.

One view is that “the angel of the Lord” is a **theophany**, meaning God revealing Himself in a visible or audible form. Some Christian interpreters even understand this as a **pre-incarnation appearance of Christ**.

Another view is that the angel is a **messenger who represents God**, speaking in the first person because he carries divine authority. This kind of representation was common in the ancient Near East, where messengers spoke as if they were the sender.

Both interpretations fit the text, since the figure speaks as God, and Hagar responds as if she has encountered God Himself.

What is clear is the outcome: Hagar receives **direct reassurance, guidance, and a promise** about her child.

So regardless of whether the encounter is understood as divine appearance or mediated message, the meaning is the same: **God sees Hagar, speaks to her, and cares for her situation in a personal way**.

Scholar:

Commentators disagree about the answer to this question. Either way, God reveals His care for Hagar and gives her the same message.

Commentators disagree about how best to interpret the Old Testament figure of “the angel of the Lord,” a re-occurring *theophany* (i.e. an audio and/or visual “display to human beings that expresses the presence and character of God”¹⁰⁹) which might be interpreted as being either angelic or divine. Some who take “the angel of the Lord” to be divine understand it as a pre-

¹⁰⁹ Vern S. Poythress, “10 Things You Should Know about Theophanies” <https://www.crossway.org/articles/10-things-you-should-know-about-theophanies/>. See also: Vern Poythress, “Theophany” <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/theophany/>.

incarnation appearance of the second person of the Trinity¹¹⁰ (a so-called *Christophany*¹¹¹). The angel of the Lord may well be an angelic messenger who speaks God's words in the first person because they are acting as God's official representative/ambassador.¹¹² As theologian John H. Walton points out: "in Ugaritic literature, when Baal sends messengers to Mot, the messengers use first person forms of speech."¹¹³ Either way, Hagar had a very special encounter in which God revealed His care for Hagar and for her unborn child, and in which she received the same divine message.

Q2: Was Abraham literally 99 years old 13 years after the birth of Ishmael?

A2:

Short:

Some read Abraham's age literally, others see it as symbolic. Ancient texts often used numbers figuratively. So 99 may express significance, not exact years.

Summary:

There are two main ways to understand Abraham's age in Genesis. A **literal reading** takes the number at face value, meaning Abraham was actually 99 years old. Many believers still hold this view. However, many scholars argue that these numbers reflect **ancient literary conventions**, not precise chronology.

In the ancient Near East, numbers were often used symbolically to convey honor, importance, or structure rather than exact measurement.

Archaeological evidence suggests most people lived much shorter lives, often 60–70 years. This creates tension with a strictly literal reading.

There are also internal challenges in the biblical timeline. Taken literally, some figures would overlap in ways the text never describes, which raises questions about whether the numbers are meant arithmetically.

Other ancient sources, like Mesopotamian king lists, also use large or patterned numbers for **rhetorical effect**, not record-keeping.

Because of this, many conclude that Abraham's age is best understood as **schematic or symbolic**, fitting the storytelling style of the time.

¹¹⁰ On the Christian concept of God as Trinity, see: Andy Bannister and Keith Small, "Allah vs. Yahweh / Tawhid vs. Trinity" <https://www.bethinking.org/islam/allah-vs-yahweh-tawhid-vs-trinity>; Francis J. Beckwith, "The Trinity: A Short Introduction" www.answeringislam.org.uk/Trinity/beckwith.html; Jeffery E. Browder & Michael C. Rea, "Understanding the Trinity" <https://andrewmbailey.com/trinity/Understanding%20the%20Trinity.pdf>; Sam Shamoun, "The Qur'an and the Holy Trinity" https://answering-islam.org/Shamoun/Qur'an_trinity.htm; Peter S. Williams, "Understanding the Trinity" <https://www.peterswilliams.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Trinity.pdf>; Brian Hebblethwaite, *The Essence of Christianity: A Fresh Look At The Nicene Creed* (SPCK, 1996); J.P. Moreland & William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations For A Christian Worldview*, second edition (IVP, 2017); H.P. Owen, *Christian Theism* (T&T Clark, 1984); John Polkinghorne, *Science & Christian Belief: Theological Reflections of a Bottom-Up Thinker* (SPCK, 1994); Richard Swinburne, *Was Jesus God?* (Oxford University Press, 2008).

¹¹¹ GotQuestions, "What is a theophany? What is a Christophany?" <https://www.gotquestions.org/theophany-Christophany.html>.

¹¹² See Peter S. Williams, "Do Angels Really Exist?" <https://www.bethinking.org/christian-beliefs/do-angels-really-exist>.

¹¹³ John H. Walton, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), 88.

At the same time, the literal view remains a valid position within Christian interpretation, so this is an area of **ongoing debate**.

Scholar:

While many modern-day Christians take what the Bible says about Abraham's age literally, it is likely that "the ancient audiences all understood these to be schematic, not arithmetic numbers."¹¹⁴ In other words, given the cultural context of the ancient near east, the numbers used for character ages in the patriarchal stories in *Genesis* are figurative rather than literal, and Abraham was not literally 99 years old 13 years after the birth of Ishmael.

As Egyptologist Kenneth Kitchen notes:

External evidence from burials of all periods all over the biblical world and beyond would indicate that most people died in their sixties or seventies at the latest (and most often, much younger).¹¹⁵

Theologian Craig Olsen observes that:

Not only do the lifespans themselves and a chronology based those lifespans create conflicts [with archaeological evidence] outside the Bible, but they create conflicts inside the Bible as well . . . the face value interpretation of the patriarchal lifespans cannot be maintained consistently. . . . Isaac's birth is not much of a miracle if both Abraham's father and grandson fathered children older than 100. It seems unlikely that Abimelech would have taken Sarah for his harem if she were 89 or 90 years old as the face value reading implies. And Jacob volunteering to work for seven years for Rachel's hand in marriage is ludicrous if he really was 77 years old.¹¹⁶

As Carol A. Hill points out:

If the genealogies in Genesis 5 and 11 are both literal and complete, then the death of Adam has to be dated to the generation of Noah's father Lamech. Shem, Arphaxad, Shelah, and Eber would have outlived all of the generations following as far and including Terah. Noah would have been the contemporary of Abraham for 58 years and Shem (Noah's son) would have survived Abraham by 35 years. But where does the Bible indicate that any of these men were coeval? They are spoken of as respected ancestors, not as contemporaries that interacted with them or who were to be cared for in their old age.¹¹⁷

However, as Olsen also observes:

¹¹⁴ Craig Olsen, "How Old was Father Abraham? Part 2 A Symbolic Interpretation of the Patriarchal Lifespans" file:///Users/peterwilliams/Downloads/How_Old_was_Father_Abraham_Part_2_A_Symb.pdf.

¹¹⁵ K.A. Kitchen, *On The Reliability Of The Old Testament* (Eerdmans, 2003), 444.

¹¹⁶ Craig Olsen, "How Old was Father Abraham? Part 2 A Symbolic Interpretation of the Patriarchal Lifespans" file:///Users/peterwilliams/Downloads/How_Old_was_Father_Abraham_Part_2_A_Symb.pdf.

¹¹⁷ Carol A. Hill, "Making Sense of the Numbers in Genesis," *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 55, no. 4 (2003) <https://www.asa3.org/ASA/PSCF/2003/PSCF12-03Hill.pdf>.

There is also no evidence of any ancient culture recording lifespans or reigns of ancient ancestors as accurate face value numbers. All the evidence discovered to date shows that ancient cultures either did not record the lifespans of their ancestors, or they exaggerated their lifespan or reign using symbolic numbers as a way to bestow honor Ancient texts, like the Sumerian King List, the Gilgamesh Epic, the Lagaš King List, and Egyptian writings use numbers for rhetorical effect. They do exhibit use of multiplication and fractions; not for accurate record keeping, but hyperbolically to exaggerate and glorify their gods, kings or ancestors. They also use round numbers (10, 20, 30, 40, 60, 100, 200), sacred numbers (e.g., repeated use of the number seven), and graded numbers. All of these are also common biblical rhetorical devices .

¹¹⁸

Likewise, Hill explains that:

the purpose of numbers in ancient religious texts could be numerological rather than numerical. Numerologically, a number's symbolic value was the basis and purpose for its use, not its secular value in a system of counting. One of the religious considerations of the ancients involved in numbers was to make certain that any numbering scheme worked out numerologically; i.e., that it used, and added up to, the right numbers symbolically. This is distinctively different from a secular use of numbers in which the overriding concern is that numbers add up to the correct total arithmetically. Another way of looking at it is that the sacred numbers used by the Mesopotamians gave a type of religious dignity or respect to important persons or to a literary text Figurative numbers are used throughout the Old Testament, and also (but less frequently) in the New Testament.¹¹⁹

Olsen adds that: "A symbolic understanding of the patriarchal lifespans supports the antiquity of their origin, and it allows them to speak in the idiom of their day."¹²⁰

Q3: What is the significance of God changing Abram's name to Abraham and Sari's name to Sarah?

A3:

Short:

The name changes mark a new phase in God's plan.

Abraham becomes "father of many," and Sarah "princess."

They reflect new identity, purpose, and promise.

Summary:

In Genesis, God changes Abram's name to **Abraham** and Sarai's to **Sarah** to mark a major turning point in their story.

¹¹⁸ Craig Olsen, "How Old was Father Abraham? Part 2 A Symbolic Interpretation of the Patriarchal Lifespans" file:///Users/peterwilliams/Downloads/How_Old_was_Father_Abraham_Part_2_A_Symb.pdf

¹¹⁹ Carol A. Hill, "Making Sense of the Numbers in Genesis," *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 55, no. 4 (2003) <https://www.asa3.org/ASA/PSCF/2003/PSCF12-03Hill.pdf>.

¹²⁰ Craig Olsen, "How Old was Father Abraham? Part 2 A Symbolic Interpretation of the Patriarchal Lifespans" file:///Users/peterwilliams/Downloads/How_Old_was_Father_Abraham_Part_2_A_Symb.pdf.

In the ancient Near East, a name change often signaled a **new identity, role, or destiny**, especially when linked to a covenant or royal purpose. Here, it reflects God’s promise that Abraham will become the **father of many nations**.

The meanings of the names are debated, but the shift clearly emphasizes expansion and elevation:

- Abram becomes Abraham, linked to the idea of a **multitude of descendants**.
- Sarai becomes Sarah, often understood as “**princess**,” highlighting her role as a mother of nations.

Importantly, Sarah’s renaming shows that she is not just secondary, but **central to the promise**, on equal footing with Abraham in God’s plan.

In the Qur’an, Abraham is consistently called *Ibrahim*, and this name change is not mentioned, so the biblical detail stands on its own within that tradition.

So the significance is not just linguistic, but theological: the new names signal a **new identity, a new future, and a covenant relationship** that will shape generations to come.

Scholar:

God changes Abram’s name to Abraham: “No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations.” (Genesis 17:5, ESV.) The meaning of both names is much debated. Christopher Eames of the Armstrong Institute of Biblical Archaeology argues that: “*Abram* as an East Semitic, Akkadian-Babylonian name meaning ‘Beloved Father’” while *Abraham* is “a West Semitic, *Aramaic*-inclined name meaning ‘Exalted Father.’”¹²¹ God also changes Sarai’s name (which may have had pagan connotations) to “Sarah,” meaning “princess.”

Theologian Nahum M. Sarna observes that “Throughout the Near East the inauguration of a new era or a new state policy would frequently be marked by the assumption of a new name expressive of the change on the part of the King.”¹²² In an analogous way, God’s giving of new names to Abram and Sarai suggests the inauguration of a new phase in God’s purposes that comes with the conception of their son Isaac. Islamic writer Imam Mufti comments that:

In the Qur’an, the only name given to Abraham is “Ibraheem” and “Ibrahaam”, all sharing the original root, b-r-h-m. Although in the Bible Abraham is known as Abram at first, and then God is said to change his name to Abraham, the Qur’an has kept silent on this subject, neither affirming nor negating it.¹²³

The meaning of the names “Abram” and “Abraham” is a much debated issue. Christopher Eames of the Armstrong Institute of Biblical Archaeology argues that:

Abraham’s family was a West (or Northwest) Semitic family, essentially falling under the “Amorite” umbrella (at least linguistically and geographically), in native association. They were native speakers of a West Semitic language, from which was

¹²¹ Christopher Eames, “What does the name Abraham really mean?” (December 1st, 2022) <https://armstronginstitute.org/806-what-does-the-name-abraham-really-mean>.

¹²² Nahum M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis Through Rabbinic Tradition and Modern Scholarship* (Skoike, IL: Varda), 130.

¹²³ Imam Mufti, “The Story of Abraham (Part 1 of 7)” <https://www.islamreligion.com/articles/293/story-of-abraham-part-1/>.

derived Aramaic, Hebrew, Arabic, etc. Abraham's family was - as with many other "Amorites" during this specific period [2000–1600 B.C.E.] - living in the East Semitic, Akkadian-speaking Babylonian Empire initially. And Abraham's original name, Abram, was an *Akkadian* name meaning something like "Beloved Father." Following Abram's migration west, part of the family stayed put in or around Haran . . . among fellow Aramaic-speaking, West Semitic countrymen. . . . Then, following Abram's commanded further migration south into Canaan . . . and following his obedience to God and fulfilment of certain tests and trials, he was renamed with the West Semitic, more Aramaic-oriented name *Abraham*, meaning "Exalted Father," with the promise that this patriarch would become exalted as a "father of a multitude of nations" (Genesis 17:5).¹²⁴

Eames also considers the change of name from Sarai to Sarah:

When it comes to such a short, three-letter name as Sarai's (שרי), it can be hard to get a fix on the accurate original meaning of the name - there is enough wiggle-room in ambiguity for endless theories . . . unless or until archaeological discovery brings further clarity to the matter. Some kind of Indo-European, Hittite linguistic or territorial connection is one option What is, at least, apparent is that Sarah's original name, *Sarai*, appears to be a *foreign* name Thus, *could it be* that Sarah's initial name, *Sarai* . . . had some form of *pagan*, or at least negative, connotation? Thus, with the name-change of Genesis 17: At the same time that *Abram* became an "exalted father," *Abraham*, through the promise of "many nations," *Sarai* herself was similarly elevated - her former name reworked into the Semitic/Hebrew word "princess," a royal title she was destined to fulfill over the multitude that would descend from her, as a royal "mother of nations."¹²⁵

As Tammi J. Schneider comments:

Sarah receives a new or corrected name, which in either case points puts her in the same category as Abraham, who recently received a new name. The deity *twice* states categorically that he will bless her and that she will have a son (17:16, 19). There is nothing subtle about the Deity's intentions or stance on the matter. The text has just introduced the novel concept that Sarah's maternity will be as important as Abraham's paternity.¹²⁶

¹²⁴ Christopher Eames, "What does the name Abraham really mean?" (December 1st, 2022) <https://armstronginstitute.org/806-what-does-the-name-abraham-really-mean>.

¹²⁵ Christopher Eames, "What Does the Name 'Sarai' Really Mean?" (21st December 2022) [https://armstronginstitute.org/818-what-does-the-name-sarai-really-mean#:~:text=In%20the%20Hebrew%20language%2C%20a,nations%20\(verse%205\)%2C%20Sarai](https://armstronginstitute.org/818-what-does-the-name-sarai-really-mean#:~:text=In%20the%20Hebrew%20language%2C%20a,nations%20(verse%205)%2C%20Sarai).

¹²⁶ Tammi J. Schneider, *Sarah: Mother of Nations* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 58.

Q4: Is the “eternal covenant” God makes with Abraham literally “eternal”?

A4:

Short:

“Eternal” doesn’t always mean endless.

The Hebrew word can mean a very long or undefined time.

It emphasizes lasting significance, not necessarily infinity.

Summary:

The word translated “eternal” or “everlasting” in Genesis is the Hebrew word “**olam.**” This word does not always mean an infinite, never-ending duration in a strict sense.

Instead, “olam” refers to something **beyond the horizon**, either in the distant past or far into the future. It can describe a time span that is long, enduring, and significant, without clearly defining its limits.

In biblical usage, “olam” can mean:

- A very long time
- An enduring or lasting period
- Or, in some contexts, true eternity

So when God makes an “eternal covenant” with Abraham, the emphasis is on the **enduring and ongoing nature** of the relationship and promise, rather than a precise philosophical definition of infinity.

The covenant is meant to be **permanent in its significance and impact**, extending far beyond Abraham’s lifetime and shaping generations.

So the key idea is not technical duration, but **lasting commitment and faithfulness.**

Scholar:

The Hebrew word “olam,” which is sometimes translated as “everlasting” or “eternal” in English, refers to the distant past or future without necessarily specifying a literally unending temporal duration.

The Hebrew word sometimes translated as “eternal” or “everlasting” in English is “olam,” a metaphorical term that encompasses a range of temporal meanings, including “long duration, antiquity, futurity . . . time out of mind (past or future), i.e. (practically) eternity.”¹²⁷

According to Jeff A. Benner:

Hebrew words used for space are also used for time. The Hebrew word qedem means “east” but is also the same word for the “past.” The Hebrew word olam literally means “beyond the horizon.” When looking off in the far distance it is difficult to make out any details and what is beyond that horizon cannot be seen. This concept is the olam. The word olam is also used for time for the distant past or the distant future as a time that is difficult to know or perceive.¹²⁸

Although “olam” can be used to refer to the future as “everlasting” in the sense of being a never ending, continuously increasing temporal duration, it can also refer to an unspecifically

¹²⁷ See <https://biblehub.com/hebrew/5769.htm>.

¹²⁸ Jeff A. Benner, “Eternity.” <https://www.ancient-hebrew.org/definition/eternity.htm>.

long but temporally limited span of past or future time. As Dr. Rachel Zohar Dulin explains: “olam is understood in the Bible to express long duration of time, antiquity, continued existence and even eternity or uninterrupted future . . .”¹²⁹

Q5: Who are the three “men” who visit Abraham at the end of episode six?

A5:

Short:

The three “men” are usually understood as God and two angels.

They appear in human form to visit Abraham.

The exact identity is debated, but the message is clear.

Summary:

In Genesis 18, the three “men” who visit Abraham are generally understood as **God and two angels appearing in human form**. The text itself later distinguishes them: two continue on to Sodom (Genesis 19:1) and are clearly called angels, while the third speaks with divine authority and is identified as the Lord.

There are different interpretations:

- Some Jewish and early Christian traditions see all three as **angels**.
- Many Christian interpreters understand one of them as **God appearing in a veiled form**, with the other two as angels.
- Some later Christian readings suggest a symbolic link to the Trinity, though this is not explicit in the text.

Ancient readers likely understood this as a **divine visitation**, where God is present, either directly or through a representative, accompanied by heavenly messengers.

The key point is not the exact metaphysical identity, but the event itself:

God comes near to Abraham, speaks with him, and reveals His plans.

So Episode 6 reflects a widely held interpretation: a **divine encounter expressed through human-like figures**, making the interaction personal and understandable.

Scholar:

While one of the three “men” who visit Abraham is either an appearance of “the angel of the Lord” or a veiled in-person appearance of God, the other two “men” are angels.

While some Christians have interpreted the “three men” in Genesis 18 as an Old Testament appearance of the Trinity,¹³⁰ this would not be how the original audience of the text

¹²⁹ Rachel Zohar Dulin, “Olam: Time And Space.” <https://daytonjewishobserver.org/2014/01/14414/>.

¹³⁰ On the Christian concept of God as Trinity, see: Andy Bannister and Keith Small, “Allah vs. Yahweh / Tawhid vs. Trinity.” <https://www.bethinking.org/islam/allah-vs-yahweh-tawhid-vs-trinity>; Francis J. Beckwith, “The Trinity: A Short Introduction.” <http://www.answerislam.org.uk/Trinity/beckwith.html>; Jeffery E. Browder & Michael C. Rea, “Understanding the Trinity.” <https://andrewmbailey.com/trinity/Understanding%20the%20Trinity.pdf>; Sam Shamoun, “The Qur’an and the Holy Trinity.” https://answering-islam.org/Shamoun/Qur’an_trinity.htm; Peter S. Williams, “Understanding the Trinity.” <https://www.peterswilliams.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Trinity.pdf>; Brian Hebblethwaite, *The Essence of Christianity: A Fresh Look At The Nicene Creed* (SPCK, 1996); J.P. Moreland & William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations For A Christian Worldview*, second edition (IVP, 2017); H. P. Owen,

understood it and “forces on the text an interpretation the text itself will not yield.”¹³¹ The Jewish Talmud identifies all three “men” as angels, as did Christian theologian Augustine of Hippo (354-430 CE). Islamic tradition “details how the angels in the form of handsome men – identified as Gabriel/Jibril, Michael/Mikal, and Israfil by Ibn Kathir – came to Abraham’s/Ibrahim’s and Sarah’s house as guests.”¹³² Many Christian interpreters hold that “God appears to Abraham along with two angels, all with their glory veiled in a human form.”¹³³ For example, theologian Bruce K. Waltke affirms that:

This is actually the Lord and two angels (see 18:1, 10; 19:1). The later identifications of the “men” (18:10, 13, 16–17, 33; 19:1) confirm their manifest difference. One man is none other than the Lord, as 18:2–3 and especially 10, 13–15 make explicit. However, the Lord and his heavenly assembly in their incarnation appear in human form (see 16:7).¹³⁴

John Goldingay describes this as a story about a visit “by God and by his envoys who appear in human form . . .”¹³⁵ Likewise, Victor P. Hamilton affirms that “Yahweh appears to Abraham with others at his side.”¹³⁶ An appearance of God in human form is a special form of *theophany* (i.e. an audio and/or visual “display to human beings that expresses the presence and character of God”¹³⁷). Some Christians understand this as a pre-incarnation appearance of the second person of the Trinity (a so-called *Christophany*¹³⁸), but this is something that has to be read into the text.¹³⁹

Catholic theologian E.F. Sutcliffe, S.J. cautions that in Genesis 18: “It’s difficult to know whether Yahweh appeared in person or through the intermediary of an angel.”¹⁴⁰ Sutcliffe references Genesis 16:7, in which “the Angel of Yahweh” could be understood as an angelic messenger who speaks God’s words in the first person because they are acting as God’s official representative/ambassador, and who is thus *functionally* identified as God himself (16:13). As theologian John H. Walton points out: “in Ugaritic literature, when Baal sends messengers to Mot, the messengers use first person forms of speech.”¹⁴¹

Christian Theism (T&T Clark, 1984); John Polkinghorne, *Science & Christian Belief: Theological Reflections of a Bottom-Up Thinker* (SPCK, 1994); Richard Swinburne, *Was Jesus God?* (Oxford University Press, 2008).

¹³¹ Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18-50*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995, 8.

¹³² John Kaltner & Younus Mizra, *The Bible and the Qur’an: Biblical Figures In The Islamic Tradition*. London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 65.

¹³³ Luke Wayne, “Who were the three men who appeared to Abraham in Genesis 18?” <https://carm.org/about-bible-verses/who-were-the-three-men-who-appeared-to-abraham-in-genesis-18/>.

¹³⁴ Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 266.

¹³⁵ John Goldingay, *Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Pentateuch: Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020), 293.

¹³⁶ Victor P; Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18-50* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 8.

¹³⁷ Vern S. Poythress, “10 Things You Should Know about Theophanies” <https://www.crossway.org/articles/10-things-you-should-know-about-theophanies/>. See also: Vern Poythress, “Theophany” <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/theophany/>.

¹³⁸ GotQuestions, “What is a theophany? What is a Christophany?” <https://www.gotquestions.org/theophany-Christophany.html>.

¹³⁹ Tremper Longman III argues that, as in Genesis 16: “we are to understand the angel as a theophany and not specifically as a pre-incarnate appearance of Jesus, also known as a Christophany.” - *The Story of God Bible Commentary: Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 249.

¹⁴⁰ E.F. Sutcliffe S.J., quoted by Tom Nash, “The “Three Men” Who Appeared to Abraham” <https://www.catholic.com/qa/the-three-men-who-appeared-to-abraham>.

¹⁴¹ John H. Walton, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), 88.

However one interprets this incident, the central point remains that God (whether more or less directly) reveals himself to Abraham “veiled in a human form.”¹⁴²

Recommended Resources for Episode 6

- Peter S. Williams, “The Beginnings of History: Evidence from Genesis to Joseph.” (2025) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jKsilBIhjV4&t=1848s>
- YouTube Playlist, “Islam.” www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLQhh3qcwVEWjhD84EB0jEG5PswCOcDsmJ
- All Israel News Staff, “Evidence for the historical site of the Oaks of Mamre.” <https://allisrael.com/evidence-for-the-historical-site-of-the-oaks-of-mamre>
- Andy Bannister and Keith Small, “Allah vs. Yahweh / Tawhid vs. Trinity.” <https://www.bethinking.org/islam/allah-vs-yahweh-tawhid-vs-trinity>
- Francis J. Beckwith, “The Trinity: A Short Introduction.” www.answerislam.org.uk/Trinity/beckwith.html
- Jeff A. Benner, “Eternity.” <https://www.ancient-hebrew.org/definition/eternity.htm>
- Jeffery E. Browder & Michael C. Rea, “Understanding the Trinity.” <https://andrewmbailey.com/trinity/Understanding%20the%20Trinity.pdf>
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- Christopher Eames, “What does the name Abraham really mean?” (December 1st, 2022) <https://armstronginstitute.org/806-what-does-the-name-abraham-really-mean>
- Christopher Eames, “What Does the Name ‘Sarai’ Really Mean?” (21st December 2022) [https://armstronginstitute.org/818-what-does-the-name-sarai-really-mean#:~:text=In%20the%20Hebrew%20language%2C%20a,nations%20\(verse%205\)%2C%20Sarai.](https://armstronginstitute.org/818-what-does-the-name-sarai-really-mean#:~:text=In%20the%20Hebrew%20language%2C%20a,nations%20(verse%205)%2C%20Sarai.)
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- Vern S. Poythress, “Theophany.” <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/theophany/>
- Sam Shamoun, “The Qur’an and the Holy Trinity.” https://answering-islam.org/Shamoun/Qur’an_trinity.htm
- Peter S. Williams, “Understanding the Trinity.” <https://www.peterswilliams.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Trinity.pdf>
- Peter S. Williams, “Do Angels Really Exist?” <https://www.bethinking.org/christian-beliefs/do-angels-really-exist>
- Bryan Windle, “Top Ten Discoveries Related to Abraham.” <https://biblearchaeologyreport.com/2021/07/16/top-ten-discoveries-related-to-abraham/>
- John Goldingay. *Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Pentateuch: Genesis* (Baker Academic, 2020)

¹⁴² Luke Wayne, “Who were the three men who appeared to Abraham in Genesis 18?” <https://carm.org/about-bible-verses/who-were-the-three-men-who-appeared-to-abraham-in-genesis-18/>.

Tammi J. Schneider. *Sarah: Mother of Nations* (Continuum, 2004)

John H. Walton. *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Genesis* (Zondervan, 2013)

Episode 7: Torn

Q1: Who are the three “men” visiting Abraham at the start of episode seven?

A1:

Short:

The three “men” are usually understood as God and two angels.

They appear in human form to visit Abraham.

The exact identity is debated, but the message is clear.

Summary:

In Genesis 18, the three “men” who visit Abraham are generally understood as **God and two angels appearing in human form**. The text itself later distinguishes them: two continue on to Sodom (Genesis 19:1) and are clearly called angels, while the third speaks with divine authority and is identified as the Lord.

There are different interpretations:

- Some Jewish and early Christian traditions see all three as **angels**.
- Many Christian interpreters understand one of them as **God appearing in a veiled form**, with the other two as angels.
- Some later Christian readings suggest a symbolic link to the Trinity, though this is not explicit in the text.

Ancient readers likely understood this as a **divine visitation**, where God is present, either directly or through a representative, accompanied by heavenly messengers.

The key point is not the exact metaphysical identity, but the event itself:

God comes near to Abraham, speaks with him, and reveals His plans.

So Episode 6 reflects a widely held interpretation:

a **divine encounter expressed through human-like figures**, making the interaction personal and understandable.

Scholar:

While one of the three “men” who visit Abraham is either an appearance of “the angel of the Lord” or a veiled in-person appearance of God, the other two “men” are angels.

While some Christians have interpreted the “three men” in Genesis 18 as an Old Testament appearance of the Trinity,¹⁴³ this would not be how the original audience of the text

¹⁴³ On the Christian concept of God as Trinity, see: Andy Bannister and Keith Small, “Allah vs. Yahweh / Tawhid vs. Trinity” <https://www.bethinking.org/islam/allah-vs-yahweh-tawhid-vs-trinity>; Francis J. Beckwith, “The Trinity: A Short Introduction” www.answeringislam.org.uk/Trinity/beckwith.html; Jeffery E. Browder & Michael C. Rea, “Understanding the Trinity” <https://andrewmbailey.com/trinity/Understanding%20the%20Trinity.pdf>; Sam Shamoun, “The Qur’an and the Holy Trinity” https://answering-islam.org/Shamoun/Qur’an_trinity.htm; Peter S. Williams, “Understanding the Trinity” <https://www.peterswilliams.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Trinity.pdf>; Brian Hebblethwaite, *The Essence of Christianity: A Fresh Look At The Nicene Creed* (SPCK, 1996); J.P. Moreland & William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations For A Christian Worldview*, second edition (IVP, 2017); H.P. Owen, *Christian Theism* (T&T Clark, 1984); John Polkinghorne, *Science & Christian Belief: Theological Reflections of a Bottom-Up Thinker* (SPCK, 1994); Richard Swinburne, *Was Jesus God?* (Oxford University Press, 2008).

understood it and “forces on the text an interpretation the text itself will not yield.”¹⁴⁴ The Jewish Talmud identifies all three “men” as angels, as did Christian theologian Augustine of Hippo (354-430 CE). Islamic tradition “details how the angels in the form of handsome men – identified as Gabriel/Jibril, Michael/Mikal, and Israfil by Ibn Kathir – came to Abraham’s/Ibrahim’s and Sarah’s house as guests.”¹⁴⁵ Many Christian interpreters hold that “God appears to Abraham along with two angels, all with their glory veiled in a human form.”¹⁴⁶ For example, theologian Bruce K. Waltke affirms that:

This is actually the Lord and two angels (see 18:1, 10; 19:1). The later identifications of the “men” (18:10, 13, 16–17, 33; 19:1) confirm their manifest difference. One man is none other than the Lord, as 18:2–3 and especially 10, 13–15 make explicit. However, the Lord and his heavenly assembly in their incarnation appear in human form (see 16:7).¹⁴⁷

John Goldingay describes this as a story about a visit “by God and by his envoys who appear in human form . . .”¹⁴⁸ Likewise, Victor P. Hamilton affirms that “Yahweh appears to Abraham with others at his side.”¹⁴⁹ An appearance of God in human form is a special form of *theophany* (i.e. an audio and/or visual “display to human beings that expresses the presence and character of God”¹⁵⁰). Some Christians understand this as a pre-incarnation appearance of the second person of the Trinity (a so-called *Christophany*¹⁵¹), but this is something that has to be read into the text.¹⁵²

Catholic theologian E.F. Sutcliffe, S.J. cautions that in Genesis 18: “It’s difficult to know whether Yahweh appeared in person or through the intermediary of an angel.”¹⁵³ Sutcliffe references Genesis 16:7, in which “the Angel of Yahweh” could be understood as an angelic messenger who speaks God’s words in the first person because they are acting as God’s official representative/ambassador, and who is thus *functionally* identified as God himself (16:13). As theologian John H. Walton points out: “in Ugaritic literature, when Baal sends messengers to Mot, the messengers use first person forms of speech.”¹⁵⁴ However one interprets this incident, the central point remains that God (whether more or less directly) reveals himself to Abraham “veiled in a human form.”¹⁵⁵

¹⁴⁴ Victor P; Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18-50* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 8.

¹⁴⁵ John Kaltner & Younus Mizra, *The Bible and the Qur’an: Biblical Figures In The Islamic Tradition* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark), 65.

¹⁴⁶ Luke Wayne, “Who were the three men who appeared to Abraham in Genesis 18?” <https://carm.org/about-bible-verses/who-were-the-three-men-who-appeared-to-abraham-in-genesis-18/>.

¹⁴⁷ Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 266.

¹⁴⁸ John Goldingay, *Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Pentateuch: Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020), 293.

¹⁴⁹ Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18-50* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 8.

¹⁵⁰ Vern S. Poythress, “10 Things You Should Know about Theophanies” <https://www.crossway.org/articles/10-things-you-should-know-about-theophanies/>. See also: Vern Poythress, “Theophany” <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/theophany/>.

¹⁵¹ GotQuestions, “What is a theophany? What is a Christophany?” <https://www.gotquestions.org/theophany-Christophany.html>.

¹⁵² Tremper Longman III argues that, as in Genesis 16: “we are to understand the angel as a theophany and not specifically as a pre-incarnate appearance of Jesus, also known as a Christophany.” - *The Story of God Bible Commentary: Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 249.

¹⁵³ E.F. Sutcliffe S.J., quoted by Tom Nash, “The “Three Men” Who Appeared to Abraham” <https://www.catholic.com/qa/the-three-men-who-appeared-to-abraham>.

¹⁵⁴ John H. Walton, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), 88.

¹⁵⁵ Luke Wayne, “Who were the three men who appeared to Abraham in Genesis 18?” <https://carm.org/about-bible-verses/who-were-the-three-men-who-appeared-to-abraham-in-genesis-18/>.

Q2: Doesn't Abram break Jewish dietary laws by giving his guests milk and meat (Genesis 18:8)?

A2:

Short:

No, Abram is not breaking any laws. Jewish dietary laws did not exist yet. He is simply showing normal ancient hospitality.

Summary:

Abram is not breaking Jewish dietary laws in Genesis 18:8 because those laws **did not yet exist** in his time.

The dietary rules about separating milk and meat come much later in the Law of Moses. Abram lived centuries before this, so he cannot be judged by standards that were not yet given.

Instead, his actions reflect the **hospitality culture of the ancient Near East**, where offering generous food to guests was a sign of honor and respect. Serving both dairy and meat would have been seen as a rich and appropriate meal.

Interestingly, the fact that the text openly shows revered figures doing things that later laws would prohibit is often seen as a sign of **historical authenticity**. If the story had been invented later, it likely would have been adjusted to match later religious practices.

So rather than breaking a law, Abram is simply acting in line with the customs of his time, showing **generosity and hospitality** to his visitors.

Scholar:

Serving milk and meat together is against Jewish kashrut laws about diet, but as these laws did not exist in Abram's day, he is not breaking them.

Although serving milk and meat together is against Jewish kashrut laws about diet, since these laws did not exist in Abram's day, he is not breaking them in Genesis 18:8. Indeed, Abram's behaviour in serving his guests fits with the hospitality culture of the ancient world, and as Denis Prager observes:

The Torah's repeated recounting of Jews engaged in practices that violate later Jewish law actually conforms traditional beliefs about the veracity and the age of the Torah. Had the Torah been written much later – after Jewish law was established – such violation of Jewish law by key Jewish figures likely would never have been recorded.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁶ Denis Prager, *The Rational Bible: Genesis* (Washington, DC: Regnery Faith, 2019), 211.

Q3: Did Sarai really ask if she would “feel lust”?

A3:

Short:

The Hebrew word means “pleasure” or “delight,” not specifically “lust.” It could refer to sexual joy, having a child, or both. “Lust” is a stronger, more interpretive translation.

Summary:

The original Hebrew word in Genesis 18:12 is **‘ednāh**, which means “pleasure,” “delight,” or “joy.” It is related to the word “Eden,” carrying the idea of something enjoyable or life-giving.

Some translations render this as “pleasure” or “delight,” while others interpret it more specifically as **sexual pleasure**, since the context is about Sarah having a child in old age.

Because of this, translating it as “lust” is not strictly wrong in the sense of “desire,” but it is **stronger and more specific** than the original Hebrew. In modern English, “lust” often carries a narrow, sexual meaning that may not fully reflect the broader nuance of the text.

Scholars differ on what Sarah had in mind:

- Some think she is referring to the **physical aspect** of conceiving a child.
- Others think she is focused on the **joy of having and raising a child**.
- It is also possible the text intentionally includes **both ideas**.

So the most accurate understanding is that Sarah is expressing surprise at the idea of experiencing **pleasure or joy again**, whether through intimacy, motherhood, or both.

Scholar:

A literal translation of the original Hebrew of Genesis 18:22 would indicate that Sari wondered if she would have “pleasure” or “delight.” This “pleasure” may have been at the prospect of either the sexual means or of the parental outcome of having her own child with Abram, or both.

The script of episode seven translated a Hebrew word from Genesis 18:22 as “feel lust.” Whilst a “lust” is literally simply a “desire,” common English usage combines with the context here to suggest that Sarai’s desire is sexual. The Hebrew word at issue in Genesis 18:22 is “*‘ed-nāh*,” which is the feminine form of “eden” (as in the garden “in eden”), a word that means “delicate, delight, pleasure.”¹⁵⁷ More literal English translations of Genesis 18:22 translate this word as “pleasure” (e.g. ESV and World English Bible) or “delight” (e.g. CSB). The specific “pleasure” to which this refers is open to interpretation. For example, seventeenth century theologian Matthew Poole coyly suggested that the “pleasure” referenced by Sarai was “Not so much in the conception, as in the education and fruition of a child.”¹⁵⁸ In other words, Sarai was mostly laughing in herself at the idea that she would have the pleasure of *raising* her own child. However, as Tammi J. Schneider notes, the Hebrew

¹⁵⁷ <https://biblehub.com/hebrew/5730.htm>.

¹⁵⁸ Matthew Poole, <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/poole/genesis/18.htm>.

term *'ed-nāh* has “a possible sexual connotation.”¹⁵⁹ Some translators therefore infer from the use of *'ed-nāh* in context that Sarai *is* indeed thinking about “conception.” Hence the New English Bible translates: “So Sarah laughed to herself and said, ‘Now that I am worn out and my husband is old, am I still to have sexual pleasure?’” Likewise, the Good News Bible has: “So Sarah laughed to herself and said, ‘Now that I am old and worn out, can I still enjoy sex? And besides, my husband is old too.’” Theologian Andrew E. Steinmann agrees that Sarah’s thought here “probably refers to sexual pleasure . . .”¹⁶⁰ That said, perhaps the Hebrew of Genesis 8:22 is deliberately vague, so that it can encompass both thoughts. In sum, Sarai’s *'ed-nāh* (pleasure/delight/joy) may have been at the prospect of either the sexual means or of the parental outcome of having her own child with Abram, or both.

Q4: Does the name “Isaac” mean “God laughs”?

A4:

Short:

Isaac means “he laughs” or “he will laugh.”
It does not literally mean “God laughs.”
But the name is closely tied to God bringing joy.

Summary:

The name “Isaac” comes from the Hebrew **Yitzchak**, which means “**he laughs**” or “he will laugh.” It is directly connected to the moments in Genesis where both Abraham and Sarah laugh at the idea of having a child in old age.

While some suggest a longer form like “Isaac-el” could imply “may God laugh,” the biblical text itself emphasizes the simpler meaning: **laughter**.

This laughter carries multiple layers:

- At first, it reflects **surprise or disbelief**.
- Later, it becomes **joy and fulfillment** when Isaac is born.

Sarah herself highlights this meaning in Genesis 21:6: “God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.”

So the name does not literally mean “God laughs,” but it **points to God’s action** in turning doubt into joy.

Isaac’s name becomes a lasting reminder that what seemed impossible became reality, and that **God brings joy out of unlikely situations**.

Scholar:

The name Isaac is derived from the Hebrew name Yitzchak, which literally means “he laughs” or “he will laugh.”

The name “Isaac” comes from the Hebrew name Yitzchak, which has the same root letters (*šḥq*) as the word translated as “laughed” in Genesis 17:17: “Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed . . .” (ESV). Indeed:

¹⁵⁹ Tammi J. Schneider, *Sarah: Mother of Nations* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 69.

¹⁶⁰ Andrew E. Steinmann, *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries: Genesis* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019), 193.

the name Isaac means “laughter” and is probably a shortened form of Isaac-el, which means “may God laugh.” In conferring this name on Sarah’s son, the Lord superimposes His own laughter upon Abraham, forever reminding the patriarch that He always gets the last laugh.¹⁶¹

Hence:

Isaac’s name and meaning connect directly to his story in Genesis where laughter and joy come out of the improbable. His name is a constant reminder of God’s provision and Abraham’s faith.¹⁶²

When Isaac was born, Sarah said: “God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.” (Genesis 21:6).

Q5: Was Abraham really “at the astonishing age of one hundred years old” when Isaac was born?

A5:

Short:

Some take Abraham’s age literally, others see it as symbolic.

Ancient texts often used numbers figuratively.

So “100 years” may express significance more than exact age.

Summary:

There are two main approaches to Abraham’s age at Isaac’s birth. A **literal reading** accepts that Abraham was actually 100 years old. This view is still held by many believers and fits a straightforward reading of the text. However, many scholars argue that these numbers reflect **ancient literary conventions** rather than precise historical data. In the ancient Near East, numbers were often used symbolically to convey importance, honor, or structure.

Archaeological evidence suggests typical lifespans were much shorter, usually around 60–70 years. This creates tension if the ages are read strictly literally.

There are also internal challenges in the biblical narrative. Taken at face value, some timelines would imply overlapping generations that the text never describes interacting.

Other ancient sources, like Mesopotamian king lists, also use large or patterned numbers for **rhetorical and symbolic purposes**, not exact record-keeping.

Because of this, many conclude that Abraham’s age is best understood as **schematic or symbolic**, fitting the storytelling style of the time.

At the same time, the literal interpretation remains a valid option within Christian tradition, so this question is still **open to debate**.

¹⁶¹ “Call His Name Isaac.” *Tabletalk*, <https://tabletalkmagazine.com/daily-study/2006/10/call-his-name-isaac/>.

¹⁶² Amanda Williams, “What Does Isaac Mean In The Bible? A Detailed Look At The Meaning And Significance.” https://www.christianwebsite.com/what-does-isaac-mean-in-the-bible/?utm_content=cmp-true.

Scholar:

While many modern-day Christians take what the Bible says about Abraham's age literally, it is likely that "the ancient audiences all understood these to be schematic, not arithmetic numbers."¹⁶³ In other words, given the cultural context of the ancient near east, the numbers used for character ages in the patriarchal stories in *Genesis* are figurative rather than literal, and Abraham was not literally 99 years old 13 years after the birth of Ishmael.

As Egyptologist Kenneth Kitchen notes:

External evidence from burials of all periods all over the biblical world and beyond would indicate that most people died in their sixties or seventies at the latest (and most often, much younger).¹⁶⁴

Theologian Craig Olsen observes that:

Not only do the lifespans themselves and a chronology based those lifespans create conflicts [with archaeological evidence] outside the Bible, but they create conflicts inside the Bible as well . . . the face value interpretation of the patriarchal lifespans cannot be maintained consistently. . . . Isaac's birth is not much of a miracle if both Abraham's father and grandson fathered children older than 100. It seems unlikely that Abimelech would have taken Sarah for his harem if she were 89 or 90 years old as the face value reading implies. And Jacob volunteering to work for seven years for Rachel's hand in marriage is ludicrous if he really was 77 years old.¹⁶⁵

As Carol A. Hill points out:

If the genealogies in Genesis 5 and 11 are both literal and complete, then the death of Adam has to be dated to the generation of Noah's father Lamech. Shem, Arphaxad, Shelah, and Eber would have outlived all of the generations following as far and including Terah. Noah would have been the contemporary of Abraham for 58 years and Shem (Noah's son) would have survived Abraham by 35 years. But where does the Bible indicate that any of these men were coeval? They are spoken of as respected ancestors, not as contemporaries that interacted with them or who were to be cared for in their old age.¹⁶⁶

However, as Olsen also observes:

There is also no evidence of any ancient culture recording lifespans or reigns of ancient ancestors as accurate face value numbers. All the evidence discovered to date shows that ancient cultures either did not record the lifespans of their ancestors, or

¹⁶³ Craig Olsen, "How Old was Father Abraham? Part 2 A Symbolic Interpretation of the Patriarchal Lifespans." file:///Users/peterwilliams/Downloads/How_Old_was_Father_Abraham_Part_2_A_Symb.pdf.

¹⁶⁴ K.A. Kitchen, *On The Reliability Of The Old Testament* (Eerdmans, 2003), 444.

¹⁶⁵ Craig Olsen, "How Old was Father Abraham? Part 2 A Symbolic Interpretation of the Patriarchal Lifespans." file:///Users/peterwilliams/Downloads/How_Old_was_Father_Abraham_Part_2_A_Symb.pdf.

¹⁶⁶ Carol A. Hill, "Making Sense of the Numbers in Genesis," *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 55, no. 4 (2003) <https://www.asa3.org/ASA/PSCF/2003/PSCF12-03Hill.pdf>.

they exaggerated their lifespan or reign using symbolic numbers as a way to bestow honor Ancient texts, like the Sumerian King List, the Gilgamesh Epic, the Lagaš King List, and Egyptian writings use numbers for rhetorical effect. They do exhibit use of multiplication and fractions; not for accurate record keeping, but hyperbolically to exaggerate and glorify their gods, kings or ancestors. They also use round numbers (10, 20, 30, 40, 60, 100, 200), sacred numbers (e.g., repeated use of the number seven), and graded numbers. All of these are also common biblical rhetorical devices . . .¹⁶⁷

Likewise, Hill explains that:

the purpose of numbers in ancient religious texts could be numerological rather than numerical. Numerologically, a number's symbolic value was the basis and purpose for its use, not its secular value in a system of counting. One of the religious considerations of the ancients involved in numbers was to make certain that any numbering scheme worked out numerologically; i.e., that it used, and added up to, the right numbers symbolically. This is distinctively different from a secular use of numbers in which the overriding concern is that numbers add up to the correct total arithmetically. Another way of looking at it is that the sacred numbers used by the Mesopotamians gave a type of religious dignity or respect to important persons or to a literary text Figurative numbers are used throughout the Old Testament, and also (but less frequently) in the New Testament.¹⁶⁸

Olsen adds that: "A symbolic understanding of the patriarchal lifespans supports the antiquity of their origin, and it allows them to speak in the idiom of their day."¹⁶⁹

Q6: Why was Isaac being weaned an occasion for a celebration?

A6:

Short:

Weaning meant the child had survived early childhood. In a time of high infant mortality, this was a big milestone. So families celebrated it as a sign of life and hope.

Summary:

In the ancient world, weaning was a **major milestone** in a child's life. Infant mortality was high, and many children did not survive their earliest years. In Isaac's case, the celebration is especially significant because his birth had been **long-awaited and unexpected**. The weaning feast highlights that the promise was not only fulfilled in birth, but that the child was now **securely part of the future**.

¹⁶⁷ Craig Olsen, "How Old was Father Abraham? Part 2 A Symbolic Interpretation of the Patriarchal Lifespans." file:///Users/peterwilliams/Downloads/How_Old_was_Father_Abraham_Part_2_A_Symb.pdf

¹⁶⁸ Carol A. Hill, "Making Sense of the Numbers in Genesis." *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 55, no. 4 (2003) <https://www.asa3.org/ASA/PSCF/2003/PSCF12-03Hill.pdf>.

¹⁶⁹ Craig Olsen, "How Old was Father Abraham? Part 2 A Symbolic Interpretation of the Patriarchal Lifespans." file:///Users/peterwilliams/Downloads/How_Old_was_Father_Abraham_Part_2_A_Symb.pdf.

Scholar:

Weaning marked a significant rite of passage in a cultural context that had a high infant mortality rate.

As Dennis Prager explains:

Abraham was a wealthy man who could afford to throw a great party in honor of his son's weaning. Today, parties are often made on the eighth day, at the time of a child's circumcision. But in the ancient world, with its very high rate of infant mortality, it was only later – at the time of weaning, for example – that parents felt confident the child would survive and would throw a party in the child's honor.¹⁷⁰

Recommended Resources for Episode 7

Peter S. Williams, "The Beginnings of History: Evidence from Genesis to Joseph." (2025)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jKsilBIhjV4&t=1848s>

YouTube Playlist, "Islam." www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLQhh3qcwVEWjhD84EB0jEG5PswCOcDsmJ

All Israel News Staff, "Evidence for the historical site of the Oaks of Mamre." <https://allisrael.com/evidence-for-the-historical-site-of-the-oaks-of-mamre>

Andy Bannister and Keith Small, "Allah vs. Yahweh / Tawhid vs. Trinity."

<https://www.bethinking.org/islam/allah-vs-yahweh-tawhid-vs-trinity>

Francis J. Beckwith, "The Trinity: A Short Introduction." www.answeringslam.org.uk/Trinity/beckwith.html

Jeffery E. Browder & Michael C. Rea, "Understanding the Trinity."

<https://andrewmbailey.com/trinity/Understanding%20the%20Trinity.pdf>

GotQuestions, "What is a theophany? What is a Christophany?" <https://www.gotquestions.org/theophany-Christophany.html>

Carol A. Hill, "Making Sense of the Numbers in Genesis" *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 55, no. 4 (2003) <https://www.asa3.org/ASA/PSCF/2003/PSCF12-03Hill.pdf>

E.W.G. Masterman, "Valley of Hebron" https://bibleatlas.org/valley_of_hebron.htm

Craig Olsen, "How Old was Father Abraham? Re-examining the Patriarchal Lifespans in Light of Archaeology." www.academia.edu/33972456/How_Old_was_Father_Abraham_Re-examining_the_Patriarchal_Lifespans_in_Light_of_Archaeology

Craig Olsen, "How Old was Father Abraham? Part 2 A Symbolic Interpretation of the Patriarchal Lifespans" file:///Users/peterwilliams/Downloads/How_Old_was_Father_Abraham_Part_2_A_Symb.pdf

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¹⁷⁰ See: Dennis Prager, *The Rational Bible: Genesis* (Washington, DC: Regnery Faith, 2019), 242.

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Episode 8: Unbearable

Q1: What is being celebrated at the start of this episode?

A1:

Short:

Weaning meant the child had survived early childhood. In a time of high infant mortality, this was a big milestone. So families celebrated it as a sign of life and hope.

Summary:

In the ancient world, weaning was a **major milestone** in a child's life. Infant mortality was high, and many children did not survive their earliest years. In Isaac's case, the celebration is especially significant because his birth had been **long-awaited and unexpected**. The weaning feast highlights that the promise was not only fulfilled in birth, but that the child was now **securely part of the future**.

Scholar:

The episode begins with the celebration of Isaac's weaning, which was a significant rite of passage in a cultural context that had a high infant mortality rate.

As the Jewish author Dennis Prager explains:

Abraham was a wealthy man who could afford to throw a great party in honor of his son's weaning. Today, parties are often made on the eighth day, at the time of a child's circumcision. But in the ancient world, with its very high rate of infant mortality, it was only later – at the time of weaning, for example – that parents felt confident the child would survive and would throw a party in the child's honor.¹⁷¹

Theologian John Goldingay adds that: "In traditional societies mothers nurse children for longer than is customary in the West, in 2 Macc. 7:27 a mother refers to having nursed her son for three years."¹⁷²

Q2: How old are Ishmael and Isaac in Episode Eight?

A2:

Short:

Isaac is about 2–3 years old.
Ishmael is around 15–17 years old.
There is roughly a 12–15 year age gap between them.

¹⁷¹ Dennis Prager, *The Rational Bible: Genesis* (Washington, DC: Regnery Faith, 2019), 242.

¹⁷² John Goldingay, *Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Pentateuch: Genesis* (Baker Academic, 2020), 331.

Summary:

In Episode 8, Isaac is likely around **2–3 years old**, while Ishmael is about **15–17 years old**. (Artistically Isaac is portrayed as 4-5 years old.)

This is based on the timeline in Genesis. Ishmael is said to be 13 when Abraham is 99, and Isaac is born when Abraham is 100. Even if Abraham's ages are symbolic, the **time gap between Ishmael's birth and Isaac's birth appears consistent**.

If Isaac is weaned at around age 2 or 3, and Ishmael is already a teenager by the time Isaac is born, then Ishmael would be in his mid-to-late teens during this episode.

Some readers think Ishmael must have been a small child because of how Genesis describes Hagar leaving with him. However, the Hebrew grammar suggests Abraham gave her provisions and sent the boy with her, **not that she carried him**.

So the narrative is best understood with Ishmael as a **teenager** and Isaac as a **young child**, highlighting both the age gap and the tension between them.

Scholar:

In Episode Eight Isaac is two or three years old and Ishmael is about sixteen years old.

According to Genesis 17:24-25: "Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. And Ishmael his son was thirteen years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin." (ESV.) Genesis 21:5 says that "Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him." (ESV.) It is worth noting that although there is good reason to think the ages ascribed to Abraham in Genesis 17:24 and 21:5 are honorific rather than literal,¹⁷³ it seems that the temporal gap between Abram's honorific age when Ishmael was circumcised (i.e. 99) and his honorific age when Isaac was born (i.e. 100) is meant literally. If we assume that Ishmael's given age when he was circumcised is literal (the Jewish concept of boys becoming adults at age thirteen is a late medieval one), and if we reckon that Isaac would have been weaned at age two or three,¹⁷⁴ we can calculate that Ishmael would have been between fifteen and seventeen years old when Isaac was weaned. That would mean that the age gap between Isaac and Ishmael was some twelve to fifteen years. Like many commentators, Jewish author Dennis Prager simplifies this to the conclusion that: "At this point, Ishmael was about sixteen years old and Isaac was about two."¹⁷⁵

Genesis 21:14 is sometimes thought to imply that Ishmael must have been a small child rather than a teenager, because it is read as saying that Abraham put him on Hagar's shoulder along with the provisions of bread and water. However, as the famous nineteenth century German Bible commentators Karl Keil and Franz Delitzsch explain:

¹⁷³ Carol A. Hill, "Making Sense of the Numbers in Genesis" *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 55, no. 4 (2003) <https://www.asa3.org/ASA/PSCF/2003/PSCF12-03Hill.pdf>; Craig Olsen, "How Old was Father Abraham? Re-examining the Patriarchal Lifespans in Light of Archaeology" www.academia.edu/33972456/How_Old_was_Father_Abraham_Re-examining_the_Patriarchal_Lifespans_in_Light_of_Archaeology; Craig Olsen, "How Old was Father Abraham? Part 2 A Symbolic Interpretation of the Patriarchal Lifespans" file:///Users/peterwilliams/Downloads/How_Old_was_Father_Abraham_Part_2_A_Symb.pdf.

¹⁷⁴ See: John Goldingay, *Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Pentateuch: Genesis* (Baker Academic, 2020), 331; Dennis Prager, *The Rational Bible: Genesis* (Washington, DC: Regnery Faith, 2019), 242.

¹⁷⁵ See: Dennis Prager, *The Rational Bible: Genesis* (Washington, DC: Regnery Faith, 2019), 242.

The words, “he took bread and a bottle of water and gave it to Hagar, putting it (שם participle, not perfect) upon her shoulder, and the boy, and sent her away,” do not state the Abraham gave her Ishmael also to carry. For ואת-הילד does not depend upon שם and ויתן because of the copula ו, but upon יקח, the leading verb of the sentence, although it is separated from it by the parenthesis “putting it upon her shoulder.” It does not follow from these words, therefore, that Ishmael is represented as a little child.¹⁷⁶

Hence the Literal Standard Version translates: “And Abraham rises early in the morning, and takes bread, and a bottle of water, and gives to Hagar (placing [it] on her shoulder), also the boy, and sends her out; and she goes on, and goes astray in the wilderness of Beer-Sheba . . .” The slightly less literal New American Standard Version avoids confusion by translating: “So Abraham rose early in the morning and took bread and a skin of water and gave them to Hagar, putting them on her shoulder, and gave her the boy, and sent her away. And she departed and wandered about in the wilderness of Beersheba.”

Q3: What was Ishmael “mocking” or just “playing” with Isaac in Genesis 21:9?

A3:

Short:

The word can mean play, but likely implies mocking.
It suggests behavior in poor taste rather than innocent play.
Some interpret it as a form of rivalry or hostility.

Summary:

The Hebrew word used in Genesis 21:9 is related to Isaac’s name and literally means “**to laugh.**” However, its meaning depends on context and can range from **playful behavior to mocking or inappropriate joking.**

In this case, many scholars believe Ishmael’s behavior was not innocent play, but something done in **bad taste**, possibly ridiculing or undermining Isaac.

The word is used elsewhere in the Bible with negative or even inappropriate connotations, which supports this interpretation. The New Testament also reflects this view, describing Ishmael’s behavior as a form of **persecution** (Galatians 4:29).

Some suggest Ishmael may have been acting in a way that challenged Isaac’s position, perhaps even **mocking his role as the promised child.**

Others think the behavior may reflect underlying tension within the household, possibly influenced by the strained relationship between Hagar and Sarah.

So while the word could mean “playing,” the context strongly suggests something more serious: **a form of mocking or rivalry rather than harmless play.**

Scholar:

Ishmael’s behaviour in Genesis 21:9 was probably a matter of bad taste “sporting,” rather than being a matter of good natured “play.”

¹⁷⁶ <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/kad/genesis/21.htm>.

Genesis 21: 9 says that “Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, mocking.” (WEB.) The final word of this sentence is a play on Isaac’s name that literally means “make to laugh.” Less literally, the word has a range of meaning that includes “play,” “jest” and “mock,” and which can even have a sexual connotation (see Genesis 39:14, Exodus 32:6).¹⁷⁷ Theologian John H. Walton suggests that the verb “describes something that is done ‘in bad taste’ (whether that be sexual, coarse, or in some other way inappropriate).”¹⁷⁸ In the New Testament, the apostle Paul (who was a Jewish scholar), described Ishmael’s behaviour as persecuting Isaac (Galatians 4:29).¹⁷⁹ Theologian John Goldingay comments that:

Ishmael . . . is making people laugh (at baby Isaac?) or is laughing uproariously; the verb is the one associated with Isaac’s name It’s as if Ishmael is pretending to be Isaac, the boy whose name links him with laughter, as if he’s still threatening to take the place that belongs to Isaac.¹⁸⁰

Perhaps Ishmael’s bad taste making fun somehow reflected antipathy on Hagar’s part towards Isaac, as children’s behaviour often gives an unfiltered window into the words and/or actions of adults close to them.

Q4: Why did Sarah want Abraham to send away Hagar and Ishmael?

A4:

Short:

Sarah wanted to protect Isaac’s inheritance.

Ishmael was a potential rival as Abraham’s first son.

Her decision likely mixed fear, tension, and cultural norms.

Summary:

Sarah’s decision likely came from a **combination of motives**, but the clearest one is protecting Isaac’s position as heir.

In the ancient Near East, Ishmael, as Abraham’s first son, could have a legitimate claim to inheritance. Laws from that time show that sons of servant women could share in the family estate, especially if recognized by the father.

After Isaac’s weaning, Sarah may have realized that **Isaac now had a real future**, and therefore a real competitor. Ishmael’s behavior toward Isaac may have reinforced her concern, suggesting tension or rivalry.

Her request to send Hagar and Ishmael away would effectively remove that threat, ensuring that **Isaac alone would inherit**.

At the same time, this action was not outside cultural norms. It could be understood as a form of **legal separation**, granting Hagar and her son freedom while removing their claim to the household.

¹⁷⁷ See: Dennis Prager, *The Rational Bible: Genesis* (Washington, DC: Regnery Faith, 2019), 242.

¹⁷⁸ John H. Walton, *Genesis: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 478 (and see 496).

¹⁷⁹ On Galatians 4:29 see Charles B. Cousar, *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Galatians* (Louisville, Kentucky: WJK, 2012), 102-111.

¹⁸⁰ John Goldingay, *Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Pentateuch: Genesis* (Baker Academic, 2020), 331-332.

Abraham's distress shows that, even if culturally acceptable, the situation was **personally painful and morally complex**.

So Sarah's actions reflect a mix of **maternal protection, social custom, and household tension**, rather than a simple or purely noble motive.

Scholar:

Sarah may have had a mixture of motives, but she clearly wanted to protect the inheritance of her son Isaac.

There may be a combination of factors at work behind Sarah's desire to have Abraham send away Hagar and Ishmael. Perhaps Ishmael's mocking play in Genesis 21:9 somehow reflected antipathy on Hagar's part towards Isaac, as children's behaviour often gives an unfiltered window into the words and/or actions of adults close to them. According to American Jewish author Dennis Prager, "now that Isaac has survived past the crucial age of weaning, Sarah realized he will have competition for his inheritance, and she sought to eliminate it."¹⁸¹ Jewish scholar Nahum M. Sarna, Emeritus Professor of Biblical Studies at Brandeis University, comments that:

According to the laws of Hammurabi, the sons of a slave-wife share the inheritance equally with the sons of the free woman, provided the father, at his own discretion, legitimates them. Should he not recognize them as his sons, the slave and her children are given their freedom. We do not know whether legitimation would be required when the wife herself supplied the slave-girl to provide a son and heir, but at any rate, the status and rights of such a son would certainly not have been inferior to those of an ordinary slave; and we have already seen that Abraham had undoubtedly recognized Ishmael as his son. The laws of Lipit-Ishtar, about one hundred and fifty years earlier than Hammurabi, stipulate that the offspring of a slave-wife relinquish their inheritance rights in return for their freedom. In the light of the foregoing we may safely assume that Ishmael, as the legitimated son of Abraham, was entitled to his share of the inheritance.¹⁸²

Consequently, Sarna argues that:

What Sarah demanded was that Hagar and her son be given their freedom, thereby renouncing all claim to a share of the family estate. This being the case, the entire episode can be seen as having taken place according to the social custom and legal procedure of the times. Abraham's distress would then not be over the legality of the act, which was not in question, but because of both fatherly love and moral considerations.¹⁸³

According to theologian John H. Walton:

¹⁸¹ See: Dennis Prager, *The Rational Bible: Genesis* (Washington, DC: Regnery Faith, 2019), 242.

¹⁸² N.M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis Through Rabbinic Tradition and Modern Scholarship (The Heritage of Biblical Israel)* (The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 2014), 154.

¹⁸³ N.M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis Through Rabbinic Tradition and Modern Scholarship (The Heritage of Biblical Israel)* (The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 2014), 154.

A woman of Hagar's status could be expelled, but not by either husband or wife alone, and she could not be sold. Her son had the status of legitimate heir, and she would generally have to be divorced. By sending Hagar away, both Sarah and Abraham's claims are being dissolved. This means that she is being given her freedom as well as being divorced. The verb in 21:14 ("send her away") is the verb for divorce . . .¹⁸⁴

While the verb for "send her away" is not a technical term for "divorce," it is a term used with this meaning (indeed, Jewish tradition says that Abraham gave Hagar a certificate of divorce).¹⁸⁵

Professor Rabbi Reuven Firestone adds the hopeful notes that:

The verses announcing Abraham's death [Genesis 25:9] strike an optimistic chord about the relationship between the brothers Later we are told that Isaac's son Esau married Ishmael's daughter (Gen 28:9, 36:3), further implying that relations were normalized between the brothers and their families.¹⁸⁶

Q5: Why did God tell Abraham to listen to Sarah on this matter? Does God have something against Hagar and Ishmael?

A5:

Short:

God supports the outcome, not necessarily Sarah's motives. Isaac is chosen for the covenant, but Ishmael is also blessed. God cares for both, not just one.

Summary:

God tells Abraham to listen to Sarah not because her motives are fully right, but because her request aligns with **His larger plan**.

In Genesis, Isaac is chosen as the one through whom the covenant will continue. Sarah is focused on inheritance and protecting her son, but God's concern is broader: the unfolding of a **historical and spiritual purpose**.

This does not mean God is against Hagar or Ishmael. In fact, the text emphasizes the opposite. God had already promised that Ishmael would become a **great nation**, and later He intervenes directly to protect and provide for Hagar and her son.

So there is a distinction:

- Isaac is chosen for the **covenant line**.
- Ishmael is still **blessed and cared for**.

Abraham's distress shows the human cost of the situation, and God's response shows both **justice and compassion**.

The story also reflects a recurring biblical pattern: the chosen line is not always the firstborn, highlighting that God's purposes are not based on human expectations.

¹⁸⁴ John H. Walton, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), 95.

¹⁸⁵ See: John Goldingay, *Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Pentateuch: Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020), 334.

¹⁸⁶ Reuven Firestone, "Abraham Visits Ishmael and His Wives: Between Jewish and Islamic Tradition." <https://www.thetorah.com/article/abraham-visits-ishmael-and-his-wives-between-jewish-and-islamic-tradition>.

Scholar:

God told Abraham to listen to Sarah because doing so facilitated His providential plan, not because God endorsed Sarah's motives or because He has anything against Hagar and Ishmael.

Jewish author Dennis Prager suggests that:

God told Abraham to listen to Sarah because she was right, even though her reasoning was ignoble. Though Sarah's intent was to banish Ishmael to safeguard her son's inheritance, God nevertheless supported her plan because it coincided with His ultimate purpose: that Isaac carries on Abraham's mission.¹⁸⁷

He adds:

It is possible that Sarah was also concerned with Isaac's divine destiny, since she heard the words of the three angels heralding his birth (Genesis 18:10). Still, it is disquieting that she . . . phrased her demand solely in terms of inheritance.¹⁸⁸

Indeed, Jewish scholar Nahum M. Sarna suggests that readers of Genesis should:

Note the delicate shift from Sarah's motivation to God's. The matriarch was solely interested in safeguarding the material patrimony of her son. God is concerned with Abraham's posterity, with the fulfillment of the divine plan of history.¹⁸⁹

As theologian John Goldingay suggests, maybe "God appreciates the opportunity to give expression to the important principle that you don't come first just because you're born first (cf. Cain and Able, Esau and Jacob, Manasseh and Ephraim)."¹⁹⁰

Theologian Tammi J. Schneider notes that in the Genesis narrative: "The Deity, all along, has nothing against Ishmael, and even from the announcement of his birth has intended a role for him (16:11-12)."¹⁹¹ Although God's covenant promises to Abraham and Sarah flow through Isaac, God also promises to bless Ishmael "and make him fertile and numerous; he shall be the father of twelve chieftains, and the Deity will make Ishmael a great nation (17:20; fulfilled 25:12-18)."¹⁹²

When Hagar (with Ishmael) is in the arid Negev region (a region which nevertheless contains low vegetation, including brush and dwarf bushes),¹⁹³ she receives a second visitation from God, who "not only comforts her with a promise (21:18) but provides for her

¹⁸⁷ Dennis Prager, *The Rational Bible: Genesis* (Washington, DC: Regnery Faith, 2019), 243-244.

¹⁸⁸ Dennis Prager, *The Rational Bible: Genesis* (Washington, DC: Regnery Faith, 2019), 244.

¹⁸⁹ N.M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis Through Rabbinic Tradition and Modern Scholarship (The Heritage of Biblical Israel)* (The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 2014), 155.

¹⁹⁰ John Goldingay, *Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Pentateuch: Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020), 333.

¹⁹¹ Tammi J. Schneider, *Sarah: Mother of Nations* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 59.

¹⁹² Tammi J. Schneider, *Sarah: Mother of Nations* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 59.

¹⁹³ See: John H. Walton, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), 96; *ESV Archaeology Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 42.

needs (21:19). Few individuals in the Bible are favoured with two theophanies and can claim to have been rescued by receiving divine instruction.”¹⁹⁴

Professor Rabbi Reuven Firestone adds the happy note that:

The verses announcing Abraham’s death [Genesis 25:9] strike an optimistic chord about the relationship between the brothers Later we are told that Isaac’s son Esau married Ishmael’s daughter (Gen 28:9, 36:3), further implying that relations were normalized between the brothers and their families.¹⁹⁵

As Christian minister Rick Richter asks:

Might not Abraham’s deep love for his two sons and his concern for Ishmael as well as for Isaac, and the fact that Isaac and Ishmael came together to bury their father (see Gen. 25:9), be an inspiration for understanding between Jews and Arabs today?¹⁹⁶

Q6: Why don’t Abraham, Hagar and Ishmael travel together to Mecca in Episode Eight?

A6:

Short:

The biblical account places Hagar and Ishmael in the region of Beersheba, not Mecca. The connection to Mecca comes from later Islamic tradition. The episode follows the earlier Genesis narrative.

Summary:

In Genesis 21:14, Hagar and Ishmael are sent into the wilderness of Beersheba, in the southern Levant. This fits with the wider geographical setting of Abraham’s life, which takes place between Mesopotamia, Canaan, and Egypt.

Islamic tradition, developed later, teaches that Abraham took Hagar and Ishmael to Mecca.

In that tradition, the Zamzam well is miraculously provided, and Abraham later returns to build the Ka’ba with Ishmael.

However, the Qur’an itself does not clearly describe this journey or explain how Abraham would have traveled between these regions.

The detailed Mecca narrative comes mainly from later Islamic sources such as hadith and tafsir.

From a historical perspective, there is no clear evidence placing Abraham in Mecca. His movements in Genesis are consistently located within the Near East.

A journey to Mecca would involve a long desert crossing not mentioned in the earlier texts.

Additionally, Mecca is not clearly attested in early archaeological or literary sources from the time of Abraham.

¹⁹⁴ John H. Walton, *Genesis: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 496.

¹⁹⁵ Reuven Firestone, “Abraham Visits Ishmael and His Wives: Between Jewish and Islamic Tradition” <https://www.thetorah.com/article/abraham-visits-ishmael-and-his-wives-between-jewish-and-islamic-tradition>.

¹⁹⁶ R. Richter, *Comparing the Qur'an and the Bible: What They Really Say about Jesus, Jihad, and More* [Kindle Android version, 2011], 30.

Other cities in the region are well documented, but Mecca appears later in the historical record.

Some scholars have also noted that early mosque directions do not always align with Mecca, though this point is debated.

In summary, the Genesis account and the later Islamic tradition present different locations for this event. The episode follows the earlier biblical narrative, placing Hagar and Ishmael in the region of Beersheba rather than Mecca.

Scholar:

The Islamic tradition associating Abraham and Ishmael with Mecca (Makkah) is contradicted by the older narrative in Genesis, and is disconfirmed by all of the available archaeological, cartographic and independent literary historical evidence concerning Mecca.

Professor Reuven Firestone, President of the International Qur'anic Studies Association, observes that:

While some Qur'anic texts such as Suras 11:69-76 and 15:51-60 refer to Abraham in Syria and others such as 2:125-127, 3:97, 14:37 and 22:26 refer to him in Mecca, the Qur'an itself does not explain how he made the transition.¹⁹⁷

Competing Islamic traditions give different accounts of how this transition took place. According to the most popular tradition, associated with Abdallah Ibn Abbas (d. 687),¹⁹⁸ Abraham did not send Hagar and Ishmael away to "the Wilderness of Beersheba" (Genesis 21:14) in the Negev region of southern Israel,¹⁹⁹ but personally *took* them to Mecca, where he left them. The Genesis narrative about an angel revealing of a providentially handy well to Hagar after the water-skin provided by Abraham ran out (see Genesis 21:15-19) is transformed by this Islamic tradition into an angel creating the Zamzam well in Mecca.²⁰⁰ Abraham is then said to have rebuilt the Ka'ba with Ishmael during a later visit to Mecca. However, as Peter Townsend comments:

Abraham's recorded movements covered an arc from Mesopotamia to Canaan (roughly equivalent to the area covered by the modern state of Israel) and Egypt. To go from there to the middle of Arabia would require a 750-mile trip, mostly through empty desert and we are entitled to ask why on earth Abraham undertook such a

¹⁹⁷ Reuven Firestone, "Abraham's Journey to Mecca in Islamic Exegesis: A Form-Critical Study of a Tradition" *Studia Islamica*, No. 76 (1992), 12, https://www.academia.edu/4069216/Abrahams_Journey_to_Mecca_in_Islamic_Exegesis_A_Form_Critical_Study_of_a_Tradition.

¹⁹⁸ See: Reuven Firestone, "Abraham's Journey to Mecca in Islamic Exegesis: A Form-Critical Study of a Tradition." *Studia Islamica*, No. 76 (1992), 16-20, https://www.academia.edu/4069216/Abrahams_Journey_to_Mecca_in_Islamic_Exegesis_A_Form_Critical_Study_of_a_Tradition.

¹⁹⁹ See: Samuel McKoy and George Haddad, "Uncovering the Bible's Buried Cities: Beersheba." (2023) <https://armstronginstitute.org/873-uncovering-the-bibles-buried-cities-beersheba>.

²⁰⁰ See: YouTube Playlist, "Zamzam Well & Islam." https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLQhh3qcwVEWgbXNtKVO0QLrXwm_R49JP1&si=cyuCxDX8WRparWC.

journey and why this epic expedition did not leave any trace on the earliest records dealing with his life.²⁰¹

Islamic tradition “holds that Muhammad led prayers towards Jerusalem until the 16th or 17th month after his migration from Mecca to Medina [in 622 CE], when Allah directed him to instead turn towards the Kaaba in Mecca”²⁰² (see Sura 2:144, 149-50):

Yet the earliest archaeological evidence from mosques built at the beginning of the 8th century suggests their sanctuary was located a long way north of Mecca The Qibla of the first mosque in Kufa, Iraq, constructed in 670 AD, pointed west instead of due south. Likewise, floor plans from two later Umayyad (650-750 AD) mosques in Iraq, demonstrate their Qiblas were oriented too far north. The Wasit mosque is off by 33 degrees, the Baghdad mosque by 30 degrees. The ‘Amr b. al ‘As mosque near Cairo, again pointed too far north . . . Jacob of Odessa . . . was a contemporary eye-witness writing in Egypt around 705 AD. His letter in the British Museum maintains the “Mahgraye” (Greek term for Arabs) in Egypt prayed facing east, towards their Ka’ba, the place of their patriarchal origin - in other words towards Palestine, not Mecca.²⁰³

Peter Harremoës, a mathematician who is also trained in archaeology, explains that:

Typically a mosque has a long qibla wall with a mihrab, a prayer niche, in the middle and the Muslims are praying facing the qibla wall Many early mosques have a qibla that appear to be inconsistent with a direction towards Mecca in Saudi Arabia.²⁰⁴

Harremoës considers the “theory is that the early Muslims did not know the exact direction towards Mecca.”²⁰⁵ However, he argues that “Given their ability to navigate through the desert this is seems less likely”²⁰⁶ than that these qibla are deliberately facing an alternative location or locations. In a journal article on this very subject, Professor Walter R. Schumm notes that:

The point of contention is not that some early mosques do not appear to point toward the city of Mecca (most scholars seem to agree on that) but on how to explain that issue, especially with respect to technological limitations at that earlier time.²⁰⁷

²⁰¹ Peter Townsend, *The Mecca Mystery: Probing the Black Hole at the Heart of Muslim History* [Kindle Android version, 2018], location 1308. See also: Michael L. Muluk, “The Abrahamic Legacy: Beersheba or Mecca.” <https://medium.com/@michaelmuluk/the-abrahamic-legacy-beersheba-or-mecca-5eb07060e007>.

²⁰² Wikipedia, “Dome of the Rock.” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dome_of_the_Rock.

²⁰³ “The Archeological Evidence against Islam - Shaking the Strongholds (2).” *Isa Masih*, Summer 1999, <https://www.cmf.org.uk/resources/publications/content/?context=article&id=1419>.

²⁰⁴ Peter Harremoës, “Rate Distortion Theory for Descriptive Statistics.” *Entropy* 25, no. 3 (2023), https://nabataea.net/media/01explore/08FoundingIslam/Rate_Distortion_Theory_for_Descriptive_Statistics.pdf.

²⁰⁵ Peter Harremoës, “Rate Distortion Theory for Descriptive Statistics.” *Entropy* 25, no. 3 (2023), https://nabataea.net/media/01explore/08FoundingIslam/Rate_Distortion_Theory_for_Descriptive_Statistics.pdf.

²⁰⁶ Peter Harremoës, “Rate Distortion Theory for Descriptive Statistics.” *Entropy* 25, no. 3 (2023), https://nabataea.net/media/01explore/08FoundingIslam/Rate_Distortion_Theory_for_Descriptive_Statistics.pdf.

²⁰⁷ Walter R. Schumm, “How Accurately Could Early (622-900 C.E.) Muslims Determine the Direction of Prayers (Qibla)?” *Religions* 11: 102 (2020), 1-16, <https://nabataea.net/media/01explore/08FoundingIslam/religions-11-00102-v2.pdf>.

Schumm's own analysis suggests: "that most mosques in the first two centuries of Islam could have had a fairly high degree of qibla accuracy . . ." ²⁰⁸ As the abstract of a paper by Schumann and Zvi Goldstein published in the *Open Access Journal of Archaeology & Anthropology* observes:

Dan Gibson has argued that the first holy city of Islam was Petra. David King has disputed Gibson's conclusions. Using data from Gibson's website, the two theories are tested and contrasted statistically. While King's theory works well for most mosques and other sites after 900 C.E., Gibson's theory seems to work well for sites prior to 900 C.E., especially for sites constructed before 725 C.E. In summary, many early mosques and related structures do appear to face Petra geographically rather than towards Mecca. However, later structures may be related to today's Mecca in a variety of ways other than simple geographical alignment. ²⁰⁹

There is some dispute about exactly where some of the early (seventh-early eighth century CE) qibla's are facing (e.g. some may face Jerusalem), and as to why they are facing where they do, but the key point is that long after Islamic tradition says they are supposed to face towards the Kaaba in Mecca, none do. ²¹⁰ In fact, the first qibla facing Mecca has been dated to 727 CE! ²¹¹

Harremoës uses statistics based on Gibson's data to highlight a "descriptive confidence region" of early qibla's that is "closely confined around the ancient city of Petra," ²¹² as well as a secondary "descriptive confidence region" over the Ruwafa temple in northern Arabia. Harremoës reaches the "temporary conclusion that early Muslims [outside of a few outliers] used Petra as qibla." ²¹³ Indeed, according to Harremoës: "There are a lot of indications that Islam has its origin in north western Arabia rather than in the area around Mecca . . ." ²¹⁴

Professor of religious studies Stephen J. Shoemaker, a specialist on the beginnings of Islam, comments that:

²⁰⁸ Walter R. Schumm, "How Accurately Could Early (622-900 C.E.) Muslims Determine the Direction of Prayers (Qibla)?" *Religions* 11: 102 (2020), 1-16, <https://nabataea.net/media/01explore/08FoundingIslam/religions-11-00102-v2.pdf>.

²⁰⁹ Walter R. Schumm and Zvi Goldstein, "A Statistical Assessment of Early Islamic History and the Qibla: Comparing the Theories of David King and Dan Gibson." *Open Access Journal of Archaeology & Anthropology*, Volume 3 - Issue 1 (2021),

<https://nabataea.net/media/01explore/08FoundingIslam/SchummJuly2021.pdf>. See also: Dan Gibson et al, *Let the Stones Speak: Archaeology Challenges Islam* (Canbooks, 2023), https://www.academia.edu/109022281/Archaeology_Challenges_Islam.

²¹⁰ See: Islamic Origins, "A Live Stream on MECCA with Chris, Jay & Mel, yet Muslims can't respond!" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xsjFgYGa8ro&list=PLQhh3qcvVEWiVEG4kjvd_6N44cxBRX2i6&index=51&t=1776s, 30:02-43:30.

²¹¹ See: Islamic Origins, "A Live Stream on MECCA with Chris, Jay & Mel, yet Muslims can't respond!" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xsjFgYGa8ro&list=PLQhh3qcvVEWiVEG4kjvd_6N44cxBRX2i6&index=51&t=1776s, 34:15-38:23.

²¹² Peter Harremoës, "Rate Distortion Theory for Descriptive Statistics." *Entropy* 25, no. 3 (2023), https://nabataea.net/media/01explore/08FoundingIslam/Rate_Distortion_Theory_for_Descriptive_Statistics.pdf.

²¹³ Peter Harremoës, "Rate Distortion Theory for Descriptive Statistics." *Entropy* 25, no. 3 (2023), https://nabataea.net/media/01explore/08FoundingIslam/Rate_Distortion_Theory_for_Descriptive_Statistics.pdf.

²¹⁴ Peter Harremoës, "Rate Distortion Theory for Descriptive Statistics." *Entropy* 25, no. 3 (2023), https://nabataea.net/media/01explore/08FoundingIslam/Rate_Distortion_Theory_for_Descriptive_Statistics.pdf. See also: Mark Duire, "Problems With The Qur'an Origin Story." In *Understanding & Answering Islam*, edited by Ruth J. Nicholls (Melbourne: Melbourne School of Theology Press, 2018), 53-58.

The Islamic historical tradition claims to know a lot about pre-Islamic Mecca. Yet scholars of early Islam have long recognised that these much later memories of Muhammad's Mecca are not historically reliable and cannot be taken at face value. These canonical narratives about the beginnings of Islam are instead pious reminiscences, which have little if any connection with the actual events of the seventh century or the history of ancient Arabia.²¹⁵

For example:

The quaranic community is described as being busy with various forms of agriculture including growing crops and tending sheep, goats, cattle, camels, horses, mules and donkeys, taking them out to pasture and bringing them back each day. The Messenger keeps telling his audience to contemplate their crops, orchards and livestock, and consider the goodness of Allah to them None of this makes any sense in Mecca or Medina. Furthermore, in the Qur'an the Messenger is criticized by his opponents for not having a garden. When he was preaching about the garden that will come in the next life, some of his audience mocked him for not even owning a garden here on earth. Such a charge could only make sense in a context where cultivation of gardens was possible, but Mecca is not such a place.²¹⁶

Indeed, the Islamic portrait of Mecca simply isn't reflected in the historical and archaeological evidence, as one would expect it to be if that portrait was accurate:²¹⁷

According to the Qur'an, Mecca was the first and most important city in the world. Adam placed the black stone in the original Ka'ba (sanctuary) there, while Abraham and Ishmael rebuilt the Meccan Ka'ba centuries later (Sura 2:125-127). Mecca was allegedly the centre of Arabian trading routes before Muhammad's time. Yet there is no archeological corroboration for this Mecca is certainly not on the natural overland trade routes - it is a barren valley requiring a one hundred mile detour.²¹⁸

Peter Townsend reports that "this supposedly great historical city, indeed 'the mother of all cities', is entirely absent from the historical record until long after the advent of Islam."²¹⁹ He also notes that:

²¹⁵ Stephen J. Shoemaker, "The Making of Mecca." *The Spectator* (June 2023)

<https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/the-making-of-mecca/>.

²¹⁶ Mark Duire, "Problems With The Qur'an Origin Story." In *Understanding & Answering Islam*, edited by Ruth J. Nicholls (Melbourne: Melbourne School of Theology Press, 2018), 57.

²¹⁷ See: YouTube Playlist, "Mecca & Islam."

[https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLQhh3qcwVEWiVEG4kjvd_6N44cxBRX2i6](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLQhh3qcwVEWiVEG4kjvd_6N44cxBRX2i6;);

Rafat Amari, *Islam in Light of History* (Religion Research Institute, 2004)

<https://ia801001.us.archive.org/20/items/IslamInLightOfHistoryDrRafatAmari/Islam%20in%20Light%20of%20History%20-Dr%20Rafat%20Amari.pdf>; Dan Gibson et al, *Let the Stones Speak: Archaeology Challenges Islam*

(Canbooks, 2023), https://www.academia.edu/109022281/Archaeology_Challenges_Islam; Peter

Townsend, *The Mecca Mystery: Probing the Black Hole at the Heart of Muslim History* [Kindle Android version, 2018].

²¹⁸ "The Archeological Evidence against Islam - Shaking the Strongholds (2)." *Isa Masih*, Summer 1999,

<https://www.cmf.org.uk/resources/publications/content/?context=article&id=1419>. See also: PfanderFilms,

"Mecca was NOT the Center of Trade!" <https://youtu.be/lrsRyoCF6Jo?si=zm50xfk-sl9dfS7z>; PfanderFilms,

"Mecca Was No Trade City!" <https://youtu.be/butHOIQW4gs?si=jmfha82Uz60Xpa8q>.

²¹⁹ Peter Townsend, *Questioning Islam: Tough Questions & Honest Answers About the Muslim Religion* (Amazon, 2014), 39.

The first map on which Mecca appears dates from approximately 900 CE or about 300 years after Muhammad is supposed to have lived there Mecca is entirely absent from the ancient cartographic record until long after the advent of Islam.²²⁰

This disconfirming data cannot be dismissed as an invalid argument from ignorance, for an absence of evidence does count as evidence against a hypothesis *when that evidence is to be expected if the hypothesis in question were true*. As Townsend argues:

detailed historical records for many other towns and cities dotted up and down the Arabian Peninsula. These include Yathrib (later Medina, “second city” of Islam), Sana’a and Petra. We can even . . . point to detailed sources confirming the pre-Islamic existence of the city of Ta’if. At 70 miles from Islam’s holy city, Ta’if is practically on modern Mecca’s doorstep. It is presented in the Islamic record as very much in the shadow of its much more illustrious neighbor. We would be justified in thinking, considering this, that there would be plenty of sources from which to reconstruct the pre-Islamic history of Mecca with scanty evidence for Ta’if. Instead we have much to draw upon for Ta’if and precisely nothing for Mecca If Mecca existed in ancient times, the scribes and kings of Arabia and Northeast Africa would have noticed. They clearly did not. It is entirely absent from the historical record and the implications of this should be abundantly obvious. To draw an analogy, the silence of the Arabian documentary and archaeological record regarding Mecca would be akin to studying the early medieval records of Naples, Florence, Venice, Pisa, Genoa and Milan and not finding even a single mention of the city of Rome. It simply beggars belief that Mecca could have existed as the most important city of mid-Arabia and then not make it into any kind of historical record When we study the inscriptions, documents and archaeological evidence produced by Mecca’s Arab near-neighbors and the imperial powers that dominated the ancient Near-East (Babylonian, Assyrian, Persian and Roman), we do not find a single reference to Mecca. This despite the fact that we can produce historical evidence trails for even relatively insignificant Arabian cities.²²¹

Q7: Wasn’t it Ishmael, rather than Isaac, that was nearly sacrificed by Abraham?

A7:

Short:

Genesis clearly identifies Isaac as the son Abraham was told to sacrifice. The Qur’an does not name the son, and early Muslim scholars disagreed. The episode follows the biblical account, where Isaac is the son of promise.

Summary:

In Genesis 22:2, God explicitly tells Abraham to sacrifice “your son, your only son Isaac.” The biblical text leaves no ambiguity about which son is meant.

²²⁰ Peter Townsend, *Questioning Islam: Tough Questions & Honest Answers About the Muslim Religion* (Amazon, 2014), 39. See also: Al Fadi and Jay Smith, “They’ve Lost Mecca, as it’s not on ANY ancient Maps!” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=77PQKbkRfpo>.

²²¹ Peter Townsend, *The Mecca Mystery: Probing the Black Hole at the Heart of Muslim History* [Kindle Android version, 2018], location 1013.

In the Qur'an (Surah 37:102), the son is not named. Because of this, later Islamic tradition came to identify the son as Ishmael.

However, early Muslim commentators were not in agreement. Some, including the historian Al-Tabari, identified the son as Isaac. Within Surah 37 itself, the narrative mentions the "good news" of a son and later explicitly refers to Isaac. This has led some scholars to conclude that Isaac fits the flow of the passage.

The claim that the biblical text was corrupted to replace Ishmael with Isaac is not supported by manuscript evidence. All existing versions of Genesis consistently name Isaac.

The phrase "only son" in Genesis does not deny Ishmael's existence. Rather, it highlights Isaac's unique role as the covenant son. The Hebrew word "yachid" can mean "unique" or "special," not strictly "only one in existence." Similarly, the New Testament describes Isaac as Abraham's "one and only" son in terms of promise.

So while Islamic tradition later identifies Ishmael, the earlier biblical account consistently points to Isaac. The episode follows that earlier textual tradition.

Scholar:

Despite claims to the contrary by some Muslims, the son who was almost sacrificed by Abraham was Isaac.

The Qur'an features the following conversation between Abraham and an un-named son:

. . . he said, "O My son, I see in a dream that I am sacrificing you; see what you think." He said, "O my Father, do as you are commanded; you will find me, God willing, one of the steadfast." (Sura 37:102.)²²²

Many Muslims believe the son in this exchange is Ishmael, and consequently assume (without any textual evidence) that Jewish scribes corrupted the original text of Genesis, which states that Isaac is the nearly sacrificed son of Abraham.²²³ However, "the earliest Islamic commentators were divided over which son was intended."²²⁴

After discussing Abraham leaving behind idol worship, Surah 37 gives its own account of the narrative in Genesis 22:

99. He [i.e. Abraham] said, "I am going towards my Lord, and He will guide me."

100. "My Lord, give me one of the righteous."

101. So We gave him good news of a clement boy.

102. Then, when he was old enough to accompany him, he said, "O My son, I see in a dream that I am sacrificing you; see what you think." He said, "O my Father, do as you are commanded; you will find me, Allah willing, one of the steadfast."

103. Then, when they had submitted, and he put his forehead down.

²²² <https://m.clearQur'an.com/037.html>.

²²³ See: Justin Rodgers, "The Integrity of the Biblical Text (Part 3): Text of the Old Testament" (2022) <https://apologeticspress.org/the-integrity-of-the-biblical-text-part-3-text-of-the-old-testament/>; Ellis R. Brotzman and Eric J. Tully, *Old Testament Textual Criticism: A Practical Introduction* (Baker Academic, 2016); Josh McDowell & Sean McDowell, *Evidence That Demands A Verdict* (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, 2017), Chapter Four; Dan Wickwire, *Has The Bible Been Changed? The Reliability Of The Scriptures According To Jewish, Christian, And Islamic Sources* (Aneko Press, 2016).

²²⁴ M.A. Bennett, *The Qur'an and the Christian* [Kindle Android version, 2022], 56. See: Sam Shamoun, "Abraham and the Child of Sacrifice - Isaac or Ishmael?" <https://www.answering-islam.org/Shamoun/sacrifice.htm>.

104. We called out to him, “O Abraham!
105. You have fulfilled the vision.” Thus We reward the doers of good.
106. This was certainly an evident test.
107. And We redeemed him with a great sacrifice.
108. And We left with him for later generations.
109. Peace be upon Abraham.
110. Thus We reward the doers of good.
111. He was one of Our believing servants.
112. And We gave him good news of Isaac, a prophet, one of the righteous.
113. And We blessed him, and Isaac. But among their descendants are some who are righteous, and some who are clearly unjust to themselves.²²⁵

The “good news” of a child to be given by God to Abraham in verse 101 is picked up by verse 112’s reference back to “good news of Isaac . . .” Consequently, contemporary Islamic historian Al-Tabari argues that the son in Genesis 22 is indeed Isaac.²²⁶

The description of Isaac as Abraham’s “only son” in Genesis 22:2 is not contradicted by the existence of Ishmael. In the first place, it may simply reflect that fact that, since Abraham sent away Ishmael with Hagar, Isaac is the only son left to Abraham. Then again, the Hebrew used for “only” in Genesis 22:2 is *yachiyd*, which has a range of meanings, including “‘unique’ or ‘only begotten’ (special). So the Hebrew clarifies that Isaac is indeed the special, unique, only begotten son of Abraham. Isaac was the son of promise.”²²⁷ As Norman L. Geisler and Thomas Howe note: “the phrase ‘only son’ may be equivalent to . . . a special son.”²²⁸ Indeed, in stating that “By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered Isaac - he who had received the promises was about to offer his unique son in sacrifice,” the New Testament book of Hebrews (11:17) uses the Greek term *monogenē*, a word traditionally translated as “only begotten” and that literally means “one (*monos*) of a class, *genos*” (the *only* of its kind)²²⁹ (see also John 1:18²³⁰). Hence, the International Standard Version translation of Genesis 22:2 reads: “God said, ‘Please take your son, your unique son whom you love – Isaac - and go to the land of Moriah.’” Isaac was certainly a unique, one-of-a-kind son of Abraham, being the only son miraculously conceived with his first wife Sarah, and being the subject of God’s covenant with Abraham.²³¹

²²⁵ <https://m.clearQur'an.com/037.html>.

²²⁶ See: Sam Shamoun, “Abraham and the Child of Sacrifice - Isaac or Ishmael?” <https://www.answering-islam.org/Shamoun/sacrifice.htm>.

²²⁷ Bodie Hodge, “My Two Sons” <https://answersingenesis.org/bible-characters/contradictions-my-two-sons/>.

²²⁸ Norman L. Geisler and Thomas Howe, “Genesis 22:2.” In *When Critics Ask: A Popular Handbook on Bible Difficulties* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1992), [https://defendinginerrancy.com/bible-solutions/Genesis_22.2_\(2\).php](https://defendinginerrancy.com/bible-solutions/Genesis_22.2_(2).php).

²²⁹ Bodie Hodge, “My Two Sons.” <https://answersingenesis.org/bible-characters/contradictions-my-two-sons/>.

²³⁰ <https://biblehub.com/interlinear/john/1-18.htm>.

²³¹ See: Sam Shamoun, “Reply to Mohamed Ghounem’s: Was Isaac or Ishmael to be sacrificed?” <https://www.answering-islam.de/Responses/Ghounem/isaac.htm>.

Q8: Why did God ask Abraham to offer up Isaac as a sacrifice?

A8:

Short:

God tested Abraham to reveal and strengthen his faith, not to gain new knowledge as God already knows all things..

Christians also see it as a foreshadowing of Jesus.

Summary:

In Genesis 22, God tests Abraham, but not to learn something new. Rather, the test reveals and strengthens Abraham's faith.

As Nahum Sarna explains, the story has a didactic purpose for people, not for God. It shows what genuine trust in God looks like under extreme pressure.

Stephen Coleman notes that the test proves the reality of Abraham's faith. It demonstrates that Abraham trusts God's promise, even when it seems contradictory.

Fr. Vincent Serpa adds that the test also reveals Abraham's faith to himself. Through the trial, Abraham discovers the depth of his own trust in God.

Importantly, God never intended Isaac to die. The intervention at the last moment shows that this was always a test, not a command meant to be completed.

The story also firmly rejects human sacrifice. Instead, God provides a substitute, a ram in place of Isaac.

From a Christian perspective, the event carries additional meaning. It is seen as a form of enacted prophecy. There are parallels between Isaac and Jesus. Both are beloved sons, both carry the wood for their sacrifice, and both willingly follow their father. In both cases, God provides the sacrifice. In Genesis, it is a ram, while in the New Testament, Jesus is called "the Lamb of God." So the story functions on two levels: a test of faith in its original context, and a foreshadowing of a greater sacrifice in later interpretation.

Scholar:

God put Abraham through this "trial" in order to strengthen and demonstrate his trust in God, and to give an enacted prophecy about Jesus.

In the first place, as Jewish scholar Nahum M. Sarna writes:

When "God put Abraham to the test" it was obviously not a trial, the outcome of which was meant to add to the sum of God's knowledge. Such an idea would obviously be incompatible with the biblical concept of the omniscience of God. If the story is included in biblical literature it is doubtless due to its didactic value for man.²³²

As Stephen M. Coleman observes:

²³² N.M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis (The Heritage of Biblical Israel)* [Kindle Android version, 2014], 160.

God did not test Abraham to discover something about the patriarch that He did not know But God tested Abraham to reveal, strengthen, and prove the reality of his faith when he was called to trust God’s word of promise²³³

Catholic writer Fr. Vincent Serpa O.P. comments that:

In asking Abraham to sacrifice his son, God was not testing him for his own information but for that of Abraham. Up until this point Abraham did not know that he had such faith within himself. In making such a difficult request, God actually drew the best out of Abraham.²³⁴

In the second place, from the Christian point of view, the story of Genesis 22 takes on an additional significance as an example of enacted prophecy. As Andy Patton explains:

The story of Abraham and Isaac takes on a larger significance when you place it in the context of prophetic reenactment. Throughout the Bible, God asked prophets to act out things that he said he would do (e.g., Ezek. 5:1-4). The acts themselves are a lot less strange when we see them in this light. Then we start asking [What] did God intend for us to learn through this? Just as God . . . told Ezekiel to lie on his side for over a year to symbolize the siege of Jerusalem (Ezek. 4), so God asked Abraham to play the part of God in the sacrifice of his own son Both Isaac and Jesus are long-awaited “beloved sons” who are born in miraculous circumstances (Gen. 22:1). Both sons carry the wood that is to be the instrument of their deaths on their backs (Gen. 22:6; John 19:17). In both stories, the father leads the son up a mountain, and the son follows obediently toward his own death (Gen. 22:3; Matt. 26:39). And in both scenarios, God provides the sacrificial substitute, which Abraham says will be a ram (a male lamb) and the New Testament authors identify as Jesus, “the lamb of God” (Gen. 22:8; John 1:29).²³⁵

Q9: Where is the land of the Moriah (Genesis 22:2)?

A9:

Short:

The exact location of “the land of Moriah” is uncertain. Jewish tradition links it to Jerusalem, where the temple was later built. However, this identification is debated among scholars.

Summary:

Genesis 22:2 refers to “the land of Moriah,” but does not clearly identify its location. The only other biblical reference to “Moriah” is in 2 Chronicles 3:1, where it is linked to Jerusalem and the site of Solomon’s temple. Because of this, Jewish tradition has long associated Abraham’s near-sacrifice of Isaac with the temple mount in Jerusalem. This creates a strong theological connection between Abraham’s act and later temple worship.

²³³ Stephen M. Coleman, “The Testing of Abraham” <https://tabletalkmagazine.com/article/2023/08/the-testing-of-abraham/#:~:text=But%20God%20tested%20Abraham%20to,faith%20for%20the%20same%20reason.>

²³⁴ Vincent Serpa, “Why God Tested Abraham” <https://www.catholic.com/qa/why-god-tested-abraham.>

²³⁵ Andy Patton, “Why Did God Ask Abraham to Sacrifice Isaac?” [https://bibleproject.com/articles/why-did-god-ask-abraham-to-sacrifice-isaac/.](https://bibleproject.com/articles/why-did-god-ask-abraham-to-sacrifice-isaac/)

However, some scholars question whether these two references point to the same place. John Walton suggests the similarity in names may be coincidental rather than intentional. Nahum Sarna argues that the geography does not fit easily. Jerusalem may not align naturally with the “three-day journey” described in Genesis. Others, like A. E. Steinmann, respond that “the third day” is a narrative expression and does not require a full three-day journey. In that case, Jerusalem remains a possible location.

Additional arguments involve practical details, such as Abraham bringing wood with him. Some see this as evidence for a more remote destination, while others interpret it as preparation for immediate obedience.

Robert Harris cautions that “the land of Moriah” and “Mount Moriah” may not refer to the same exact place. The terminology itself leaves room for uncertainty.

In summary, while tradition strongly connects Moriah to Jerusalem, the exact location of the Genesis 22 event cannot be established with certainty.

Scholar:

It isn't clear what location is referred to in Genesis 22:2 as the “land [or ‘region’] of the Moriah.” Jewish tradition associates “the land of the Moriah” with that part of Jerusalem where the temple was later built.

God tells Abraham to go to “the land of the Moriah” (Genesis 22:2). On the one hand, theologian Victor P. Hamilton points out: “The only other Old Testament use of this name is in 2 Chr. 3:1. There Moriah is connected with Jerusalem, specifically that part of Jerusalem where Solomon built the temple.”²³⁶ In Abraham’s time, this area had not yet been built upon, although it was near to the city walls. However, on the other hand, theologian John H. Walton argues that “the reference in Chronicles is most likely a coincidence of the same name.”²³⁷

Jewish scholar Nahum M. Sarna objects that the identity of locations between Genesis 22 and the later temple mount “cannot possibly be maintained” because “Jerusalem is not a three-days’ journey from Beer-sheba . . .”²³⁸ However, theologian A. E. Steinmann responds that:

this is a misunderstanding of the phrase the third day in verse 4. It does not denote a three-day journey. Instead, the first day is the first day of the narrative – the day when God commanded the sacrifice; the second day marked the beginning of the journey (v. 3); and the third day was the day of arrival at the mountain and the sacrifice on it. Therefore, the journey occupied only parts of two days, and we ought not doubt that Mount Moriah in Chronicles is the mountain in the region of Moriah where Abraham sacrificed to God.²³⁹

Moreover, as theologians Alex Varughese and Christina Bohn observe:

²³⁶ Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18-50* (Eerdmans, 1995), 102.

²³⁷ John H. Walton, *Genesis: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 510.

²³⁸ N.M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis (The Heritage of Biblical Israel)* [Kindle Android version, 2014], 157.

²³⁹ A.E. Steinmann, *Genesis: An Introduction And Commentary* [Kindle Android version, 2019], 219.

Reference to three days/third day appears frequently in the OT to designate a significant segment of time necessary for the preparation of important events (see, for example, Gen 31:22; Exod 3:18; 5:3; Num 10:33; Jonah 3:3; Esth 5:1).²⁴⁰

Sarna also objects that since “the hills of Judea would have amply supplied”²⁴¹ wood for a sacrifice, the fact that Abraham took wood on the journey shows he must have had a different destination in mind, one where an ample supply of wood could not be relied upon. Varughese and Bohn offer the alternative conjecture that “Taking enough wood for the offering indicates Abraham’s intent to carry out the sacrifice without any delay upon arrival at the destination.”²⁴²

Robert Harris (Professor of Bible and Ancient Semitic Languages at Jewish Theological Seminary) urges caution in identifying “the land of the Moriah” with “Mount Moriah”:

At first glance, the reference to Moriah seems clear enough: our tradition associates it with the place that Abraham nearly sacrificed Isaac . . . and, later on, with the site of Solomon’s Temple . . . however [2 Chronicles 3:1] mentions “Mount Moriah,” not “the land of (the) Moriah.” While it does seem evident that by the later biblical books, Moriah was a place–name identified with Jerusalem, it is less clear that this site is necessarily the same one to which Abraham led Isaac. To make a long story short, an exact understanding of the name (or word) “Moriah” will likely always elude us.²⁴³

Perhaps “Mount Moriah” in Jerusalem is “one of the mountains [or ‘hills’]” in “the land of the Moriah” mentioned in Genesis 22:2, and *perhaps* Jewish tradition named this hill “Mount Moriah” on the basis of an accurate tradition linking it to the Genesis 22 narrative, but it is hard to have much confidence here. In sum, the identification of Mount Moriah in Jerusalem with the location of the “binding” of Isaac in Genesis 22 is possible but “far from certain . . .”²⁴⁴

Q10: In Episode Eight Sarah says that “in the city . . . they sacrificed their children” and expresses horror at the memory. Is this historically accurate?

A10:

Short:

Human sacrifice did occur in the ancient Near East, though it was relatively rare. Child sacrifice is attested in some cultures, but not specifically in Ur. Sarah’s reaction in the episode is artistic license and may be anachronistic.

²⁴⁰ Alex Varughese and Christina Bohn, *Genesis 12-50: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition (New Beacon Bible Commentary)* [Kindle Android version, 2019], 189.

²⁴¹ A.E. Steinmann, *Genesis: An Introduction And Commentary* [Kindle Android version, 2019], 219.

²⁴² Alex Varughese and Christina Bohn, *Genesis 12-50: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition (New Beacon Bible Commentary)* [Kindle Android version, 2019], 188.

²⁴³ Robert Harris “Examining the Word Moriah” (2006), <https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/examining-the-word-moriah/>. See: Christianity Stack Exchange, “What evidence is available that Mt. Moriah is actually the Temple Mount?” <https://christianity.stackexchange.com/questions/19258/what-evidence-is-available-that-mt-moriah-is-actually-the-temple-mount>.

²⁴⁴ Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18-50* (Eerdmans, 1995), 107.

Summary:

Human sacrifice was practiced in parts of the ancient Near East, though it was not widespread. It is attested among cultures such as the Canaanites, Phoenicians, Moabites, and others. Child sacrifice is also mentioned in biblical texts and some external sources. For example, practices associated with Molech are condemned in the Old Testament. Outside the Bible, child sacrifice is most clearly attested in places like Carthage. However, this is later and geographically removed from Abraham's setting.

Archaeological evidence from Ur, Abraham's likely city of origin, includes human sacrifice. The Royal Cemetery of Ur contains "retainer sacrifices," where attendants were buried with elites. These victims were adults, not children. There is no clear evidence of child sacrifice specifically in Ur.

Other sites in the ancient world show possible sacrifice of younger individuals, but such cases are relatively rare and often debated.

Importantly, ancient people did not necessarily view sacrifice the way modern people do. It could be seen as a religious duty rather than a moral horror.

This means Sarah's strong emotional reaction in the episode may not reflect ancient attitudes. It is likely a modern perspective projected into the story.

Additionally, Isaac himself is best understood as a young man in Genesis 22, not a small child.

In summary, while human and even child sacrifice did exist in the ancient world, there is no specific evidence for it in Ur, and Sarah's reaction is a creative addition rather than a historical detail.

Scholar:

Human sacrifice was a feature of ancient near eastern culture, though child sacrifice was probably a less common practice than adult sacrifice. Sarah's horror at child sacrifice in Episode Eight, which does not feature in the Genesis narrative, is a piece of artistic license that may be anachronistic. We do have literary and archaeological evidence for the practice of human sacrifice in the ancient near east, including in the city of Ur (which is presumably "the city" to which Sarah refers in this episode). Some of the literary and archaeological evidence pertains to child sacrifice, although there's no specific evidence of child sacrifice taking place in Ur. That said, Isaac was actually a young man rather than a child at this point in the Genesis narrative.

Human sacrifice was a reoccurring if fairly rare feature of ancient near eastern culture,²⁴⁵ and child sacrifice seems to have been a less common practice than that of adult sacrifice. As Alex Varughese and Christina Bohn observe: "Human sacrifice was a religious practice in the ancient world. . . This practice is attested among the Phoenicians, the Ammonites, the Moabites (2 Kgs 3:27), the Egyptians, and the Canaanites . . ." ²⁴⁶ Besides multiple references reporting and condemning the practice of child sacrifice in the Old Testament literature (e.g. Leviticus 18:21, Deuteronomy 12:31 & 18:10, 2 Kings 3:27, Jeremiah 32:35):

²⁴⁵ See: Luis Siddall, "Ritual Killing and Human Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East" in *The Cambridge World History of Violence* (edited by Garrett G. Fagan, Linda Fibiger, Mark Hudson and Matthew Trundle; Cambridge University Press, 2020), 460-474, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/cambridge-world-history-of-violence/ritual-killing-and-human-sacrifice-in-the-ancient-near-east/15D2059982C482750124293D29EF55BA>.

²⁴⁶ Alex Varughese and Christina Bohn, *Genesis 12-50: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (New Beacon Bible Commentary) [Kindle Android version, 2019], 187.

The practice of child sacrifice is attested in other sources throughout the ancient Mediterranean world, particularly in Carthage [a Phoenician colony that thrived from c. 800 BC until 146 BC]. In the city, a sacred grove and a temple were dedicated to one such cult. Carthage was founded by Phoenician colonists which gives them a connection to the Canaanites. It has been suggested that there is also a connection between the child sacrifices practiced in Carthage and similar practices in Canaan and Judah such as the cult of Moloch.²⁴⁷

Danish archaeologist Laerke Recht observes that: “In terms of the archaeological evidence, human sacrifice can be very difficult to detect, and may at times be indistinguishable from other practices.”²⁴⁸ However, she notes that:

The prime archeological example of human sacrifice in the ancient Near East is the Early Dynastic “Royal Cemetery” at Ur. Dug in the early twentieth century by Leonard Woolley, this cemetery contains at least 16 “royal” graves and “death pits” with human sacrificial victims.²⁴⁹

The Early Dynastic “Royal Cemetery” at Ur (dated c. 2600-2450 BC, about seven or eight centuries before Abraham lived) features a so-called “retainer sacrifice,” whose victims were adults intended to accompany their masters into the afterlife.²⁵⁰ Another example of retainer sacrifice occurred during Egypt’s early history:

Human sacrifices have been found by the graves of early pharaohs at Abydos, a city in southern Egypt that served at times as Egypt's capital and was the cult center for Osiris, the god of the underworld. The practice appears to have become less common or completely phased out by the time the Giza pyramids were built around 4,500 years ago.²⁵¹

Archaeology testifies to other forms of human sacrifice in the ancient world, and children sometimes feature in this evidence. For example, a team led by Dr Brenna Hassett:

examined burial practices at Başur Höyük, a Bronze Age cemetery in Turkey. It contains a series of individuals who were buried between 3100 and 2800 BCE. The site dates to 500 years before the famous Royal Cemetery of Ur In three graves were found the remains of at least 11 people, male and female, ranging from age 11 to young adults.²⁵²

²⁴⁷ Caleb Strom, “Was Moloch really Ba’al, the Ancient God Who Demanded Child Sacrifice?” www.ancient-origins.net/myths-legends-asia/identity-moloch-0011457.

²⁴⁸ Laerke Recht, “Human sacrifice in the ancient Near East.” *Trinity College Dublin Journal of Postgraduate Research*, 2010, https://www.academia.edu/1561457/Human_sacrifice_in_the_ancient_Near_East.

²⁴⁹ Laerke Recht, “Human sacrifice in the ancient Near East.” *Trinity College Dublin Journal of Postgraduate Research*, 2010, https://www.academia.edu/1561457/Human_sacrifice_in_the_ancient_Near_East.

²⁵⁰ P. R. S. Moorey, “What Do We Know About the People Buried in the Royal Cemetery?” *Expedition Magazine* 20, no. 1 (October, 1977), <https://www.penn.museum/sites/expedition/what-do-we-know-about-the-people-buried-in-the-royal-cemetery/>.

²⁵¹ Owen Jarus, “25 cultures that practiced human sacrifice.” (2017), <https://www.livescience.com/59514-cultures-that-practiced-human-sacrifice.html>.

²⁵² Katie Pavid, “New evidence of ancient child sacrifice found in Turkey.” <https://www.nhm.ac.uk/discover/news/2018/june/new-evidence-of-ancient-child-sacrifice-found-in-turkey.html>.

According to Hasset: “There are various pieces of evidence which suggest that these young people did not die accidentally or naturally - rather they were sacrificed.”²⁵³

As for Sarah’s reaction to child sacrifice, we should heed the note of caution struck by Dr Josephine Quinn of Oxford University’s Faculty of Classics when she comments that “We should not imagine that ancient people thought like us and were horrified by the same things.”²⁵⁴ As Recht observes: “the ancient people of the Near East may not have understood human, or indeed animal, sacrifice as a violent, repulsive act.”²⁵⁵ The “test” set before Abraham (and Sarah and Isaac) in Genesis 22 is not the “horrific” concept of child sacrifice as such, but the “test” of how they will respond to God’s request in light of everything else they think they know about God’s character and covenant agenda. As theologian John H. Walton comments:

the command to sacrifice his son would not have been as shocking to Abraham as it is to us. In the Canaanite worldview, the god who provided fertility (El) was also entitled to demand a portion of what had been produced in Abraham’s day it was considered a deity’s right to ask for such a sacrifice, and Abraham does not question that right.²⁵⁶

What Abraham (along with Sarah and Isaac) has to wrestle with is the baffling, paradoxical nature of God’s request “in light of the covenant promises.”²⁵⁷

Q11: Why did Abraham follow God’s command?

A11:

Short:

Abraham trusted that God would keep His promise about Isaac.
He believed God would preserve Isaac’s life.
His obedience flowed from faith, not certainty about the outcome.

Summary:

Abraham followed God’s command because he trusted God’s character and promises. God had already promised that Isaac would be the one through whom the covenant would continue. This created a tension: how could Isaac die if the promise depended on him? Abraham obeyed anyway, trusting that God would resolve the contradiction.

Genesis 22 contains deliberate ambiguity about what would happen. Abraham tells his servants, “we will come back,” suggesting he expected Isaac to return. When Isaac asks about the sacrifice, Abraham replies that “God will provide.” This answer leaves open whether God would provide a substitute or act in another way.

Some Jewish interpreters suggest Abraham may not have fully understood the command. The wording can mean “offer him up,” without explicitly stating that Isaac must

²⁵³ Katie Pavid, “New evidence of ancient child sacrifice found in Turkey.”

<https://www.nhm.ac.uk/discover/news/2018/june/new-evidence-of-ancient-child-sacrifice-found-in-turkey.html>.

²⁵⁴ University of Oxford, “Ancient Carthaginians really did sacrifice their children.”

<https://www.ox.ac.uk/news/2014-01-23-ancient-carthaginians-really-did-sacrifice-their-children>.

²⁵⁵ Laerke Recht, “Human sacrifice in the ancient Near East.” *Trinity College Dublin Journal of Postgraduate Research*, 2010, https://www.academia.edu/1561457/Human_sacrifice_in_the_ancient_Near_East.

²⁵⁶ John H. Walton, *Genesis: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 510.

²⁵⁷ John H. Walton, *Genesis: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 510.

be killed. Even so, Abraham proceeds in obedience. His faith is not based on clarity, but on trust.

The New Testament (Hebrews 11:19) later reflects that Abraham believed God could even raise Isaac from the dead. This shows the depth of his confidence in God's ability to keep His word.

Culturally, sacrifice was not an unthinkable concept in Abraham's world. What made this situation unique was the conflict with God's promise.

In the end, Abraham acts because he trusts that God is just and faithful. He does not know how the story will end, but he believes God will remain true.

Scholar:

Abraham had an active faith in God (i.e. he gave God his allegiance and placed his trust in Him) and was confident that God would be true to his covenantal word. Consequently, Abraham seems to have thought that God would either prevent the sacrifice of Isaac (and provide an alternative victim), or that God would bring Isaac back from the dead.

There are several deliberate ambiguities in the Genesis narrative about "the binding of Isaac" which suggest Abraham may have been unsure whether or not God wanted him to sacrifice Isaac; but Abraham was sure that *one way or another*, as he told his servants before he headed up the mountain with Isaac: "*We will worship and then we will come back to you.*" (Genesis 22:5, NIV, emphasis added).

According to Genesis 22:2, God asks Abraham to take Isaac to "the land of Moriah" and to "offer him there as [or "for"²⁵⁸] a burnt offering on one of the mountains [hills] of which I shall tell you." Philosopher Paul Copan explains that:

The Hebrew word *Moriah* is derived from the Hebrew word *ra'ha*, "provide, see, show." So in the very word Moriah ("provision") we have a hint of salvation and deliverance.²⁵⁹

Moreover, the Hebrew translated as "offer him up there as a sacrifice" *literally* means "cause him to ascend there as [for] a thing that ascends." According to the medieval Jewish exegete Rashi, God gave Abraham an ambiguous command, omitting any explicit instruction to "slaughter" Isaac (which would've required the Hebrew word *shachtehu*²⁶⁰):

because the Holy One . . . did not desire that he should slay him, but he told him to bring him up to the mountain to prepare him as a burnt offering. So when he had taken him up, God said to him, "Bring him down."²⁶¹

In other words, God asked Abraham to *offer* Isaac as an offering, but He didn't actually ask Abraham to *kill* or "slaughter" Isaac.

The ambiguity of God's request sets the scene for Abraham's own apparent uncertainty about what would happen. Hence Rabbi Binny Freedman asks the rhetorical

²⁵⁸ See <https://biblehub.com/interlinear/genesis/22-2.htm> and https://uhg.readthedocs.io/en/latest/preposition_definite_article.html.

²⁵⁹ Paul Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011), 48.

²⁶⁰ http://www.moshereiss.org/articles/14_abraham.htm.

²⁶¹ Rashi, *Genesis Rabbah* 56:8, http://www.sefaria.org/Rashi_on_Genesis.22.2.4?lang=bi.

question: “What if Abraham actually was not sure what [God] really wanted of him?”²⁶² Likewise, Paul Copan writes that: “Abraham knew that God would fulfill his promise regarding Isaac, but he didn’t know what God would do in the end.”²⁶³

As they were walking up the mountain:

Isaac said to his father Abraham, “My father!” And he said, “Here I am, my son.” He said, “Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” Abraham said, “God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” So they went both of them together. (Genesis 22: 7-8, ESV.)

Note the ambiguity of Abraham’s answer, which leaves it open as to whether Abraham is saying that God will provide “my son” (i.e. Isaac) as the metaphorical “lamb,” or whether Abraham is saying to his son (i.e. Isaac) that God will provide his own literal “lamb” for sacrifice.

Jean E. Jones points out that:

In Abraham’s birthplace Ur, religious rituals included human sacrifice. One of the most startling excavations from Ur is the so-called “Royal Cemetery” with its pits containing human sacrifices Abraham moved to Haran, not far from other sites where human sacrifices have been uncovered from the same age Although there were also infant sacrifices in the regions, these are mostly adult sacrifices. This is significant because at the time God tested Abraham by asking him to sacrifice Isaac, Isaac was not a child . . .²⁶⁴

Indeed, the term Genesis 22:5 uses for both Isaac and the servants is used in Genesis 14:24 to describe a young man of military age. Alex Varughese and Christina Bohn report that:

The word na‘ar (meaning “boy,” “youth,” “servant”) is used in v 5 for both the servants and Isaac the term is only indirectly related to age; it often indicates one’s status as a “person under the authority and protection of his father” or “his superior or commander” . . .²⁶⁵

Jewish Old Testament scholar Isaac Kalimi explains that:

Some rabbis consider the *Aqedah* not only a test of Abraham but also of Isaac . . . he was aware that his father was leading him to death, yet willingly followed and obeyed him. This is the intention of the repeated phrase, “and they went both of them together” (Gen. 22:6b, 8b) The willingness of Isaac to be sacrificed is stated already by Josephus [*Antiquities* 1.232], Pseudo-Philo (*Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum* 32:1-3), and 4 [*Maccabees*] 7:13-14 . . .²⁶⁶

²⁶² Binny Freedman, <https://www.isralight.org/small-tastings-torah-judaism-spirituality-rav-binny-freedman-portion-vayera-3/>.

²⁶³ Paul Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011), 47.

²⁶⁴ Jean E. Jones, “Abraham and Human Sacrifice? Answering Rachel Held Evans, Part 2.” <http://www.jeanejones.net/2015/11/was-abraham-wrong-answering-rachel-held-evans-part-2/>.

²⁶⁵ Alex Varughese and Christina Bohn, *Genesis 12-50: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (New Beacon Bible Commentary) [Kindle Android version, 2019], 189.

²⁶⁶ Isaac Kalimi, “Go, I Beg You, Take Your Beloved Son and Slay him! The Binding of Isaac in Rabbinic Literature and Thought.” 8-9, <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/9797/851dbbf829cfc44e254556350591c1cb201f.pdf>.

Another textual clue within the Genesis narrative that points in this direction is the fact that Isaac was strong enough to carry the firewood for the sacrifice, and therefore could probably have resisted Abraham had he minded to do so:

The tying up then simply means that Abraham acts in conformity to the rite of a burnt offering. The hints in this chapter that Isaac is complicit in what is happening provide a basis for Jewish interpretation's focus on Isaac's willingness to be sacrificed.²⁶⁷

This Jewish understanding of Genesis 22 makes sense against the cultural background of the ancient near east. As Jones observes:

The people of Abraham's day would not have thought there was anything immoral about human sacrifices. In fact, they considered it an act of great piety . . . in cultures that believed in gods that give blessings in return for sacrifices, sacrificing offspring would be considered a moral good . . . the Lord God provided a ram to show that this God was different: This God did not want humans sacrificing humans.²⁶⁸

Danish archaeologist Laerke Recht comments that "the ancient people of the Near East may not have understood human, or indeed animal, sacrifice as a violent, repulsive act."²⁶⁹

This Jewish interpretation of Genesis 22 influenced the Qur'an, where Abraham and his un-named son have this exchange:

[Abraham] said: "O My son, I see in a dream that I am sacrificing you; see what you think." He said, "O my Father, do as you are commanded; you will find me, God willing, one of the steadfast." (Sura 37:102)²⁷⁰

While contemporary Muslims often think that the son in this exchange is Ishmael, "the earliest Islamic commentators were divided over which son was intended."²⁷¹ See Episode Eight: Question Seven for more details about this.

Finally, note what Abraham told his servants before he headed off with Isaac: "*We* will worship and then *we* will come back to you." (Genesis 22:5, NIV, emphasis added). The New Testament book known as *Hebrews* observes that because Abraham "had received the promises [of God]" (Hebrews 11:17) – including the miraculous reversal of Sarah's menopause and the subsequent conception of Isaac himself - he "considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead" (Hebrews 11:19). In other words, given his life experience following God, Abraham was confident that "the judge of the whole earth [would] deal justly," (see Genesis 18:25) and that *in some way*, God would fulfill His covenant promises (Genesis 17:19). Hence, if God did want Abraham to actually sacrifice Isaac, then God would bring Isaac back from the dead, because that would be the only way for God to keep his covenant promise to Abraham, centered as it was upon Isaac's descendants.

²⁶⁷ John Goldingay, *Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Pentateuch: Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020), 354. See also: A.E. Steinmann, *Genesis: An Introduction And Commentary* [Kindle Android version, 2019], 220.

²⁶⁸ Jean E. Jones, "Abraham and Human Sacrifice? Answering Rachel Held Evans, Part 2." www.jeanejones.net/2015/11/was-abraham-wrong-answering-rachel-held-evans-part-2/.

²⁶⁹ Laerke Recht, "Human sacrifice in the ancient Near East" (*Trinity College Dublin Journal of Postgraduate Research*, 2010), https://www.academia.edu/1561457/Human_sacrifice_in_the_ancient_Near_East.

²⁷⁰ <https://m.clearQur'an.com/037.html>.

²⁷¹ M.A. Bennett, *The Qur'an and the Christian* [Kindle Android version, 2022], 56.

Recommended Resources for Episode 8

- Peter S. Williams, "The Beginnings of History: Evidence from Genesis to Joseph." (2025)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jKsilBIhjV4&t=1848s>
- YouTube Playlist, "Mecca & Islam."
https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLQhh3qcwVEWiVEG4kjvd_6N44cxBRX2i6
- YouTube Playlist, "Zamzam Well & Islam."
https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLQhh3qcwVEWgbXNtKVO0QLrXwm_R49JP1
- YouTube Playlist, "Islam." www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLQhh3qcwVEWjhD84EB0jEG5PswCOcDsmJ
- Kyle Butt, "Does God Accept Human Sacrifice?" <https://apologeticspress.org/does-god-accept-human-sacrifice-2775/>
- Reuven Firestone, "Abraham Visits Ishmael and His Wives: Between Jewish and Islamic Tradition."
<https://www.thetorah.com/article/abraham-visits-ishmael-and-his-wives-between-jewish-and-islamic-tradition>
- Reuven Firestone, "Abraham's Journey to Mecca in Islamic Exegesis: A Form-Critical Study of a Tradition."
Studia Islamica, No. 76 (1992)
https://www.academia.edu/4069216/Abrahams_Journey_to_Mecca_in_Islamic_Exegesis_A_Form_Critical_Study_of_a_Tradition
- Dan Gibson, "Suggested Solutions for Issues Concerning The Location of Mecca in Ptolemy's Geography."
<https://www.ancientportsantiques.com/wp-content/uploads/Documents/ETUDESarchivees/Ptolemy/PtolemyMecca-Gibson2013.pdf>
- Peter Harremoës, "Rate Distortion Theory for Descriptive Statistics." *Entropy* 25, no. 3 (2023),
https://nabataea.net/media/01explore/08FoundingIslam/Rate_Distortion_Theory_for_Descriptive_Statistics.pdf
- Carol A. Hill, "Making Sense of the Numbers in Genesis." *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 55, no. 4 (2003) <https://www.asa3.org/ASA/PSCF/2003/PSCF12-03Hill.pdf>
- Isaac Kalimi, "Mitigating the Akedah." <https://www.thetorah.com/article/mitigating-the-akedah>
- Ian D. Morris, "Mecca and Macoraba." <https://www.middleeastmedievalists.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/UW-26-Morris.pdf>
- Robin Ngo, "Did the Carthaginians Really Practice Infant Sacrifice?"
www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/ancient-cultures/did-the-carthaginians-really-practice-infant-sacrifice/
- Christianity Stack Exchange, "What evidence is available that Mt. Moriah is actually the Temple Mount?"
<https://christianity.stackexchange.com/questions/19258/what-evidence-is-available-that-mt-moriah-is-actually-the-temple-mount>
- Craig Olsen, "How Old was Father Abraham? Re-examining the Patriarchal Lifespans in Light of Archaeology."
www.academia.edu/33972456/How_Old_was_Father_Abraham_Re-examining_the_Patriarchal_Lifespans_in_Light_of_Archaeology
- Craig Olsen, "How Old was Father Abraham? Part 2 A Symbolic Interpretation of the Patriarchal Lifespans."
file:///Users/peterwilliams/Downloads/How_Old_was_Father_Abraham_Part_2_A_Symb.pdf
- Keith Paterson, "Did The Canaanites Really Sacrifice Their Children?"
<https://biblereadingarcheology.com/2016/05/13/did-the-canaanites-sacrifice-their-children/>
- Katie Pavid, "New evidence of ancient child sacrifice found in Turkey."
<https://www.nhm.ac.uk/discover/news/2018/june/new-evidence-of-ancient-child-sacrifice-found-in-turkey.html>
- University of Oxford, "Ancient Carthaginians really did sacrifice their children."
<https://www.ox.ac.uk/news/2014-01-23-ancient-carthaginians-really-did-sacrifice-their-children>
- Laerke Recht, "Human sacrifice in the ancient Near East" *Trinity College Dublin Journal of Postgraduate Research*, 2010, https://www.academia.edu/1561457/Human_sacrifice_in_the_ancient_Near_East

- Justin Rodgers, "The Integrity of the Biblical Text (Part 3): Text of the Old Testament." (2022) <https://apologeticspress.org/the-integrity-of-the-biblical-text-part-3-text-of-the-old-testament/>
- Walter R. Schumm, "How Accurately Could Early (622-900 C.E.) Muslims Determine the Direction of Prayers (Qibla)?" *Religions*, 11: 102 (2020), <https://nabataea.net/media/01explore/08FoundingIslam/religions-11-00102-v2.pdf>
- Walter R. Schumm and Zvi Goldstein, "A Statistical Assessment of Early Islamic History and the Qibla: Comparing the Theories of David King and Dan Gibson." *Open Access Journal of Archaeology & Anthropology*, Volume 3 - Issue 1 (2021), <https://nabataea.net/media/01explore/08FoundingIslam/SchummJuly2021.pdf>
- Sam Shamoun, "Abraham and the Child of Sacrifice - Isaac or Ishmael?" <https://www.answering-islam.org/Shamoun/sacrifice.htm>
- Sam Shamoun, "Was Abraham commanded to sacrifice Isaac or Ishmael?" <https://www.judaism-islam.com/was-abraham-commanded-to-sacrifice-isaac-or-ishmael/>
- Sam Shamoun, "Reply to Mohamed Ghounem's: Was Isaac or Ishmael to be sacrificed?" <https://www.answering-islam.de/Responses/Ghounem/isaac.htm>
- Hershel Shanks, "Human Sacrifice to an Ammonite God?" www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/ancient-cultures/daily-life-and-practice/first-person-human-sacrifice-to-an-ammonite-god/
- Stephen J. Shoemaker, "The making of Mecca." *The Spectator* (June 2023) <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/the-making-of-mecca/>
- Patricia Smith et al, "Cemetery or sacrifice? Infant burials at the Carthage Tophet" *Antiquity* 87 (338):1191-1199 (December 2015) https://www.researchgate.net/publication/273293693_Cemetery_or_sacrifice_Infant_burials_at_the_Carthage_Tophet
- Rafat Amari, *Islam in Light of History* (Religion Research Institute, 2004) <https://ia801001.us.archive.org/20/items/IslamInLightOfHistoryDrRafatAmari/Islam%20in%20Light%20of%20History%20-Dr%20Rafat%20Amari.pdf>
- Ellis R. Brotzman and Eric J. Tully. *Old Testament Textual Criticism: A Practical Introduction* (Baker Academic, 2016)
- Paul Copan. *Is God A Moral Monster?* (Baker, 2011), Chapter Five.
- Dan Gibson et al. *Let the Stones Speak: Archaeology Challenges Islam* (Canbooks, 2023), https://www.academia.edu/109022281/Archaeology_Challenges_Islam
- John Goldingay. *Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Pentateuch: Genesis* (Baker Academic, 2020)
- Josh McDowell & Sean McDowell. *Evidence That Demands A Verdict* (Thomas Nelson, 2017), Chapter Four.
- Ruth J. Nicholls, ed. *Understanding & Answering Islam* (Melbourne School of Theology Press, 2018)
- Dennis Prager. *The Rational Bible: Genesis* (Regnery Faith, 2019)
- N.M. Sarna. *Understanding Genesis Through Rabbinic Tradition and Modern Scholarship (The Heritage of Biblical Israel)*. (The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 2014)
- Tammi J. Schneider. *Sarah: Mother of Nations* (Continuum, 2004)
- Peter Townsend. *The Mecca Mystery: Probing the Black Hole at the Heart of Muslim History* (2018)
- Dan Wickwire. *Has The Bible Been Changed? The Reliability Of The Scriptures According To Jewish, Christian, And Islamic Sources* (Aneko Press, 2016)

Episode 9: Sacrifice

Q1: Why did God ask Abraham to offer up Isaac as a sacrifice?

A1:

Short:

God tested Abraham to reveal and strengthen his faith.
The story teaches trust in God's promises under extreme tension.
Christians also see it as a foreshadowing of Jesus.

Summary:

God asked Abraham to offer Isaac as a test, not for God to gain knowledge. The purpose was to reveal and strengthen Abraham's faith.

As Nahum Sarna explains, the story is included for its teaching value to people. It shows what true trust in God looks like.

Stephen Coleman notes that the test proves the reality of Abraham's faith. It demonstrates obedience even when God's command seems to conflict with His promise.

Fr. Vincent Serpa adds that the test also reveals Abraham's faith to himself. Through the trial, Abraham discovers the depth of his own trust.

Importantly, God never intended Isaac to be sacrificed. The intervention shows that this was always a test.

The story also rejects human sacrifice. God provides a ram instead, showing a different kind of worship.

From a Christian perspective, the event has a second layer of meaning. It can be understood as an enacted prophecy. There are strong parallels between Isaac and Jesus. Both are beloved sons, both carry the wood, and both follow in obedience. In both cases, God provides the sacrifice. In Genesis it is a ram, while in the New Testament Jesus is called the "Lamb of God."

So the story functions both as a test of faith and as a prophetic pattern.

Scholar:

God put Abraham through this "trial" in order to strengthen and demonstrate his trust in God, and to give an enacted prophecy about Jesus.

In the first place, as Jewish scholar Nahum M. Sarna writes:

When "God put Abraham to the test" it was obviously not a trial, the outcome of which was meant to add to the sum of God's knowledge. Such an idea would obviously be incompatible with the biblical concept of the omniscience of God. If the story is included in biblical literature it is doubtless due to its didactic value for man.²⁷²

As Stephen M. Coleman observes:

²⁷² N. M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis (The Heritage of Biblical Israel)* [Kindle Android version, 2014], 160.

God did not test Abraham to discover something about the patriarch that He did not know But God tested Abraham to reveal, strengthen, and prove the reality of his faith when he was called to trust God’s word of promise²⁷³

Catholic writer Fr. Vincent Serpa O.P. comments that:

In asking Abraham to sacrifice his son, God was not testing him for his own information but for that of Abraham. Up until this point Abraham did not know that he had such faith within himself. In making such a difficult request, God actually drew the best out of Abraham.²⁷⁴

In the second place, from the Christian point of view, the story of Genesis 22 takes on an additional significance as an example of enacted prophecy. As Andy Patton explains:

The story of Abraham and Isaac takes on a larger significance when you place it in the context of prophetic reenactment. Throughout the Bible, God asked prophets to act out things that he said he would do (e.g., Ezek. 5:1-4). The acts themselves are a lot less strange when we see them in this light. Then we start asking [What] did God intend for us to learn through this? Just as God . . . told Ezekiel to lie on his side for over a year to symbolize the siege of Jerusalem (Ezek. 4), so God asked Abraham to play the part of God in the sacrifice of his own son Both Isaac and Jesus are long-awaited “beloved sons” who are born in miraculous circumstances (Gen. 22:1). Both sons carry the wood that is to be the instrument of their deaths on their backs (Gen. 22:6; John 19:17). In both stories, the father leads the son up a mountain, and the son follows obediently toward his own death (Gen. 22:3; Matt. 26:39). And in both scenarios, God provides the sacrificial substitute, which Abraham says will be a ram (a male lamb) and the New Testament authors identify as Jesus, “the lamb of God” (Gen. 22:8; John 1:29).²⁷⁵

Q2: Why did Abraham follow God’s command?

A2:

Short:

Abraham trusted that God would keep His promise about Isaac.
He believed God would either provide a substitute or preserve Isaac’s life.
His obedience was based on trust, not full understanding.

Summary:

Abraham followed God’s command because he trusted God’s character and promises. God had already promised that Isaac would be the covenant son. This created a tension: how could Isaac die if the promise depended on him? Abraham obeyed anyway, trusting that God would resolve this.

²⁷³ Stephen M. Coleman, “The Testing of Abraham.” <https://tabletalkmagazine.com/article/2023/08/the-testing-of-abraham/#:~:text=But%20God%20tested%20Abraham%20to,faith%20for%20the%20same%20reason.>

²⁷⁴ Vincent Serpa, “Why God Tested Abraham.” <https://www.catholic.com/qa/why-god-tested-abraham>.

²⁷⁵ Andy Patton, “Why Did God Ask Abraham to Sacrifice Isaac?” <https://bibleproject.com/articles/why-did-god-ask-abraham-to-sacrifice-isaac/>.

Genesis 22 contains deliberate ambiguity about what would happen. Abraham tells his servants, “we will come back,” suggesting he expected Isaac to return. When Isaac asks about the sacrifice, Abraham says, “God will provide.” This leaves open whether God would provide a substitute or act in another way.

Some Jewish interpreters suggest Abraham may not have fully understood the command. The wording allows for uncertainty about whether Isaac would actually be killed. Even so, Abraham proceeds in obedience. His faith is shown in action, not in certainty.

The New Testament later reflects that Abraham believed God could raise Isaac from the dead. This shows how strongly he trusted God’s ability to keep His word.

Culturally, sacrifice was not an unthinkable act in Abraham’s world. What made this situation unique was the conflict with God’s promise.

Isaac himself may also have participated willingly, as some traditions suggest.

In the end, Abraham acts because he trusts that God is just and faithful. He does not know the outcome, but he believes God will remain true.

Scholar:

Abraham had an active faith in God (i.e. he gave God his allegiance and placed his trust in Him) and was confident that God would be true to his covenantal word. Consequently, Abraham seems to have thought that God would either prevent the sacrifice of Isaac (and provide an alternative victim), or that God would bring Isaac back from the dead.

There are several deliberate ambiguities in the Genesis narrative about “the binding of Isaac” which suggest Abraham may have been unsure whether or not God wanted him to sacrifice Isaac; but Abraham was sure that *one way or another*, as he told his servants before he headed up the mountain with Isaac: “*We will worship and then we will come back to you.*” (Genesis 22:5, NIV, emphasis added).

According to Genesis 22:2, God asks Abraham to take Isaac to “the land of Moriah” and to “offer him there as [or “for”²⁷⁶] a burnt offering on one of the mountains [hills] of which I shall tell you.” Philosopher Paul Copan explains that:

The Hebrew word *Moriah* is derived from the Hebrew word *ra’ha*, “provide, see, show.” So in the very word Moriah (“provision”) we have a hint of salvation and deliverance.²⁷⁷

Moreover, the Hebrew translated as “offer him up there as a sacrifice” *literally* means “cause him to ascend there as [for] a thing that ascends.” According to the medieval Jewish exegete Rashi, God gave Abraham an ambiguous command, omitting any explicit instruction to “slaughter” Isaac (which would’ve required the Hebrew word *shachtehu*²⁷⁸):

because the Holy One . . . did not desire that he should slay him, but he told him to bring him up to the mountain to prepare him as a burnt offering. So when he had taken him up, God said to him, “Bring him down.”²⁷⁹

²⁷⁶ See <https://biblehub.com/interlinear/genesis/22-2.htm> and https://uhg.readthedocs.io/en/latest/preposition_definite_article.html.

²⁷⁷ Paul Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011), 48.

²⁷⁸ www.moshereiss.org/articles/14_abraham.htm.

²⁷⁹ Rashi, *Genesis Rabbah* 56:8, http://www.sefaria.org/Rashi_on_Genesis.22.2.4?lang=bi.

In other words, God asked Abraham to *offer* Isaac as an offering, but He didn't actually ask Abraham to *kill* or "slaughter" Isaac.

The ambiguity of God's request sets the scene for Abraham's own apparent uncertainty about what would happen. Hence Rabbi Binny Freedman asks the rhetorical question: "What if Abraham actually was not sure what [God] really wanted of him?"²⁸⁰ Likewise, Paul Copan writes that: "Abraham knew that God would fulfill his promise regarding Isaac, but he didn't know what God would do in the end."²⁸¹

As they were walking up the mountain:

Isaac said to his father Abraham, "My father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." He said, "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" Abraham said, "God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So they went both of them together. (Genesis 22: 7-8, ESV.)

Note the ambiguity of Abraham's answer, which leaves it open as to whether Abraham is saying that God will provide "my son" (i.e. Isaac) as the metaphorical "lamb," or whether Abraham is saying to his son (i.e. Isaac) that God will provide his own literal "lamb" for sacrifice.

Jean E. Jones points out that:

In Abraham's birthplace Ur, religious rituals included human sacrifice. One of the most startling excavations from Ur is the so-called "Royal Cemetery" with its pits containing human sacrifices Abraham moved to Haran, not far from other sites where human sacrifices have been uncovered from the same age Although there were also infant sacrifices in the regions, these are mostly adult sacrifices. This is significant because at the time God tested Abraham by asking him to sacrifice Isaac, Isaac was not a child . . .²⁸²

Indeed, the term Genesis 22:5 uses for both Isaac and the servants is used in Genesis 14:24 to describe a young man of military age. Alex Varughese and Christina Bohn report that:

The word na'ar (meaning "boy," "youth," "servant") is used in v 5 for both the servants and Isaac the term is only indirectly related to age; it often indicates one's status as a "person under the authority and protection of his father" or "his superior or commander" . . .²⁸³

Jewish Old Testament scholar Isaac Kalimi explains that:

Some rabbis consider the *Aqedah* not only a test of Abraham but also of Isaac . . . he was aware that his father was leading him to death, yet willingly followed and obeyed him. This is the intention of the repeated phrase, "and they went both of them together" (Gen. 22:6b, 8b) The willingness of Isaac to be sacrificed is stated

²⁸⁰ Binny Freedman, <https://www.isralight.org/small-tastings-torah-judaism-spirituality-rav-binny-freedman-portion-vayera-3/>.

²⁸¹ Paul Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011), 47.

²⁸² Jean E. Jones, "Abraham and Human Sacrifice? Answering Rachel Held Evans, Part 2." <http://www.jeanejones.net/2015/11/was-abraham-wrong-answering-rachel-held-evans-part-2/>.

²⁸³ Alex Varughese and Christina Bohn, *Genesis 12-50: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (New Beacon Bible Commentary) [Kindle Android version, 2019], 189.

already by Josephus [*Antiquities* 1.232], Pseudo-Philo (*Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum* 32:1-3), and 4 [*Maccabees*] 7:13-14 . . .²⁸⁴

Another textual clue within the Genesis narrative that points in this direction is the fact that Isaac was strong enough to carry the firewood for the sacrifice, and therefore could probably have resisted Abraham had he minded to do so:

The tying up then simply means that Abraham acts in conformity to the rite of a burnt offering. The hints in this chapter that Isaac is complicit in what is happening provide a basis for Jewish interpretation's focus on Isaac's willingness to be sacrificed.²⁸⁵

This Jewish understanding of Genesis 22 makes sense against the cultural background of the ancient near east. As Jones observes:

The people of Abraham's day would not have thought there was anything immoral about human sacrifices. In fact, they considered it an act of great piety . . . in cultures that believed in gods that give blessings in return for sacrifices, sacrificing offspring would be considered a moral good . . . the Lord God provided a ram to show that this God was different: This God did not want humans sacrificing humans.²⁸⁶

Danish archaeologist Laerke Recht comments that "the ancient people of the Near East may not have understood human, or indeed animal, sacrifice as a violent, repulsive act."²⁸⁷

This Jewish interpretation of Genesis 22 influenced the Qur'an, where Abraham and his un-named son have this exchange:

[Abraham] said: "O My son, I see in a dream that I am sacrificing you; see what you think." He said, "O my Father, do as you are commanded; you will find me, God willing, one of the steadfast." (Sura 37:102)²⁸⁸

While contemporary Muslims often think that the son in this exchange is Ishmael, "the earliest Islamic commentators were divided over which son was intended."²⁸⁹ See Episode Eight: Question Seven for more details about this.

Finally, note what Abraham told his servants before he headed off with Isaac: "*We* will worship and then *we* will come back to you." (Genesis 22:5, NIV, emphasis added). The New Testament book known as *Hebrews* observes that because Abraham "had received the promises [of God]" (Hebrews 11:17) – including the miraculous reversal of Sarah's menopause and the subsequent conception of Isaac himself - he "considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead" (Hebrews 11:19). In other words, given his life experience following God, Abraham was confident that "the judge of the whole earth [would]

²⁸⁴ Isaac Kalimi, "Go, I Beg You, Take Your Beloved Son and Slay him! The Binding of Isaac in Rabbinic Literature and Thought." 8-9,

<https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/9797/851dbbf829cfc44e254556350591c1cb201f.pdf>.

²⁸⁵ John Goldingay, *Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Pentateuch: Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020), 354. See also: A.E. Steinmann, *Genesis: An Introduction And Commentary* [Kindle Android version, 2019], 220.

²⁸⁶ Jean E. Jones, "Abraham and Human Sacrifice? Answering Rachel Held Evans, Part 2."

<http://www.jeanejones.net/2015/11/was-abraham-wrong-answering-rachel-held-evans-part-2/>.

²⁸⁷ Laerke Recht, "Human sacrifice in the ancient Near East." *Trinity College Dublin Journal of Postgraduate Research*, 2010, https://www.academia.edu/1561457/Human_sacrifice_in_the_ancient_Near_East.

²⁸⁸ <https://m.clearQur'an.com/037.html>.

²⁸⁹ M.A. Bennett, *The Qur'an and the Christian* [Kindle Android version, 2022], 56.

deal justly,” (see Genesis 18:25) and that *in some way*, God would fulfill His covenant promises (Genesis 17:19). Hence, if God did want Abraham to actually sacrifice Isaac, then God would bring Isaac back from the dead, because that would be the only way for God to keep his covenant promise to Abraham, centered as it was upon Isaac’s descendants.

Q3: Episode Nine shows Isaac deciding to allow himself to be sacrificed. Is this realistic, and is it true to the Genesis narrative?

A3:

Short:

Genesis does not explicitly say Isaac was willing, but it allows for that interpretation. Jewish tradition often portrays Isaac as a willing participant. The episode reflects a plausible and longstanding interpretation.

Summary:

Genesis 22 does not explicitly state whether Isaac resisted or consented. However, the narrative includes clues that support the idea of willingness.

Isaac is strong enough to carry the wood for the sacrifice. This suggests he could have resisted Abraham if he chose to.

The repeated phrase “they went both of them together” implies unity of purpose. Some interpreters see this as evidence that Isaac understood and cooperated.

Jewish tradition has long developed this idea further. Writings such as Josephus, Pseudo-Philo, and later rabbinic sources portray Isaac as willing.

Isaac Kalimi notes that some rabbis saw the event as a test of both Abraham and Isaac. In this view, Isaac knowingly submits to God’s will. This interpretation also fits the cultural context. In the ancient Near East, sacrifice was not seen as morally shocking in the same way as today.

Archaeological evidence shows that human sacrifice did occur in surrounding cultures. Although rare, it would not have been unthinkable to people of that time.

Additionally, Isaac is likely a young man, not a small child. This makes voluntary participation more plausible.

The Qur’an also reflects a similar idea, where the son agrees to the sacrifice.

In summary, while Genesis does not state it directly, the portrayal of Isaac as willing is consistent with textual clues and longstanding interpretation.

Scholar:

The portrayal of Isaac as being willing to be sacrificed is plausible in the cultural context of the ancient near east, and is a traditional Jewish interpretation of the Genesis 22 narrative that makes sense in light of several “clues” within the text.

Jewish Old Testament scholar Isaac Kalimi explains that:

Some rabbis consider the *Aqedah* not only a test of Abraham but also of Isaac . . . he was aware that his father was leading him to death, yet willingly followed and obeyed him. This is the intention of the repeated phrase, “and they went both of them together” (Gen. 22:6b, 8b) The willingness of Isaac to be sacrificed is stated

already by Josephus [*Antiquities* 1.232], Pseudo-Philo (*Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum* 32:1-3), and 4 [*Maccabees*] 7:13-14 . . .²⁹⁰

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The tying up then simply means that Abraham acts in conformity to the rite of a burnt offering. The hints in this chapter that Isaac is complicit in what is happening provide a basis for Jewish interpretation's focus on Isaac's willingness to be sacrificed.²⁹¹

This Jewish understanding of Genesis 22 makes sense against the cultural background of the ancient near east. As Jean E. Jones observes:

The people of Abraham's day would not have thought there was anything immoral about human sacrifices. In fact, they considered it an act of great piety . . . in cultures that believed in gods that give blessings in return for sacrifices, sacrificing offspring would be considered a moral good . . . the Lord God provided a ram to show that this God was different: This God did not want humans sacrificing humans.²⁹²

As Jones points out:

In Abraham's birthplace Ur, religious rituals included human sacrifice. One of the most startling excavations from Ur is the so-called "Royal Cemetery" with its pits containing human sacrifices . . . Abraham moved to Haran, not far from other sites where human sacrifices have been uncovered from the same age . . . Although there were also infant sacrifices in the regions, these are mostly adult sacrifices. This is significant because at the time God tested Abraham by asking him to sacrifice Isaac, Isaac was not a child . . .²⁹³

Danish archaeologist Laerke Recht comments that "the ancient people of the Near East may not have understood human, or indeed animal, sacrifice as a violent, repulsive act."²⁹⁴

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²⁹⁰ Isaac Kalimi, "Go, I Beg You, Take Your Beloved Son and Slay him! The Binding of Isaac in Rabbinic Literature and Thought." 8-9,

<https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/9797/851dbbf829cfc44e254556350591c1cb201f.pdf>.

²⁹¹ John Goldingay, *Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Pentateuch: Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020), 354. See also: A.E. Steinmann, *Genesis: An Introduction And Commentary* [Kindle Android version, 2019], 220.

²⁹² Jean E. Jones, "Abraham and Human Sacrifice? Answering Rachel Held Evans, Part 2." www.jeanejones.net/2015/11/was-abraham-wrong-answering-rachel-held-evans-part-2/.

²⁹³ Jean E. Jones, "Abraham and Human Sacrifice? Answering Rachel Held Evans, Part 2." www.jeanejones.net/2015/11/was-abraham-wrong-answering-rachel-held-evans-part-2/.

²⁹⁴ Laerke Recht, "Human sacrifice in the ancient Near East." *Trinity College Dublin Journal of Postgraduate Research*, 2010) https://www.academia.edu/1561457/Human_sacrifice_in_the_ancient_Near_East.

²⁹⁵ <https://m.clearQur'an.com/037.html>.

While contemporary Muslims often think that the son in this exchange is Ishmael, “the earliest Islamic commentators were divided over which son was intended.”²⁹⁶ See Episode Eight: Question Seven for more details about this.

Recommended Resources for Episode 9

Peter S. Williams, “The Beginnings of History: Evidence from Genesis to Joseph.” (2025)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jKsilBIhjV4&t=1848s>

Sam Shamoun, “Abraham and the Child of Sacrifice - Isaac or Ishmael?” <https://www.answering-islam.org/Shamoun/sacrifice.htm>

Sam Shamoun, “Was Abraham commanded to sacrifice Isaac or Ishmael?” <https://www.judaism-islam.com/was-abraham-commanded-to-sacrifice-isaac-or-ishmael/>

Sam Shamoun, “Reply to Mohamed Ghounem’s: Was Isaac or Ishmael to be sacrificed?” <https://www.answering-islam.de/Responses/Ghounem/isaac.htm>

Paul Copan. *Is God A Moral Monster?* (Baker, 2011), Chapter Five.

Dennis Prager. *The Rational Bible: Genesis* (Regnery Faith, 2019)

N. M. Sarna. *Understanding Genesis Through Rabbinic Tradition and Modern Scholarship (The Heritage of Biblical Israel)*. (The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 2014)

²⁹⁶ M.A. Bennett, *The Qur'an and the Christian* [Kindle Android version, 2022], 56.

Episode 10: Anointed

Q1: How much of a historical jump does the narrative of *The Legacy of Adam* take between Episodes Nine and Ten?

A1:

Short:

The story jumps forward about seven centuries.

It moves from Abraham's time to the era of Israel as a nation.

This includes the Exodus, Moses, and the early monarchy.

Summary:

Episode Ten takes place roughly seven centuries after Episode Nine. The narrative shifts from Abraham's life to the established nation of Israel.

After Abraham, his descendants grow through Isaac and Jacob (Israel). A famine leads Jacob's family into Egypt, where they eventually settle.

Over time, the Israelites become enslaved by the Egyptians. God then raises up Moses to lead them out of slavery in the Exodus.

Following their escape, they journey through the wilderness. At Mount Sinai, God makes a covenant with Israel and gives them the Law.

Because of disobedience, the people wander for a generation. After Moses' death, Joshua leads them into the promised land.

The land is gradually taken from various Canaanite groups. This period is led by figures known as judges.

Eventually, the people ask for a king. The prophet Samuel anoints Saul as Israel's first king.

Episode Ten begins around this transition into monarchy. Israel is now a nation settled in the land, moving into a new phase of leadership.

Scholar:

Episode Ten of *The Legacy of Adam* is set some seven centuries after the events of Episode Nine.

After Episode Nine, *The Legacy of Adam* jumps forward some seven centuries to the time when Abraham's descendants (now known as the children of Israel) are established as a nation in "the promised land" (that is, the land promised to them by God). Abraham's descendants (i.e. Isaac's son Jacob and his family, including Jacob's youngest son Joseph) had been forced into Egypt by a famine. Having settled there, the growing population of "the children of Israel" ("Israel" being a name given to Jacob by God in Genesis 32:22-32 & 35:10),²⁹⁷ had become enslaved by the Egyptians. Later, under the prophet Moses, God freed the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, leading them into the wilderness (in "the Exodus") to begin a journey to take possession of "the promised land." At Mount Saini, God made a

²⁹⁷ See: Eric Lyons, "Why Was Jacob Still Called Jacob After His Name Was Changed to Israel?" <https://apologeticspress.org/why-was-jacob-still-called-jacob-after-his-name-was-changed-to-israel-1009/>; Got Questions, "Why is Jacob called Jacob and Israel alternately in the book of Genesis?" <https://www.gotquestions.org/Jacob-Israel.html>.

covenant with Israel and gave them laws (including the famous “Ten Commandments”). After the hard-hearted adult Israelites had died off during a period of nomadic “wandering,” and following the death of Moses, God finally led Israel into the promised land under the leadership of Joshua, gradually dispossessing various Canaanite tribes from the land in a process that continued under the auspices of various religious leaders called “judges.”²⁹⁸ As Episode Ten of *The Legacy of Adam* picks up the narrative, the people of Israel have recently decided they wanted to be ruled by a king, and Saul (whom Muslims will know as Talut²⁹⁹) had been appointed as king by the prophet Samuel.

Q2: What can we learn from how God rejected the older brothers in favor of David?

A2:

Short:

God does not judge by outward appearance, but by the heart.

Human standards focus on strength and status, but God sees character.

David is chosen because of his inner trust and courage.

Summary:

The rejection of David’s older brothers shows that God’s measures are different from human standards. People tend to judge based on appearance, strength, and status. In 1 Samuel 16:7, God tells Samuel that He looks at the heart, not outward appearance. This means God evaluates a person’s inner character, motives, and faith.

David’s older brothers appeared more suitable as king. They likely looked stronger, more experienced, and more impressive. However, their later fear of Goliath reveals a lack of trust in God. Their outward strength did not match inner courage.

²⁹⁸ For historical overview of the seven centuries of history skipped over between Episode Nine and Ten of *The Legacy of Adam* series, see: Bill T. Arnold and Richard Hess, *Ancient Israel’s History: An Introduction to Issues and Sources* (Baker Academic, 2014); K.A. Kitchen, *On The Reliability of the Old Testament* (Eerdmans, 2003); Iain Provine *et al.* *A Biblical History of Israel*, second edition (WJK, 2015).

On the “exodus” and “wilderness” narratives, see also: Peter S. Williams, “Exodus and Conquest: From Egypt to the Promised Land.” (2025) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FdHzHb2P474&t=27s>; YouTube Playlist, “The Exodus.” www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLQhh3qcvVEWjbiCIsVBzoXW4bFq72c3EJ; Barry J. Beitzel, *Where Was The Biblical Red Sea? Examining the Ancient Evidence* (Lexham Press, 2020); James K. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition* (Oxford, 1996); James K. Hoffmeier, *Ancient Israel in Sinai: The Evidence of the Authenticity of the Wilderness Tradition* (Oxford, 2005); James K. Hoffmeier *et al.*, ed.’s. “Did I Not Bring Israel Out of Egypt?” *Biblical, Archaeological, and Egyptological Perspectives on the Exodus Narratives* (Eisenbrauns, 2016); Colin Humphreys, *The Miracles of Exodus* (Continuum, 2003); Mark D. Janzen, ed. *Five Views On The Exodus: Historicity, Chronology, And Theological Implications* (Zondervan Academic, 2021). On Israel’s entry into and conquest of the promised land in particular, see also Paul Copan, “How Could God Command Killing The Canaanites?” <https://enrichmentjournal.ag.org/Issues/2010/Fall-2010/How-Could-God-Command-Killing-the-Canaanites>;

Paul Copan, “Yahweh Wars and the Canaanites: Divinely Mandated Genocide or Corporate Capital Punishment? Responses to Critics” *Philosophia Christi* Volume 11, Number 1 (2009), <http://www.epsociety.org/library/printable/63.pdf>; Paul Copan, *Is God A Moral Monster?* (Baker, 2011); Colin Humphreys, *The Miracles of Exodus* (Continuum, 2003).

²⁹⁹ This being the English translation of the Arabic name used for Saul in the Qur’an.

Scholar:

God does not make base his judgements on the superficial standard of outward appearance, but on his knowledge of a person's inner self or "heart."

The God of truth is not misled by superficial appearances. God is quoted in this episode as saying to the prophet Samuel: "I do not look at the thing people look at, for people look at the outward appearance but the Lord looks at the heart." (1 Samuel 16:7.) David's three oldest brothers may have looked more handsome or impressive than he did, but they were afraid of Goliath, the champion of the Philistine army, whereas David's zeal for God meant he was not afraid (see 1 Samuel 17).

Q3: How is God's choice of the young and humble David consistent with his wisdom in choosing leaders?

A3:

Short:

God consistently values humility over status in his choice of leaders.

Biblical leadership is defined by service, not dominance.

David's selection reflects this pattern rather than contradicting wisdom.

Summary:

According to the biblical tradition, humility is a central virtue that God looks for in those who follow him, including leaders. This is not an isolated idea, but a consistent theme across both the Old and New Testaments.

In *Numbers 12:3*, Moses, Israel's foundational leader, is described as "very humble," despite his authority and unique role. Similarly, the instructions for kings in *Deuteronomy 17:14–20* are designed to prevent pride by limiting power, wealth, and self-exaltation. The king is meant to remain under God's law, not above it.

This principle is reinforced and clarified by Jesus. In *Luke 22:27*, he presents himself as one who serves, and in *Mark 10:42–45*, he contrasts worldly rulers, who dominate others, with godly leadership, which is marked by service and self-sacrifice. Greatness, in this framework, is redefined as serving others.

David's selection fits directly into this pattern. He is chosen not because of external qualifications such as age, status, or military strength, but because of his heart and posture before God (1 Samuel 16:7). His humility makes him suitable for leadership in a way that outward strength alone does not.

Interestingly, this biblical emphasis is echoed in modern leadership research. Scholars Edward D. Hess and Katherine Ludwig note that humility is strongly associated with better decision-making, self-awareness, and relational effectiveness.

Seen this way, God's choice of David is not a departure from wisdom, but an expression of a deeper leadership principle: that character, especially humility, is more foundational than power or appearance.

Scholar:

According to the biblical tradition, humility is a key virtue that God looks for in those who follow him, including those who act as leaders.

Humility is one of the key moral virtues encouraged in the Bible.³⁰⁰ For example, in Numbers 12:3, the prophet Moses, who led the children of Israel out of their slavery in Egypt, is described as “a very humble man.” (ESV.) When God first gives a job description for the kings of Israel in the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy 17:14-20, his instructions are designed to encourage them to serve God and God’s people with humility.

In the New Testament, Jesus points out to his disciples that he has come “among you as one who serves” (Luke 22:27), and he teaches them to emulate his own example of humble leadership:

You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those in high positions act as tyrants over them. But it is not so among you. On the contrary, whoever wants to become great among you will be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you will be a slave to all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. (Mark 10:42-45, CSB.)

Interestingly, leadership scholars Edward D. Hess and Katherine Ludwig report that a growing body of psychological literature “correlates humility with higher physical and psychological well-being and interpersonal and interpersonal advantages, particularly in the context of intellectual concerns, metacognitive abilities, leadership, and relationship building.”³⁰¹

Q4: Why do contemporary secular scholars accept the historical existence of King David when he was often dismissed as a legend only a generation ago?

A4:

Short:

Archaeological discoveries since the 1990s provide independent evidence for David. The Tel Dan Stele refers to the “house of David” outside the Bible. This shifted scholarly consensus from skepticism to general acceptance.

³⁰⁰ See: Peter S. Williams, “Leading and Following in the Spiritual Footsteps of Jesus” <http://podcast.peterswilliams.com/e/leading-and-following-in-the-spiritual-footsteps-of-jesus/>; M. W. Austin, *Humility: Rediscovering the Way of Love and Life in Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2024); D. R. Edwards, *Humility Illustrated: The Biblical Path Back to Christian Character* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2023); John Stott, *Calling Christian Leaders: Rediscovering radical servant ministry* (Nottingham: IVP, 2002); C. J. Wright, *Spiritual Practices of Jesus. Learning Simplicity, Humility and Prayer with Luke’s Earliest Readers* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020).

³⁰¹ Edward D. Hess and Katherine Ludwig, *Humility Is the New Smart: Rethinking human Excellence in the Smart Machine Age* (Oakland, CA: BK, 2017), 64.

Summary:

Until the late 20th century, many secular scholars doubted whether King David was a historical figure, often viewing him as a later legendary construct. This skepticism was largely due to the lack of extra-biblical evidence.

The situation changed significantly with the discovery of the Tel Dan Stele in 1993. This 9th-century B.C.E Aramaic inscription, likely commissioned by the Aramean king Hazael, refers to the “house of David” (*byt dwd*). This is widely understood as a dynastic reference, similar to how other ancient kingdoms were named after founding rulers.

As Kenneth Kitchen explains, this was the first widely recognized non-biblical reference to David, dating to within about a century of his lifetime. That proximity strengthens its historical value.

Similarly, Eric H. Cline notes that this discovery played a decisive role in shifting the debate, leading many scholars to accept David as a real historical person rather than a myth.

Additional inscriptions support this conclusion. The Mesha Stele, attributed to the Moabite king Mesha, likely contains a reference to the “house of David,” though the text is partially damaged. Epigrapher André Lemaire argues that “David” is the most plausible reconstruction of the text.

An Egyptian topographical list from around 925 B.C.E. may also refer to a region associated with David, possibly rendered as “Heights of David.” While this reading is more debated, it fits linguistically and historically within known variations of the name.

Taken together, these discoveries provide independent, non-biblical confirmation of a Davidic dynasty. As a result, most contemporary secular scholars now accept that David was a historical figure, even if debates remain about the size and power of his kingdom.

In other words, the shift in consensus was not driven by theological arguments, but by new archaeological data that made the earlier skepticism increasingly difficult to maintain.

Scholar:

Archaeological discoveries since 1993 have convinced even secular scholars that King David was a real historical figure who founded a dynasty in Judah.

Prior to 1993, secular scholars generally doubted the historical existence of King David (c. 1030-970 B.C.E), seeing him as a legendary figure. However, archaeological discoveries have now proved the existence of King David (whom many Muslims will know as Dawud³⁰²), who is consequently generally acknowledged by secular scholars to have been a historical figure. The 9th century B.C.E Tel Dan Stela references the kingdom of Judah as “the house of David.” As Kenneth Kitchen explains:

The publication of fragments of an Old Aramaic stela from Tel Dan in 1993/1995 brought to light the first recognized nonbiblical mention of the tenth-century king David, in a text that reflected events of the year 841 and would have been set up at no great interval after that date.³⁰³

Eric Cline, a Professor of classics, anthropology and history at George Washington University, explains that: “the finding of this inscription brought an end to the debate and settled the question of whether David was an actual historical person . . .”³⁰⁴

³⁰² This being the English translation of the Arabic name used for David in the Qur’an.

³⁰³ K. A. Kitchen, *On The Reliability of the Old Testament* (Eerdmans, 2003), 92.

³⁰⁴ Eric Cline, *Biblical Archaeology: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2009), 60.

Discovered in 1993, the Tel Dan Stele is:

a dark, medium-sized, broken victory stone . . . found in secondary use as part of an ancient wall in the northern city of Tel Dan. Its original use had been as a ninth century B.C.E celebratory inscription belonging to Syria's King Hazael, a glorification of his triumphs over Israel's King Jehoram and Judah's King Ahaziah.³⁰⁵

The inscription reads (emphasis added):

And I killed two [power]ful kin[gs], who harnessed two thou[sand cha]riots and two thousand horsemen. [I killed Jeho]ram son of [Ahab] king of Israel, and I killed [Ahaz]yahu son of [Joram kin]g of the *house of David*. And I set . . .³⁰⁶

Fig. The Tel Dan Stela, with the “House of David” highlighted
(https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:JRSLM_300116_Tel_Dan_Stele_01.jpg).



³⁰⁵ Christopher Eames, “David: The True Story of History’s Most Legendary King.”
<https://armstronginstitute.org/25-david-the-true-story-of-historys-most-legendary-king>.

³⁰⁶ Christopher Eames, “David: The True Story of History’s Most Legendary King.”
<https://armstronginstitute.org/25-david-the-true-story-of-historys-most-legendary-king>.

As Christopher Eames reports:

after much examination and questioning, retranslating and re-questioning, the Tel Dan Stele has been accepted as a genuine piece And while it is the most certain of all references to King David, there *are* two other artifacts that, with near certainty, make similar mention of the king.³⁰⁷

One of these artifacts is the Mesha Stele:

This victory stone belonged to another man mentioned in the Bible—the Moabite King Mesha. This stone celebrated Moab’s rebellion against the king of Israel around the middle of the ninth century B.C.E (2 Kings 3). Toward the base of the inscription, the same phrase used on the Tel Dan Stele can be found: “house of David.” Although, due to damage, the initial “D” is missing (i.e., BT[D]WD). According to epigrapher and philologist André Lemaire, who carefully studied the artifact, any reading other than “David” would be an awkward fit.³⁰⁸

Fig. The Mesha Stele

(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mesha_Stele#/media/File:P1120870_Louvre_st%C3%A8le_de_M%C3%A9sha_AO5066_rwk.JPG)



³⁰⁷ Christopher Eames, “David: The True Story of History’s Most Legendary King”
<https://armstronginstitute.org/25-david-the-true-story-of-historys-most-legendary-king>.

³⁰⁸ Christopher Eames, “David: The True Story of History’s Most Legendary King”
<https://armstronginstitute.org/25-david-the-true-story-of-historys-most-legendary-king>.

The final artefact of relevance is:

an Egyptian inscription dating to around the end of the 10th century B.C.E., which describes a part of Israel's Negev desert region as the "Heights of David." Leading Egyptologist Kenneth Kitchen translated the Egyptian inscription as H[Y]DBT DWT. The first word indicates "heights," or "highlands." The second word presents more of a problem at first glance. The name "David" is properly written on the first two inscriptions as DWD. So what of DWT? Kitchen came across a sixth-century A.D. inscription from Ethiopia, which referred to David as *Davit*. Hence, for this general region, there is a precedent for the name DWT, Davit. As with the Mesha Stele, "David" seems to be the best-fitting translation. Naming this area of the Negev as the "Heights of David" also makes sense because it was in the area to which David fled and commanded while on the run from King Saul.³⁰⁹

This Egyptian Topographical List dates to 925 B.C., around 45 years after David's death, which as Kitchen notes is "within living memory of the man."³¹⁰

Q5: Was King David in charge of a kingdom, as the Bible claims, or was he just a local chieftain as some secular scholars claim?

A5:

Short:

There is growing archaeological evidence for a centralized Judahite state in David's time. Finds from multiple sites suggest urban planning, fortifications, and administration. While debate remains, most scholars now reject the idea that David was only a local chieftain.

Summary:

The question of whether David ruled a true kingdom or was merely a local chieftain has been heavily debated, particularly between "minimalist" and "maximalist" scholars. Minimalists have argued that the biblical accounts were written much later and exaggerate David's status. However, this view has increasingly come under pressure from archaeological discoveries. As Kenneth Kitchen argues, there is no concrete evidence that the accounts of David and Solomon were invented in later periods, making the minimalist hypothesis largely speculative.

At the same time, new archaeological data points toward the existence of a developing state in Judah during the 10th century B.C.E. Excavations in Jerusalem, including work by Eilat Mazar, have uncovered large structures that may indicate significant building activity, possibly associated with a royal center.

A 2024 peer-reviewed study based on carbon dating from multiple sites in Jerusalem suggests that the city was more developed and populated during this period than previously thought, challenging the idea that it was merely a small village.

³⁰⁹ Christopher Eames, "David: The True Story of History's Most Legendary King," <https://armstronginstitute.org/25-david-the-true-story-of-historys-most-legendary-king>.

³¹⁰ K. A. Kitchen, *On The Reliability of the Old Testament* (Eerdmans, 2003), 93.

Additional evidence comes from administrative artifacts. As noted by Jimmy Hardin, the discovery of “bullae” (seal impressions) indicates organized governance and elite activity, which are typical features of a functioning state.

Sites such as Tel ‘Eton show signs of major transformation in the early 10th century B.C.E., including large buildings and urban expansion. Archaeologists Avraham Faust and Yair Sapir link these developments to a broader highland polity, likely corresponding to the biblical united monarchy.

Further support comes from Khirbet Qeiyafa, where Yosef Garfinkel and colleagues argue that the site reflects an organized urban society consistent with early state formation. Similar planning patterns across multiple fortified cities suggest centralized control.

Finally, the network of fortifications identified by Tali Erickson-Gini indicates territorial management and strategic defense, further supporting the existence of a structured political entity.

Taken together, this evidence does not prove every biblical detail, but it strongly supports the view that David was more than a tribal leader. Instead, he likely ruled an emerging kingdom with increasing administrative and military organization, broadly consistent with the biblical account.

Scholar:

A steady accumulation of archaeological evidence has emerged in the twenty-first century that corroborates the biblical picture of a united monarchy in the 10th century B.C.E.

While some secular scholars believe that the biblical narratives about David are “a fictionalized account” of historical events “put together . . . to encourage the politically demoralized exiles in Babylon or the recently returned people of Judah,” theologian Mark A. Throntveit reports that “Most scholars reject this ‘minimalist’ view.”³¹¹

On the one hand, as Egyptologist Kenneth Kitchen comments:

There is not one scintilla of hard, verifiable, independent evidence that the accounts of David and Solomon’s reigns were invented in either the Neo-Babylonian or Achaemenid periods. This view is purely hypothetical . . .³¹²

On the other hand, archaeologists investigating several 10th century B.C. sites in Israel have argued for an accumulation of evidence pointing to the existence of a Davidic state. For example, archaeologist Eilat Mazar discovered the remains of a large structure in Jerusalem that may have been a palace built for and/or used by King David.³¹³ A 2024 peer reviewed study of 103 carbon samples taken from several locations in ancient Jerusalem produced “evidence indicating the widespread habitation of Jerusalem during the time of David and Solomon Thanks to this study, we can say with much greater confidence that

³¹¹ Mark A. Throntveit, “Introductory Issues in 1 Samuel.” <https://enterthebible.org/courses/1-samuel/lessons/introductory-issues-in-1-samuel#:~:text=Historicity%20of%20David&text=For%20these%20historians%2C%20what%20we,reject%20his%20%E2%80%9Cminimalist%E2%80%9D%20view.>

³¹² K. A. Kitchen, “Assessing the Historical Status of the Israelite United Monarchy” in V. Philips Long *et al.* *Windows into Old Testament History: Evidence, Argument, and the Crisis of “Biblical Israel”* (Eerdmans, 2002), 127.

³¹³ See: CBN, “Perfect for a Palace: Find Testifies to David’s Royalty” www.youtube.com/watch?v=pN6Tl8ea_IQ.

Jerusalem at the time of David and Solomon was more a city than a village, as the minimalists claim.”³¹⁴

Jimmy Hardin, associate professor in the MSU Department of Anthropology and Middle Eastern Cultures, comments of the discovery of Davidic era “Bullae” seal impressions that indicate the existence of “a political entity that is typified by elite activities, suggesting that a state was already being formed in the 10th century BC . . . as recorded in the Hebrew biblical texts.”³¹⁵

Discoveries from Tel ‘Eton, on the southeastern edge of ancient Israel’s territory, fit the biblical description of an expanding kingdom during the reign of King David. Archaeologists Avraham Faust and Yair Sapir report that carbon dating from Tel ‘Eton:

suggest that the site was transformed around the first half of the 10th century BCE . . . A new edifice, probably serving as a residence of the family of a high ranking official . . . was built on the top of the mound, using impressive building technology . . . The construction of the building coincided with the expansion of the mound (and probably also with the erection of the city wall), signifying a major change of the entire site. Both historical circumstances and the plan of the building - a classical four-room house - connect the changes with the highland polity, most likely the contested United Monarchy.³¹⁶

Archaeologists Yosef Garfinkel, Saar Ganor and Michael G. Hasel conclude their 2018 book *In The Footsteps Of King David: Revelations from A Biblical City* with the following comments:

Historical processes and cultural phenomena referred to in the Bible relating to the 10th century BCE . . . find concrete expression at Khirbet Qeiyafa at the same time period. Such clear examples of correspondence between archaeological finds and the biblical tradition stand in contrast to the theories of scholars advocating the minimalist approach, and their assertion that the Bible was written during the Hellenistic or Persian period, or at the end of the 7th century BCE, and contains no historical memory, but who have no data or finds to support such views The Khirbet Qeiyafa excavations have provided archaeological evidence corroborating historical memories from the time of King David The excavations showed that at the end of the 11th century BCE an urban society and central monarchy began to take shape The proposal that the Bible was written many hundreds of years after the events it describes, and that it reflects only the period in which it was written, is no longer sustainable.³¹⁷

Professor Garfinkel argues that similarities in the design, construction and material presence of several fortified 10th-century B.C.E Judahite sites demonstrates the presence of a centralized government:

³¹⁴ Brent Nagtegall and Brad Macdonald, “A Revolutionary Carbon-Dating Study of Ancient Jerusalem”

³¹⁵ Science Daily, “Discovery of official clay seals support existence of biblical kings David and Solomon, archaeologists say” www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2014/12/141216100433.htm.

³¹⁶ Avraham Faust and Yair Sapir, “The ‘Governor’s Residency’ at Tel ‘Eton, The United Monarchy, and the Impact of the Old-House Effect on Large-Scale Archaeological Reconstructions” https://www.researchgate.net/publication/323736495_The_Governor's_Residency_at_Tel_'Eton_The_United_Monarchy_and_the_Impact_of_the_Old-House_Effect_on_Large-Scale_Archaeological_Reconstructions.

³¹⁷ Yosef Garfinkel et al, *In The Footsteps Of King David: Revelations from A Biblical City* (Thames & Hudson, 2018), 201-202.

During the early Iron Age, the kingdom of Judah encompassed at least three cities: Khirbet Qeiyafa, Beth Shemesh and Tell en-Naşbeh. They featured the same underlying urban plan comprised of an outer casemate city wall and a belt of houses abutting the casemates, on the one side, and facing a peripheral road, on the other. Furthermore, none was more than a day's walk from Jerusalem and, thus, may be considered as marking the kingdom's geographical core. They were ... positioned to guard strategic roads leading into the kingdom: Khirbet Qeiyafa controlled the Elah Valley, Beth Shemesh controlled the Soreq Valley, and Tell en-Naşbeh controlled the northern road to Jerusalem.³¹⁸

According to Dr. Tali Erickson-Gini, former Israel Antiquities Authority archaeology inspector for the Southern Negev, this centralized government exerted its territorial control in the 10th century B.C.E via a large network of fortifications and associated water cisterns. Dr. Erickson-Gini notes the existence of over 60 fortification sites:

there's probably even more fortifications that have not been investigated. I know for a fact that there have been areas that have not been properly surveyed yet There are smaller sites, that are towers, that are dotting along roads going between the bigger sites . . .³¹⁹

She observes that: "You can see how these forts, [are] lining roads, they're lining along wadis that are used as roads, and they're blocking wadis. So, there was a great amount of control exerted through this area."³²⁰

Q6: Why take the Biblical narratives about Samuel, Saul, David and his son Solomon, seriously as history?

A6:

Short:

The narratives show realism, including flaws, consistent with historical sources. They draw on early materials and near-contemporary records. Archaeology and extra-biblical texts broadly support their historical setting.

Summary:

There are several reasons why many scholars take the biblical narratives about Samuel, Saul, David, and Solomon seriously as history, even if not every detail can be independently verified.

First, the narratives pass what historians call the "criterion of embarrassment." Key figures, especially David, are portrayed with significant moral failures, including abuse of power and personal sin. As Scott Hahn notes, these accounts present leaders "warts and all," which is unusual for fictional propaganda and suggests reliance on earlier, less idealized traditions.

³¹⁸ Yosef Garfinkel, "Early City Planning in the Kingdom of Judah." <https://armstronginstitute.org/956-early-city-planning-in-the-kingdom-of-judah>.

³¹⁹ See: Christopher Eames, "Revealing King David's Edomite Garrisons." <https://armstronginstitute.org/970-revealing-king-davids-edomite-garrisons>.

³²⁰ See: Christopher Eames, "Revealing King David's Edomite Garrisons." <https://armstronginstitute.org/970-revealing-king-davids-edomite-garrisons>.

Second, there are strong reasons to believe that these texts are based on relatively early sources. Joyce G. Baldwin describes Samuel as a compilation of earlier records, including narratives about Samuel, the ark, and the rise of monarchy. Similarly, V. Philips Long argues that much of the material likely originated close to the events themselves, possibly during Solomon’s reign in the 10th century B.C.E.

Internal features support this early dating. The texts reflect conditions specific to the 11th–10th centuries B.C.E., such as Philistine control over metalworking, accurate geographic details, and the absence of later dominant empires like Assyria and Babylon. Linguistically, they also lack strong Aramaic influence typical of later periods.

Third, the books of Kings explicitly cite earlier written sources, such as “the book of the acts of Solomon” and the “chronicles of the kings of Israel and Judah.” These likely refer to royal annals or administrative records preserved in state archives, as noted by Scott Hahn.

Archaeology also provides supporting context. Inscriptions like the “Ishbaal” name found at Khirbet Qeiyafa align with names known from the biblical period. While interpretations of some finds remain debated, they demonstrate cultural and linguistic consistency with the biblical setting.

Finally, geographical and historical details match what is known from archaeology. As Yosef Garfinkel and others argue, the placement of Philistine cities in biblical narratives reflects earlier realities rather than later conditions, suggesting access to authentic historical memory.

Taken together, the combination of realistic portrayal, early source material, internal consistency, and external corroboration provides a strong case that these narratives preserve genuine historical traditions about Israel’s early monarchy.

Scholar:

The biblical narratives about Samuel, Saul, David and his son Solomon pass the historical criterion of embarrassment, are based on contemporaneous sources, and are corroborated by extra-biblical evidence.

The Qur’anic material about king David draws upon a partial knowledge of the Biblical narrative about him, which is found principally in the biblical histories of *Samuel*, *Kings* and *Chronicles*. In particular, as Professor Khaleel Mohammed argues, “Q38:21-5 seems to presuppose a familiarity with the biblical narrative”³²¹ about David’s adultery with Bathsheba. According to Professor Mohammed: “The Qur’an . . . takes the David story and makes it meaningful for its listeners in a new setting, conditioned by the accretions over the ages”³²² He concludes that these “accretions” were part of an oral tradition, wherein the story of 2 Samuel 12 was “refracted by midrash.”³²³

While some scholars believe that the biblical narratives about the Davidic dynasty are “a fictionalized account” of events “put together . . . to encourage the politically demoralized exiles in Babylon or the recently returned people of Judah,” theologian Mark A. Throntveit reports that “Most scholars reject this ‘minimalist’ view.”³²⁴

³²¹ Khaleel Mohammed, *David in the Muslim Tradition: The Bathsheba Affair* (Lanham: Lexington, 2015), 187 & 194.

³²² Khaleel Mohammed, *David in the Muslim Tradition: The Bathsheba Affair* (Lanham: Lexington, 2015), 193.

³²³ Khaleel Mohammed, *David in the Muslim Tradition: The Bathsheba Affair* (Lanham: Lexington, 2015), 193.

³²⁴ Mark A. Throntveit, “Introductory Issues in 1 Samuel.” <https://enterthebible.org/courses/1-samuel/lessons/introductory-issues-in-1->

The biblical accounts of Samuel, Saul, David and Solomon “not only are wonderfully told but also have a ring of truth about them.”³²⁵ For example, “The David that emerges from a careful reading of the biblical texts is a complex, very human character.”³²⁶ Indeed, despite being “a man after my own heart” (1 Samuel 13:14), David is presented as a deeply flawed man – an unlikely product of fictional myth-making.³²⁷ In other words, the biblical portrait of King David passes the historical “criteria of embarrassment.” Indeed, theologian Scott Hann points out that: “the Books of Samuel do little to idealize the personalities of Samuel and David but relate their sins and shortcomings with a warts-and-all honesty that inspires confidence in the objectivity and antiquity of their sources.”³²⁸

Theologian Joyce G. Baldwin describes the book of (1 & 2) *Samuel* as:

A compilation of earlier accounts, which may have included a life of Samuel, a history of the ark, and accounts of the inauguration of the monarchy, as well as annals of the reign . . . put together by an editor, probably during the exile.³²⁹

Old Testament scholar V. Philips Long argues there are “good reasons to assume that the bulk of the book was composed early, perhaps during the reign of David’s son Solomon in the tenth century.”³³⁰ He observes that:

the book of Samuel makes no reference to the major powers, Assyria and Babylonia, that begin to dominate in the ninth century . . . Samuel’s description of kingship in 1 Samuel 8 is appropriate to its setting but not to later periods when monarchy was more developed . . . geographic details and war strategies are accurately described . . . “one cannot find in the book any significant influence of the Aramaic language that later became an international means of correspondence” . . . the Philistine monopoly on “metal weaponry and agricultural tools” mentioned in 1 Samuel 13: 19– 23 existed only in the eleventh century [B.C.] . . . references in 1 Samuel 27 to settlements in the Negev wealthy enough to yield spoils of war make little sense after the tenth century, as they were destroyed during Shishak’s campaign in 926 [B.C.] . . .³³¹

Long quotes Professor Moshe Garsiel, who concludes that:

In the light of the above literary, historical and archaeological considerations, it seems to me that there is no possibility other than to attribute most of the significant composition of the book of Samuel to the tenth century BCE, though small changes took place much later.³³²

[samuel#:~:text=Historicity%20of%20David&text=For%20these%20historians%2C%20what%20we,reject%20his%20%E2%80%9Cminimalist%E2%80%9D%20view.](#)

³²⁵ Iain Provine *et al.* *A Biblical History of Israel*, second edition (WJK, 2015), 316.

³²⁶ Iain Provine *et al.* *A Biblical History of Israel*, second edition (WJK, 2015), 288.

³²⁷ See: The Bible Sojourner, “A Man After God’s Own Heart? An Alternative Interpretation.”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7tblHhNIE-Q>; Cindy Arora, “A Man After God’s Own Heart.”

<https://baonline.org/a-man-after-gods-own-heart/>.

³²⁸ Scott Hann, *The First and Second Book of Samuel: Ignatius Catholic Study* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2016), 21.

³²⁹ Joyce Baldwin, *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries: 1 and 2 Samuel* (IVP, 1988), 22.

³³⁰ V. Philips Long, *1 and 2 Samuel: An Introduction And Commentary (Tyndale Old Testament Commentary)* (2020), 25.

³³¹ V. Philips Long, *1 and 2 Samuel: An Introduction And Commentary (Tyndale Old Testament Commentary)* (2020), 26.

³³² V. Philips Long, *1 and 2 Samuel: An Introduction And Commentary (Tyndale Old Testament Commentary)* (2020), 26.

This means that “large parts of our information on the United Monarchy stem from roughly contemporary sources.”³³³

The narrative history of (1 & 2) *Kings* explicitly references earlier historical texts (currently lost to us) which it drew upon (e.g. 1 Kings 11:41 & 14:19). As theologian Scott Hann comments:

the anonymous compiler of Kings . . . consulted several ancient sources to produce a narrative of the Israelite monarchy extending from the reign of Solomon in the tenth century B.C. up to the Babylonian Exile in the sixth century B.C. Three sources are identified by name in the work: "the book of the acts of Solomon" (1 Kings 11: 41), "the Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Israel" (1 Kings 14: 19; 2 Kings 1: 18, etc.), and "the Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Judah" (1 Kings 14: 29; 2 Kings 8: 23, etc.). It is likely that these documents were royal administrative annals written close in time to the events they record and preserved in state archives. Other possible sources utilized in Kings include a “Succession Narrative” that details the transition from David's kingship to Solomon's rule (underlying 2 Sam 9- 20 and 1 Kings 1- 2) as well as stories about influential prophets who intervened in the affairs of Israel and Judah (e.g., the Elijah and Elisha cycles in 1 Kings 17— 2 Kings 13).

Hence, the relevant question *from the purely historical point of view*, is not so much when these narratives or narrative units were first “published” (or even when the canonical form of the text was edited), but whether the canonical text relays information that puts its readers in touch with the life and times of Samuel, Saul, David, Solomon, etc. The available evidence seems to confirm the historicity of the narratives with respect to the claims it makes that can be independently verified, and this should bolster our confidence in the general reliability of these accounts.

In their *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary* on 1 & 2 *Kings*, John M. Monson and Iain Provan refer to “the good number of extrabiblical texts and archaeological finds that corroborate the biblical record.”³³⁴ For example, a late 11th/early 10th century B.C.E inscription on a storage jar, discovered in the archaeological excavations at Khirbet Qeiyafa:

bears the words “Ishbaal, son of Beda.” Saul himself had a son by this name (1 Chronicles 8:33). This inscription therefore confirms the use of the name for figures belonging to the same period. Moving into later periods in Israel’s history, however, names like this that include the term “Baal” fall out of use.³³⁵

Professor of Old Testament Dr Claude Mariottini comments that: “Since the inscription is dated to the 11th-10th centuries B.C., the discovery becomes an important addition to the many discoveries that help confirm the chronology of the biblical text.”³³⁶

³³³ V. Philips Long, *1 and 2 Samuel: An Introduction And Commentary (Tyndale Old Testament Commentary)* (2020), 26.

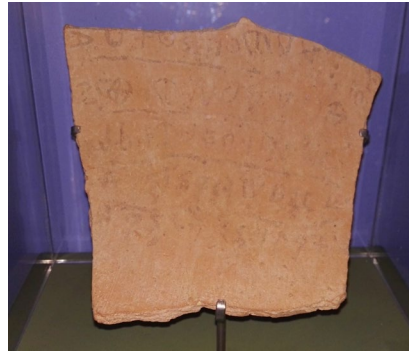
³³⁴ John M. Monson and Iain Provan, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: 1 & 2 Kings* (Zondervan, 2009), 51.

³³⁵ Armstrong Institute of Biblical Archaeology Staff, “Uncovering Khirbet Qeiyafa.” <https://armstronginstitute.org/934-uncovering-khirbet-qeiyafa>.

³³⁶ Claude Mariottini. “The Ishbaal Inscription” <https://claudemariottini.com/2015/06/29/the-ishbaal-inscription/#:~:text=The%20name%20in%20the%20inscription,ancient%20inscriptions%20and%20the%20Bibl>e.

Professor Emile Puech of the École Biblique et Archéologique Française, thinks that another Ostrakon inscription discovered at Khirbet Qeiyafa: “Represents the earliest known text relating to the establishment of some form of administration of the Israelite society, likely referring to the installation of the first king, Saul.”³³⁷ However, this interpretation of the inscription is controversial, because “the five line text of the ostrakon, written in ink on a potsherd, is badly abraded and cannot be deciphered with certainty.”³³⁸

Fig. The Khirbet Qeiyafa Ostrakon (<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bible-Lands-Museum-Khirbet-Qeiyafa-30244.jpg>).



Archaeologist Yosef Garfinkel and co-authors highlight “the basic and fascinating correspondence between the location of the important Philistine centers that emerges from archaeological-historical research and the geographical location of the biblical traditions.”³³⁹ For example, the biblical story of David and Goliath relates how the Philistine army camped near the city of Socoh before retreating to the cities of Gath and Ekron:

If the story was written at the end of the 7th century BCE, during the Persian or Hellenistic period, when these cities no longer existed, its author would probably have noted Ashdod, Ashkelon, and Gaza as the cities from which the Philistine forces originated. It is thus clear that the biblical author had access to historical information originating in the 10th and 8th centuries BCE.³⁴⁰

Having compared the biblical material about Samuel, Saul and David to extra-biblical data about culture in the eleventh to tenth centuries BCE, Professor Daniel Bodi concludes

³³⁷ Daniel Bodi, “The Story of Samuel, Saul, and David.” In Bill T. Arnold and Richard S. Hess ed.’s, *Ancient Israel’s History: An Introduction to Issues and Sources* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 196. See also: Gerard Leval, “Ancient Inscription Refers to Birth of Israelite Monarchy” *Biblical Archaeology Review* (May/June 2012), 41-43 & 70; Brian Donnelly-Lewis, “The Khirbet Qeiyafa Ostrakon: A New Collation Based on the Multispectral Images, with Translation and Commentary.” *Bulletin of ASOR* (2022), <https://www.academia.edu/82766705>; Yosef Garfinkel et al. *In The Footsteps Of King David: Revelations From An Ancient Biblical City* (Thames & Hudson, 2018), Chapter Five.

³³⁸ Daniel Bodi, “The Story of Samuel, Saul, and David.” In Bill T. Arnold and Richard S. Hess ed.’s, *Ancient Israel’s History: An Introduction to Issues and Sources* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 196. See: Gerard Leval, “Ancient Inscription Refers to Birth of Israelite Monarchy.” *Biblical Archaeology Review* (May/June 2012), 41-43 & 70; Brian Donnelly-Lewis, “The Khirbet Qeiyafa Ostrakon: A New Collation Based on the Multispectral Images, with Translation and Commentary.” *Bulletin of ASOR* (2022), <https://www.academia.edu/82766705>; Yosef Garfinkel et al. *In The Footsteps Of King David: Revelations From An Ancient Biblical City* (Thames & Hudson, 2018), Chapter Five.

³³⁹ Yosef Garfinkel et al, *In The Footsteps Of King David: Revelations From An Ancient Biblical City* (Thames & Hudson, 2018), 16.

³⁴⁰ Yosef Garfinkel et al, *In The Footsteps Of King David: Revelations From An Ancient Biblical City* (Thames & Hudson, 2018), 18.

that these narratives: “seem to reflect authentic historical reminiscence of a stage when ancient Israelite seminomadic chieftains were slowly becoming sedentary, adopting urban mores and lifestyles.”³⁴¹

Recommended Resources for Episode 10

- Peter S. Williams, “Exodus and Conquest: From Egypt to the Promised Land.” (2025)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FdHzHb2P474&t=27s>
- Peter S. Williams, “United and Divided: Israel’s Kingdom from Judges to Exile.” (2025)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0r7f5SzeTI&t=7s>
- Peter S. Williams, “The History of Israel from Samson to Solomon.”
<https://youtu.be/5v4zs1MMYFk?si=ZyMG3E0F8NgRqWjn>
- YouTube Playlist, “King David.”
<http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLQhh3qcvVEWjGWuucxuxxZbCVntIcVBsB>
- Peter S. Williams, “Leading and Following in the Spiritual Footsteps of Jesus.”
<http://podcast.peterswilliams.com/e/leading-and-following-in-the-spiritual-footsteps-of-jesus/>
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³⁴¹ Daniel Bodi, “The Story of Samuel, Saul, and David” in Bill T. Arnold and Richard S. Hess ed.’s, *Ancient Israel’s History: An Introduction to Issues and Sources* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 226.

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Episode 11: Play

Q1: What was the “evil spirit” that troubled king Saul? Was he afflicted by a demon, or mad?

A1:

Short:

The phrase may refer to a troubled mental state or a literal demon.

The Hebrew allows meanings like distress, sadness, or harmful disposition.

Spiritual and psychological explanations are not mutually exclusive.

Summary:

The phrase “an evil spirit from the Lord” (1 Samuel 16:14) has been widely debated, and its meaning is not as straightforward as it may appear in translation. While some interpret it as a demon permitted by God, others suggest it could refer to a divinely sent agent of judgment, or more plausibly, a description of Saul’s psychological state.

In the narrative, Saul’s behavior is described in ways that resemble mental distress. He experiences mood swings, fear, and instability, leading those around him to question whether he has “gone mad.” At the same time, his servants interpret his condition in spiritual terms, reflecting the worldview of the time.

The key to understanding the phrase lies in the Hebrew language. The word *rûah* (“spirit”) can mean wind, breath, disposition, or state of mind, not only a personal spiritual being. Similarly, the word *rā’āh*, often translated “evil,” can also mean harmful, distressing, or unpleasant.

As V. Philips Long notes, the phrase may describe not a literal evil entity, but a harmful or troubled disposition. Some translations reflect this nuance, rendering it as a “spirit of distress” or “tormenting spirit.”

A psychological reading also fits the context. Saul had just been rejected as king, lost divine favor, and faced the end of his dynasty. Studies such as those by Edward Oyetunde Adeloye suggest that his symptoms resemble severe depression, jealousy, and paranoia, possibly triggered by these events.

Importantly, ancient authors did not sharply separate spiritual and psychological categories as we do today. What we might describe as mental illness could be expressed in spiritual language.

Whether one emphasizes divine causation, spiritual agency, or internal mental struggle, the text portrays a king unraveling under pressure, rather than presenting a simple case of demon possession.

Scholar:

While the “evil spirit from the Lord” (1 Samuel 16:14) that afflicted Saul *may* have been a demon providentially permitted by God to afflict him, or even a good angel sent to punish him, it *probably* refers to Saul’s self-inflicted state of mind.

When King Saul first has a choking fit in episode 11, Abner says “this must be an evil spirit.” When David arrives to play harp music for Saul, the king’s solders are worried that “the king has gone mad . . .” and that they’ll have to go into battle with “a mad king.” Of course, we

aren't forced to choose between these diagnoses, as if they contradicted each other, since it's possible that an "evil spirit" caused Saul to go "mad." Moreover, there is a long-standing debate amongst interpreters about what the biblical text actually means when it talks about Saul being troubled by an "evil spirit from God" (1 Samuel 16:16):

The Spirit of the Lord departed from Saul when God rejected his kingship, and in his place came "a harmful spirit from the LORD" to torment him (16:14). The exact nature of this spirit is not clear in the text Whatever the case, this spirit operated according to the sovereign ordination of the Lord³⁴²

The noun *rûah* ("spirit") has a broad range of meaning, including: "wind, breath, transitoriness, volition, disposition, temper, spirit, Spirit."³⁴³ Again, the Hebrew word (*rā·'āh*) often translated as "evil" in 1 Samuel 16:14 and 16, also has a range of meanings, from wicked, to harmful, to unpleasant or sad. While most English translations render 1 Samuel 16 as referencing an "evil spirit," some literal translations refer to "a spirit of sadness" (i.e. Literal Standard Version, Young's Literal Translation). Other translations mention a "tormenting spirit" (NLT) or "spirit of distress (Berean Study Bible). Consequently, theologian V.P. Long observes that: "the 'evil spirit' visited on Saul may connote not a malevolent spiritual being per se, but an ill temper or even psychological affliction."³⁴⁴ According to a psychological study of Saul by Edward Oyetunde Adeloje and co-authors:

it may be reasonable to conclude that his own sad reflections, the awareness that he had failed to live up to the expected requirements of an Israelite ruler, the forfeiture of his crown, and the termination of his ruling dynasty induced jealousy . . . and . . . fits of frightening depression. He appears to have ruminated on Samuel's deposition, and rather than repenting, he had given himself over to melancholy, till his mind was overloaded, and he had extreme mood swings that made him become fearful and anguished.³⁴⁵

Q2: Why do Abner and Jonathan think harp music "might ward off the evil spirits"?

A2:

Short:

Music was commonly associated with emotional and spiritual relief in the ancient world. Saul's improvement with music suggests psychological distress rather than possession. Later traditions also link music with calming or driving away harmful influences.

Summary:

Abner and Jonathan's expectation that harp music might "ward off the evil spirit" reflects an ancient understanding of the close connection between music, emotion, and spiritual states. In

³⁴² Ligonier Ministries, "David's Ministry to Saul." <https://learn.ligonier.org/devotionals/davids-ministry-to-saul>.

³⁴³ V.P. Long, *1 and 2 Samuel (Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary)*. [Kindle Android version] (Zondervan, 2016), 258.

³⁴⁴ V.P. Long, *1 and 2 Samuel (Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary)*. [Kindle Android version] (Zondervan, 2016), 258.

³⁴⁵ Edward Oyetunde Adeloje, et al. "'An Evil Spirit from the Lord Troubled Him': A Psychological Examination of the Life of King Saul." <https://ijrpr.com/uploads/V3ISSUE11/IJRPR7829.pdf>.

1 Samuel 16, David's harp playing brings relief to Saul, suggesting that his condition responds to natural, observable means. This detail is significant. As V. Philips Long notes, the effectiveness of music supports the interpretation that Saul's "evil spirit" refers to a troubled mental or emotional state rather than a literal demon. If Saul's condition can be eased through music, it aligns well with what we would today describe as psychological distress.

Music has long been recognized as having a regulating effect on the human mind. It can calm anxiety, stabilize mood, and interrupt cycles of negative thinking. In Saul's case, David's playing appears to soothe his agitation and restore a measure of clarity and peace.

At the same time, ancient cultures often described emotional or psychological disturbances in spiritual language. What we might call depression or paranoia could be understood as the influence of a harmful spirit. Therefore, using music to "drive away" such a spirit would not have seemed unusual.

Later Jewish traditions also associate music with spiritual influence. For example, texts among the Dead Sea Scrolls, such as 11Q5, include compositions intended to counteract harmful spirits, possibly through recitation or musical performance.

However, there is no clear evidence from Saul's time that music functioned as a formal exorcism technique. Rather, the narrative presents a practical observation: music helps. This reinforces the idea that Saul's condition is best understood as a form of inner turmoil, described in the language available to the ancient authors.

In summary, Abner and Jonathan's reasoning reflects both experiential knowledge, that music can calm a troubled mind, and a worldview in which emotional distress and spiritual influence are closely connected.

Scholar:

The use of music in treating Saul's distress probably indicates that the "evil spirit" referred to in 1 Samuel 16 was Saul's own mental distress.

As theologian V.P. Long comments: "That music provides some relief for Saul (see 16:15–17) seems to support this more mundane interpretation of the 'evil spirit' that comes on Saul after the departure of the 'Spirit of the LORD.'"³⁴⁶ (For discussion of the nature of the "evil spirit" that afflicted Saul, see Episode 11, Question 1.)

The earliest evidence indicating an association between music and exorcism in Jewish culture may be the Dead Sea Scroll Psalms collection, in particular 11Q5, which contains "four songs for the charming of demons with music."³⁴⁷ However, as latter tradition suggests, these Psalms may have been *recited* rather than sung.

³⁴⁶ V.P. Long, *1 and 2 Samuel (Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary)*. [Kindle Android version] (Zondervan, 2016), 258.

³⁴⁷ Rabbi Geoffrey Dennis, "Jewish Exorcism." <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/jewish-exorcism/>.

Q3: What instrument did David play for King Saul?

A3:

Short:

David likely played a lyre, not a large harp as often imagined. The Hebrew word *kinnôr* refers to a smaller, portable string instrument. It was probably a “thin” lyre with a few strings, played with a plectrum.

Summary:

The instrument David played, often translated as “harp” in English Bibles, is more accurately understood as a *lyre*. The Hebrew word *kinnôr* refers to a family of stringed instruments that were common throughout the ancient Near East.

As V. Philips Long explains, the most likely type is the so-called “Eastern” or “thin” lyre. This instrument typically had between four and eight strings and was played with a plectrum rather than plucked like a modern harp.

Archaeological discoveries help us visualize this instrument. Lyres have been found in the royal cemetery at Ur (ca. 2500 B.C.), showing that the instrument was already well established long before David’s time. Artistic depictions also appear across the region, including wall paintings from Beni Hasan in Egypt (ca. 1900 B.C.), ivory carvings from Megiddo, and Philistine pottery from the 11th century B.C.

These finds demonstrate that the lyre was widely used across Mesopotamia, Canaan, and surrounding cultures, making it entirely plausible that David would have played such an instrument in Saul’s court.

According to composer Michael Levy, the oldest known written melody, the Hurrian Hymn from Ugarit (ca. 1400 B.C.), was likely performed on a similar type of lyre. Modern reconstructions of this instrument and its music give us a rough idea of how David’s playing might have sounded.

Importantly, this was not a large, stationary instrument like a modern concert harp. It was relatively small, portable, and suitable for personal performance, which fits the biblical description of David being brought into Saul’s presence to play and soothe him.

In summary, David’s instrument was most likely a simple but expressive lyre, deeply rooted in the musical culture of the ancient Near East.

Scholar:

David played a stringed instrument that’s called a “lyre” (probably the so-called “Eastern” or “thin” lyre).

Theologian V.P. Long notes that:

The word rendered “harp” [in some translations of 1 Samuel] (*kinnôr*) probably refers to a “lyre,” of which there were several types in antiquity. The type of lyre David played was presumably the “Eastern,” or “thin,” lyre, which was strung with four to eight strings and was played with a plectrum. Archaeological discovery has yielded many representations of lyres, such as the remains of nine lyres from the Sumerian royal cemetery at Ur (ca. 2500 B.C.), a depiction of “an Amorite/Canaanite lyre player entering Egypt with his clan” (ca. 1900 B.C. wall painting at Beni Hasan in Egypt), a depiction of a female lyre player on an ivory plaque from Megiddo (twelfth

century B.C.), and a male lyre player on a Philistine bichrome jug (Megiddo, eleventh century B.C.).³⁴⁸

Composer and lyre player Michael Levey explains that:

The oldest surviving written *melody* so far discovered in History which can actually be reconstructed, was Hurrian Hymn Text H6. The musical notation for this amazing 3400 year old melody, was discovered in Ugarit, Northern Canaan (now forming the Southern part of modern Syria) in the early 1950s, and was preserved for 3400 years on a clay tablet, written in the Cuneiform text of the ancient Hurrian language³⁴⁹

Contemporary performances of this ancient tune on lyre's patterned after those seen in the archaeological record (e.g. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QpxN2VXPMLc>) bring us as close as its possible to get to hearing today how David's lyre playing would have sounded.

Fig. “Lyre player 1350-1150 BC performs before a Canaanite king; the instrument is possibly a kinnor; the artwork is a portion of a larger artwork on Megiddo Ivory (LB II), an ivory plaque found at Megiddo. This ivory engraving shows one possibility for the ancient instrument, kinnor.”³⁵⁰



³⁴⁸ V.P. Long, *1 and 2 Samuel (Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary)*. [Kindle Android version] (Zondervan, 2016), 259-260.

³⁴⁹ Michael Levey, <https://ancientlyre.com/the-oldest-written-melody-in-history>.

³⁵⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lyre#/media/File:Kinnor_played_before_a_king.jpg.

Q4: Why did God allow David to help Saul after the Spirit of the LORD had departed from him?

A4:

Short:

God's rejection of Saul as king did not remove His mercy toward him. David's role shows God's compassion working through others. It also positioned David to learn and prepare for future leadership.

Summary:

Although the Spirit of the LORD had departed from Saul (1 Samuel 16:14), this does not mean that God ceased to show him any form of mercy. The biblical narrative often holds together both judgment and compassion. Saul is rejected as king, but he is not abandoned as a human being.

David's presence in Saul's court can therefore be understood, in part, as an expression of God's grace. Through David's music, Saul experiences relief from his distress. David becomes an instrument of care for the very man he will eventually replace, which reflects a deeper moral pattern in the biblical story.

At the same time, this situation serves a clear providential purpose. As V. Philips Long notes, David's introduction into Saul's court is not accidental. It places him in a position to observe royal leadership up close, learning both what to emulate and what to avoid.

David is described not only as a skilled musician but also as a capable and wise young man, "a man of valor," "prudent in speech," and one with whom "the LORD is" (1 Samuel 16:18). These qualities make him suitable for service in the royal court and explain why Saul accepts him.

This arrangement also highlights a subtle irony. David serves the king he is destined to replace, and does so faithfully. Rather than undermining Saul, he supports him in his weakness. This reinforces the biblical theme that leadership is grounded in character, not ambition.

From a theological perspective, this episode illustrates how God's purposes often unfold gradually. Saul remains on the throne for a time, while David is being formed in the background. The transition of power is prepared long before it becomes visible.

In summary, God allows David to help Saul as an act of mercy toward Saul, as a means of shaping David, and as part of a larger providential plan guiding the transition from one king to another.

Scholar:

There are several possible reasons why God permitted or arranged for David to help king Saul with his "spirit of distress" by playing soothing music to him, not least of which is God's gracious love even for a man he no longer endorsed as king.

That God no longer endorses Saul as the king (1 Samuel 16:14) is no reason to think God lacks any mercy towards Saul in his mental distress, a divine mercy of which David can be seen as an instrument when he's called to minister to Saul by playing the lyre. Moreover, due to his skill in playing the lyre:

David ended up serving the very man whom he would replace Seeing that Saul was suffering, the servants of Saul encouraged him to call a musician whose playing of the lyre could bring relief. And it just “so happened” . . . that one of the servants knew David would fit the bill (1 Sam. 16:15–18). Not only was David a good musician, but he was also a “man of valor,” a “man of war,” and one “prudent in speech” (v. 18). Given that Saul prized strength and valor, we are not surprised that Saul sent for David to serve him (vv. 19–23; see 14:52). Most importantly, the Lord was with David (16:18) We can see then the hand of God’s providence at work in David’s life. Saul would remain on the throne a while longer, but David became a member of Saul’s court where he could observe the ways of kings firsthand and learn how to - and how not to - lead the people of God. The Lord blessed David in his ministry to Saul, putting him in place to finally sit on God’s throne (1 Sam. 16:23).³⁵¹

Q5: Who were the Philistines?

A5:

Short:

The Philistines were likely migrants from the Aegean region, possibly Crete. They settled along the southern coast of Canaan around the 12th century B.C.E. They formed a distinct, technologically advanced culture that often conflicted with Israel.

Summary:

The Philistines were a non-Semitic people group who settled along the Mediterranean coast of Canaan around the beginning of the 12th century B.C.E., during the wider movement of the so-called “Sea Peoples.” Many scholars connect their origins to the Aegean world, particularly Crete.

Recent research, including DNA studies, supports this connection. As Megan Sauter notes, genetic and archaeological evidence suggests that at least part of the Philistine population migrated from the Aegean, bringing elements of Minoan or Mycenaean culture with them. However, over time they mixed with local populations and developed a hybrid identity.

The Philistines established themselves in a pentapolis of major cities: Ashdod, Ashkelon, Ekron, Gath, and Gaza. Excavations at these sites reveal a distinct material culture, including unique pottery styles, architectural forms, and dietary habits, such as the consumption of pork, which set them apart from their Israelite neighbors.

Religiously, they were polytheists. Their gods included Dagon, Ashtoreth, and Baal-Zebub, each associated with different cities and functions. Archaeological evidence and biblical references indicate that they sometimes carried cultic objects or symbols of their gods into battle.

They also appear to have had a technological edge, particularly in metallurgy. As Trude Dothan observes, early iron tools and weapons in the region are often associated with Philistine sites, suggesting they may have controlled or advanced iron production during this period.

³⁵¹ Ligonier Ministries, “David’s Ministry to Saul.” <https://learn.ligonier.org/devotionals/davids-ministry-to-saul>.

Throughout the Iron Age, the Philistines were a major regional power and frequent adversaries of Israel, featuring prominently in the stories of Samson, Saul, and David. Their military organization and urban centers indicate a well-structured society.

Over time, however, their independence declined. They came under the control of larger empires, including the Assyrians, Egyptians, and Babylonians, eventually losing their distinct identity.

In summary, the Philistines were an Aegean-influenced people who established a powerful and culturally distinct society in Canaan, playing a central role in the historical and biblical landscape of the early Iron Age.

Scholar:

The Philistines were a non-Semitic people-group who had probably migrated from Crete to the Mediterranean coast of Canaan around the beginning of the 12th century B.C.E.

The Philistines were a non-Semitic people-group who had probably migrated from Crete and inhabited the Mediterranean coast of Canaan around the beginning of the 12th century B.C.E. Megan Sauter reports that:

new DNA evidence, coupled with the biblical and archaeological testimonies, suggests that the Philistines originated in Crete. That is not to say that the Philistines were a homogenous group, all coming from the Aegean world, but it seems that many Philistines did indeed migrate from there, bringing with them vestiges of Minoan culture.³⁵²

The Philistines were polytheists who worshiped three gods “Ashtoreth, Dagon, and Baal-Zebub - each of which had shrines in various cities (Judges 16:23; 1 Samuel 31:10; 2 Kings 1:2). Archaeological findings show that Philistine soldiers carried images of their gods into battle (2 Samuel 5:21).”³⁵³

Archaeological excavations at the Philistine cities of Ashdod, Ashkelon, Ekron, and Gath: “show that the Philistines had distinct pottery, weapons, tools, and houses. They also ate pork and had vast trade networks. Philistine culture flourished during the Iron Age (12th through sixth centuries B.C.E.).”³⁵⁴ Towards the end of this period, “the Philistines lost their autonomy . . . and paid tribute to the Assyrians, Egyptians, and then Babylonians . . .”³⁵⁵ Trude Dothan observes that:

The Bible (*1 Samuel 13:19; 17:7*) offers only tantalizing hints that the Philistines attempted to maintain a technological superiority over the Israelites in the production and distribution of metals, perhaps including iron. This suggestion is supported by the

³⁵² Megan Sauter, “Who Were the Philistines, and Where Did They Come From?” (April 16th, 2023) <https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/people-cultures-in-the-bible/who-were-philistines-where-did-they-come-from/>.

³⁵³ Got Questions, “Who Were the Philistines?” <https://www.gotquestions.org/Philistines.html>.

³⁵⁴ Megan Sauter, “Who Were the Philistines, and Where Did They Come From?” (April 16th, 2023) <https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/people-cultures-in-the-bible/who-were-philistines-where-did-they-come-from/>.

³⁵⁵ Megan Sauter, “Who Were the Philistines, and Where Did They Come From?” (April 16th, 2023) <https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/people-cultures-in-the-bible/who-were-philistines-where-did-they-come-from/>.

fact that most of the iron tools and weapons found in Israel before about 1000 B.C. come from sites that show signs of Philistine occupation or influence - for example, the iron knives from Tell Qasile and from the Tell el-Far'ah (South) Philistine tombs. . . . Moreover, iron did not become common in Israel until after the eclipse of Philistine culture in the tenth and ninth centuries.³⁵⁶

Q6: What is the “Efes-dammim”?

A6:

Short:

Efes-dammim refers to a border region between Israelite and Philistine territory. The name likely means “boundary of blood,” reflecting frequent conflict. It was a known battlefield area near Socoh in Judah.

Summary:

Efes-dammim (also called Pas-dammim in 1 Chronicles 11:13) refers to a geographical location on the border between Israelite and Philistine-controlled territory. It is mentioned in connection with the events leading up to David’s confrontation with Goliath.

“Efes-dammim” likely means “boundary of blood.” This reflects the reality that it was a contested frontier zone where repeated battles took place between the two groups. Geographically, the site is associated with the region near Socoh (or Sochoh) in Judah, roughly 20–25 kilometers southwest of Jerusalem. This area formed part of the Shephelah, a lowland region that served as a natural battleground between the coastal plains controlled by the Philistines and the hill country inhabited by the Israelites.

Scholar:

The “Ephes-dammim” refers to the boarder territory between the land controlled by the Philistines and the land controlled by the Israelites.

In *The Legacy of Adam* the Efes-dammim is portrayed as a river. However, according to the Pulpit Commentary:

The Philistine camp was at Ephes-dammim, called Pas-dammim in 1 Chronicles 11:13. The best explanation of the word gives as its meaning the boundary of blood, so called from the continual fighting which took place there upon the borders.³⁵⁷

With reference to 1 Chronicles 11:13, the Pulpit Commentary says:

Pas-dammim was the scene of frequent conflicts with the Philistines, and was the spot where they were encamped at the time of Goliath’s challenge to Israel. It was near Shocoh, or Soech, in Judah, some fourteen miles south-west of Jerusalem.³⁵⁸

³⁵⁶ Trude Dothan, “What We Know About the Philistines.” (BAR, 1982)

<https://library.biblicalarchaeology.org/article/what-we-know-about-the-philistines/>.

³⁵⁷ https://biblehub.com/commentaries/pulpit/1_samuel/17.htm.

³⁵⁸ https://biblehub.com/commentaries/pulpit/1_chronicles/11.htm.

Recommended Resources for Episode 11

Edward Oyetunde Adeloje, et al. “‘An Evil Spirit from the Lord Troubled Him’: A Psychological Examination of the Life of King Saul.” <https://ijrpr.com/uploads/V3ISSUE11/IJRPR7829.pdf>

Trude Dothan, “What We Know About the Philistines.” (BAR, 1982)
<https://library.biblicalarchaeology.org/article/what-we-know-about-the-philistines/>

Dave Miller, “Did God Send an Evil Spirit upon Saul?” <https://apologeticspress.org/did-god-send-an-evil-spirit-upon-saul-1278/>

Megan Sauter, “Who Were the Philistines, and Where Did They Come From?” (April 16th, 2023)
<https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/people-cultures-in-the-bible/who-were-philistines-where-did-they-come-from/>

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Williams, Peter S. “Do Angels Really Exist?” <http://www.bethinking.org/christian-beliefs/do-angels-really-exist>

Gallagher, Richard. *Demonic Foes: My Twenty-Five Years as a Psychiatrist Investigating Possessions, Diabolic Attacks, and the Paranormal* (HarperOne, 2020)

Guthrie, Shandon L. *Gods of This World: A Philosophical Discussion and Defense of Christian Demonology* (Wipf & Stock, 2018)

V.P. Long, *1 and 2 Samuel (Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary)*. (Zondervan, 2016)

Episode 12: The Mocking

Q1: Why doesn't *The Legacy of Adam* include the story about Saul (who is known in the Qur'an as "Talut") giving his army a drinking test at a river?

A1:

Short:

The story appears in the Qur'an, not in the Bible.

A similar test exists in Judges, but it is linked to Gideon, not Saul.

The most likely explanation is that the Qur'anic account reflects a conflation of earlier traditions.

Summary:

The story of Saul (Talut) testing his army at a river appears in Qur'an 2:249, but it is not part of the biblical narrative. Since *The Legacy of Adam* follows the biblical account, this episode is not included.

Interestingly, there is a closely parallel story in the Old Testament, but it involves Gideon, not Saul. In Judges 7:4–8, God tests Gideon's army by observing how the men drink water, reducing the army to a small, chosen group. The similarity between the two accounts is striking.

It is theoretically possible that two similar events occurred independently. However, from a historical-critical perspective, this is considered less likely. The Qur'an was written in the 7th century C.E., over a thousand years after the events it describes, whereas the biblical texts are much closer in time to the period they portray.

For scholars who do not assume the Qur'an to be divine revelation, the simplest explanation, following Occam's razor, is that the Qur'anic account reflects a blending or adaptation of earlier biblical traditions, particularly the Gideon narrative.

There are also additional differences between the Qur'anic and biblical accounts of Saul that raise historical questions. For example, the Qur'an presents the Israelites as requesting a king in order to fight their enemies, whereas the Bible describes them as already engaged in ongoing conflicts under leaders like the Judges (1 Samuel 7–8).

Similarly, the Qur'an links Saul's kingship with the return of the Ark, while in the biblical account, the Ark had already been returned prior to Saul's rise to power (1 Samuel 6–7).

Another notable detail is that in the Qur'anic version, Saul explains the terms of the test beforehand. As Jochen Katz points out, this removes the element of genuine testing seen in Judges, where the behavior of the soldiers reveals their character without prior instruction.

In summary, the river test is excluded because it is not part of the biblical tradition and is best understood, from a historical perspective, as a later adaptation of an earlier narrative about Gideon rather than a separate historical event involving Saul.

Scholar:

The story about Saul giving his army a drinking test at a river is not from the Biblical tradition, but is a story that appears in Sura 2:249 of the Qur'an, which is probably based on a different Old Testament narrative about Gideon.

According to the Qur'an (2:249):

When Saul marched forth with his army, he cautioned: "Allah will test you with a river. So whoever drinks 'his fill' from it is not with me, and whoever does not taste it - except a sip from the hollow of his hands - is definitely with me." They all drank 'their fill' except for a few! When he and the 'remaining' faithful with him crossed the river, they said, "Now we are no match for Goliath and his warriors." But those 'believers' who were certain they would meet Allah reasoned, "How many times has a small force vanquished a mighty army by the Will of Allah! And Allah is 'always' with the steadfast."³⁵⁹

The Legacy of Adam does not depict this story because it is not part of the Biblical account.

There is a very similar story in the Old Testament book of Judges 7:4-5, which recounts an event under the leadership of Gideon several generations before Saul's day. It is of course possible for two similar events to happen in history, and a mere absence of evidence in one historical source does not contradict evidence in another historical source. However, the seventh century C.E. Qur'an cannot reasonably be accepted as "a historical source" for events in the eleventh century B.C.E. by anyone who doesn't presuppose that it is a divine revelation. Occam's razor will lead anyone who doesn't presuppose the revelatory status of Qur'an to suspect that the Qur'an's story about Saul giving his army a drinking test is probably based on a conflation with the Old Testament narrative about Gideon.

This conclusion also follows from the fact that the much later Qur'an contradicts numerous aspects of the Old Testament's account of Saul's reign. In the Qur'an the Israelites "asked him to appoint a king over them so that they could fight their enemies under his command"³⁶⁰ (see Sura 2:246), but under the leaderships of Moses, Joshua and then the Judges, they had already been fighting their enemies (especially the Midianites and the Philistines) long before requested a king (See the book of Joshua, the book of Judges and 1 Samuel 7, the chapter right before they ask for a king, where Samuel leads them in a victorious battle against the Philistines). Again, the Qur'an says the return of the Ark to the Israelites signalled Allah's election of Saul as king. While the Ark was captured at some time by the Philistines (1 Samuel 5), it had been returned *before* Saul became king (see (1 Samuel 6 & 10). According to 1 Samuel 7:2, the Ark had returned years before the events of chapter 7, and only afterwards do Israel ask for a king (1 Samuel 8:1-5).

Indeed, when one thinks through the narrative offered by Sura 2:249, it seems odd that Saul *explains* to his troops the conditions of the test he puts them through! As Jochen Katz comments:

the Qur'an loses the whole point of the testing and separating of men, when Talut supposedly tells his men the terms of the test *before they drink*. As such it becomes an act of open disobedience instead of means of separating out the soldiers chosen by God . . . as in Judges 7:4-8.³⁶¹

³⁵⁹ <https://Qur'an.com/2?startingVerse=249>.

³⁶⁰ Ibn Al Kathir, <https://Qur'anx.com/tafsirs/2.246>.

³⁶¹ Jochen Katz, "The Story of Talut: Saul, Gideon, David and Goliath." <https://answering-islam.org/Qur'an/Sources/talut.html>.

Q2: How tall was Goliath?

A2:

Short:

Goliath was likely between about 7 and 9 feet tall.

Different ancient manuscripts give different heights.

Most modern scholars favor a height around 6'9" to 7'8", though taller is possible.

Summary:

The height of Goliath depends on which ancient textual tradition one follows. In the Masoretic Text (the traditional Hebrew Bible), 1 Samuel 17:4 describes Goliath as “six cubits and a span,” which would place him roughly between 8.5 and 10 feet tall, depending on how the cubit is calculated.

However, earlier textual witnesses tell a different story. The Septuagint (Greek translation) and the Dead Sea Scrolls manuscript 4QSama both record Goliath’s height as “four cubits and a span.” This would place him closer to 6'9" to 7'0" using standard estimates.

As J. Daniel Hays notes, these earlier sources are often considered more reliable in this case, leading many modern scholars to favor the shorter reading.

Even so, the exact height remains uncertain because the length of a “cubit” was not standardized. Estimates vary, but around 18 inches is often used as an average, with some shorter or longer variants.

Some scholars, such as Jeff Chadwick, calculate a height of around 7 feet 8 inches based on detailed research into ancient measurement systems. Others, like Clyde E. Billington, suggest that even the taller reading could place Goliath just under 9 feet when using smaller cubits.

Importantly, individuals of comparable size have existed in modern history. Robert Wadlow reached 8 feet 11 inches, demonstrating that such stature, while rare, is possible.

Claims that Goliath suffered from severe visual impairment are more speculative. For example, interpretations that he was “seeing double” are not well supported linguistically, as the biblical text likely uses a figure of speech.

In summary, while older interpretations imagined Goliath as nearly 10 feet tall, current scholarship tends to place him more conservatively between about 7 and 9 feet, still making him an exceptionally large and intimidating warrior.

Scholar:

Goliath (whom the Qur’an calls “Jalut”) probably stood either about seven foot tall, or somewhere between eight and nine foot tall.

According to 1 Samuel 17:4: “there came out from the camp of the Philistines a champion named Goliath, of Gath, whose height was six cubits and a span.” Older commentaries on this verse reckon Goliath’s height at between some eight foot five inches and ten and a half foot tall, with most concluding Goliath was about nine foot, nine inches tall. More recent research on the lengths of different types of “cubit” in the ancient world suggests Goliath was either about seven foot tall, or somewhere between eight and nine foot tall.

Theologian J. Daniel Hays points out that:

in the major Septuagint (LXX) manuscripts Goliath's height is given as "four cubits and a span," which puts him at [about] 6'9". . . . only one large substantial manuscript of 1-2 Samuel was discovered [at Qumran], referred to as 4QSama and in this manuscript, by far our oldest Hebrew manuscript of this text, Goliath is listed as four cubits and a span . . .³⁶²

Hays notes that "defining the precise modern equivalent of the biblical cubit with certainty is difficult because of the lack of standardization in the ancient world most of the serious discussions regarding the length of the cubit underscore that 18 inches is our best approximate average, but that the precise length represented by the term 'cubit' throughout the ancient world varied."³⁶³ Jeff Chadwick (of BYU): "accepts the reading of four cubits and a span. Using the measurements for the cubit and span that he has determined in seven years of intensive on-the-spot research, that comes out to 7 feet 8 inches."³⁶⁴

Clyde E. Billington harmonizes the MT and LXX heights by distinguishing between royal and common cubits: "Assuming a 16 1/2 inch cubit . . . would indicate that, according to the 6-cubit [Masoretic Text] Goliath was about 8 feet 11 inches tall . . ."³⁶⁵ Taking Goliath's reported stature as a round figure (the use of round figures is a common practice in the biblical text), Billington reckons: "It is nearly certain that [Goliath] was not 9 feet tall. But, it is likely that he was over 8 feet tall, and he may have been as tall as 8 feet 7 inches."³⁶⁶ Moreover, Billington suggests that "David may have measured Goliath with his helmet still on, and this would shrink Goliath's height some."³⁶⁷

Medical geneticists Deirdre E. Donnelly and Patrick J. Morrison argue that: "The biblical giant Goliath has an identifiable family tree suggestive of autosomal dominant inheritance. We suggest that he had a hereditary pituitary disorder possibly due to the AIP gene, causing early onset and familial acromegaly or gigantism."³⁶⁸ They note the possibility that a pituitary tumour could end up pressing on Goliath's optic chiasm, resulting in "visual disturbance due to pressure on his optic nerve," making it "difficult for him to see the stone in his lateral vision."³⁶⁹ They also note that: "Pituitary giants look impressive in terms of stature, but may not have speed and agility to match their perceived strength."³⁷⁰ However, it seems unlikely that Goliath suffered from such side-effects.

³⁶² J. Daniel Hays, "Reconsidering the Height of Goliath." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, http://www.davidacook.com/uploads/1/0/8/8/10887248/reconsidering_the_height_of_goliath.pdf.

³⁶³ J. Daniel Hays, "The Height of Goliath: A Response to Billington." *JETS* 50/3 (September 2007) 509–16, https://etsjets.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/files_JETS-PDFs_50_50-3_JETS_50-3_509-516_Hays.pdf.

³⁶⁴ Dave Armstrong, "How Tall Was Goliath?" *National Catholic Register* (2021), <https://www.ncregister.com/blog/how-tall-was-goliath#:~:text=However%2C%20the%20discovery%20of%20the,around%206'9%E2%80%9D%E2%80%A6%E2%80%9D>.

³⁶⁵ Clyde E. Billington, "Goliath and the Exodus Giants: How Tall Were They?" https://etsjets.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/files_JETS-PDFs_50_50-3_JETS_50-3_489-508_Billington.pdf.

³⁶⁶ Clyde E. Billington, "Goliath and the Exodus Giants: How Tall Were They?" https://etsjets.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/files_JETS-PDFs_50_50-3_JETS_50-3_489-508_Billington.pdf.

³⁶⁷ Clyde E. Billington, "Goliath and the Exodus Giants: How Tall Were They?" https://etsjets.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/files_JETS-PDFs_50_50-3_JETS_50-3_489-508_Billington.pdf.

³⁶⁸ Deirdre E Donnelly & Patrick J. Morrison, "Hereditary Gigantism-the biblical giant Goliath and his brothers." *The Ulster Medical Journal*, May 2014, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC4113151/>.

³⁶⁹ Deirdre E Donnelly & Patrick J. Morrison, "Hereditary Gigantism-the biblical giant Goliath and his brothers." *The Ulster Medical Journal*, May 2014, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC4113151/>.

³⁷⁰ Deirdre E Donnelly & Patrick J. Morrison, "Hereditary Gigantism-the biblical giant Goliath and his brothers." *The Ulster Medical Journal*, May 2014, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC4113151/>.

Malcolm Gladwell suggests that Goliath’s taunt, “Am I a dog that you should come to me with sticks?” (1 Samuel 17:43) is evidence he was seeing double. However, the Hebrew of this verse is probably “a plural of contempt”:

Some English translations say “sticks,” because that is how the sentence works best in English [though some English translations do use the singular]. French translations use the singular “stick.” It’s a figure of speech, not a sign Goliath was cross eyed and seeing double.³⁷¹

1 Samuel 17 presents Goliath as an experienced, “champion” warrior (1 Samuel 17:4 & 33), equipped with an impressive array of weaponry and armour (including a helmet and large shield), upon whom the Philistine’s are willing to place their bet for success through one-on-one “representative warfare.”

According to *Guinness World Records*, the tallest human in modern history was Robert Wadlow of the United States (1918–1940), who stood at 8 foot 11.1 inches (272 cm) when he died (with no sign he’d stopped growing): “His great size and his continued growth in adulthood were due to hypertrophy of his pituitary gland, which results in an abnormally high level of human growth hormone . . .”³⁷²

Fig. Robert Wadlow (1918 – 1940).³⁷³



James M. Rochford observes that:

Several people throughout history have grown to extreme heights as a result of gigantism (e.g. Potsdam Giants [i.e. 18th century Prussian infantry regiment], [18th century Swedish/Finnish giant] Daniel Cajanus [c. 7 foot 8], [wrestler and actor] Andre the Giant [7 foot 2], Robert Wadlow [8 foot 11.1], John Middleton [a 17th

³⁷¹ CatholicBridge.com, “David and Goliath, Underdogs, Misfits, and the Art of Battling Giants.” <https://www.catholicbridge.com/catholic/malcolm-gladwell-david-goliath-ted-talk-youtube.php>.

³⁷² Robert Wadlow, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Wadlow.

³⁷³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Wadlow#/media/File:Robert_Wadlow_postcard.jpg.

century English bodyguard who probably 7 foot 9]). While gigantism and acromegaly often lead to clumsy and uncoordinated people (e.g. Robert Wadlow), this is not always the case. The soldiers in the Potsdam Giants, Andre the Giant, and [wrestler] Big Show [7 foot] are all examples of incredibly strong and coordinated men who were highly athletic.³⁷⁴

Likewise, Olivier Rioux (b. 2006) is a Canadian college basketball player. In 2024, Rioux stood at 7 foot 9 inches (2.36 m) tall.³⁷⁵ American sideshow performer Willie Camper (1924-1943) was 8 foot 7 (262 cm) at his death.

Fig. Willie Camper (1924-1943)³⁷⁶



In short (!), contemporary scholarship suggests a height for Goliath of either about seven foot tall, or somewhere between about eight and nine foot tall.

Recommended Resources for Episode 12

Peter S. Williams, “United and Divided: Israel’s Kingdom from Judges to Exile.” (2025)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0r7f5SzeTI&t=7s>

YouTube Playlist, “King David.”
www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLQhh3qcwVEWjGWuucxuxxZbCVnt1cVBsB

³⁷⁴ James M. Rochford, “1 Samuel 17: David and Goliath.” <https://www.evidenceunseen.com/bible-difficulties-2/ot-difficulties/1-samuel-2-chronicles/1-samuel-17-david-and-goliath/>.

³⁷⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Olivier_Rioux.

³⁷⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Willie_Camper.

- Got Questions, “What does it mean that the battle is the Lord’s (1 Samuel 17:47)?”
<https://www.gotquestions.org/battle-is-the-Lords.html>
- Wikipedia, “Daniel Cajanus.” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daniel_Cajanus
- Wikipedia, “John Middleton (giant)” [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Middleton_\(giant\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Middleton_(giant))
- Robert Wadlow, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Wadlow
- James M. Arlandson, “Saul and Gideon: revelation or error? An analysis of Sura 2:249.” https://answering-islam.org/Authors/Arlandson/saul_gideon.htm
- Dave Armstrong, “How Tall Was Goliath?” *National Catholic Register* (2021),
<https://www.ncregister.com/blog/how-tall-was-goliath#:~:text=However%2C%20the%20discovery%20of%20the.around%206%9%E2%80%9D%E2%80%A6%E2%80%9D>
- Clyde E. Billington, “Goliath and the Exodus Giants: How Tall Were They?” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, https://etsjets.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/files_JETS-PDFs_50_50-3_JETS_50-3_489-508_Billington.pdf
- Deirdre E Donnelly & Patrick J. Morrison, “Hereditary Gigantism-the biblical giant Goliath and his brothers.” *The Ulster Medical Journal* (May 2014), <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC4113151/>
- J. Daniel Hays, “Reconsidering the Height of Goliath” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 48/4 (December 2005) 701-14,
http://www.davidacook.com/uploads/1/0/8/8/10887248/reconsidering_the_height_of_goliath.pdf
- J. Daniel Hays, “The Height of Goliath: A Response to Billington.” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 50/3 (September 2007) 509–16,
https://etsjets.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/files_JETS-PDFs_50_50-3_JETS_50-3_509-516_Hays.pdf
- Jochen Katz, “The Story of Talut: Saul, Gideon, David and Goliath.” <https://answering-islam.org/Qur'an/Sources/talut.html>
- James M. Rochford, “1 Samuel 17: David and Goliath.” <https://www.evidenceunseen.com/bible-difficulties-2/ot-difficulties/1-samuel-2-chronicles/1-samuel-17-david-and-goliath/>
- Megan Sauter, “Who Were the Philistines, and Where Did They Come From?” (April 16th, 2023)
<https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/people-cultures-in-the-bible/who-were-philistines-where-did-they-come-from/>
- Jeffrey R. Zorn, “Reconsidering Goliath: An Iron Age I Philistine Chariot Warrior.” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, November 2010, No. 360 (November 2010), pp. 1-22,
<https://ecommons.cornell.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/9f0a9cd9-7d4f-4bac-82b9-9c4d2e6a3a19/content>
- V. P. Long, *1 and 2 Samuel (Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary)* (Zondervan, 2016)
- John H. Walton, et al. *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (IVP Academic, 2000)

Episode 13: The Rocks

Q1: Is the biblical story about David fighting and defeating Goliath historically credible?

A1:

Short:

Yes, the story is historically plausible.

It fits known ancient warfare practices and geography.

Archaeology also supports the existence of David and his setting.

Summary:

The story of David and Goliath is historically credible on several levels.

First, the setting and details match what we know of the ancient Near East. The idea of “representative warfare,” where champions fight on behalf of armies, is well attested. Pre-battle taunts and challenges were also common in that culture.

The geography in 1 Samuel 17 accurately reflects the Elah Valley region.

Key locations like Socoh, Azekah, and Gath align with archaeological findings.

The book of Samuel itself shows signs of early composition. It reflects a time before Assyria and Babylon became dominant powers. It also accurately describes Philistine control of metal technology in that period.

Archaeology supports the existence of David as a historical figure. The Tel Dan Stele refers to the “House of David,” confirming a Davidic dynasty. Additional inscriptions, such as the Mesha Stele, likely reference David as well.

The name “Goliath” also fits the cultural and linguistic context of Philistine society. An inscription from Gath shows similar names from the same period.

Goliath’s size, while unusual, is not impossible. Cases of gigantism are well documented in both ancient and modern times.

A sling, like David’s weapon, could be deadly even against armored opponents.

In summary, the story fits its historical, cultural, and archaeological context well. While dramatic, it does not require legendary assumptions to be credible.

Scholar:

The biblical story of David defeating Goliath contains many indications that it is historically credible.

The story of David and Goliath fighting as the champions of the Philistine and Israelite armies is historically plausible.

The internal evidence indicates that the book of Samuel was composed in or soon after the tenth century B.C.E. (albeit with some later editing). Old Testament scholar V. Philips Long argues there are “good reasons to assume that the bulk of the book was composed early, perhaps during the reign of David’s son Solomon in the tenth century.”³⁷⁷ He points out that:

³⁷⁷ V. Philips Long, *1 and 2 Samuel: An Introduction And Commentary (Tyndale Old Testament Commentary)* (2020), 25.

the book of Samuel makes no reference to the major powers, Assyria and Babylonia, that begin to dominate in the ninth century; Samuel's description of kingship in 1 Samuel 8 is appropriate to its setting but not to later periods when monarchy was more developed; geographic details and war strategies are accurately described; "one cannot find in the book any significant influence of the Aramaic language that later became an international means of correspondence" . . . the Philistine monopoly on "metal weaponry and agricultural tools" mentioned in 1 Samuel 13: 19–23 existed only in the eleventh century BC after which Israel had such items; references in 1 Samuel 27 to settlements in the Negev wealthy enough to yield spoils of war make little sense after the tenth century, as they were destroyed during Shishak's campaign in 926 BC, after which the Negev hills "remained desolate until the Persian Period".³⁷⁸

Moreover, theologian Scott Hann points out that: "the Books of Samuel do little to idealize the personalities of Samuel and David but relate their sins and shortcomings with a warts-and-all honesty that inspires confidence in the objectivity and antiquity of their sources."³⁷⁹

The story of David and Goliath in 1 Samuel 17 portrays a practice from the ancient world known as "representative warfare." As theologian R. F. Youngblood explains, this sort of one-on-one fight was:

an attempt at representative warfare effected by means of a contest of champions Whether this kind of radical limitation on warfare is ever sincerely accepted by either side remains in itself a matter of dispute It is clear, however, that contests of champions (to be carefully distinguished from duels, which are individual combats not representing larger groups) such as that between David and Goliath . . . were not uncommon in ancient times . . .³⁸⁰

Both the Israelites and Philistines would have acknowledged divine intervention in warfare:

The idea that God [or gods] fought as a partner in battle was a common theme in the ancient Near East. Victories were attributable to deities in both Egypt and Mesopotamia it was recognized in these societies that the gods also participated through the use of individual agents who had been commissioned to do the god's bidding in battle. This aspect is clearly seen in contemporary Greek literature as the various gods aid and protect their favourites in the *Illiad*.³⁸¹

The exchange of pre-battle insults between Goliath and David reflects "a common rhetoric in these types of confrontations that is found throughout the Near East."³⁸²

We have several pieces of archaeological evidence demonstrating the existence of David. For example, the 9th century B.C.E Tel Dan Stela references the kingdom of Judah as "the house of David." Eric Cline, a Professor of classics, anthropology and history at George Washington University, explains that: "the finding of this inscription brought an end to the debate and settled the question of whether David was an actual historical person . . ."³⁸³

³⁷⁸ V. P. Long, *1 and 2 Samuel: An Introduction And Commentary (Tyndale Old Testament Commentary)*, 26.

³⁷⁹ Scott Hann, *The First and Second Book of Samuel: Ignatius Catholic Study* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2016), 21.

³⁸⁰ R. F. Youngblood, *1 and 2 Samuel (The Expositor's Bible Commentary)* (Zondervan Academic, 2017), 357.

³⁸¹ John H. Walton et al, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (IVP Academic, 2000), 308.

³⁸² John H. Walton et al, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (IVP Academic, 2000), 309.

³⁸³ Eric Cline, *Biblical Archaeology: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2009), 60.

Fig. The Tel Dan Stela, with the “House of David” highlighted
(https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:JRSLM_300116_Tel_Dan_Stele_01.jpg).



As Christopher Eames reports:

after much examination and questioning, retranslating and re-questioning, the Tel Dan Stele has been accepted as a genuine piece And while it is the most certain of all references to King David, there *are* two other artifacts that, with near certainty, make similar mention of the king.³⁸⁴

One of these artifacts is the Mesha Stele:

This victory stone belonged to another man mentioned in the Bible—the Moabite King Mesha. This stone celebrated Moab’s rebellion against the king of Israel around the middle of the ninth century B.C.E (2 Kings 3). Toward the base of the inscription, the same phrase used on the Tel Dan Stele can be found: “house of David.” Although, due to damage, the initial “D” is missing (i.e., BT[D]WD). According to epigrapher and philologist André Lemaire, who carefully studied the artifact, any reading other than “David” would be an awkward fit.³⁸⁵

³⁸⁴ Christopher Eames, “David: The True Story of History’s Most Legendary King,” <https://armstronginstitute.org/25-david-the-true-story-of-historys-most-legendary-king>.

³⁸⁵ Christopher Eames, “David: The True Story of History’s Most Legendary King,” <https://armstronginstitute.org/25-david-the-true-story-of-historys-most-legendary-king>.

Fig. The Mesha Stele

(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mesha_Stele#/media/File:P1120870_Louvre_st%C3%A8le_de_M%C3%A9sha_AO5066_rwk.JPG)



The final artifact of relevance is:

an Egyptian inscription dating to around the end of the 10th century B.C.E., which describes a part of Israel's Negev desert region as the "Heights of David." Leading Egyptologist Kenneth Kitchen translated the Egyptian inscription as H[Y]DBT DWT. The first word indicates "heights," or "highlands." The second word presents more of a problem at first glance. The name "David" is properly written on the first two inscriptions as DWD. So what of DWT? Kitchen came across a sixth-century A.D. inscription from Ethiopia, which referred to David as *Davit*. Hence, for this general region, there is a precedent for the name DWT, Davit. As with the Mesha Stele, "David" seems to be the best-fitting translation. Naming this area of the Negev as the "Heights of David" also makes sense because it was in the area to which David fled and commanded while on the run from King Saul.³⁸⁶

This Egyptian Topographical List dates to 925 B.C., around 45 years after David's death, which as Kitchen notes is "within living memory of the man."³⁸⁷

David's claim that as a shepherd he'd had to kill "Both the lion and the bear" (YLT) is not undercut by the absence of such animals in present day Palestine, since:

³⁸⁶ Christopher Eames, "David: The True Story of History's Most Legendary King."

<https://armstronginstitute.org/25-david-the-true-story-of-historys-most-legendary-king>.

³⁸⁷ K. A. Kitchen, *On The Reliability of the Old Testament* (Eerdmans, 2003), 93.

excavations in Palestine have uncovered both the lion and the bear in Iron Age levels (early first millennium B.C.). Bears were typically found in the hilly wooded areas of the central hill country, where caves and forests provided their habitat. Similarly the lion would have made its home in the central hills, which were more heavily forested during this period.³⁸⁸

As a shepherd, David would likely have been well versed in using both his shepherd's staff and his shepherd's sling. According to a 2017 forensic science paper on "The traumatic potential of a projectile shot from a sling":

projectiles shot from unconventional weapons such as a sling have serious traumatic potential for unprotected human beings and can cause fractures of the trunk, limb and facial skull bone, causing blunt trauma of moderate to critical severity, depending on the weight and shape of the projectile and on the distance from the source of danger.³⁸⁹

Of course, Goliath was wearing armour and was equipped with a shield.

In 2005, excavations in the Philistine city of Gath (Tell es-Safi), revealed a Semitic inscription dating to the 10th to mid 9th centuries BC, bearing two Indo-European names that resembled "Goliath." Gath was "Goliath's hometown, located five miles due west of Azekah. The first of two names on the sherd is *'lwt*, which excavator Aren Maeir notes is similar to, and indeed may be the equivalent of, the name Goliath . . ."³⁹⁰ At the very least, as Maeir says, this inscription: "shows us that David and Goliath's story reflects the cultural reality of the time."³⁹¹

Having compared the biblical description of Goliath with a wide variety of extra-biblical sources, Jeffrey R. Zorn argues that:

it makes a great deal of sense to view Goliath as a Canaanized Philistine chariot warrior equipped with just the sort of panoply that one might well expect in this region in this era. His equipment shows that he was not some common soldier dragooned from the ranks for this combat. Clearly he was an elite warrior, perhaps one of the most well equipped in the Philistine army (fitting, indeed, for the army's champion in a ritual duel), and the elite warriors of this era came from the maryannu chariot warrior class.³⁹²

Contemporary scholarship suggests a height for Goliath somewhere between 6 foot 9 and 8 foot 11 inches tall (see Episode 12, Question 2), in a culture where the average man stood around five and a half feet tall. He may have had "a hereditary pituitary disorder . . . causing early onset and familial acromegaly or gigantism."³⁹³

³⁸⁸ John H. Walton et al, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (IVP Academic, 2000), 308.

³⁸⁹ Igor Borovsky et al, "The traumatic potential of a projectile shot from a sling." *Forensic Science International* (Volume 272, March 2017), 10-15, <https://dacemirror.sci-hub.se/journal-article/a1838c1c341c07984238b74b040f0086/borovsky2016.pdf>.

³⁹⁰ R. F. Youngblood, *1 and 2 Samuel (The Expositor's Bible Commentary)* (Zondervan Academic, 2017), 365.

³⁹¹ <https://faithfulphilosophy.wordpress.com/2017/07/09/the-life-of-david/>.

³⁹² Jeffrey R. Zorn, "Reconsidering Goliath: An Iron Age I Philistine Chariot Warrior." *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, November 2010, No. 360 (November 2010), 1-22, <https://ecommons.cornell.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/9f0a9cd9-7d4f-4bac-82b9-9c4d2e6a3a19/content>.

³⁹³ Deirdre E Donnelly & Patrick J. Morrison, "Hereditary Gigantism-the biblical giant Goliath and his brothers." *The Ulster Medical Journal*, May 2014, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC4113151/>.

Perhaps the most famous modern example of someone with a pituitary disorder was Robert Wadlow of the United States (1918–1940), who stood at 8 foot 11.1 inches (272 cm) when he died (with no sign he'd stopped growing): “His great size and his continued growth in adulthood were due to hypertrophy of his pituitary gland, which results in an abnormally high level of human growth hormone . . .”³⁹⁴

Fig. Robert Wadlow (1918 – 1940).³⁹⁵



Geneticists Deirdre E Donnelly & Patrick J. Morrison observe that “Pituitary giants look impressive in terms of stature, but may not have speed and agility to match their perceived strength.”³⁹⁶ Having such a disorder *could* have caused Goliath to lose some of his peripheral vision, or to develop double vision. However, it seems unlikely that Goliath suffered such debilitating side-effects.

Goliath is presented in 1 Samuel 17 as an experienced, “champion” warrior (1 Samuel 17:4 & 33), equipped with an impressive array of weaponry and armour (including a helmet and large shield), upon whom the Philistine’s are willing to place their bet for success through one-on-one “representative warfare.” As James M. Rochford observes:

Several people throughout history have grown to extreme heights as a result of gigantism (e.g. Potsdam Giants [i.e. 18th century Prussian infantry regiment], [18th century Swedish/Finnish giant] Daniel Cajanus [c. 7 foot 8], [wrestler and actor] Andre the Giant [7 foot 2], Robert Wadlow [8 foot 11.1], John Middleton [a 17th century English bodyguard who probably 7 foot 9]). While gigantism and acromegaly often lead to clumsy and uncoordinated people (e.g. Robert Wadlow), this is not always the case. The soldiers in the Potsdam Giants, Andre the Giant, and [wrestler]

³⁹⁴ Robert Wadlow, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Wadlow.

³⁹⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Wadlow#/media/File:Robert_Wadlow_postcard.jpg.

³⁹⁶ Deirdre E Donnelly & Patrick J. Morrison, “Hereditary Gigantism—the biblical giant Goliath and his brothers.” *The Ulster Medical Journal*, May 2014, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC4113151/>.

Big Show [7 foot] are all examples of incredibly strong and coordinated men who were highly athletic.³⁹⁷

Likewise, Olivier Rioux (b. 2006) is a Canadian college basketball player. In 2024, Rioux stood at 7 foot 9 inches (2.36 m) tall.³⁹⁸ American sideshow performer Willie Camper (1924-1943) was 8 foot 7 (262 cm) at his death.

Fig. Willie Camper (1924-1943)³⁹⁹



There is a debate about where the original text of 1 Samuel intended its audience to understand that David hit Goliath with a stone flung from his shepherd's sling. V. Philips Long comments:

Where did David's well-aimed stone strike Goliath (v. 49): on the "forehead" (mēṣaḥ) or at the bronze greave (miṣḥâ) covering Goliath's shin (v. 6)? "Forehead" is the traditional understanding, but "greave" has been argued, given how similar the two words are in Hebrew (Deem 1978). Fokkelman (1986: 2.186) follows Deem in assuming that the stone entered just above the greave in the space necessary for walking and lodged between the greave and the shin, causing Goliath to fall forwards (v. 49) not backwards, as would likely have been the effect of a stone to the forehead.⁴⁰⁰

The socio-geographical details of the narrative accurately depict Israel in the Iron Age. Long notes that the first three verses of 1 Samuel 17:

map well onto the known topography of the Elah Valley (Wadi es-Sant), which lies some 12 miles west of Bethlehem. The Elah Valley was a major corridor descending

³⁹⁷ James M. Rochford, "1 Samuel 17: David and Goliath" <https://www.evidenceunseen.com/bible-difficulties-2/ot-difficulties/1-samuel-2-chronicles/1-samuel-17-david-and-goliath/>.

³⁹⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Olivier_Rioux.

³⁹⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Willie_Camper.

⁴⁰⁰ V. P. Long, *1 and 2 Samuel: An Introduction And Commentary (Tyndale Old Testament Commentary)*, 184.

from the Judean hill country westwards towards Philistine territory along the coast and was of great strategic importance. Sokoh lies to the south of the Elah Valley, almost 15 miles west of Bethlehem, while Azekah is 3 miles north-west of Sokoh. Gath (Goliath's home town; v. 4) is 5 miles west of Azekah.⁴⁰¹

Likewise, archaeologist Yosef Garfinkel and co-authors highlight “the basic and fascinating correspondence between the location of the important Philistine centers that emerges from archaeological-historical research and the geographical location of the biblical traditions.”⁴⁰² For example, the biblical story of David and Goliath relates how the Philistine army camped near the city of Socoh before retreating to the cities of Gath and Ekron after David killed Goliath:

If the story was written at the end of the 7th century BCE, during the Persian or Hellenistic period, when these cities no longer existed, its author would probably have noted Ashdod, Ashkelon, and Gaza as the cities from which the Philistine forces originated. It is thus clear that the biblical author had access to historical information originating in the 10th and 8th centuries BCE.⁴⁰³

Q2: Is the story about David killing Goliath contradicted by the claim in 2 Samuel 21:19 that “Elhanan . . . the Bethlehemite, struck down Goliath the Gittite . . .”?

A2:

Short:

The apparent contradiction can be explained in several plausible ways. Most likely, Elhanan killed Goliath's brother, not Goliath himself. Textual and scribal factors help explain the difference.

Summary:

At first glance, 2 Samuel 21:19 appears to say that Elhanan killed Goliath. This seems to contradict 1 Samuel 17, where David kills Goliath. However, there are several reasonable explanations.

First, the context shows these are different time periods. David kills Goliath while serving Saul, but Elhanan's battle occurs later, when David is king.

Second, 1 Chronicles 20:5 provides an important clarification. It states that Elhanan killed “Lahmi, the brother of Goliath.” This suggests that the Samuel text may contain a scribal issue. The Hebrew words for “Bethlehemite” and “Lahmi” look very similar. Scholars argue that a copying error could have caused confusion between these terms. Another likely error involves similar-looking Hebrew words meaning “brother of” and a grammatical marker. Taken together, these small textual shifts can explain how the wording changed.

It is also worth noting that ancient scribes did not always harmonize texts. This supports the idea that differences could arise accidentally rather than deliberately.

⁴⁰¹ V. P. Long, *1 and 2 Samuel: An Introduction And Commentary (Tyndale Old Testament Commentary)*, 177.

⁴⁰² Yosef Garfinkel, et al. *In The Footsteps Of King David: Revelations From An Ancient Biblical City* (Thames & Hudson, 2018), 16.

⁴⁰³ Yosef Garfinkel, et al. *In The Footsteps Of King David: Revelations From An Ancient Biblical City* (Thames & Hudson, 2018), 18.

A consistent reconstruction is that Elhanan killed Goliath's brother, not Goliath himself.

In summary, the passage does not require a contradiction. Textual transmission issues provide a plausible explanation for the difference.

Scholar:

There are a number of plausible ways to avoid the uncharitable reading of 2 Samuel 21:19 as contradicting the story about David killing Goliath earlier in the biblical book of Samuel.

According to 2 Samuel 21:19: "And there was again war with the Philistines at Gob, and Elhanan the son of Jaare-oregim, the Bethlehemite, struck down Goliath the Gittite, the shaft of whose spear was like a weaver's beam." (ESV). At first glance, this seem to contradict 1 Samuel 17. However, 1 and 2 Samuel are a single source (the "book" of Samuel was only later divided into two "books"), and it seems unlikely that the book of Samuel would have either been written, or accepted by others, with a glaring contradiction in it on such a significant issue. Indeed:

the context of 2 Samuel 21:19 makes it clear that it is describing an entirely separate event from David's slaying of Goliath in 1 Samuel 17:50. Second Samuel 21:11–14 puts the passage after the death of Saul, who was alive when David killed Goliath (1 Samuel 17:31–39, 55–58). Second Samuel 21:15–17 indicates that Elhanan killed "Goliath" when David was the king of Israel, not when he was a servant of King Saul.⁴⁰⁴

Consequently, we should avoid attributing a self-contradiction to the author/s of the book of Samuel if there is a plausible way to avoid doing so. According to theologian Edward D. Andrews, "the discrepancies between the accounts could be attributed to either a scribal error or the existence of two distinct Philistine warriors. In either case, these accounts do not necessarily contradict each other . . ." ⁴⁰⁵ Theologian Joyce G. Baldwin affirms that "in view of the textual problems, it is a precarious argument to insist that 2 Sa. 21:19 contradicts 1 Sa. 17."⁴⁰⁶

Interestingly, 1 Chronicles 20:5 states that ". . . Elhanan the son of Jair struck down Lahmi the brother of Goliath the Gittite." Actually, there could be some textual corruption in this text, which may have originally said ". . . Elhanan son of Jair the Bethlehemite killed the brother of Goliath the Gittite . . ." How do these puzzle pieces fit together? A detailed treatment of the textual issues here is given by Dr Kaspars Ozolins, Assistant Professor of Old Testament Interpretation at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary:

A comparison of [2 Samuel 21:19 and 1 Chronicles 20:5] raises two questions: First, who is the Israelite hero, and secondly, who is the Philistine giant?

⁴⁰⁴ Got Questions, "Who killed Goliath, David or Elhanan?" <https://www.gotquestions.org/Goliath-David-Elhanan.html#:~:text=Why%20the%20discrepancy?.article%20in%20Bible%20Study%20Magazine>.

⁴⁰⁵ Edward D. Andrews, "Resolving the Elhanan Enigma: A Close Examination of 2 Samuel 21:19 and 1 Chronicles 20:5" <https://christianpublishinghouse.co/2023/09/17/resolving-the-elhanan-enigma-a-close-examination-of-2-samuel-2119-and-1-chronicles-205/#:~:text=Apologist%20Dr.,Answers%20from%20Genesis%20to%20Revelation>.

⁴⁰⁶ Joyce Baldwin, *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries: 1 and 2 Samuel* (IVP, 1992), 286.

The first problem is somewhat easier to solve. Notice that the family name of the hero, Elhanan, differs slightly in both verses. The second half of a name is missing in 1 Chronicles 20:5: *’ōr³gîm*. This word actually means “weavers” and it is found at the end of both verses in Samuel and Chronicles as a descriptor of the spear carried by the giant whom Elhanan slew (“...the shaft of whose spear was like a weaver’s [*’ōr³gîm*] beam”). . . it is likely that Elhanan’s father (or ancestor) did not bear such a compound name and that this extra *’ōr³gîm* has crept into the text of Samuel by a process called *homoioteleuton* (a scribal error caused by visual oversight of two similar endings) . . .

. . . the identity of the Philistine giant, is harder to untangle. Because of the way the Hebrew text is laid out, this problem partly overlaps with the issue we just addressed: the identity of Elhanan. Notice that in Samuel, Elhanan is identified as a Bethlehemite, but not in Chronicles. Conversely, in Chronicles, the giant’s name is given as ‘Lahmi’, whereas in Samuel, this name is missing. Notice further that these two features occur in precisely the same position in the Hebrew text, and that both words look very similar: Chronicles has *lahmî* “Lahmi” (presumably the giant’s name), while Samuel has [*bêṭ*] *hallaḥmî* “[Beth-]lehemite”. The full form *bêṭ hallaḥmî* is technically called a gentilic (a place name assigned to an individual) and in a form of this type, the second half normally bears the definite article *ha-*.

These names leave us with three possibilities: (1) “Lahmi” really was the name of the Philistine giant, and therefore ‘Bethlehemite’ has later crept into the text of Samuel, (2) Elhanan really was a Bethlehemite, and therefore we have a scribal error at Chronicles (i.e., “Lahmi” wasn’t the name of the Philistine giant), or (3) both were true: Elhanan was a Bethlehemite, and “Lahmi” really was the name of the giant he slew.

. . . in 2 Samuel 23 (and in its parallel in 1 Chronicles 11), the same Elhanan shows up, and the text there explicitly mentions that he comes from Bethlehem. This is therefore very likely the same Elhanan as our giant-slaying hero. (Nowhere else in the Hebrew Bible do we see the name Elhanan appear.)

If Elhanan really was a Bethlehemite, then what should we make of the Philistine giant’s name “Lahmi”? Could it be a Philistine name? Although we don’t know much about the language(s) the Philistines spoke . . . it is likely that they were part of invading “Sea peoples” who entered the land of Israel in the late second millennium, BC. These were non-Semitic speaking peoples, yet it is interesting to note that the putative name “Lahmi” contains a sound (the “h”, phonetically /h/) which is very characteristic of Semitic languages yet is not found in other Ancient Near Eastern languages.

Let’s recall a few other things about this name: (1) it only occurs in the Chronicles parallel, (2) it occurs in precisely the same place that the word “[Beth-]lehemite” is found in the Samuel text, (3) it looks very similar in terms of its visual look in Hebrew (הלחמי vs. להמי) and even its sound (*hallaḥmî* vs. *lahmî*). On balance, these three factors should make us seriously consider the possibility that the name “Lahmi” has accidentally entered the text of Chronicles as a scribal confusion of the (second half of the) place-name “Bethlehemite”.

. . . the word *ṣṭ* (which has no equivalent in English) is a marker in Biblical Hebrew of the *direct object* (the word(s) which receive the action of a verb: “John hit *the ball*”). In the texts we’re looking at, the word *ṣṭ* precedes the name of the individual whom Elhanan killed. Notice that although it occurs in each verse, its placement in both differs. The *ṣṭ* of 2 Samuel 21:19 is paralleled by *’āḥî* “brother of” in Chronicles. Visually, both words look very similar in Hebrew (תא vs. אח), even

though they have very different meanings. Conversely, the $\tilde{e}t$ of 1 Chronicles 20:5 is paralleled by the very similar-sounding $b\tilde{e}t$ (“house of”), which occurs as the *first* half of the gentilic “Beth-[lehemite]” . . .

. . . the same three factors mentioned above are at play here: (1) $\check{a}h\hat{i}$ “brother of” is found only in Chronicles, whereas we find $\tilde{e}t$ (a sign of the direct object) in Samuel, (2) both $\tilde{e}t$ and $\check{a}h\hat{i}$ occur in the same place in the text when we align both verses, (3) both $\tilde{e}t$ (תא) and $\check{a}h\hat{i}$ (יחא) strikingly resemble each other visually. This same kind of *complementary distribution* should make us suspect that one of these words may be some kind of scribal alteration of the other. So was $\tilde{e}t$ deliberately changed to $\check{a}h\hat{i}$ “brother of” in Chronicles by some scribe in order to avoid an embarrassing contradiction? Or, instead, was this simply an accidental visual oversight, in which a scribe misread $\check{a}h\hat{i}$ (יחא) “brother of” as $\tilde{e}t$ (תא) in Samuel? We ought to favour the latter, for at least two reasons: (1) visually similar words are most naturally explained as accidental (*not* deliberate) scribal errors, (2) scribes who copied Samuel apparently were not bothered by the resulting contradiction . . . [Thus] one plausible option is that Elhanan the Bethlehemite actually killed the *brother* of Goliath, who himself was left unnamed. That this giant was unnamed should not be seen as something unusual, since the very next mini-episode in 2 Samuel 21:20–21 mentions another giant (this time slain by Jonathan the son of Shimei), who is likewise not given a name in the narrative.⁴⁰⁷

Recommended Resources for Episode 13

Peter S. Williams, “United and Divided: Israel’s Kingdom from Judges to Exile.” (2025)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0r7f5SzreTI&t=7s>

YouTube Playlist, “King David”

www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLQhh3qcvVEWjGWuucxuxxZbCVnt1cVBsB

Wikipedia, “Daniel Cajanus.” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daniel_Cajanus

Wikipedia, “John Middleton (giant).” [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Middleton_\(giant\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Middleton_(giant))

Robert Wadlow, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Wadlow

Ariella Deem, “‘. . . And the Stone Sank into His Forehead’: A Short Note on 1 Samuel XVII 49.” VT 28 (1978) 349–51, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1517043>

Christopher Eames, “David: The True Story of History’s Most Legendary King.”

<https://armstronginstitute.org/25-david-the-true-story-of-historys-most-legendary-king>

Benjamin J. M. Johnson, “Did David Bring a Gun to a Knife Fight? Literary and Historical Considerations in Interpreting David’s Victory over Goliath” *The Expository Times*, Volume 124, Issue 11,

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0014524613485519>

Jochen Katz, “The Story of Talut: Saul, Gideon, David and Goliath.” <https://answering-islam.org/Qur'an/Sources/talut.html>

Randy McCracken, “How David Killed Goliath: Are You Sure?”

<https://www.biblestudywithrandy.com/2015/01/david-killed-goliath-sure/>

Kaspars Ozolins, “Who killed Goliath? The puzzling text of 2 Samuel 21:19.” <https://textandcanon.org/who-really-killed-goliath/>

Gregory T. K. Wong, “Goliath’s Death and the Testament of Judah.” *Biblica* Vol. 91 (2010) 425-432, <https://www.bsw.org/biblica/vol-91-2010/goliath-s-death-and-the-testament-of-judah/451/>

⁴⁰⁷ Kaspars Ozolins, “Who killed Goliath? The puzzling text of 2 Samuel 21:19.” <https://textandcanon.org/who-really-killed-goliath/>.

Gregory T.K. Wong, "A Farewell to Arms: Goliath's Death as Rhetoric against Faith in Arms." *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 23:1 (2013): 43-55,
https://www.academia.edu/24921030/A_Farewell_to_Arms_Goliaths_Death_as_Rhetoric_against_Faith_in_Arms

V. P. Long, *1 and 2 Samuel (Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary)* (Zondervan, 2016)

John H. Walton et al, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (IVP Academic, 2000)

Episode 14: The Hate

Q1: Were David and Jonathan in a homosexual relationship?

A1:

Short:

There is no evidence in the biblical text that David and Jonathan had a homosexual relationship.

Their bond is best understood as a covenantal friendship and political allegiance. Modern readings might project categories onto a text where they do not belong.

Summary:

The relationship between David and Jonathan is described using strong emotional language. However, this reflects covenant loyalty, not sexual or romantic involvement.

In 1 Samuel 18:3, Jonathan makes a “covenant” with David. In the ancient Near East, this typically referred to political alliances or loyalty agreements.

Jonathan’s actions support this interpretation. He gives David his robe and weapons, symbolically recognizing him as the future king. This is a political act of submission and allegiance, not a romantic gesture.

The Hebrew word for “love” (ahavah) has a broad meaning. It can describe friendship, loyalty, family bonds, or covenant commitment. Nothing in the immediate context suggests sexual behavior.

David’s lament in 2 Samuel 1:26 is often cited. But saying Jonathan’s love was “greater than that of women” reflects loyalty and trust. David’s relationships with Saul’s daughters were politically complicated and unreliable. By contrast, Jonathan’s support was consistent and sacrificial.

Ancient Israelite culture also strongly prohibited homosexual acts. This makes such a relationship highly unlikely within the narrative’s own framework.

Jewish and early Christian interpreters consistently understood this as deep friendship.

In summary, the text presents a covenantal, political, and personal bond.

The idea of a homosexual relationship is a modern reinterpretation, not grounded in the text.

Scholar:

Jonathan gives his friendship and political allegiance to David as the next king.

Some contemporary readers misinterpret the biblical description of the relationship between David and King Saul’s son Jonathan as suggesting they had a homosexual relationship. Given the cultural context of the narrative, a homosexual relationship is clearly something that is read into the text by modern readers, rather than something found in the text itself. As theologian Kevin DeYoung observes: “The fact of the matter is that homosexual behavior was almost unheard of within Israel and even revisionist scholars have argued that in ancient Judaism . . . it would have been completely forbidden. . .”⁴⁰⁸

⁴⁰⁸ Kevin DeYoung, “Were David and Jonathan Lovers?” <https://www.crossway.org/articles/were-david-and-jonathan-lovers/?srsltid=AfmBOor9qxwHS0SGEdQ4c2tts0gybkc7bK2pmCigzX0QcZauWCHELuIM>.

According to 1 Samuel 18:3, after he'd seen how David squared up to Goliath, "Jonathan made a covenant with David, for he loved him as much as he did his own life." (NET.) However, this is not a reference to the "covenant" of marriage. As James Rochford point out:

The term "covenant" (*bĕrit*) refers to a "treaty, alliance, pledge, or an agreement." Typically, it refers to a political agreement between parties. For instance, the author used the term to refer to a peace treaty between the Ammonites and the people of Jabesh (1 Sam. 11:1). . . . the context strongly implies that this was an oath from David to protect Jonathan's family after the transfer of power. Later, David fulfils this promise: "[David] spared Mephibosheth, the son of Jonathan the son of Saul, *because of the oath of the LORD which was between them, between David and Saul's son Jonathan*" (2 Sam. 21:7).⁴⁰⁹

In context, the statement that Jonathan "loved" David as his own life, speaks of Jonathan giving his political allegiance to David.

Then, according to 1 Samuel 18:4, Jonathan "stripped himself of the robe that was on him and gave it to David, and his armor, and even his sword and his bow and his belt." (ESV.) Again, there are no sexual overtones of any kind here. Rather, "The act was at once a ratification of their compact and a public mark of honour. . . . We may compare the exchange of armour between Glaucus and Diomedes when they met before Troy, as a pledge of old family friendship (Hom. *Il.* VI. 230)."⁴¹⁰

2 Samuel 1:26 records David's lament after Jonathan's death, in which David says: "I grieve for you, Jonathan my brother; you were very dear to me. Your love for me was wonderful, more wonderful than that of women." (NIV.) Some people read into this the suggestion of a homosexual relationship. However,

First, the Hebrew word for "love" used here covers a broad range of meanings and does not mean "romantic" or "sexual" love unless the context demands it. . . . Second, David's comparison of his relationship with Jonathan with that of women is probably a reference to his experience with King Saul's daughters. He was promised one of Saul's daughters for killing Goliath. The first daughter was abruptly given to another man. The second daughter was promised, but Saul continued to add conditions to the deal, hoping to see David killed in battle (1 Samuel 18:17 & 25). The loyalty and camaraderie David had with Jonathan came with no conditions and was of greater value than the companionship of Saul's daughter.⁴¹¹

As DeYoung comments:

when it says that Jonathan's love was greater to him than that of women, it's making a particular biblical, redemptive point that the house of Saul (and David has married one of Saul's daughters) is falling and that she was less of a help to David than was Jonathan. So it's showing in God's providential care that Jonathan is actually going to be the means of David's ascendancy to the throne through his friendship, which was even more of a loyal friendship than he received from his wife. But that's not at all to

⁴⁰⁹ James Rochford, "Were David and Jonathan Gay?" <https://evidenceunseen.com/old-testament/1-samuel/difficulties/were-david-and-jonathan-gay>.

⁴¹⁰ Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges, https://biblehub.com/commentaries/cambridge/1_samuel/18.htm.

⁴¹¹ "What was the relationship between David and Jonathan?" <https://www.gotquestions.org/David-and-Jonathan.html>.

suggest, as no ancient Jew would have even thought to begin to think, that this was somehow marriage covenant or any kind of sexual relationship.⁴¹²

Q2: Did king Saul reign in Jerusalem?

A2:

Short:

No, Saul did not reign in Jerusalem.
His capital was Gibeah, north of Jerusalem.
Jerusalem was only conquered later by David.

Summary:

King Saul ruled from Gibeah in the territory of Benjamin. This is explicitly stated in 1 Samuel and fits the tribal geography of the time. Jerusalem, however, was not yet an Israelite city during Saul's reign. It was controlled by the Jebusites and referred to as Jebus.

Although the site of Jerusalem had been inhabited for thousands of years, it had not yet become Israel's political or religious center. Ancient references such as the Amarna Letters call it "Ursalim." This likely reflects an older Canaanite name connected to the deity Shalem.

In the Bible, "Salem" is mentioned in Genesis and Psalms. It is generally understood to refer to the same location as later Jerusalem. However, the Israelites did not control the city at that stage. It was only after Saul's death that David took Jerusalem. According to 2 Samuel 5, David captured the city from the Jebusites. He then established it as his capital, calling it the "City of David." This move was strategic. Jerusalem was centrally located and not tied to any single tribe. From that point on, it became the political and later religious center of Israel.

So historically and biblically, Saul ruled from Gibeah, not Jerusalem.

Scholar:

King Saul reigned from a city called Gibeah. The city now know as Jerusalem wasn't conquered until after David had become king.

King Saul's capital was Gibeah of Benjamin (1 Samuel 14:16 & 1 Samuel 15:34), three miles north of Jerusalem.⁴¹³ People have lived at the site of what came to be called Jerusalem since c. 5000 BCE, due to its hill-top location and spring-water supply. Around 1900 BCE some pottery discovered in Egypt "mentions a town named Ursalim, a version of Salem or Shelem, god of the evening star [or dusk] . . . 'the name may mean 'Salem has been founded.'"⁴¹⁴ Likewise, in the 14th century BCE the clay tablet Amarna Letters refer to the town as "Ursalim." In the Old Testament, "Salem" is mentioned in both Genesis 14:18 (in the story of Abraham)⁴¹⁵ and in Psalm 76:2: "And His tabernacle is in Salem, And His habitation in

⁴¹² Kevin DeYoung, "Were David and Jonathan Lovers?" <https://www.crossway.org/articles/were-david-and-jonathan-lovers/?srsltid=AfmBOor9qxwHS0SGEdQ4c2tts0gybkc7bK2pmCigzX0QcZauWCHELuIM>.

⁴¹³ Chaim Herzog and Mordechai Gichon, *Battles of the Bible* (London: Greenhill Books, 1997), 82.

⁴¹⁴ Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Jerusalem: The Biography* (W&N, 2011), 18.

⁴¹⁵ See: Gordon J. Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary: Genesis 1-15* (Zondervan, 1987), 304-322.

Zion.” (YLT.) The paralleling of “Salem” with “Zion” (i.e. mount Zion in Jerusalem, where Solomon built the first temple) identifies Salem with what came to be called Jerusalem.

It is generally agreed that “Jerusalem” (which in Hebrew is “Yerushalayim”) means “City of peace.” Perhaps the word “Salem/Shelem” lost its Canaanite cultural connotation and came to mean “peace” (as reflected in the Hebrew root word שָׁלַם - *shalam*), due to its also meaning being whole or complete.⁴¹⁶ Dr. Yeshaya Gruber explains that: “In Hebrew the name ‘Salem’ is written שָׁלַם (*Shalem*) and seems related to שְׁלוֹם (*shalom*) ‘peace, wholeness.’ The Arabic names *Sālim* and *Salām* come from the same Semitic root.”⁴¹⁷ Indeed, “The god Shalim may have been associated with dusk and the evening star in the etymological senses of a ‘completion’ of the day, ‘sunset’ and ‘peace’.”⁴¹⁸ Alternatively, *Uru* is the Sumerian word for “city” and *Salim* for “peace,”⁴¹⁹ so that might explain why “Ursalim” means “city of peace.” Either way, the “peace” aspect of the city’s name, or a pun playing on this association, appears to be referenced in both Psalm 122 and Hebrews 7:2.

The tribe referred to in the Bible as “Jebusites” appear to have conquered Salem some time in the 12th century BCE.⁴²⁰ The Bible refers to Jerusalem under the Jebusites as “Jebus” (in Hebrew *Yəbus* literally means “trampled place.”). British Assyriologist Theophilus G. Pinches observes that:

the name of Yabusu, which would be the old form of Jebus, occurs in a contract tablet of the time of the first dynasty of Babylon (about 2200 B.C.), and, if really the name of the tribe, as it would seem to be, confirms its antiquity, as indicated by the references to it in Genesis.⁴²¹

So *perhaps* “Yabusa” is actually the older name for the village/town that would later be called “Salem,” “Jebus” and “Jerusalem.” Some of these names may have been used concurrently, perhaps by different people-groups. And perhaps the biblical “Jebusites” are actually named after the site they conquered (i.e. “Jebus”), rather than vice-versa. In any case, as the *ESV Global Study Bible* explains:

After having ruled Judah for seven years from Hebron, David became King of all Israel and set his sights on Jebus as his new capital (2 Samuel 5:5). The Jebusites were so confident of their walls that they taunted David, saying even the blind and the lame would prevent him from capturing their city (2 Samuel 5:6). However, David sent a small force under the command of his commander-in-chief, Joab, to secretly enter Jebus through its water system and opened the gates (1 Chronicles 11:6). The city surrendered, and the Jebusite Citadel was destroyed and replaced by the “stronghold of Zion, that is, the city of David” (2 Samuel 5:7).⁴²²

⁴¹⁶ <https://biblehub.com/hebrew/8003.htm>.

⁴¹⁷ Yeshaya Gruber, “Jerusalem, Thrower of Peace?” <https://weekly.israelbiblecenter.com/jerusalem-thrower-peace>.

⁴¹⁸ “Shalim” <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shalim>.

⁴¹⁹ “The origins of Jerusalem.” http://biblefellowshipunion.co.uk/2007/Mar_Apr/Jerusalem.htm.

⁴²⁰ My Jewish Learning, “History of Jerusalem: From Canaanite City to Israelite Capital.” <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/timeline-for-the-history-of-jerusalem-4500-bce-present>.

⁴²¹ Theophilus Goldridge Pinches, *The Old Testament In the Light of The Historical Records and Legends of Assyria and Babylonia*, (SPCK, 1908),

<https://web.archive.org/web/20151119110213/http://www.gutenberg.org/files/38732/38732-8.txt>.

⁴²² Jerusalem in the time of David, <https://www.esv.org/resources/esv-global-study-bible/illustration-10-jerusalem-in-the-time-of-david/>.

In 2018 a stone column was unearthed in Jerusalem bearing a 1st century AD Hebrew inscription which is the earliest-known “of the full name of the city that is spelled as it is today.”⁴²³

Q3: What instrument did David play for King Saul?

A3:

Short:

David played a lyre (Hebrew: *kinnôr*).
It was a small stringed instrument, not a modern harp.
It was likely used to soothe Saul.

Summary:

The instrument David played is called a *kinnôr* in Hebrew. Although some Bible translations say “harp,” it was more likely a lyre.

A lyre is a smaller, portable stringed instrument. It typically had between four and eight strings. It was often played with a plectrum rather than plucked by fingers alone.

Archaeological finds support this identification. Lyres have been discovered in places like Ur (c. 2500 BCE).

Visual depictions also exist from Egypt, Canaan, and Philistine regions. These show instruments very similar to what David likely used.

The “Eastern” or “thin” lyre is the most probable type. This matches both the time period and geographic context.

The Bible describes David using this instrument to calm Saul. Music was commonly associated with emotional and even spiritual effects in the ancient world.

We also have ancient musical evidence from the same region. The Hurrian Hymn from Ugarit shows that structured music existed at the time.

Modern reconstructions of such instruments give a rough idea of the sound.

So historically and archaeologically, the lyre fits very well. It aligns with both the biblical description and the wider ancient Near Eastern context.

Scholar:

David played a stringed instrument called a “lyre” (probably the so-called “Eastern” or “thin” lyre).

Theologian V.P. Long notes that:

The word rendered “harp” [in some translations of 1 Samuel] (*kinnôr*) probably refers to a “lyre,” of which there were several types in antiquity. The type of lyre David played was presumably the “Eastern,” or “thin,” lyre, which was strung with four to eight strings and was played with a plectrum. Archaeological discovery has yielded

⁴²³ Ashley Cowie, “Earliest Known Inscription of the Word ‘Jerusalem’ Discovered at Ancient City’s Entrance.” <https://www.ancient-origins.net/news-history-archaeology/word-jerusalem-0010822>. See: Laura Geggel, “This Is the Oldest Known Inscription Bearing the Full Name of Jerusalem.” <https://www.livescience.com/63786-jerusalem-stone-inscription-archaeology.html>.

many representations of lyres, such as the remains of nine lyres from the Sumerian royal cemetery at Ur (ca. 2500 B.C.), a depiction of “an Amorite/Canaanite lyre player entering Egypt with his clan” (ca. 1900 B.C. wall painting at Beni Hasan in Egypt), a depiction of a female lyre player on an ivory plaque from Megiddo (twelfth century B.C.), and a male lyre player on a Philistine bichrome jug (Megiddo, eleventh century B.C.).⁴²⁴

Composer and lyre player Michael Levey explains that:

The oldest surviving written *melody* so far discovered in History which can actually be reconstructed, was Hurrian Hymn Text H6. The musical notation for this amazing 3400 year old melody, was discovered in Ugarit, Northern Canaan (now forming the Southern part of modern Syria) in the early 1950s, and was preserved for 3400 years on a clay tablet, written in the Cuneiform text of the ancient Hurrian language⁴²⁵

Contemporary performances of this ancient tune on lyre’s patterned after those seen in the archaeological record (e.g. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QpxN2VXPMLc>) bring us as close as its possible to get to hearing today how David’s lyre playing would have sounded.

Fig. “Lyre player 1350-1150 BC performs before a Canaanite king; the instrument is possibly a kinnor; the artwork is a portion of a larger artwork on . . . an ivory plaque found at Megiddo. This ivory engraving shows one possibility for the ancient instrument, kinnor.”⁴²⁶



⁴²⁴ V.P. Long, *1 and 2 Samuel (Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary)*. [Kindle Android version] (Zondervan, 2016), 259-260.

⁴²⁵ Michael Levey, <https://ancientlyre.com/the-oldest-written-melody-in-history>.

⁴²⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lyre#/media/File:Kinnor_played_before_a_king.jpg.

Recommended Resources for Episode 14

Peter S. Williams, “United and Divided: Israel’s Kingdom from Judges to Exile.” (2025)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0r7f5SzreTI&t=7s>

YouTube Playlist, “King David.”
www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLQhh3qewVEWjGWuucxuxxZbCVnt1cVBsB

Christopher Yuan Debunks the Homosexuality of David and Jonathan,
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zht2aXzjZBw>

Biblical Warfare, “How Jerusalem Became the “City of David.”
<https://www.biblicalwarfare.com/how-jerusalem-became-the-city-of-david/>

Got Questions, “Who Were the Jebusites?” <https://www.gotquestions.org/Jebusites.html>

Michael Levey, <https://ancientlyre.com/the-oldest-written-melody-in-history>

Jerusalem in the time of David, <https://www.esv.org/resources/esv-global-study-bible/illustration-10-jerusalem-in-the-time-of-david/>

Stephen Flurry, “Did King David Conquer Jerusalem Using This Tunnel?” <https://armstronginstitute.org/9-did-king-david-conquer-jerusalem-using-this-tunnel>

John Knight, “Did David really hate ‘the lame and the blind’?” <https://theworksofgod.com/2010/10/12/did-david-really-hate-the-lame-and-the-blind/>

James Rochford, “Were David and Jonathan Gay?” <https://evidenceunseen.com/old-testament/1-samuel/difficulties/were-david-and-jonathan-gay>.

Never Thirsty, “David and Jonathan — Same sex relationship in the Bible?” <https://www.neverthirsty.org/bible-qa/qa-archives/question/david-and-jonathan-same-sex/#:~:text=This%20lengthy%20explanation%20of%20dod,friendship%20commitment%20between%20two%20men>

V. P. Long, *1 and 2 Samuel (Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary)* (Zondervan, 2016)

Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Jerusalem: The Biography* (W&N, 2011)

Gordon J. Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary: Genesis 1-15* (Zondervan, 1987)

Episode 15: A Promise

Q1: How does the story of David and Bathsheba align with the Islamic idea of prophetic infallibility (*ismah*)?

A1:

Short:

The story of David and Bathsheba conflicts with the Islamic doctrine of prophetic infallibility.

The Bible presents prophets as morally fallible, while Islam (in most forms) limits or denies major sin in prophets.

The Qur'an itself shows prophets seeking forgiveness, which complicates strict interpretations of *ismah*.

Summary:

The biblical account of David and Bathsheba portrays David committing serious sin. This directly challenges the Islamic doctrine of *ismah*, especially in its stronger forms.

In Islamic theology, prophets are generally protected from major sins. Some traditions allow minor mistakes, but not moral failures like adultery or murder.

By contrast, the Bible consistently portrays prophets as flawed. David's sin is not hidden, but openly confronted and judged.

From a Christian perspective, this strengthens the narrative's credibility. It presents leaders "warts and all," rather than idealized figures.

The Qur'an does not clearly define *ismah* as later theology does. Instead, it includes multiple examples of prophets seeking forgiveness. Muhammad is told to ask forgiveness for his sins (Surah 47:19, 48:2). Hadith literature also portrays him repenting regularly.

Other prophets like Adam, Moses, and Noah are also linked with error or repentance. This creates tension with the later, stricter doctrine of infallibility.

Regarding David, the Qur'an includes a shortened and less explicit version. It alludes to wrongdoing but omits the Bathsheba narrative. Some scholars argue this reflects a partial retelling of the biblical account.

In summary, the Bible and Islamic theology diverge here. The Bible affirms the fallibility of prophets in terms of admitting their sins (though not the fallibility of their prophecies), while Islam tends to minimize or deny the sins of prophets.

Scholar:

The biblical story of David and Bathsheba contradicts the Islamic idea of prophetic infallibility. This is a problem for the biblical story only if one assumes that this Islamic concept, which is not found in the Qur'an, is correct.

According to the concept of 'Isma al-Anbiya (which is not explicitly found within the Qur'an, but which originated amongst Shia Muslims in the 8th century CE), if someone is a prophet of Allah, "they are infallible with regard to the message that they convey from Allah."⁴²⁷ Moreover, this infallibility is extended by Muslim scholars to cover the *entire*

⁴²⁷ Shaykh Al-Islam [Ibn Taymiyyah], Majmu' Al-Fatawa, 18/7.

conduct of a prophet. In the words of the 12th century CE theologian Fakhruddin Razi, “According to us the best view is that, owing to their prophethood, there is neither a grave nor a small sin or error (dhanb).”⁴²⁸ The majority of contemporary Muslim scholars hold that while prophets may make ethical mistakes, and may also commit *minor sins*, they are protected against committing any *major sins* (at least once they have become a prophet).

Most Christians would affirm that any genuine prophetic message is infallible. However, except in the special case of Jesus Christ, Christians do not extend this infallibility to the prophet’s ethical conduct *in general*.

However, the concept of ‘Isma al-Anbiya is not found in the Qur’an. Indeed, the Qur’an appears to assume that prophets both can and do sin. For example, according to Surah 69:44-47:

And if he [Muhammad] had forged a false saying concerning Us [Allah], We surely would have seized him by his right hand [or “with power and might”], And then We certainly would have cut off his life artery, And none of you could have withheld Us from [punishing] him.

Note that the conditional counterfactual statement “*if he had* forged a false saying concerning Us (Allah), We surely would have seized him . . .” assumes *it was possible* for Muhammad to make such a false statement. Furthermore, the Qur’an asserts that Muhammad *did* sin:

- “Indeed, We have given you, [O Muhammad], a clear conquest, that Allah may forgive for you what preceded of your sin and what will follow...” (Surah 48:1-2)
- “So know [O Muhammad] that there is no deity except Allah and ask forgiveness for your sin...” (Surah 47:19)

According to Sahih Muslim 2702a, Muhammad said: “By Allah, I seek forgiveness from Allah and turn to Him in repentance more than seventy times a day.” Sahih Muslim is “a collection of hadith compiled by Imam Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj al-Naysaburi” and is considered by Muslims to be “one of the most authentic collections of the Sunnah of the Prophet . . .”⁴²⁹ According to Sahih al-Bukhari 6307, Muhammad said: “Sometimes my heart is clouded, and I ask Allah for forgiveness a hundred times a day.”⁴³⁰ Sahih al-Bukhari “is a collection of hadith compiled by Imam Muhammad al-Bukhari (d. 256 AH/870 CE),” and is “recognized by the overwhelming majority of the Muslim world to be the most authentic collection”⁴³¹ of *Sunnah* (sayings, actions, and tacit approvals inferred from silence) ascribed to Muhammad.

As David Suarez reports, the Sunni Muslim scholars Al-Tabari and Ibn Kathir both say that Muhammad “had committed past errors and would need forgiveness for future ones. These sins are often minimized, but they still affirm the Qur’an’s admission of moral fallibility.”⁴³² Suarez notes that:

While Muslims claim Muhammad is the ‘perfect example,’ the Qur’an plainly acknowledges that he sinned and required forgiveness. This stands in stark contrast to

⁴²⁸ Wikipedia, “Ismah.” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ismah#cite_note-Donaldson1933-35.

⁴²⁹ <https://sunnah.com/muslim>.

⁴³⁰ Suarez, D. (2025). *What Should a Muslim Believe? A Field Guide to Core Teachings & Moral Questions: A Practical Handbook on Islamic Beliefs from Qur’an, Hadith & History* [Kindle Android version], 48.

⁴³¹ <https://sunnah.com/bukhari>.

⁴³² Suarez, D. (2025). *What Should a Muslim Believe? A Field Guide to Core Teachings & Moral Questions: A Practical Handbook on Islamic Beliefs from Qur’an, Hadith & History* [Kindle Android version], 41.

Jesus ('Isa), whom the Qur'an calls 'pure/sinless (zakiyy)' (Surah Maryam 19:19) and never asks forgiveness for.⁴³³

In the Qur'anic depiction of Adam, he eats the forbidden fruit in Eden. Although this is described as an act of forgetfulness (Surah, 20:115), Allah is said to have "turned to him in forgiveness" (Surah 20:122). According to Surah 2:37: "Then Adam received from his Lord [some] words, and He accepted his repentance . . ." Presumably, Adam's forgetfulness is *a sinful failure to remember what he is under an obligation to remember*. After all, if Adam's fruit-eating was not sinful, how can it receive forgiveness? However, if Adam's fruit-eating was sinful, then the concept of *ismah* cannot extend to entirely excluding all sin from the life of a prophet. According to Sayyid Muhammad Rizvi:

Although Adam did not commit a sin, it was improper for him to adopt an inappropriate behaviour. The people with high ranks are expected to live by the standard that is higher than that of the normal human beings. As the saying goes: the virtuous deeds of the pious are considered 'sins' by those who are nearest to God.⁴³⁴

But if Adam's act was rebuked by Allah *only as if it was a sin* (even though it was only inappropriate and not actually a sin), we are left to wonder how forgiveness enters into the picture. The Qur'an does not say that Allah only acted *as if* Adam was forgiven, but did not actually forgive him. It says that Allah "turned to him in forgiveness" (Surah 20:122).

Then again, Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyah argued (al-Fataawaa 10/296) that:

Concerning the issue of forgiveness of the Prophets sins: Allah, may He be exalted, does not speak of any Prophet in the Quraan, except He also mentions repentance and seeking forgiveness. For example, Adam and his wife said: Our Lord! We have wronged ourselves. If You forgive us not, and bestow not upon us Your Mercy, we shall certainly be of the losers. [al-Araaf 7:23 interpretation of the meaning]. Nooh said: O my Lord! I seek refuge with You from asking You that of which I have no knowledge. And unless You forgive me and have Mercy on me, I would indeed be one of the losers. [Hood 11:47 interpretation of the meaning]. Ibraaheem said: Our Lord! Forgive me and my parents, and (all) the Believers on the Day when the reckoning will be established. [Ibraaheem 14:41 interpretation of the meaning] and You are our wali (Protector), so forgive us and have Mercy on us, for You are the Best of those who forgive. And ordain for us good in this world, and in the Hereafter. Certainly we have turned unto You [al-Araaf 7:155-156 interpretation of the meaning]. Moosa said: You are our wali (Protector), so forgive us and have Mercy on us, for You are the Best of those who forgive. [al-Araaf 7:155 interpretation of the meaning]. Then he [Ibn Taymiyah, may Allah have mercy on him] gave further examples, but what we have mentioned here is sufficient.⁴³⁵

When it comes to King David, Mateen Ellass observes that:

The longest Koranic story about David finds its source in the biblical account of the prophet Nathan's rebuke of David over his sin with Bathsheba (2 Sam. 12:1-15). In

⁴³³ Suarez, D. (2025). *What Should a Muslim Believe? A Field Guide to Core Teachings & Moral Questions: A Practical Handbook on Islamic Beliefs from Qur'an, Hadith & History* [Kindle Android version], 41.

⁴³⁴ The Infallibility of the Prophets in the Qur'an, <https://al-islam.org/printpdf/book/export/html/12219>.

⁴³⁵ Islam Question & Answer, "Do Prophets sin? Do they need forgiveness?" <https://islamqa.info/en/answers/1684/do-prophets-sin-do-they-need-forgiveness>.

the Koran, however, Nathan is absent from the scene, and the parable he tells to trap David in his sin becomes an historical event (Sura 38:21-26). Two men with a complaint come to David seeking his wise judgment between them. The stronger, with ninety-nine sheep, has demanded of the weaker his lone ewe. Immediately David, without listening to the other side, takes up the cause of the weaker man and judges on his behalf. Somehow from this event, David discerns that God is convicting him of sin (though we are told nothing of his transgressions related to Bathsheba), and he prostrates himself in repentance.⁴³⁶

The historical evidence indicates that the later Qur'anic text is based upon an incomplete understanding of the much earlier biblical text. The biblical story about King David being an adulterer is so embarrassing that it is highly unlikely to have been an unhistorical invention.

Q2: Is God's promise of a coming Messiah from the lineage of King David consistent with the Qur'an? How does this link with David inform the New Testament portrait of Jesus?

A2:

Short:

The Qur'an does not explicitly state that Jesus is from David's line, but it is consistent with that idea.

Some Muslim scholars accept a Davidic lineage through Mary.

In the New Testament, this lineage is essential for identifying Jesus as the Messiah.

Summary:

In the New Testament, being descended from King David is central to the Messiah concept. Jesus is explicitly presented as part of David's lineage in passages like Matthew 1. This fulfills Jewish expectations of a Davidic Messiah.

The Qur'an affirms that Jesus is the Messiah and that Mary is his mother.

However, it does not explicitly state that Jesus descends from David. Still, it places Jesus within a prophetic lineage connected to earlier figures.

Some classical Muslim scholars, such as Al-Tabari, trace Mary's ancestry back to David. If this is accepted, then Jesus would also belong to the Davidic line. So while the Qur'an is silent on the detail, it does not contradict the claim.

In Jewish tradition, the Messiah is expected to come from David's house. This expectation forms the backdrop for New Testament claims about Jesus.

The Gospels emphasize several connections between Jesus and David. He is born in Bethlehem, David's city. He is portrayed as a shepherd figure, echoing David's early life. His kingship is framed as a fulfillment of God's covenant with David. Jesus himself refers to David in ways that reinforce this connection. From a Christian perspective, these links are deliberate and foundational.

In summary, the Qur'an allows for a Davidic connection, while the New Testament requires it.

⁴³⁶ Mateen Ellass, *Understanding the Koran: A Quick Christian Guide to the Muslim Holy Book* (Zondervan, 2009).

Scholar:

For the New Testament writers, having a family tree that stems from King David is a pre-requisite for Jesus' status as Messiah. The Qur'an affirms that Jesus' mother was Mary, and that he is the Messiah (a role that Jewish tradition connects with the David line); and although it does not explicitly say that he is a descendent of King David, it is consistent with this claim, which is accepted by at least some Muslim scholars (e.g. Al-Tabari).

The Qur'an says that the mother of Jesus is Mary. According to Aliah Schleifer, "The Qur'an informs us that the father of Mary was named 'Imran and the classical Muslim scholars unanimously accept that she was from the line of the prophet David . . .'"⁴³⁷ Likewise, Muslim scholar and historian Al-Tabari traces Jesus' genealogy to King David.⁴³⁸ The Qur'an describes Jesus' messianic status in conjunction with his lineage, with the angels saying of Mary in Surah 3:45 that "his name will be the Messiah,² Jesus, son of Mary; honoured in this world and the Hereafter, and he will be one of those nearest 'to Allah'." Jewish tradition associates the Messiah with the Davidic line. Surah 6:84-85 says:

And We bestowed upon Abraham (offspring) Ishaq (Isaac) and Ya'qub (Jacob) and each of them did We guide to the right way as We had earlier guided Noah to the right way; and (of his descendants We guided) Da'ud (David) and Sulayman (Solomon), Ayyub (Job), Yusuf (Joseph), Musa (Moses) and Harun (Aaron). Thus do We reward those who do good. (And of his descendants We guided) Zakariya (Zachariah), Yahya (John), Isa (Jesus) and Ilyas (Elias): each one of them was of the righteous.⁴³⁹

While these verses do not explicitly state that Jesus was a descendent of King David, they are consistent with Jesus being his descendent.

From a Christian viewpoint, Catholic theologian Scott Hann highlights various parallels between King David and Jesus:

Beyond the fact that Jesus has a Davidic genealogy that links him with this ancient king (Mt 1: 1- 16), it is significant that Jesus was born in David's hometown of Bethlehem (17: 12; Mt 2: 1), that he was baptized by John the Baptist, a Levitical prophet and Nazirite (Mk 1: 9- 10; Lk 3: 21- 22), just as David was anointed by Samuel, a Levitical prophet and Nazirite (16: 13), and that he claimed to be the Good Shepherd who, like David, was willing to risk his life for his sheep (17: 34- 35; Jn 10: 11). These connections are not playful inventions of the early Church, for Jesus himself laid the groundwork for Davidic typology when he declared that he and his disciples were comparable to David and his men, who had eaten holy bread on a Sabbath day in 1 Samuel (21: 1- 6; Mt 12: 1- 4).⁴⁴⁰

⁴³⁷ Aliah Schleifer, *Mary The Blessed Virgin of Islam* (Fons Vitae, 1998), 22.

⁴³⁸ Answering Islam, "Islam Affirms Jesus' Physical Descent from King David." <https://answeringislamblog.wordpress.com/2017/08/26/islam-affirms-jesus-physical-descent-from-king-david/>.

⁴³⁹ <https://www.islamicstudies.info/tafheem.php?sura=6&verse=83&to=90>.

⁴⁴⁰ Scott Hann, *The First and Second Book of Samuel: Ignatius Catholic Study Bible*. San Francisco: Ignatius, 2016, 27.

Recommended Resources for Episode 15

YouTube Playlist, “King David.”

www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLQhh3qcvVEWjGWuucxuxxZbCVnt1cVBsB

Answering Islam, “Islam Affirms Jesus’ Physical Descent from King David.”

<https://answeringislamblog.wordpress.com/2017/08/26/islam-affirms-jesus-physical-descent-from-king-david/>

“Who Killed King Saul?” <https://apologeticspress.org/who-killed-king-saul/>

Testify, “Jesus vs. Muhammad: Who Was Truly Sinless?”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=olqdXj1ikz0>

Got Questions, “The Witch of Endor.” <https://www.gotquestions.org/witch-of-endor.html>

“How do you explain the Witch from Endor?” <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/you-asked-how-do-you-explain-the-witch-from-endor/>

Clive E. Belington. “King Saul And The Witch Of Endor: Necromancy And Ghost Pits In The Ancient World.”

<https://biblearchaeology.org/research/chronological-categories/united-monarchy/4991-king-saul-and-the-witch-of-endor-necromancy-and-ghost-pits-in-the-ancient-world>

Scott Hann. *The First and Second Book of Samuel: Ignatius Catholic Study Bible* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2016)

David Suarez. *What Should a Muslim Believe? A Field Guide to Core Teachings & Moral Questions: A Practical Handbook on Islamic Beliefs from Qur’an, Hadith & History* (Kindle, 2025).

Episode 16: The Break Up

Q1: How much of a historical jump does the narrative of *The Legacy of Adam* take between Episodes Fifteen and Sixteen?

A1:

Short:

A thousand years have passed between episode 15 and 16. The transition is from David's rule to the Roman leadership of Israel.

Summary:

The story jumps nearly 1,000 years, from the 10th century BC to the 1st century BC. After David and Solomon, Israel splits into two kingdoms, Israel and Judah. Both kingdoms are eventually conquered, with Judah falling to Babylon. This leads to the Jewish exile. Persia later allows the Jews to return and rebuild Jerusalem and the temple. Greek and then Roman rule follow, increasing expectation of a coming Messiah.

Scholar:

Between episode fifteen and episode sixteen we jump forward almost a thousand years, from the 10th century BC to the 1st century BC.

After David, and his son King Solomon, the kingdom of Israel was split into the twin kingdoms of Israel in the north and Judah in the south, a situation that led to the eventual conquest of both kingdoms. Jerusalem in Judah was the last city to fall to the Babylonians, leading to the era known as the "Jewish exile." Later, Babylon was itself conquered by the Persian Empire, which allowed the Jews to return to Judea, renovate Jerusalem and rebuild its temple. After this, Judea came under Greek influence, resulting in the "Maccabean revolt" against Greek rulership, before Judea fell under a Roman rulership that fermented Jewish expectations of God's prophesied messiah from the line of David.⁴⁴¹

Q2: What does it mean when Jesus is described as "The Word"?

A2:

Short:

"The Word" (logos) in John refers to a divine person who was with God and is God. It describes Jesus as pre-existent and active in creation. This Word then became human in Jesus.

⁴⁴¹ On the history between David and the birth of Jesus see, Peter S. Williams, "United and Divided: Israel's Kingdom from Judges to Exile." (2025) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0r7f5SzreTI&t=7s>; Anthony J. Tomasino, *Judaism Before Jesus: The Events & Ideas That Shaped the New Testament World* (IVP, 2003).

Summary:

In John's Gospel, Jesus is described as "the Word" (Greek: *logos*).

This term carries both Jewish and Greek background meaning.

John 1 presents the Word as existing "in the beginning."

This places the Word before creation, not as part of it.

The Word is also described as being "with God."

This implies a personal relationship, not just an abstract force.

At the same time, "the Word was God."

This describes the nature of the Word as fully divine.

Importantly, John maintains a distinction between God and the Word.

They are not the same person, but share the same divine nature.

The Word is also the agent of creation.

"All things were made through him."

This places the Word on the creator side of reality.

Then comes the key claim in John 1:14.

"The Word became flesh and dwelt among us."

This identifies Jesus as the incarnation of the Logos.

So Jesus is not just a prophet or messenger.

He is presented as pre-existent, divine, and active in creation.

The Qur'an also calls Jesus a "Word from God."

But it does not explain this concept in detail.

John, however, gives a developed theological framework.

In summary, "the Word" means that Jesus is God's self-expression, personally present, divine in nature, and incarnate in human form.

Scholar:

John's gospel uses the Greek term *logos* to describe Jesus as a person that existed in close relationship "with" God "in the beginning," a person "through" whom creation was accomplished, a person who thus exists on the Divine side of the fundamental Jewish distinction between God and the creation, but who nevertheless "became flesh and dwelt among us" as Jesus of Nazareth, "full of grace and truth."

Sura 3:45 of the Qur'an reads:

'Remember' when the angels proclaimed, "O Mary! Allah gives you good news of a Word from Him, his name will be the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary; honoured in this world and the Hereafter, and he will be one of those nearest 'to Allah'".⁴⁴²

However, the Qur'an gives no context for understanding what is meant by calling Jesus *kalimatim-minhu*, a "Word from Him" (that is, from God).⁴⁴³ This episode begins by quoting the first and third verses of what is known as the fourth gospel (which is traditionally known as "the gospel according to John," often referred to simply as "John"), one of four first-century biographies of Jesus in the "New Testament" section of the Christian Bible⁴⁴⁴:

⁴⁴² <https://Qur'an.com/3>.

⁴⁴³ "The Uniqueness and Titles of Jesus in Islam. C. The Titles Word And Spirit Of God."
<https://www.answering-islam.org/Gilchrist/Vol2/5c.html>.

⁴⁴⁴ For a discussion of the dating, authorship, and historical credentials of the fourth gospel, see Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of John's Gospel*. Apollos, 2015; Lydia McGrew, *The Eye of the Beholder*:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. (John 1:1-3, ESV.)

The Greek term translated here as the capitalised “Word” is “*logos*.” In Greek philosophy *logos* was “the wisdom behind the creation of the world and everything in it . . .”⁴⁴⁵ For example, according to the ancient Greek “Stoic” philosophy that stemmed from Zeno of Citium (circa. 300 BC) “the seminal reason (*logos spermatikos*) is the cosmic source of order Logos also has another aspect: it is what enables us to apprehend the principles and forms, i.e. it is an aspect of our own reasoning.”⁴⁴⁶ However, the term had been adopted by Jewish thinkers (such as the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria), and one cannot assume that every use of the term means exactly the same thing. Moreover, classicist F.F. Bruce has a point when he proposes that “It is not in Greek philosophical usage . . . that the background of John’s thought and language should be sought . . . but in Hebrew revelation.”⁴⁴⁷

According to John, the *logos* existed “in the beginning” and “with God” (the Greek term here *pros* – with/towards - can suggest a personal relationship). Moreover, creation was accomplished “through” the *logos*. Therefore, when John goes on to say “and the Word was God” (i.e., “*kai theos en ho logos*”), he does not mean to say that the Word is one and the same as, or identical to, the God that the *logos* was “with” in the beginning, the God who created “through” the *logos*. As F. F. Bruce explains, “Had *theos* as well as *logos* been preceded by the article [*ho*] the meaning would have been that the Word was completely identical with God, which is impossible if the Word was also ‘with God.’”⁴⁴⁸ Rather, when John affirms “and the Word was God” (i.e., “*kai theos en ho logos*”), the Greek term *theos* (i.e., God/Divine) is without the article, and so “is predicative and describes the nature of the Word.”⁴⁴⁹ To translate “*kai theos en ho logos*” as “and the *logos* was Divine” would fit with both John’s careful distinction between “God” and “the *logos*” that was “with God” in the beginning and his assertions that “All things were made through” the *logos*, who was “with” God “in the beginning” (a reference to the creation narrative in Genesis 1:1), statements that place the *logos* on the *uncreated* side of the fundamental Jewish distinction between God as creator and the created cosmos. This demonstrates that the *logos* is not being presented by John as “a god” on a par with Greek or Roman “gods,” but as Divine in a robust sense that is nonetheless meant to be consistent with Jewish monotheism. To quote theologians Andreas J. Köstenberger and Alexander Stewart: “There are two persons, the Word and God, who are both God (Greek *theos*; i.e., they are both divine), yet these two persons are one God.”⁴⁵⁰ As theologian Colin G. Kruse observes:

The Gospel of John as Historical Reportage. Tampa, FL: DeWard, 2021; Peter S. Williams, *Behold the Man: Essays on the Historical Jesus*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2024.

⁴⁴⁵ Daniel Sakitey and Ernest van Eck, “The *logos* Christology in the fourth gospel (Jn 1:1-5, 14): A soteriological response to an Ewe cosmic prayer.” *Herv. teol. stud.* vol.79 n.4, Pretoria 2023, https://scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0259-94222023000400020#:~:text=Christology%20of%20the%20logos%20in,emphasised%20in%20John%201:2.446 <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20111116103859271>.

⁴⁴⁷ F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John: Introduction, Exposition, and Notes*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983, 29.

⁴⁴⁸ F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John: Introduction, Exposition, and Notes*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983, 31.

⁴⁴⁹ C. K. Barnett, *The Gospel According to St John*. SPCK, 1978, 156, quoted by Colin G. Kruse, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: John*. Nottingham: IVP Academic, 2003, 63.

⁴⁵⁰ Andreas J. Köstenberger and Alexander Stewart, *The First Days of Jesus: The Story of the Incarnation*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015. [Kindle Android version], 177.

Relationship implies different persons, and this moves us away from unitarianism (one God, one person) towards trinitarianism (one God, three persons – Father, Son [=the Word] and the Spirit. As the fourth gospel unfolds it becomes clear that this is what is intended.⁴⁵¹

The divine *logos* is “God the Son,” the “second” person of the one Trinitarian God. He was “with” God the Father “in the beginning,” and took on a human nature in the person of Jesus. As theologians Daniel Sakitey and Ernest van Eck observe: “It is this *logos* which in John’s interpretation existed before creation . . . that assumed flesh . . . and whose glory John and his colleague disciples beheld and proclaimed.”⁴⁵²

Q3: Is the text of the New Testament an accurate representation of the text that was originally written in the first century?

A3:

Short:

Yes, the New Testament text is highly reliable compared to other ancient works.

It is supported by a large number of early manuscripts.

Textual criticism shows that most differences are minor and do not affect core teachings.

Summary:

The New Testament is one of the best-attested texts from antiquity.

There are over 5,000 Greek manuscripts and many thousands more in other languages. Some fragments date very close to the time of the original writings. For example, Papyrus P52 is often dated to around AD 100–125. This means the gap between original writing and surviving copies is relatively small.

By comparison, most ancient works survive in far fewer copies. They also have much larger time gaps, often over 1,000 years.

Textual criticism compares all available manuscripts. This allows scholars to reconstruct the original text with high confidence.

Most variations between manuscripts are minor. They involve spelling, word order, or small copying differences. Very few affect meaning, and none change core Christian doctrines.

The idea that the Bible text was widely corrupted is not supported by evidence. Early manuscripts existed long before Islam. These manuscripts match later copies closely. This makes a large-scale alteration across regions unlikely.

The transmission of the New Testament was decentralized. Texts spread across many communities, making coordinated changes difficult.

In summary, the New Testament text is considered highly reliable. It reflects the original writings with a strong degree of accuracy.

⁴⁵¹ Colin G. Kruse, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: John* (Nottingham: IVP Academic, 2003), 64. See Peter S. Williams, “Understanding The Trinity” <https://www.peterswilliams.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Trinity.pdf>

⁴⁵² Daniel Sakitey and Ernest van Eck, “The *logos* Christology in the fourth gospel (Jn 1:1-5, 14): A soteriological response to an Ewe cosmic prayer.” *Herv. teol. stud.* vol.79 n.4, Pretoria 2023, https://scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0259-94222023000400020#:~:text=Christology%20of%20the%20logos%20in,emphasised%20in%20John%201:2.

Scholar:

The contemporary critical text of New Testament that forms the translation basis of modern editions of the New Testament is a highly accurate reproduction of the original, first century text.

Because the Qur'an affirms that the Christian scriptures (i.e., the Bible, made up of the so-called "Old Testament" scriptures and the "New Testament" scriptures, including the four New Testament Gospels) are revelations from Allah, and because the Christian scriptures contain many things that contradict the Qur'an, Muslims commonly deduce from their assumption that the Qur'an is the word of Allah that the text of the Bible must have somehow been corrupted. However, as Daniel Wickwire points out,

The Qur'an does not speak of any corruption the text of the Bible (Tahrif bil Lafiz) but it does speak of a verbal distortion of its meaning (Tahrif bil Mana). . . . Al-i Imran 3:78 – And there is a party of them who distort the Scriptures with their tongues, that you may think that what they say is from the Scripture, when it is not from the Scripture. And they say: "It is from Allah," when it is not from Allah, and they speak a lie concerning Allah knowingly.⁴⁵³

The charge that some people "distort the Scriptures with their tongues" assumes the undistorted reliability of the Scriptures they distort. As Muslim scholar Abdullah Saeed confirms, "In no verse in the Qur'an is there a denigrating remark about the scriptures of the Jews and Christians. Instead, there is respect and reverence. Any disparaging remarks were about the People of the Book, individuals or groups, and their actions."⁴⁵⁴ The Qur'an says that the Christian Bible is the written word of Allah:

- Surah Ali 'Imran 3:3-4: "He has revealed to you 'O Prophet' the Book in truth, confirming what came before it, as He revealed the Torah and the Gospel previously, as a guide for people, and 'also' revealed the Decisive Authority. Surely those who reject Allah's revelations will suffer a severe torment. For Allah is Almighty, capable of punishment."
- Surah Nisâ 4:136: "O believers! Have faith in Allah, His Messenger, the Book He has revealed to His Messenger, and the Scriptures He revealed before. Indeed, whoever denies Allah, His angels, His Books, His messengers, and the Last Day has clearly gone far astray."⁴⁵⁵
- Surah Al-Ma'idah 5:47: "So let the people of the Gospel judge by what Allah has revealed in it. And those who do not judge by what Allah has revealed are 'truly' the rebellious."⁴⁵⁶
- Surah 5:68: "Say, 'O Prophet,' 'O People of the Book! You have nothing to stand on unless you observe the Torah, the Gospel, and what has been revealed to you from your Lord.' And your Lord's revelation to you 'O Prophet' will only cause many of

⁴⁵³ Dan Wickwire. *Has the Bible Been Changed?: The Reliability of the Scriptures According to Jewish, Christian, and Islam*. Aneko, 2016. [Kindle Android version], 24.

⁴⁵⁴ Gordon Nickel, *The Gentle Answer to the Muslim Accusation of Biblical Falsification*. Bruton Gate, 2016. Kindle edition, 29.

⁴⁵⁵ <https://Qur'an.com/4>.

⁴⁵⁶ <https://Qur'an.com/5>.

them to increase in wickedness and disbelief. So do not grieve for the people who disbelieve.”⁴⁵⁷

It is important here to note with Gordon Nickel that

One of the key points of confusion between Christians and Muslims when they discuss the “Gospel” and its contents is that many Muslims have a false idea of what the Gospel is. In order to clear up this confusion, one should know what the “Gospel” meant to people in the Middle East during the six centuries between . . . Jesus and the origins of Islam. The Gospel means the “good news” of salvation through the death and resurrection of Jesus. The term for Gospel in the original Greek New Testament is euaggelion. At first, euaggelion meant the reward given to the messenger who brought good news. Later, the term came to be used for the good news itself. . . . Eventually, the word euaggelion came to be applied to a written text. . . . However, Christians used the word “Gospel” in the singular well into the third century. . . . relatively soon after the completion of the four Gospel accounts in the first century A.D., they were bound into a single book that circulated among the early Christian communities.⁴⁵⁸

Hence,

Even when euaggelion came to be applied to a written text, the word continued to be employed in the singular. . . . The usage bespeaks the conviction that the gospel was identical with the teaching of the Lord. This usage is reflected in the formulaic expression, “the Lord says in the gospel” (e.g., 2 Clem. 8:5), but it is also reflected in the titles of the Gospels. The earliest parchment codices of the New Testament, namely, the fourth-century Sinaiticus and Vaticanus codices, entitled the Gospels “according to Matthew,” “according to Mark,” and so on. This manner of providing each of the written gospels with a title suggests that euaggelion applied to the whole collection of the four canonical gospels.⁴⁵⁹

So, “the Gospel” that the Qur’an references alongside the Torah as prior divine revelation is the singular “gospel” recounted in the fourfold gospel according to Matthew, according to Mark, according to Luke, and according to John.

The Qur’an also says that Allah’s words cannot be changed:

- Surah Kehf 18:27: “Recite what has been revealed to you from the Book of your Lord. None can change His Words, nor can you find any refuge besides Him.”⁴⁶⁰
- Surah Al-An’am 6:115: “The Word of your Lord has been perfected in truth and justice. None can change His Words. And He is the All-Hearing, All-Knowing.”⁴⁶¹

Therefore, to claim that the text of the Christian Bible available to us today is a corrupted text that does not accurately represent the original, is to contradict the Qur’an.

⁴⁵⁷ <https://Qur'an.com/5>.

⁴⁵⁸ Gordon Nickel, *The Gentle Answer to the Muslim Accusation of Biblical Falsification*. Bruton Gate, 2016. Kindle edition, 124.

⁴⁵⁹ Gordon Nickel, *The Gentle Answer to the Muslim Accusation of Biblical Falsification*. Bruton Gate, 2016. Kindle edition, 9.

⁴⁶⁰ <https://Qur'an.com/18>.

⁴⁶¹ <https://Qur'an.com/6>.

In any case, if the text of the bible is supposed to have been changed, *when* is this supposed to have happened? On the one hand “The Bible could not have been changed before the time of Muhammad, because Muhammad himself accepted the Bible as the valid Word of God.”⁴⁶² On the other hand, “The Bible could not have been changed after the time of Muhammad, because pre-Islamic Bibles say exactly the same things as those after Muhammad.”⁴⁶³ We know this because “scholars are now able to study 206 Greek and forty-four Latin New Testament manuscripts that predate the seventh century.”⁴⁶⁴ Moreover, as Gordon Nickel comments, “The Gospel has been translated into many languages. If one or two language groups had changed their translations, how would the same changes have appeared in translations of other language groups far away? Instead, there is uniformity.”⁴⁶⁵ Here is a list showing the number of available manuscripts of translations of the gospels into other languages, all dating from before the rise of Islam:

- Latin Vulgate – 10,000 + manuscripts
- Aethopic – 2,000 +
- Slavic – 4,101
- Armenian – 2,587
- Syriac Peshitta – 350 +
- Buhairic – 100
- Arabic – 75
- Old Latin – 50
- Anglo Saxon – 7
- Gothic – 6
- Sogdian – 3
- Old Syriac – 2
- Persian – 2
- Frankish – 1 manuscript⁴⁶⁶

The modern, “critical text” of the New Testament thus comes to us through about 23,980 manuscripts, including some 10,000 Latin manuscripts, 975 Coptic manuscripts, 350 Syriac manuscripts, and 5,700 Greek manuscripts⁴⁶⁷ which include “135 papyri, 283 majuscules, 2,860 minuscules, and 2,422 lectionary (i.e. the New Testament text is divided into separate pericopes) manuscripts.”⁴⁶⁸

Theologians Andreas J. Köstenberger, Darrell L. Bock, and Joshua D. Chatraw jointly point out that: “in almost every case even the most widely accepted works from ancient philosophers and historians are considered verifiable with only a small handful of available

⁴⁶² Dan Wickwire. *Has the Bible Been Changed?: The Reliability of the Scriptures According to Jewish, Christian, and Isla*. Aneko, 2016. [Kindle Android version], 34.

⁴⁶³ Dan Wickwire. *Has the Bible Been Changed?: The Reliability of the Scriptures According to Jewish, Christian, and Isla*. Aneko, 2016. [Kindle Android version], 36.

⁴⁶⁴ Gordon Nickel, *The Gentle Answer to the Muslim Accusation of Biblical Falsification*. Bruton Gate, 2016. Kindle edition, 151.

⁴⁶⁵ Gordon Nickel, *The Gentle Answer to the Muslim Accusation of Biblical Falsification*. Bruton Gate, 2016. Kindle edition, 98.

⁴⁶⁶ Dan Wickwire. *Has the Bible Been Changed?: The Reliability of the Scriptures According to Jewish, Christian, and Isla*. Aneko, 2016. [Kindle Android version], 71.

⁴⁶⁷ See <https://greeknewtestament.net>; Josh McDowell and Sean McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2017, 46–68.

⁴⁶⁸ <https://greeknewtestament.net>, §9.

sources to vouch for them.”⁴⁶⁹ Indeed, according to Norman L. Geisler and Frank Turek, many ancient works survive “on fewer than a dozen manuscripts [and the average is about twenty manuscripts], yet few historians question the historicity of the events those works describe.”⁴⁷⁰ The text of the Qur’an, as a point of comparison, reaches us through just 800 or so manuscripts.⁴⁷¹ Homer’s ca. eighth-century BC *Iliad* provides the closest comparison to the New Testament on this score, with recent discoveries pushing the number of manuscripts from the oft-quoted 643 up to about 1900.⁴⁷² Classical literature can only offer a very rough point of comparison here, as unlike NT scholars, who count every manuscript, classicists don’t count any manuscript that’s clearly copied from another member of the same textual family tree. Nevertheless, the point stands that “there are a good number of manuscripts that attest to the text of the NT compared to classical authors.”⁴⁷³ If one were to be sceptical about the text of the New Testament on the basis of the number of manuscripts available to inform the contemporary text-critical edition available to us today, consistency would demand that one would have to dismiss both the *Iliad* and the Qur’an on the same grounds!

Of course, the New Testament manuscripts are spread across a wide range of dates, from the second to the sixteenth century (with numbers dropping off after the fifteenth-century invention of the printing press). However, as Don Stewart and Joseph M. Holden observe, the text of the entire New Testament is accounted for in manuscripts that date “from within 300 years of the original writing [i.e., in the mid-late 1st century AD].”⁴⁷⁴ This means that the entire New Testament is accounted for *in manuscripts that predate the traditional lifetime of Muhammad*.

Significant early manuscript witnesses to the New Testament text include:

- *Codex Alexandrinus*, circa. AD 400, “contains 773 velum folios: 630 folios of the Septuagint and 143 of the New Testament. The Septuagint is nearly complete and includes a complete copy of the Torah, though some small sections of Genesis and Leviticus are damaged.”⁴⁷⁵
- *Codex Sinaiticus*, contains the whole New Testament and about half of the Old Testament in the Septuagint Greek translation, circa. AD 350
- *Codex Vaticanus*, circa. AD 325–350, “includes the New Testament and a nearly complete Septuagint. Unfortunately, twenty original leaves from Genesis and Psalms are missing.”⁴⁷⁶
- *The Chester Beatty Papyri*, contains major portions of all four Gospels and Acts circa.

⁴⁶⁹ Andreas J. Köstenberger, et al. *Truth Matters, Confident Faith in a Confusing World*. Nashville: B&H Academic, 2014, 112.

⁴⁷⁰ Norman L. Geisler and Frank Turek, *I Don’t Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004, 225.

⁴⁷¹ <https://www.csntm.org/2024/09/30/the-Qur’an-textual-criticism-and-the-new-testament/#:~:text=The%20Sana%27a%20Palimpsest%20is,textual%20traditions%20a%20daunting%20task>

⁴⁷² See Clay Jones. “The Bibliographical Test Updated.” *Christian Research Institute*, Oct 1 2013.

<https://www.equip.org/articles/the-bibliographical-test-updated/>; Josh McDowell and Sean McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2017, 56.

⁴⁷³ Doug Potter. “A Revised Approach to Defending New Testament Textual Reliability.” (2023), https://www.academia.edu/99525454/A_Revised_Approach_to_Defending_New_Testament_Textual_Reliability?email_work_card=view-paper, 9.

⁴⁷⁴ Joseph M. Holden and Don Stewart. “Were the New Testament Manuscripts Copied Accurately?” *Defending Inerrancy*, Aug 5, 2019, <https://defendinginerrancy.com/were-nt-mss-copied-accurately/>, 193.

⁴⁷⁵ Gordon Nickel, *The Gentle Answer to the Muslim Accusation of Biblical Falsification*. Bruton Gate, 2016. Kindle edition, 82.

⁴⁷⁶ Gordon Nickel, *The Gentle Answer to the Muslim Accusation of Biblical Falsification*. Bruton Gate, 2016. Kindle edition, 82.

AD 250

- *The Bodmer Papyri*, contains several pages of Luke and most of John circa. AD 200
- P52, a scrap of ancient papyrus bearing several verses of the Fourth Gospel, which “can safely be dated to A.D. 100–125.”⁴⁷⁷

There are several NT Gospel manuscript fragments from within the time period of 50 to 200 years of the autograph. Whole pages of the NT Gospels appear in the manuscript tradition within about 100 to 150 years of the autographs. Indeed, “paleographers have documented at least 120 Greek manuscripts that date to within three centuries of the original composition of the New Testament.”⁴⁷⁸ Since we know “a manuscript could survive [in use for] 150 to 200 years as a norm,”⁴⁷⁹ some of these could be first generation copies of the autographs!

Consider the temporal gap between the original autographs and the earliest surviving *complete* manuscript in the following representative cases from ancient literature:

Fig. Temporal Gap until Our Earliest Complete Manuscript of Ancient Literature.⁴⁸⁰

Ancient Literature	Temporal Gap Until Our Earliest Complete Manuscript
Homer’s <i>Iliad</i> (epic poem from the 8 th century BC)	c. 1800 years.
Roman Poet Gaius Valerius Catullus	c. 1,500 years.
The plays of Sophocles	c. 1,500 years.
The works of Aristotle	c. 1,400 years.
The histories of Herodotus	c. 1,350 years.
The works of Plato	c. 1,300 years.
Thucydides’s <i>History of the Peloponnesian War</i>	c. 1,300 years.
The plays of Aristophanes	c. 1,200 years.
Josephus’ <i>Jewish War</i>	c. 900 years.
The poetry of Horace	c. 900 years.
The histories of Suetonius	c. 800 years.
The surviving books of the <i>Annals</i> of Tacitus	c. 800 years.

⁴⁷⁷ Comfort and Barrett, *The Text of the Earliest New Testament Manuscripts*, 1:338. For a detailed analysis of the dating of P52, see Peter S. Williams, *Behold the Man: Essays on the Historical Jesus*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2024, Chap. Three.

⁴⁷⁸ Joseph M. Holden and Don Stewart, “Were the New Testament Manuscripts Copied Accurately?” *Defending Inerrancy*, Aug 5, 2019, <https://defendinginerrancy.com/were-nt-mss-copied-accurately/>, §9.

⁴⁷⁹ William D. Mounce, *Why I Trust the Bible: Answers to Real Questions and Doubts People Have about the Bible*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Reflective, 2021, 131.

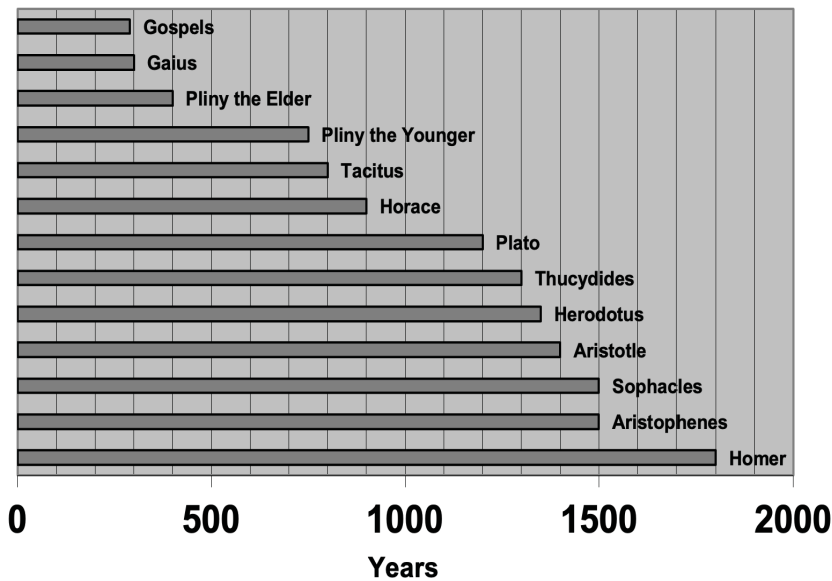
⁴⁸⁰ Data taken from various sources including: Steven Collins, *The Defendable Faith: Lessons in Christian Apologetics*. Albuquerque: Trowel, 2012, 98; Andreas J. Köstenberger, et al., *Truth Matters, Confident Faith in a Confusing World*. Nashville: B&H Academic, 2014, 115; Josh McDowell and Sean McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2017; J. P. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1987, 135; Jonathan Morrow, *Questioning the Bible: 11 Major Challenges to the Bible’s Authority*. Chicago: Moody, 2014, 96.

The writings of Pliny the Younger	c. 750 years.
Pliny the Elder's <i>Historia Naturalis</i>	c. 400 years.
Gaius's <i>Institutes of Roman Law</i>	c. 300 years.

Note that whereas Homer's *Iliad* was the closest classical textual comparison to the NT in terms of the sheer number of available manuscripts, it fares poorly in terms of this "time gap" metric. David Cloud reports that "the oldest entire manuscripts of Homer's writings are from the 10th and 11th centuries AD, at least 1,800 years later."⁴⁸¹ Moreover, according to Lynnette Wofford: "Our earliest extant papyrus fragments of the *Iliad* are from the Ptolemaic period (fourth and third century BC) and thus reflect some degree of editorial intervention by Alexandrian scholars."⁴⁸² If one were to insist on scepticism about the text of the New Testament on the grounds of the temporal gap between the autographs and the earliest complete manuscript, consistency would basically require one to shut down every university department of classics!

The following figure compares the gap between the autograph and *the earliest extant complete manuscript copies* for both the NT Gospels and a dozen representative ancient literary examples:

Fig. Temporal Gap between Autographs and Earliest Extant Complete Copies.



As Norman L. Geisler and Peter Bocchino note: "The average time span between the original and earliest [complete] copy of the other ancient texts [those outside the New Testament] is over 1,000 years."⁴⁸³

⁴⁸¹ David Cloud. "The Iliad vs the New Testament." *Way of Life Literature*, Nov 10, 2016.

<https://www.wayoflife.org/reports/the-iliad-vs-the-new-testament.php>, §2.

⁴⁸² Lynnette Wofford. "When Was Homer's Iliad Written?"

<https://www.enotes.com/topics/iliad/questions/when-was-homers-iliad-written-658281>, §4.

⁴⁸³ Norman L. Geisler and Peter Bocchino. *Unshakable Foundations: Contemporary Answers to Crucial Questions about the Christian Faith*. Bloomington, MN: Bethany, 2000, 257.

The oldest known *complete* manuscript of the Qur'an is the Topkapi Qur'an,⁴⁸⁴ which dates from the mid-eight century AD, which is around 220 years after the period of time in which Muslims traditionally believe the Qur'an was revealed to Mohammad (from 610 AD until 632 AD). That's a time-gap roughly comparable with that between the mid-to-late first century Gospels and *Codex Vaticanus* (circa. AD 325–350).

The oldest known *partial* manuscript of the Qur'an "is the Birmingham Qur'an, consisting of two parchment leaves containing Surahs 18 to 20."⁴⁸⁵ Radiocarbon dating of the animal-skin parchment on which the text is written places it "in the period between 568 and 645 with 95.4% probability."⁴⁸⁶ That doesn't mean that the text on the parchment dates to the same era, since blank parchments were often stored for years after they were produced. Indeed, the Birmingham Qur'an has chapter separators and dotted verse endings, features that were introduced to the Qur'an after the traditional lifetime of Mohammad:

Adnan Al-Sharif, who is the dean of libraries at Umm Al-Qura University, said there were many observations which cast doubt on the claims that the Birmingham manuscript was the oldest copy of the Qur'an. "One of these is the red-color separation between the Bismillah and the two Surahs of Mariam and Taha. It was not customary during the Prophet's time to separate between the Surahs."
Abdullah Al-Sharif, a historian, said the coloring and the dotting were not known at the time of the Prophet (pbuh) or the rightly-guided caliphs. "They belong to the Umayyad era between Hijra years 41-132 . . . [i.e., circa. 661-750 AD]"⁴⁸⁷

In other words, the text in the Birmingham Qur'an's probably dates from somewhere between 30 to 170 years after the time in which Muslims traditionally believe the Qur'an was revealed to Mohammad (i.e., from 610 AD until 632 AD). That places these two leaves anything from between some 30 to 120 years after the first Caliph (Abu Bakr, who reigned 632–634 AD) is traditionally said to have ordered the initial collection of the various written pieces of the Qur'an into one book. It also places them some 10 to 100 years after "the Qur'an in its codified form was [supposedly] established under the third Caliph, Uthman, around 650."⁴⁸⁸

It is worth pointing out that "the tradition of the collection under 'Uthmān first appeared in writing around 200 years after the event it purports to describe."⁴⁸⁹ It is now clear that the "codified" text-form of the Qur'an could not have been established under 'Uthmān, because when he lived Arabic was a so-called "defective script," that is "it had no way of

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https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Topkapi_manuscript#:~:text=The%20size%20of%20this%20manuscript,complete%20text%20of%20the%20Qur'an.

485 <https://www.csntm.org/2024/09/30/the-Qur'an-textual-criticism-and-the-new-testament/#:~:text=The%20Sana%27a%20Palimpsest%20is, textual%20traditions%20a%20daunting%20task>

486 University of Birmingham, "What is the Birmingham Qur'an?"

<https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/facilities/cadbury/birmingham-Qur'an-mingana-collection/birmingham-Qur'an/what-is>

487

<https://web.archive.org/web/20150906130646/http://www.saudigazette.com.sa/index.cfm?method=home.region&contentid=20150727251595>

488 University of Birmingham, "What is the Birmingham Qur'an?"

<https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/facilities/cadbury/birmingham-Qur'an-mingana-collection/birmingham-Qur'an/what-is>

489 Gordon Nickel, *The Gentle Answer to the Muslim Accusation of Biblical Falsification*. Bruton Gate, 2016. Kindle edition, 269.

recording vowels and only a very limited supply of consonantal symbols.”⁴⁹⁰ As Nickel explains:

the earliest Qur’an manuscripts show what scholars have described as a “consonantal skeleton,” in which the shapes of consonants are given, but the diacritic dots that identify the consonants are either missing or inconsistently supplied. In addition, there are no short vowels or pronunciation marks such as hamza in the earliest manuscripts, and some manuscripts also lack the long vowel alif. . . . between the earliest manuscripts of the Qur’an and the fully-pointed text Muslims use today, a great number of diacritic dots, vowel marks, and other marks presently part of the text needed to be added. The fully-pointed and vocalized Qur’an most Muslims use today is therefore not the same as the text first written down. It is, in fact, one edited version of the earliest manuscripts, dotted and vocalized in order to preserve one particular reading.⁴⁹¹

Indeed, quotations from the Qur’ān “in a letter that claims to have been written around 700 A.D. by Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 728). . . suggest that the text of the Qur’an was not yet as firmly fixed in the decades after ‘Uthmān as it came to be later.”⁴⁹² (By contrast, the text of the New Testament, including its gospels, does not show any such trajectory of textual changes between its earlier and later manuscripts.) Today, most Islamologists view ‘Uthmān is the “conventional” name for “the official version imposed by the Umayyad caliph ‘Abd al-Malik.”⁴⁹³ As Stephen Shoemaker reports, “[t]he reign of ‘Abd al-Malik has emerged as a period in which the Qur’ān’s final collection and standardization seems highly likely.”⁴⁹⁴ Born in Medina in 646/647 AD, ‘Abd al-Malik was the fifth caliph of the Umayyad Arab dynasty centred in Damascus, ruling 685–705 AD, when he died.⁴⁹⁵

Whether the text of the Qur’an was codified under ‘Uthmān or ‘Abd al-Malik, as textual critic Keith E. Small argues, the fact that a particular text-form of the Qur’an was established by a top-down process means that

the available sources do not provide the necessary information for reconstructing the original text of the Qur’an from the time of Muhammad. . . . the history of the transmission of the text of the Qur’an is at least as much a testimony to the destruction of the Qur’an material as it is to its preservation. It is also testimony to the fact that there never was one original text of the Qur’an. . . . Instead of the pure autographic text-forms being preserved, what has been preserved and transmitted for the Qur’an is a text-form that was chosen from amidst a group of others, and has been improved upon in order to make it conform to a desired ideal. . . . what cannot be determined are the Autographic text-forms of what the earliest Muslims considered to be the full corpus of revelations given through Muhammad and left at his death or the Authoritative text-forms of his Companions. Instead, a strongly edited version of one

⁴⁹⁰ Gordon Nickel, *The Gentle Answer to the Muslim Accusation of Biblical Falsification*. Bruton Gate, 2016. Kindle edition, 266.

⁴⁹¹ Gordon Nickel, *The Gentle Answer to the Muslim Accusation of Biblical Falsification*. Bruton Gate, 2016. Kindle edition, 250 & 296.

⁴⁹² Gordon Nickel, *The Gentle Answer to the Muslim Accusation of Biblical Falsification*. Bruton Gate, 2016. Kindle edition, 264.

⁴⁹³ Gordon Nickel, *The Gentle Answer to the Muslim Accusation of Biblical Falsification*. Bruton Gate, 2016. Kindle edition, 266.

⁴⁹⁴ Stephen Shoemaker, quoted by Gordon Nickel, *The Gentle Answer to the Muslim Accusation of Biblical Falsification*. Bruton Gate, 2016. Kindle edition, 266.

⁴⁹⁵ “‘Abd al-Malik: Umayyad caliph” <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Abd-al-Malik-Umayyad-caliph>.

corpus has been preserved and transmitted, made between twenty and one hundred years after Muhammad's death.⁴⁹⁶

As theologian Andrew D. Edwards comments:

Muslims often claim . . . that the Qur'an is the same today as it was in Muhammad's time, letter for letter, without alteration. The popular assertion is that not even a dot has changed in the Qur'an for over fourteen centuries. This claim is repeated in Islamic apologetics as one of the great proofs of the Qur'an's divine origin. However, this position does not withstand historical scrutiny. Numerous early Qur'anic manuscripts, as well as Islamic sources themselves, show the presence of textual variations, lost verses, and differing recitations. The very need for Uthman [or 'Abd al-Malik] to impose a single recension of the Qur'an and burn the others demonstrates that variations existed from the very beginning.⁴⁹⁷

Moreover, as Gordon Nickell explains:

today's "standard" text of the Qur'an is actually only one of fourteen variant readings that traditional Muslim scholars accepted as authentic during the medieval period of Islam. The text most Muslims today regard as standard was in fact first published in Cairo on July 10, 1924. The Egyptian scholars responsible for the text chose to preserve one of the fourteen readings, known as the reading of Ḥafṣ 'an 'Āṣim. They did not attempt to reconstruct the ancient form of the Qur'an based on the oldest available manuscripts.⁴⁹⁸

By contrast with the top-down process that established the received text-form of the Qur'an, as philosopher Richard Shumack explains,

the story of how Christianity ended up with four Gospels is a story that follows the journeys of the apostles, the communities they established and the libraries that developed as these communities collected as much of the apostolic testimony they could. . . . the sheer size, complexity, and careful nature of the global network of church libraries meant it would have been virtually impossible to systematically or deliberately destroy or corrupt all the texts.⁴⁹⁹

Indeed, as Nickel observes,

During the first three centuries of Christianity, there was no Christian political power at work making decisions about the text of the New Testament. There was an informal process among Christian leaders of copying, circulating and accepting their authority (canonization). There are stories of anti-Christian Roman rulers destroying manuscripts of the Bible, but not of Christians destroying copies of their own

⁴⁹⁶ Keith E. Small, *Textual Criticism and Qur'an Manuscripts*. Lanham: Lexington, 2012, 178, 180, 184 & 185.

⁴⁹⁷ Andrew D. Edwards, "How Does the Preservation of the Qur'an Compare to the Preservation of the Bible?" <https://uasvbible.org/2025/09/19/bible-vs-Qur'an-preservation/#:~:text=The%20Providential%20Contrast%20Between%20the,the%20ages%20by%20His%20providence>

⁴⁹⁸ Gordon Nickel, *The Gentle Answer to the Muslim Accusation of Biblical Falsification*. Bruton Gate, 2016. Kindle edition, 195.

⁴⁹⁹ Richard Shumack, *Jesus through Muslim Eyes*. SPCK Publishing, 2020. Kindle edition, 58 & 61.

scriptures. It is these manuscripts from the first three centuries that are now the most valuable for establishing the original New Testament text.⁵⁰⁰

This wealth of early manuscript evidence allows textual critics to reconstruct the original words of the New Testament with a very high degree of confidence. As Nickel affirms,

The manuscript history of the New Testament gives good reason for confidence that the New Testament we have today is substantially the same as the original manuscripts. The critical editions of the New Testament used by scholars and translators today are the result of painstaking and expert textual criticism that considers all of the best manuscript evidence. . . . the Gospel accounts are among the best-attested documents in antiquity. There are more early manuscripts of the New Testament writings, and in better condition, than any other first-century writing. Famous works that are widely accepted as the writings of Greek dramatists and Roman historians, for example, are much less strongly attested.⁵⁰¹

Nickel goes on to compare the manuscript evidence for New Testament gospels with that for the earliest biographies about Muhammad:

the earliest biography of Islam’s messenger is the Kitāb al-maghāzī by al-Wāqidī (d. 822). This important source for the details of the life of Islam’s messenger is very poorly attested. . . . only a single complete copy of the Kitāb al-maghāzī has been discovered so far, and it “is error-ridden and a significant challenge to use.” The best-known biography of the messenger of Islam, the Sīrat al-nabawiyya by Ibn Ishāq (d. 767), is not known to exist. This biography can only be accessed in the thoroughly edited version of Ibn Hishām, who died roughly 200 years after the messenger (d. 833).⁵⁰²

In sum, the evidence supports New Testament scholar Martin Hengel’s affirmation that “The text of the Gospels is the best transmitted in the whole of antiquity.”⁵⁰³ As theologian Timothy Paul Jones explains, most of the scribal variations between ancient manuscripts of the New Testament:

stem from differences in spelling, word order, or the relationships between nouns and definite articles — variants that are easily recognizable and, in most cases, virtually unnoticeable in translations. . . . Most important, *none* of the differences affects any central element of the Christian faith.⁵⁰⁴

As theologian Mark D. Roberts writes:

⁵⁰⁰ Gordon Nickel, *The Gentle Answer to the Muslim Accusation of Biblical Falsification*. Bruton Gate, 2016. Kindle edition, 312.

⁵⁰¹ Gordon Nickel, *The Gentle Answer to the Muslim Accusation of Biblical Falsification*. Bruton Gate, 2016. Kindle edition, 175.

⁵⁰² Gordon Nickel, *The Gentle Answer to the Muslim Accusation of Biblical Falsification*. Bruton Gate, 2016. Kindle edition, 182.

⁵⁰³ Martin Hengel, quoted by Gordon Nickel, *The Gentle Answer to the Muslim Accusation of Biblical Falsification*. Bruton Gate, 2016. Kindle edition, 182.

⁵⁰⁴ Timothy Paul Jones. *Misquoting Truth: A Guide to the Fallacies of Bart Ehrman’s Misquoting Jesus*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007, 42, 43, and 44.

the abundance of manuscripts and the antiquity of manuscripts, when run through the mill of text-critical methodology, allows us to know with a very high level of probability what the evangelists and other New Testament authors wrote.⁵⁰⁵

Q4: Does the evidence show that the New Testament gospels are historically reliable sources of information about Jesus?

A4:

Short:

Yes, there is strong evidence that the Gospels are historically reliable. They compare well with other ancient sources in both timing and detail. Both internal consistency and external confirmation support their credibility.

Summary:

The Gospels are evaluated using the same standards as other ancient texts. By those standards, they perform relatively well.

First, they are early sources. They were written within a few decades of the events they describe. This is a short gap compared to many ancient histories.

Second, they show strong internal markers of authenticity. These include small details, incidental references, and consistent character portrayals. Features like “undesigned coincidences” suggest independent but compatible accounts.

Third, the Gospels align well with known geography and culture. Archaeology has repeatedly confirmed places, customs, and political figures mentioned. For example, Roman crucifixion practices and burial customs match the descriptions.

External sources also support key claims. Non-Christian writers like Tacitus and Josephus mention Jesus and early Christians.

The Gospels also avoid excessive idealization. They include difficult or embarrassing details about key figures.

Compared to other ancient works, they are well within accepted historical ranges. Their time gap is similar to or shorter than many accepted classical sources. This does not prove every detail, but it supports general reliability.

In summary, both internal and external evidence point to the Gospels being credible historical testimonies about Jesus.

Scholar:

There is plenty of internal and external evidence showing that the New Testament gospels are historically reliable sources of testimony about Jesus.

As philosopher and theologian William Lane Craig comments:

Radical critics still get a free pass from the press today for their sensational assertions, but they are being increasingly marginalized within the academy, as scholarship has

⁵⁰⁵ Mark D. Roberts, *Can We Trust the Gospels?* Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007, 37.

come to a new appreciation of the historical reliability of the New Testament documents.⁵⁰⁶

As philosopher Lydia McGrew observes, this appreciation comes from simply “holding the Gospels [and other New Testament literature] up to the standards that are applicable to other ancient works.”⁵⁰⁷

McGrew sorts evidence for the reliability of any source of historical testimony into two categories: internal evidence and external evidence. Applied to literature such as the New Testament Gospels, internal evidences mostly concern:

ways in which the books look truthful by corresponding to what we know about how truthful people talk and write. They include undesigned coincidences, unnecessary details, unexplained allusions, reconcilable variation, and unity of personalities.⁵⁰⁸

External evidences concern the use of:

information from outside the canonical books of the Bible to support factual statements made within the biblical books. These include information about geography, archaeology, customs, and rulers.⁵⁰⁹

The tight connection between the New Testament Gospels and their testimonial sources is confirmed by research summarized by Cambridge New Testament scholar Peter J. Williams in his book *Can We Trust the Gospels?* (Crossway, 2018), which documents “a plethora of ways in which the Gospel writers show that they are clearly familiar with the times, places, and customs of Jesus’ day, including the local geography.”⁵¹⁰ In short, the New Testament exhibits a historical verisimilitude that would in all likelihood be lacking in material written by authors informationally detached from the life and times of Jesus.

Again, the New Testament’s testimony has been the subject of extensive *archaeological* confirmation.⁵¹¹ Archaeologists have discovered material evidence that demonstrates and/or confirms (with varying degrees of plausibility) that:

- Jesus, son of Joseph and brother of James (who was buried in Jerusalem in the middle of the first century), existed in the early-middle first century.
- Jesus was crucified (which probably killed him).
- Victims of Roman crucifixion could be entombed.
- Jesus was entombed (a process that probably confirms his death) in a disused quarry that was also used for gardening, just outside the first-century city walls of Jerusalem.
- Grave robbery was an offence that may have been particularly associated with Nazareth, where the NT says Jesus lived, by the middle of the first century AD (lending credence to Jesus’ empty tomb, and thus to his burial).

⁵⁰⁶ William Lane Craig, *On Guard*. David C. Cook, 183.

⁵⁰⁷ Lydia McGrew, *Testimonies to the Truth*. Tampa, FL: DeWard, ix.

⁵⁰⁸ Lydia McGrew, *Testimonies to the Truth*. Tampa, FL: p vii–viii. See Peter S. Williams, “Undesigned Coincidences in the Gospels”

https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLQhh3qcwVEWgZ_2TLqaPchdovuItTyZII (YouTube playlist).

⁵⁰⁹ Lydia McGrew, *Testimonies to the Truth*. Tampa, FL: DeWard, vii.

⁵¹⁰ Justin Brierley, *The Surprising Rebirth of Belief in God*. Tyndale House, 2023, 117.

⁵¹¹ See Craig A. Evans, *Jesus and the Remains of His Day: Studies in Jesus and the Evidence of Material Culture*. Hendrickson, 2016; Craig A. Evans, *Jesus and His World: The Archaeological Evidence*. SPCK, 2012; Peter S. Williams, *Digging for Evidence*.

- Despite his culturally shameful crucifixion, Jesus was considered to be divine, in the Judeo-Christian sense, by some people in the near east within ca. 170 years of his execution.
- The New Testament Gospels have been repeatedly verified by archaeological discoveries relating to places, people, culture, and beliefs, which encourages us to trust them on matters we can't independently verify in this way.⁵¹²

The internal and external evidence taken together indicates that the New Testament Gospels compare favourably with other ancient works of history in terms of the temporal interval between their date of publication and the events they claim to report:

Fig. Temporal Interval between Events and Reports.⁵¹³

Author/ Work	Reported Events	Report Published	Lapse between Events & Report	Average Lapse
Mark	ca. AD 30–33	ca. AD 49	ca. 16–19 yrs	ca. 17.5 yrs
Luke	ca. 6 BC–AD 33	ca. AD 60	ca. 27–66 yrs	ca. 46.5 yrs
Matthew	ca. 6 BC–AD 33	ca. AD 65	ca. 32–71 yrs	ca. 51.5 yrs
John	ca. AD 30–33	ca. AD 98	ca. 65–68 yrs	ca. 66.5 yrs
Pliny, <i>Letters</i>	AD 97–112	AD 100–112	0–3 yrs	1.5 yrs
Thucydides, <i>History</i>	431–411 BC	410–400 BC	0–30 yrs	15 yrs
Xenophon, <i>Anabasis</i>	401–399 BC	385–375 BC	15–25 yrs	20 yrs
Polybius, <i>History</i>	200–120 BC	150 BC	20–70 yrs	45 yrs
Tacitus, <i>Annals</i>	AD 14–68	ca. AD 100–110	ca. 32–96 yrs	ca. 64 yrs
Heroditus, <i>History</i>	546–478 BC	430–425 BC	48–121 yrs	84.5 yrs
Suetonius, <i>Lives</i>	50 BC–AD 95	ca. AD 120	ca. 25–170 yrs	ca. 97.5 yrs
Josephus— <i>War</i>	200 BC–AD 70	ca. AD 80	ca. 10–280 yrs	ca. 145 yrs
Plutarch, <i>Lives</i>	500 BC–AD 70	ca. AD 100	ca. 30–600 yrs	ca. 315 yrs

The average gap between a historical event and a published report of that event for the non-biblical sources listed here is about eighty-eight years. Even if we exclude Plutarch's *Lives*, the average temporal gap for the remaining non-biblical texts is about fifty-nine years. The average lapse between the four Gospels and the events they report is arguably just over forty-five years.

⁵¹² See Peter S. Williams, "Archaeological Evidence for Jesus" (FOCLOnline), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ESOpqrXsBzU&t=6s>; Peter S. Williams, *Behold the Man: Essays on the Historical Jesus*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2024, 89-91; Peter S. Williams, *Digging for Evidence*. Christian Evidence Society, https://christianevidence.org/booklet/digging_for_evidence/.

⁵¹³ For a justification of the Gospel dates used for the synoptic gospels in this table, see Peter S. Williams, *Getting at Jesus: A Comprehensive Critique of Neo-Atheist Nonsense About the Jesus of History*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2019. For a more recent and in-depth review of the dating the Fourth Gospel, see Chapters 2 and 3 of Peter S. Williams, *Behold the Man: Essays on the Historical Jesus*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2024.

This drops to about thirty-eight years for the Synoptic Gospels, and less if we exclude Matthew and Luke’s stories about Jesus’s infancy. Indeed, one can see that even on a “liberal” dating of the canonical Gospels (which would place Mark ca. 60–75, Matthew 65–85, and Luke ca. AD 65–95⁵¹⁴), they would still count as relatively “early” sources by the standards of ancient historiography.

For another point of comparison, it is worth noting that the gap between the New Testament Gospels and the events they report is much smaller than the gap between the earliest biographical accounts of Muhammad and the events of his lifetime:

the earliest biography of Islam’s messenger is the Kitāb al-maghāzī by al-Wāqidī (d. 822). This important source for the details of the life of Islam’s messenger is very poorly attested. . . . only a single complete copy of the Kitāb al-maghāzī has been discovered so far, and it “is error-ridden and a significant challenge to use.” The best-known biography of the messenger of Islam, the Sīrat al-nabawīyya by Ibn Ishāq (d. 767), is not known to exist. This biography can only be accessed in the thoroughly edited version of Ibn Hishām, who died roughly 200 years after the messenger (d. 833).⁵¹⁵

Much more could be said in defence of the historical reliability of the New Testament and its four Gospels, but in sum: “the available evidence from a variety of angles confirms the strong foundation on which we can base the general reliability of the New Testament reports of the historical Jesus.”⁵¹⁶ A plethora of standard tests for historical authenticity find application to the New Testament’s testimony and warrants an inference to the conclusion that this testimony is, at least generally speaking, historically reliable.

Q5: What historical evidence is there for the reliability of the “nativity” story in particular?

A5:

Short:

The nativity accounts are supported by early, independent sources in Matthew and Luke. They show overlapping details and reflect knowledge of first-century context. Early traditions and external references also support their historical plausibility.

Summary:

The nativity story is primarily recorded in Matthew and Luke. These are early sources, likely written within a few decades of the events. Importantly, they appear to be independent accounts. Matthew presents Joseph’s perspective, while Luke presents Mary’s. Despite differences, they agree on key points. Jesus is born in Bethlehem, to Mary, under Herod, and raised in Nazareth. Such overlap across independent sources strengthens credibility.

⁵¹⁴ See Mark D. Roberts, *Can We Trust the Gospels?* Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007, 58.

⁵¹⁵ Gordon Nickel, *The Gentle Answer to the Muslim Accusation of Biblical Falsification*. Bruton Gate, 2016. Kindle edition, 182.

⁵¹⁶ Gary R. Habermas, “Recent Perspectives on the Reliability of the Gospels.” https://www.garyhabermas.com/articles/crj_recentperspectives/crj_recentperspectives.htm, §13.

Luke's account in particular shows signs of eyewitness tradition. His references to Mary "treasuring these things" suggest a personal source. The language of Luke's hymns also reflects Semitic style. This suggests earlier Hebrew or Aramaic traditions behind the text.

There are also early external confirmations. Paul (c. AD 49) refers to Jesus being "born of a woman." Ignatius of Antioch (c. AD 108) affirms the virgin birth tradition.

The narratives also include potentially awkward details. For example, shepherds, who had low social status, are key witnesses. Such "embarrassing" elements are unlikely to be invented.

The accounts also make public, checkable claims. They reference rulers, locations, and widely witnessed events.

In summary, the nativity accounts show multiple signs of authenticity. They fit well within early tradition, independent testimony, and historical context.

Scholar:

Besides the internal and external evidence for the testimonial reliability of the New Testament Gospels in general, there is specific internal and external evidence for the reliability of the "nativity" story in particular.

The story of Jesus' "nativity" is related by early sources, including the first century sources known as the gospels of Matthew and Luke, which were probably published in the late 50's – early 60's A.D.⁵¹⁷ As theologians Andreas J. Köstenberger and Alexander Stewart comment, "most likely, Luke wrote independently at roughly the same time as Matthew . . ."⁵¹⁸ They observe that

Matthew's infancy narrative is told from the perspective of Joseph, Jesus's legal adoptive father. Told from this "paternal" vantage point, they provide an account of Joseph's character and actions. Luke's narrative . . . provides Mary's perspective on the events that unfolded. The different points of view may possibly reflect different sources. Perhaps Matthew interviewed or gained access to oral or written accounts through some of Joseph's sons or close friends and relatives while Luke drew information from Mary or her relatives . . . but since two of Jesus's half-brothers, James and Jude, were active in the leadership of the early church (especially James), it is probable that both Matthew and Luke would have had access to similar sources and accounts that could be traced back directly to Jesus's family members and relatives. If so, Matthew and Luke each may have exercised their authorial prerogative to select particular elements in the story of Jesus's birth that were in keeping with their larger overriding purpose for writing their respective Gospels. On the one hand, Matthew may have told the infancy narrative in his Gospel from Joseph's perspective because the paternal viewpoint would have most interested a Jewish audience. Luke, on the other hand, may have chosen to depict the story of Jesus's birth from his mother, Mary's, point of view because it echoed a key theme in

⁵¹⁷ On the dating of the gospels, see Peter S. Williams, *Getting at Jesus: A Comprehensive Critique of Neo-Atheist Nonsense About the Jesus of History*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2019, Chapter Two.

⁵¹⁸ Andreas J. Köstenberger and Alexander Stewart, *The First Days of Jesus: The Story of the Incarnation*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015. [Kindle Android version], 167.

his Gospel, namely Jesus’s consistent concern for women and others with comparatively low status in the culture of his day.⁵¹⁹

After all, Luke records

that Mary “treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart.” This comment is repeated later in the narrative: “And his mother treasured up all these things in her heart.” Mary’s perspective pervades the infancy narrative in Luke, and these verses give a reasonable clue as to how Luke came upon this information. Mary would have remembered the details of the swaddling cloths, the manger, and the report of the shepherds, and at some point would have shared these stories with other family members and friends. In this way, Luke would have gained access to Mary’s eyewitness testimony, whether oral or written.⁵²⁰

Köstenberger and Stewart also note that

Luke’s infancy narrative, particularly the hymns or canticles, reflects Semitic Greek and may have been translated from an original Aramaic or Hebrew source. . . . First, the hymns employ Hebrew poetic parallelism and, in view of the Semitic nature of the Greek, are likely based on Hebrew originals. Second, the hymns’ poetic nature admittedly suggests that their composers did not likely create them out of nothing on the spot. Luke, however, does not claim that Mary or Zechariah produced the material completely on their own; he rather records what they said or, in the case of Zechariah, prophesied. . . . Mary and Zechariah may have used existing Jewish hymns or poems that they already knew by heart and adapted to give voice to their thoughts and emotions. The hymns are thoroughly based on Old Testament words and motifs and parallel the content of other hymns in Second Temple Jewish literature.⁵²¹

Matthew and Luke’s narratives provide complementary information with major overlaps at key points:

Fig. Key overlaps between Matthew and Luke’s nativity narratives.⁵²²

Jesus was born in Bethlehem	Matt 2:1	Luke 2:2
In time of Herod (d. 4 BC)	Matt 2:1	Luke 1:5
Mother: Mary	Matt 1:18	Luke 1:26
Father: Joseph (named the child)	Matt 1:18	Luke 1:26

⁵¹⁹ Andreas J. Köstenberger and Alexander Stewart, *The First Days of Jesus: The Story of the Incarnation*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015. [Kindle Android version], 46-47.

⁵²⁰ Andreas J. Köstenberger and Alexander Stewart, *The First Days of Jesus: The Story of the Incarnation*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015. [Kindle Android version], 153.

⁵²¹ Andreas J. Köstenberger and Alexander Stewart, *The First Days of Jesus: The Story of the Incarnation*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015. [Kindle Android version], 99 & 114.

⁵²² Ian Paul, “Was Luke mistaken about the date of Jesus’ birth?” <https://www.psephizo.com/biblical-studies/was-luke-mistaken-about-the-date-of-jesus-birth-2/>.

But not the biological father	Matt 1:16, 20, 22	Luke 1:34; 3:23
Brought up in Nazareth in Galilee	Matt 2:22-23	Luke 2:39
From the line of David	Matt 1:1	Luke 1:32

In his letter to the Galatians, written circa AD 49, and thus before either Matthew or Luke’s gospels, the apostle Paul wrote that: “When the time had fully come God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law . . .” (Galatians 4:4) This verse parallels expressions and concepts found in Luke (Luke 1:68-69, 1:32, 3:23 and 2:27 & 41), which was published around AD 60 at the earliest. Historian Paul Barnett argues that “In the light of these similarities . . . it seems probable that Paul knew of the underlying tradition about Jesus’ birth that would find more complete form in the early chapters of the Gospel of Luke.”⁵²³

Writing in a letter to the Ephesian Christians circa. 108 AD, Ignatius of Antioch confirms: “For our God Jesus the Christ was conceived by Mary, in God’s plan being sprung both from the seed of David and from the Holy Spirit . . .,” and he mentions “Mary’s virginity and her giving birth . . .” Ignatius was a disciple of Jesus’ apostle John, so he was in a good position to know what he was talking about.

John Redford explains that:

At one time, a very popular idea was that the Christian idea of the virgin birth arose because pagan religions themselves had notions of gods mating with humans, thus divine/human beings emerged . . . all attempts to demonstrate a direct dependence on such legends by the early Christian community . . . have failed to produce any concrete evidence for it . . . Rather than being an idea borrowed from other traditions, a birth from a virgin woman by the power alone of God’s spirit is unique to the Christian sources.⁵²⁴

In the Christian sources, Jesus is conceived *by the power of the Holy Spirit*, and *Mary remains a virgin*, which is why “the nativity” is also traditionally referred to as “the virgin birth.” As Köstenberger and Stewart comment:

Matthew’s description of the Holy Spirit’s role in Mary’s virginal conception sets the account apart from any alleged Greco-Roman parallels, since parallels from the broader pagan world all depend upon a god having sexual intercourse with a human. Matthew excludes any hint of such activity from his description of the conception. . . . The language of the Holy Spirit “overshadowing” Mary recalls God’s original creative work in Genesis 1:2, which depicts “the Spirit of God” as “hovering over the face of the waters.” The coming of Jesus into the world would mark the beginning of God’s work of new creation. The Greeks had many tales of their gods impregnating human women through intercourse, but the angel’s words dismiss any possibility of

⁵²³ Paul Barnett, *Messiah*. IVP, 2009, 70.

⁵²⁴ John Redford, *Born of a Virgin*. London: St Pauls, 2007, 135.

such a process — the conception was supernaturally accomplished while Mary was still a virgin.⁵²⁵

Still, even mentioning the virgin birth in Matthew and Luke’s cultural context clearly ran the risk of putting people in mind of various pagan demigods, which was *not* how the Gospel writers wanted people to see Jesus! Why, then, would Matthew and Luke take such a risk, unless they at least believed the story they told was true?

Another indication of historicity is the fact that the nativity story makes claims about several matters of purportedly public knowledge within about sixty-five years of when the reported events are said to have happened (and thus within the lifetime of at least some people who would have remembered the events if they did happen), which is a risky strategy if the events in question didn’t actually happen. Zechariah’s loss and regaining of speech is reported by Luke as having been witnessed by people at the Temple, by Elizabeth, and by neighbors and relatives, such that “throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about these things.” (Luke 1:65.) Likewise, Elizabeth’s pregnancy is reported to have been witnessed by neighbors and relatives, as well as by Elizabeth and Mary. The announcement of the angels to the shepherds was of course reportedly witnessed by the shepherds, as was that fact that the new-born Jesus was placed in a manger. It is worth noting that, in light of their low social status, the shepherds count as *embarrassing* witnesses, and are thus unlikely to be a creative invention on Luke’s part. Shepherds were of low status in Jewish society because their work made them “unclean,” and consequently “Shepherds were not permitted to testify as witnesses in court . . .”⁵²⁶ The magi were witnessed by Herod’s court, and their visit was consequently said to be common knowledge in “all Jerusalem” (Matthew 2:3). As Andreas J. Köstenberger and Alexander Stewart point out, “the existence and testimony of living eyewitnesses [and eyewitnesses to eyewitnesses] would have safeguarded the truthfulness of the stories of Jesus’s life well into the period in which our four Evangelists wrote their Gospels.”⁵²⁷

Q6: Was Joseph a real historical figure?

A6:

Short:

Joseph is known primarily from the New Testament, and there is no independent direct evidence for him alone.

The James ossuary may indirectly support his existence, but it is debated.

Overall, his existence is plausible, but not independently confirmed.

Summary:

Joseph, the husband of Mary, is described in the New Testament as Jesus’ legal father. He appears in the infancy narratives, especially in Matthew and Luke.

Outside the New Testament, there is no clear, independent historical record of Joseph. The strongest proposed extra-biblical evidence is the “James ossuary.” This inscription reads:

⁵²⁵ Andreas J. Köstenberger and Alexander Stewart, *The First Days of Jesus: The Story of the Incarnation*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015. [Kindle Android version], 49 & 107.

⁵²⁶ David W. and Warren W. Wiersbe, *C is for Christmas: The History, personalities, and Meaning of Christ’s Birth*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2012, 170.

⁵²⁷ Andreas J. Köstenberger and Alexander Stewart, *The First Days of Jesus: The Story of the Incarnation*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015. [Kindle Android version], 97.

“James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus.” If authentic and correctly identified, it would indirectly confirm Joseph. However, the ossuary is heavily debated among scholars. Some argue the inscription is fully authentic. Others believe part of it, especially “brother of Jesus,” may have been added later. Even if authentic, the names James, Joseph, and Jesus were very common. This makes identification uncertain. Statistical arguments suggest the combination is rare, but not unique. Most scholars agree the ossuary cannot definitively prove Joseph’s identity.

That said, the New Testament itself is early and internally consistent. It places Joseph in a realistic cultural and historical setting. There is nothing inherently implausible about his existence.

So historically, Joseph is best seen as a probable figure. But unlike Jesus, he lacks strong independent external confirmation.

Scholar:

Besides being mentioned by , the historical existence of Joseph is plausibly confirmed by the 1st century “James ossuary” (or “bone box”).

The “James Ossuary” is a mid 1st century limestone ossuary (or “bone box”) that was discovered in the early 1970s, but only recognized in 2002 as bearing the significant Aramaic inscription: “Ya’akov bar Yosef akhui di Yeshua,” that is “Jacob, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus.” In English Jacob = James, which is the name of one of Jesus’ younger brothers, who became a major figure in the early Christian community in Jerusalem after Jesus’ resurrection (see Mark 6:3, Matthew 13:55; John 7:5; 1 Corinthians 15:7; Galatians 1:19 & 2:9; Acts 15:13).

Fig. The James Ossuary.⁵²⁸



⁵²⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Ossuary#/media/File:JamesOssuary-1-.jpg.

New Testament scholar Ben Witherington III comments that: “If, as seems probable, the ossuary found in the vicinity of Jerusalem and dated to about AD 63 is indeed the burial box of James, the brother of Jesus, this inscription is the most important extra-biblical evidence of its kind.”⁵²⁹ The dating of the ossuary dovetails with the martyrdom of James in 62 AD, as reported by the Jewish historian Josephus (*Antiquities* XX.9.1).

As Joseph M. Holden and Norman L. Geisler report:

Experts have confirmed the presence of microbial patina on the ossuary and on both parts of the inscription: “James, the son of Joseph” and “brother of Jesus,” demonstrating the unity and antiquity of the inscription . . . this patina is generally deemed ancient, without the possibility of it occurring naturally in less than 50 to 100 years, making a recent forgery impossible. The world’s leading expert in bio-geology and the patination process, Wolfgang Krumbein of Oldenburg University in Germany, affirmed that the patina on the ossuary and inscription most likely reflects a development process of thousands of years . . . researchers from the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto confirmed that the patina within the letter grooves is consistent with the patina on the surface of the ossuary; thus legitimizing the entire inscription’s antiquity. According to expert paleographers Andre Lemaire and Ada Yardeni . . . the Aramaic is fully consistent with first-century style and practice.⁵³⁰

In 2014, a paper in the *Open Journal of Geology* validated the authenticity of the James ossuary inscription.⁵³¹ According to the paper’s abstract: “An archaeometric analysis of the James Ossuary inscription “James Son of Joseph Brother of Jesus” strengthens the contention that the ossuary and its engravings are authentic.”⁵³² The patina on the ossuary contains various minerals that result from the activity of microorganisms over a long period of time, thereby demonstrating its antiquity. Moreover, the patina continues gradationally into the engraved inscription, striations on the ossuary crosscut the letters of the inscription and dissolution pits are superimposed over several letters of the inscription. This evidence shows that the inscription is not a modern addition to an ancient ossuary. Finally: “wind-blown microfossils . . . and quartz within the patina of the ossuary, including the lettering zone, reinforces the authenticity of the inscription.”⁵³³ In sum, as New Testament scholar Craig A. Evans writes: “Scientific study has determined that the inscription in its entirety is ancient and authentic.”⁵³⁴

Moreover, according to Professor Camil Fuchs, a statistician from Tel Aviv University: “with a confidence level of 95 percent, we can expect there to be 1.71 individuals in the relevant population named James with a father named Joseph and a brother Jesus.”⁵³⁵ Furthermore:

⁵²⁹ Ben Witherington, as quoted by Chad Meister, *Building Belief*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009, 146.

⁵³⁰ Joseph M. Holden and Norman L. Geisler, *The Popular Handbook of Archaeology and the Bible*. Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2013, 314.

⁵³¹ See: Amnon Rosenfeld, et al. “The Authenticity of the James Ossuary,” *Open Journal of Geology* 4, 69-78, <https://www.scirp.org/journal/paperinformation?paperid=43671>.

⁵³² Abstract, “The Authenticity of the James Ossuary,” 4, 69-78, *Open Journal of Geology* 4, 69-78, <https://www.scirp.org/journal/paperinformation?paperid=43671>.

⁵³³ Abstract, “The Authenticity of the James Ossuary,” 4, 69-78, *Open Journal of Geology* 4, 69-78, <https://www.scirp.org/journal/paperinformation?paperid=43671>.

⁵³⁴ Craig A. Evans, *Jesus and the Remains of His Day: Studies in Jesus and the Evidence of Material Culture*. Hendrickson, 2016, 44.

⁵³⁵ Hershel Shanks, “The James Ossuary is Authentic.” <http://members.bib-arch.org/publication.asp?PubID=BSBA&Volume=38&Issue=4&ArticleID=2>.

Of those ossuaries bearing an inscription, almost all speak of the deceased occupant's father, and occasionally of the person's brother, sister, or other close relative if that person is well-known. The rare presence of the sibling's name (Jesus) would indicate that Jesus was a very prominent figure.⁵³⁶

Hence, according to Hershel Shanks, former editor in chief of the *Biblical Archaeological Review*:

this box is [more] likely the ossuary of James, the brother of Jesus of Nazareth, than not. In my opinion . . . it is likely that this inscription *does* mention the James and Joseph and Jesus of the New Testament.⁵³⁷

Archaeologist Bryn Windle writes:

I would conclude that the James Ossuary is an authentic artifact, that the complete inscription is genuine, and that it *likely* contained the bones of James, the brother of Jesus Christ from the New Testament . . . Given the rarity of ossuary inscriptions referring to someone as the "brother of . . .", except in cases when the brother was famous, and given that James was identified as the brother of Jesus by Josephus, it seems reasonable to me to conclude that the James Ossuary once likely contained the bones of James, the brother of Jesus of Nazareth. . .⁵³⁸

Likewise, according to archaeologist Titus Kennedy, "the data suggests that the inscription was for James the leader of the Jerusalem church, identifying him with his father, Joseph, and his brother, Jesus Christ."⁵³⁹ Historian Paul L. Maier similarly concludes: "there is strong (though not absolutely conclusive) evidence that, yes, the ossuary and its inscription are not only authentic, but that the inscribed names are the New Testament personalities."⁵⁴⁰ Hence, the James ossuary plausibly provides inscriptional evidence from the early 60s AD for the existence of the James, Joseph and Jesus mentioned in the New Testament.

Q7: Where are Joseph and Mary living in this episode?

A7:

Short:

Joseph and Mary are living in Nazareth.

It was a small Jewish village in Galilee.

This fits the Gospel accounts and historical context.

⁵³⁶ Joseph M. Holden and Norman L. Geisler, *The Popular Handbook of Archaeology and the Bible*. Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2013, 314.

⁵³⁷ Hershel Shanks and Ben Witherington III, *The Brother of Jesus*. New York: Continuum, 2003, 64.

⁵³⁸ Bryn Windle, "Weighing the Evidence: Is the James Ossuary Authentic?" <https://biblearchaeologyreport.com/2023/04/20/weighing-the-evidence-is-the-james-ossuary-authentic/>.

⁵³⁹ Titus Kennedy, *Excavating the Evidence for Jesus*. Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2022, 223.

⁵⁴⁰ Paul L. Maier, "The James Ossuary." <http://members.bib-arch.org/publication.asp?PubID=BSBA&Volume=38&Issue=4&ArticleID=2>.

Summary:

According to the Gospels, Joseph and Mary lived in Nazareth. This was a small Jewish village in Galilee before Jesus' birth.

Luke explicitly states that they were from Nazareth. Matthew does not mention this detail, but does not contradict it either.

Nazareth in the first century was a very small settlement. It likely had around 50 houses and a population of a few hundred. Archaeology supports its existence during this period. Excavations have uncovered first-century dwellings in the area. Earlier skepticism about Nazareth's existence has largely been abandoned.

The village was likely entirely Jewish. This fits the cultural setting described in the Gospels.

In ancient Hebrew usage, even a small settlement could be called a "city."

The name Nazareth may be connected to the Hebrew word *nezer* ("branch" or "shoot"). This has been linked by some to messianic themes in Isaiah. However, that connection is interpretive, not certain.

What is historically clear is that Nazareth was a real place. It was small, obscure, and an unlikely origin for a major figure. This actually supports the authenticity of the narrative.

In summary, Joseph and Mary living in Nazareth fits both the text and archaeology.

Scholar:

Joseph and Mary are living in the little Jewish village of Nazareth.

We know from Luke's gospel that Joseph and Mary began their story in the little Jewish village of Nazareth, a site that "might have covered less than 16 acres in the early Roman period, constituting a village of a mere fifty houses."⁵⁴¹ Although Matthew's Gospel doesn't mention this,

nothing Matthew says actually contradicts Luke's account about Mary and Joseph being in Nazareth prior to the birth. Matthew is silent on the matter. . . . Matthew's silence . . . simply indicates his ignorance of or lack of interest in these details for the purpose of his narrative and does not represent a contradiction. No biblical author omnisciently claims to include every detail, nor would it be possible to do so given narrative purposes, space limitations, and costs of writing.⁵⁴²

While some researchers formerly denied that a place by the name of Nazareth existed in Jesus' time, there is now "no doubt that already in the first century B.C. Nazareth was a village inhabited solely by Jews . . ."⁵⁴³ Owen Jarus reports that:

Archaeologists working in Nazareth. . . have identified a house dating to the first century that was regarded as the place where Jesus was brought up.... The house is partly made of mortar-and-stone walls, and was cut into a rocky hillside. It was first uncovered in the 1880. . . but it wasn't until 2006 that archaeologists. . . dated the

⁵⁴¹ David A. deSilva, *Archaeology And The World Of Jesus: A Visual Guide*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2025, 23.

⁵⁴² Andreas J. Köstenberger and Alexander Stewart, *The First Days of Jesus: The Story of the Incarnation*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015. [Kindle Android version], 166.

⁵⁴³ Michael Hesemann, *Jesus of Nazareth: Archaeologists Retracing the Footsteps of Christ*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2021, 25.

house to the first century. . . . Whether Jesus actually lived in the house in real life is unknown, but [University of Reading archaeologist Ken] Dark says that it is possible.⁵⁴⁴

Furthermore, “in Hebrew there was only one term for an autonomous community, namely, ‘ir, regardless of how big or how small it was Although Nazareth was an insignificant hamlet, it was certainly autonomous, so that its designation as a “city” was accurate to the Jewish way of thinking.”⁵⁴⁵

Michael Hesemann explains that the name “Nazareth” comes from the word “sprout” (Hebrew, *nezer*):

This says little about its location, but a lot about its inhabitants. When Matthew wrote about the choice of Nazareth as the dwelling place of Jesus, he stated: “That what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled. ‘He shall be called a Nazarene’ ” (Mt 2: 23). Generations of exegetes have wondered to which Scripture passage the quote could refer, since in the form recorded by the Evangelist it is not found in any book of the Prophets. But in Isaiah, just as he announces the Messiah, it actually states: “There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots” (Is 11: 1). Since Jesse was the father of King David, the prophecy can only be interpreted in the sense that the Messiah, too, would be a “shoot” or “sprout” (that is, in Hebrew, a *nezer*) from the house of David. Also in the scrolls found near Qumran by the Dead Sea, the Messiah is called “Sprout of the divine planting” (thus in 1QS 6: 15; 8: 6, 13). The term *nezer* originally referred to all offspring from the family of David’s descendants. Did the village name Nazara = “Shootstown” consequently indicate that a Davidic clan lived here? Did some of the founders of Nazareth perhaps belong to the Jewish aristocrats, who had been deported to Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar in the sixth century B.C. and who had just now, in the late second century B.C., returned to their homeland?⁵⁴⁶

Q8: Who are the men on camels at the start of the episode, and what is the meaning of the comet that flies across the sky?

A8:

Short:

The men are Magi, likely astrologer-priests from the East.
They were interpreting a celestial sign as the birth of a king.
The “star” may reflect a real astronomical event, though its exact nature is uncertain.

Summary:

The men on camels are traditionally known as the Magi. Matthew describes them as “wise men from the east.” They were likely scholars, astrologers, or priestly figures. Possible origins include Babylon, Persia, or Arabia.

⁵⁴⁴ Ken Dark, “Jesus’ House? 1st-Century Structure May Be Where He Grew Up.”

<https://www.livescience.com/49997-jesus-house-possibly-found-nazareth.html>.

⁵⁴⁵ Michael Hesemann, *Jesus of Nazareth: Archaeologists Retracing the Footsteps of Christ*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2021, 25.

⁵⁴⁶ Michael Hesemann, *Jesus of Nazareth: Archaeologists Retracing the Footsteps of Christ*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2021, 27.

Babylon is a strong candidate due to its astronomical tradition. It also had a significant Jewish population after the exile. This means they could have known Jewish prophecies. For example, Numbers 24:17 speaks of a “star” linked to a ruler.

The Bible does not say how many Magi there were. The number three comes from the three gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. It also does not mention camels explicitly.

The “star” is interpreted in different ways. Some suggest a comet or a supernova recorded by Chinese astronomers. Others point to a rare planetary alignment. A triple conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn occurred in 7 BC. In ancient astrology, such events could signal the birth of a king. It is possible that multiple phenomena were combined in interpretation.

The story also fits known historical patterns. Eastern dignitaries sometimes traveled to honor rulers.

In summary, the Magi are historically plausible figures. The “star” likely reflects a real event interpreted through ancient astronomy.

Scholar:

The men on camels seen at the start of this episode are “Magi” (sometimes written “Magoi”) or “wise men” from the east (i.e., Arabia, Mesopotamia or Persia).

The men on camels seen at the start of this episode are “Magi” or “wise men” from the east. Although it is a traditional Christmas image, Matthew doesn’t actually mention that they rode on camels, and they may well have travelled on horse-back. And although it is traditional Christmas imagery, Matthew also doesn’t say that there were three wise men (the idea that there were three comes from the three gifts Matthew says they gave), though there may have been. In the third episode of this season these wise men are called “the star readers from Persia.” In the fourth episode they are called “wise men.” In Matthew’s Gospel, they are called “. . . Magi from the east . . .” (Matthew 2:1.)

Theologians A. J. Köstenberger and A. Stewart note that “depending on the context, the magoi could represent wise men, priests, interpreters of dreams, astrologers, or sorcerers.”⁵⁴⁷ From the fourth century BC, Babylon was a center of astronomy, and “Magi” were important members of the Babylonian royal court in Mesopotamia. Furthermore, Babylon had contained a Jewish colony since the time of the [Jewish] Exile, so Jewish prophecies of a Jewish saviour-king, the Messiah (e.g., Numbers 24:17), could well have been known to the Magi. Roger Highfield reports that “In the Hellenistic age (i.e., 322-20 BC) some of the Magi left Babylon for neighboring countries, and by the time of Christ, they lived mainly in Persia, Mesopotamia and Arabia . . .”⁵⁴⁸ Matthew’s phrase about the Magi being “From the east” thus indicates

a homeland in either Persia, Babylon, or Arabia, most likely Babylon because the Babylonians had a great interest in astrology and a large Jewish community lived there as a result of the exile. However, the nature of the gifts—gold, frankincense, and myrrh—seems to indicate Arabia, while some have suggested Persia because the term magoi was originally associated with the Medes and Persians.⁵⁴⁹

⁵⁴⁷ Andreas. J. Köstenberger and Alexander Stewart, *The First Days of Jesus: The Story of the Incarnation* (2015) [Kindle Android version], 66.

⁵⁴⁸ Roger Highfield, *Can Reindeer Fly? The Science of Christmas*. London: Metro, 1998, 15.

⁵⁴⁹ Andreas. J. Köstenberger and Alexander Stewart, *The First Days of Jesus: The Story of the Incarnation* (2015) [Kindle Android version], 66.

Fig. “*The Three Magi*, Byzantine mosaic, c. 565, Basilica of Sant’Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna, Italy (restored during the 19th century). As here, Byzantine art usually depicts the Magi in Persian clothing, which includes breeches, capes, and Phrygian caps.”⁵⁵⁰



In any case, the association between Magi, astronomy and a cultural familiarity with the Jews makes sense of the Magi’s presence in the nativity story in light of the famous “Star of Bethlehem.” Some think the Christmas “Star” was a comet.⁵⁵¹ Then again, we know from the records of Chinese and Korean astronomers that there was probably either a nova or supernova visible for some seventy days in March-May of either 5 or 4 BC, as recorded in “the Chinese book Ch’ien-han-shu and the Korean chronicle Samguk Sagi”⁵⁵² Moreover, as Köstenberger and Alexander Stewart explain, the appearance of this nova followed

A triple conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn took place in 7 BC during May/ June, September/ October, and December in the zodiacal constellation of Pisces. . . . Pisces is a constellation sometimes associated with the last days and with the Hebrews, while Jupiter . . . was associated with the world ruler and Saturn was identified as the star of the Amorites of the Syria-Palestine region. The claim has been made that this conjunction might lead Parthian astrologers to predict that there would appear in Palestine among the Hebrews a world ruler of the last days. These astronomical events would certainly have led Eastern astrologers to the conclusion that something unusual was happening in the world.⁵⁵³

The conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in 7 BC may well have primed the Magi to interpret a comet or nova as indicating the birth of a new king of the Jews. Moreover, as Köstenberger and Stewart observe: “the magoi may have been familiar with the prophecy from Balaam that ‘a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel.’ [Numbers 24:17.] If so,

⁵⁵⁰ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Magi_\(1\).jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Magi_(1).jpg).

⁵⁵¹ See Colin R. Nicholl, *The Great Christ Comet: Revealing the True Star of Bethlehem*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015.

⁵⁵² Michael Hesemann, *Jesus of Nazareth: Archaeologists Retracing the Footsteps of Christ*. Ignatius Press, 2021. Kindle edition, 78.

⁵⁵³ Andreas J. Köstenberger and Alexander Stewart, *The First Days of Jesus: The Story of the Incarnation*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015. [Kindle Android version], 67.

they may have naturally connected this prophecy with the unusual astronomical phenomena they were observing.”⁵⁵⁴

That a delegation of Magi would travel to Jerusalem to worship (i.e., pay homage to) a new king is plausible in light of the fact that when the Zoroastrian king Tiridates of Armenia visited Rome in 66 AD, his entourage included men that Pliny the Elder said were Magi.⁵⁵⁵ King Tiridates came to Rome to “worship” Nero “in the same way as Matthew’s Magi came to worship the newborn Messiah of the Jews.”⁵⁵⁶

Q9: Why does Mary say “we can’t divorce” when she is engaged to be married to Joseph?

A9:

Short:

Because in Jewish culture, betrothal was already legally binding. Mary and Joseph were considered married, though not yet living together. Ending it required a formal divorce.

Summary:

In first-century Jewish culture, marriage happened in two stages. The first stage was betrothal (*erusin*). At this point, the couple was already legally married. However, they did not yet live together or consummate the marriage.

The second stage was the wedding (*nissuin*). This is when the wife moved into the husband’s home.

During betrothal, the woman still lived with her family. But she was no longer free to marry someone else. The relationship was legally binding. So breaking it required a formal divorce. This explains why Mary says “we can’t divorce.” Even though they were only “engaged” by modern standards, their commitment was much stronger than a modern engagement.

This also explains Joseph’s dilemma in Matthew 1. He considers divorcing Mary quietly. That only makes sense if they were already legally bound.

So the language reflects ancient Jewish marriage customs. Not a contradiction, but a different cultural framework.

Scholar:

In first century Jewish society, a betrothal [*erusin*] ceremony meant that the couple were legally married, but they did not start to live together until after the wedding [*nissuin*] ceremony, in which the wife moved from her father’s house into the house of her husband.

As theologians Andreas J. Köstenberger and Alexander Stewart explain, the betrothal between Joseph and Mary “represented a legally binding contract that could be broken only by divorce, and at this time in Galilee, it was culturally unacceptable to consummate the

⁵⁵⁴ Andreas J. Köstenberger and Alexander Stewart, *The First Days of Jesus: The Story of the Incarnation*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015. [Kindle Android version], 68.

⁵⁵⁵ See Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 30:6, 16-17.

⁵⁵⁶ Geza Vermes, *The Nativity: History and Legend*. London: Penguin, 112.

marriage during the period of betrothal.”⁵⁵⁷ Up until late in the Middle Ages, Jewish marriage consisted of two separate ceremonies:

First came the betrothal [*erusin*]; and later, the wedding [*nissuin*]. At the betrothal the woman was legally married, although she still remained in her father’s house. She could not belong to another man unless she was divorced from her betrothed. The wedding meant only that the betrothed woman, accompanied by a colorful procession, was brought from her father’s house to the house of her groom, and the legal tie with him was consummated.⁵⁵⁸

Q10: How does the link with David inform the New Testament portrait of Jesus? Is God’s promise of a coming Messiah from the lineage of King David consistent with the Qur’an?

A10:

Short:

The New Testament presents Jesus as the fulfillment of the Davidic Messiah. The Qur’an affirms Jesus as Messiah and Mary’s Davidic line, but does not explain the title. So the connection is not explicit in Islam, but broadly compatible.

Summary:

In the New Testament, Davidic lineage is essential. The Messiah was expected to come from David’s line (2 Samuel 7). Jesus is presented as fulfilling this in multiple ways.

His genealogy traces back to David (Matthew 1, Luke 3). He is born in Bethlehem, David’s city. He is portrayed as king, shepherd, and anointed one.

These are not random details.

They are deliberate claims that Jesus is the promised Messiah.

Theologically, this ties into covenant.

God promised David an eternal throne.

The New Testament claims this is fulfilled in Jesus.

Not politically, but through a lasting kingdom.

The Qur’an affirms that Jesus is the Messiah.

It also places him within a prophetic lineage.

Some Muslim scholars link Mary to David’s line.

So a Davidic connection is possible within Islamic tradition.

However, the Qur’an does not define “Messiah.”

It does not connect it clearly to kingship or Davidic covenant.

So the difference is not direct contradiction.

It is more a lack of developed explanation.

Christianity builds a detailed framework.

Islam affirms the title, but leaves it largely undefined.

⁵⁵⁷ Andreas J. Köstenberger and Alexander Stewart, *The First Days of Jesus: The Story of the Incarnation*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015. [Kindle Android version], 105.

⁵⁵⁸ Hayyim Schauss, “Ancient Jewish Marriage.” <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/ancient-jewish-marriage/#:~:text=Until%20late%20in%20the%20Middle,tie%20with%20him%20was%20consummated.>

Scholar:

For the New Testament writers, having a family tree that stems from King David is a prerequisite for Jesus' status as Messiah. The Qur'an affirms that Jesus' mother was Mary, and that he is the Messiah (a role that Jewish tradition connects with the David line); and although it does not explicitly say that he is a descendent of King David, it is consistent with this claim, which is accepted by at least some Muslim scholars (e.g. Al-Tabari).

While the Qur'an affirms that Jesus was the Messiah, it offers no explanation of the title, which has a rich description in the Jewish, Old Testament scriptures:

The concept of the Messiah is central to both the Old and New Testaments, serving as a cornerstone of biblical prophecy and fulfillment. The term "Messiah" comes from the Hebrew word "Mashiach," meaning "anointed one." In the Greek New Testament, the equivalent term is "Christos," from which we derive the English word "Christ." The role of the Messiah encompasses various aspects, including prophetic fulfillment, kingship, priesthood, and redemptive work. . . . The Old Testament contains numerous prophecies concerning the coming of the Messiah. These prophecies outline the Messiah's lineage, birthplace, mission, and suffering. For instance, the Messiah is prophesied to be a descendant of David (2 Samuel 7:12-16), born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2), and a suffering servant (Isaiah 53). The New Testament writers identify Jesus of Nazareth as the fulfillment of these prophecies. . . . The Messiah is portrayed as a king who will reign with justice and righteousness. This aspect of the Messiah's role is rooted in the Davidic Covenant, where God promises David that his throne will be established forever (2 Samuel 7:16). . . . In the New Testament, Jesus is recognized as the King of Kings, a title that signifies His ultimate authority and dominion (Revelation 19:16). . . . The Messiah also fulfills a priestly role Central to the Messiah's role is the work of redemption. The Messiah is seen as the one who will deliver humanity from sin and restore the broken relationship between God and His people. Isaiah 53 vividly describes the suffering servant who bears the iniquities of many. In the New Testament, Jesus' death and resurrection are presented as the fulfillment of this redemptive mission. . . . The New Testament speaks of the Messiah's return, when He will establish His kingdom in its fullness and execute final judgment. Acts 1:11 records the promise of His return: "Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen Him go into heaven." The Book of Revelation further describes the Messiah's ultimate victory over evil and the establishment of a new heaven and earth (Revelation 21:1-4). In summary, the role of the Messiah is multifaceted, encompassing prophetic fulfillment, kingship, priesthood, redemptive work, and eschatological significance. These elements are intricately woven throughout the biblical narrative, culminating in the person and work of Jesus Christ as presented in the New Testament.⁵⁵⁹

Various Old Testament prophecies specify the lineage of the prophesied Messiah:

- The Messiah would be a descendent of Abraham (Genesis 17:7-8)
- The Messiah would be from the Jewish tribe of Judah (Micah 5:2)

⁵⁵⁹ "The Role of the Messiah." https://biblehub.com/topical/t/the_role_of_the_messiah.htm.

- The Messiah would be from seed of Isaac (Genesis 17:19)
- The Messiah would be from seed of Jacob (Genesis 28:13-14, Numbers 24:17-19)
- The Messiah would be from the stem of Jesse (Isaiah 11:1-2)
- The Messiah would be a descendant of David (2 Samuel 7.12)

The Qur'an affirms that the mother of Jesus is Mary. According to Aliah Schleifer, "The Qur'an informs us that the father of Mary was named 'Imran and the classical Muslim scholars unanimously accept that she was from the line of the prophet David . . ." ⁵⁶⁰ Likewise, Muslim scholar and historian Al-Tabari traces Jesus' genealogy to King David. ⁵⁶¹ The Qur'an describes Jesus' messianic status in conjunction with his lineage, with the angels saying of Mary in Surah 3:45 that "his name will be the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary; honoured in this world and the Hereafter, and he will be one of those nearest to Allah". Jewish tradition associates the Messiah with the Davidic line (2 Samuel 7.12). Surah 6:84-85 says:

And We bestowed upon Abraham (offspring) Ishaq (Isaac) and Ya'qub (Jacob) and each of them did We guide to the right way as We had earlier guided Noah to the right way; and (of his descendants We guided) Da'ud (David) and Sulayman (Solomon), Ayyub (Job), Yusuf (Joseph), Musa (Moses) and Harun (Aaron). Thus do We reward those who do good. (And of his descendants We guided) Zakariya (Zachariah), Yahya (John), Isa (Jesus) and Ilyas (Elias): each one of them was of the righteous. ⁵⁶²

While these verses do not explicitly state that Jesus was a descendent of King David, they are consistent with Jesus being his descendent.

From a Christian viewpoint, theologian Scott Hann highlights various parallels between King David and Jesus:

Beyond the fact that Jesus has a Davidic genealogy that links him with this ancient king (Mt 1:1-16), it is significant that Jesus was born in David's hometown of Bethlehem (17:12; Mt 2:1), that he was baptized by John the Baptist, a Levitical prophet and Nazirite (Mk 1:9- 10; Lk 3:21- 22), just as David was anointed by Samuel, a Levitical prophet and Nazirite (16:13), and that he claimed to be the Good Shepherd who, like David, was willing to risk his life for his sheep (17:34- 35; Jn 10:11). These connections are not playful inventions of the early Church, for Jesus himself laid the groundwork for Davidic typology when he declared that he and his disciples were comparable to David and his men, who had eaten holy bread on a Sabbath day in 1 Samuel (21:1- 6; Mt 12:1- 4). ⁵⁶³

⁵⁶⁰ Aliah Schleifer, *Mary The Blessed Virgin of Islam*. Fons Vitae, 1998, 22.

⁵⁶¹ Answering Islam, "Islam Affirms Jesus' Physical Descent from King David." <https://answeringislamblog.wordpress.com/2017/08/26/islam-affirms-jesus-physical-descent-from-king-david/>.

⁵⁶² <https://www.islamicstudies.info/tafheem.php?sura=6&verse=83&to=90>.

⁵⁶³ Scott Hann, *The First and Second Book of Samuel: Ignatius Catholic Study Bible*. San Francisco: Ignatius, 2016, 27.

Recommended Resources for Episode 16

Lydia McGrew. “Virgin Birth” (YouTube Playlist)

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLe1tMOs8ARn3za22QzE28xKqhTq5KvCB2>

Lee Strobel, “The Case for Christmas.” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xmvlJlrMgVI>

YouTube Playlist, “Archaeological Evidence for Jesus” (FOCLOnline),

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ESOpqrxsBzU&t=6s>

———. “The Islamic Dilemma.” YouTube playlist.

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLQhh3qcwVEWiY5DeYrxP-uTnrxQjWboV>

———. “Textual Reliability of the New Testament.” YouTube playlist.

https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLQhh3qcwVEWhx61s1CiNf9_CATxat5bn8

———. “The Reliability of the New Testament.” YouTube playlist.

www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLQhh3qcwVEWj04HUUH7t9yqIiFKKuAkjh

———. “Christianity and Archaeology.” YouTube playlist.

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLQhh3qcwVEWjh9aRRWF1kYZIVCPc5iCcw>

———. “The Historical Jesus.” YouTube playlist.

https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLQhh3qcwVEWg0CpSQPAR5cy_InXpeQMNk

———. “Who Wrote the NT Gospels?” YouTube playlist.

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLQhh3qcwVEWg2vHjaH7hwE3BdtZao15CS>

“The Qur’an’s Conflation of Mary and Miriam.” <https://faithalone.net/topical-articles/articles/islam/mary-and-miriam.html#:~:text=So%2C%20what%20does%20Muhammad%20say.any%20history%20prior%20to%20Islam>.

Keith Small. “The Textual Histories of the Qur’an and New Testament.”

<https://www.bethinking.org/islam/textual-histories-of-Qur’an-and-nt>

Gary R. Habermas. “Recent Perspectives on the Reliability of the Gospels.”

<https://www.equip.org/articles/recent-perspectives-on-the-reliability-of-the-gospels/>

———. “Why I Believe the New Testament Is Historically Reliable.” <https://www.monergism.com/threshold/sdg/Why%20I%20Believe%20the%20New%20Testament%20is%20Historically%20Reliable%281%29.pdf>

Answering Islam. “Islam Affirms Jesus’ Physical Descent from King David.”

<https://answeringislamblog.wordpress.com/2017/08/26/islam-affirms-jesus-physical-descent-from-king-david/>

Bert Jacobs. “An Early Syriac Response to the Charge of Tahrīf in George of B’eltan’s Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew.” In *Eastern Christians’ Engagement with Islam and the Qur’ān: Texts, Contexts and Knowledge Regimes*. Edited by Octavian-Adrian Negoită. DeGruyter, 2025.

https://www.academia.edu/128699864/An_Early_Syriac_Response_to_the_Charge_of_Tahrif_in_George_of_B'eltans_Commentary_on_the_Gospel_of_Matthew

Jonathan McLatchie. “The Nativity Defended.” <http://crossexamined.org/the-nativity-defended/>

J. P. Moreland. “The Historicity of the New Testament.” <https://www.bethinking.org/is-the-bible-reliable/the-historicity-of-the-new-testament>

Robert V. Peltier. Λόγος Christology in the Prologue of John’s Gospel: A Rejection of Philo of Alexandria’s Logos Philosophy? (PhD Thesis, 2019). https://sats.ac.za/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Thesis_MThmini_2019_PeltierR.pdf

Sam Shamoun, “The Qur’an and the Holy Trinity.” http://answering-islam.org.uk/Shamoun/Qur’an_trinity.htm

Peter S. Williams. “Understanding The Trinity.” <https://www.peterswilliams.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Trinity.pdf>

Bryn Windle, “Weighing the Evidence: Is the James Ossuary Authentic?”

<https://biblearchaeologyreport.com/2023/04/20/weighing-the-evidence-is-the-james-ossuary-authentic/>

Richard Bauckham. *Jesus: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

- Jo-Ann A. Brant. *Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament: John*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011.
- John Dickson. *Is Jesus History?* Epsom: Good Book, 2019.
- Charles E. Hill. *Who Chose the Books of the New Testament?* Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2022.
- Walter C. Kaiser Jr. *The Messiah in the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995.
- Mark Kidger. *The Star of Bethlehem: An Astronomer's View*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999.
- Andreas J. Köstenberger and Alexander Stewart. *The First Days of Jesus: The Story of the Incarnation*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015.
- J. Gresham Machen. *The Virgin Birth of Christ*. James Clarke & Co Ltd, 2022.
- Lydia McGrew. *Hidden in Plain View: Undesigned Coincidences in the Gospels and Acts*. Tampa, FL: DeWard, 2017.
- Michel R. Molnar. *The Star of Bethlehem: The Legacy of the Magi*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000.
- William D. Mounce. *Why I Trust the Bible: Answers to Real Questions and Doubts People Have about the Bible*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Reflective, 2021.
- Colin R. Nicholl. *The Great Christ Comet: Revealing the True Star of Bethlehem*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015.
- Gordon Nickel. *The Gentle Answer to the Muslim Accusation of Biblical Falsification*. Bruton Gate, 2016.
- Stanley E. Porter. *How We Got the New Testament: Text, Transmission, Translation*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013.
- John Redford. *Born of a Virgin: Proving the Miracle from the Gospels*. London: St Pauls, 2007.
- T. C. Schmidt. *Josephus and Jesus: New Evidence for the One Called Christ*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2025. <https://academic.oup.com/book/60034>.
- Douglas D. Scott. *Is Jesus of Nazareth the Predicted Messiah? A Historical-Evidential Approach to Specific Old Testament Messianic Prophecies and Their New Testament Fulfillments*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2019.
- Keith E. Small. *Textual Criticism and Qur'an Manuscripts*. Lanham: Lexington, 2012.
- Keith Ward. *Evidence for the Virgin Birth*. Christian Evidence Society. https://christianevidence.org/booklet/evidence_for_the_virgin_birth/
- Dan Wickwire. *Has the Bible Been Changed?: The Reliability of the Scriptures According to Jewish, Christian, and Islam*. Aneko, 2016.
- Peter J. Williams. *Can We Trust the Gospels?* Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018.
- Peter S. Williams, *Behold the Man: Essays on the Historical Jesus*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2024.
- . *Getting at Jesus: A Comprehensive Critique of Neo-Atheist Nonsense About the Jesus of History*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2019.
- . *Digging for Evidence*. Christian Evidence Society. https://christianevidence.org/booklet/digging_for_evidence/

Episode 17: The Dream

Q1: What were the Old Testament “prophecies regarding the savior, the messiah that is going to come”?

A1:

Short:

The Old Testament builds a detailed, multi-layered picture of the Messiah.

This includes lineage, kingship, suffering, and redemption.

The New Testament presents Jesus as fulfilling this unified expectation.

Summary:

The Old Testament does not give one single “Messiah verse.” Instead, it builds a composite picture across many texts.

First, lineage is central.

The Messiah must come from Abraham, Judah, and David.

Second, kingship.

He is a ruler with an eternal throne (2 Samuel 7).

Third, prophetic role.

He speaks God’s words like Moses (Deuteronomy 18).

Fourth, priestly and mediating role.

He restores relationship between God and people.

Fifth, suffering.

Isaiah 53 presents a servant who suffers for others.

Sixth, vindication.

Psalms like Psalm 16 point to resurrection themes.

Seventh, mission.

He represents Israel and succeeds where Israel failed. This is important. The Messiah is not just a king, but a representative human.

By the time of Jesus, expectations varied. Some expected a political king, others a suffering figure.

The New Testament unifies these strands. It claims Jesus fulfills all roles at once. That is the key claim. Not one prophecy, but a convergence of many.

Historically, these texts clearly predate Jesus. Dead Sea Scrolls confirm this.

So the argument is cumulative. Many independent threads, one claimed fulfillment.

Scholar:

There are many prophecies in the Jewish, Old Testament scriptures that build up a rich description of the expected “Messiah.”

While the Qur’an affirms that Jesus was the Messiah, it offers no explanation of the title, which has a rich description in the Jewish, Old Testament scriptures:

The concept of the Messiah is central to both the Old and New Testaments, serving as a cornerstone of biblical prophecy and fulfillment. The term “Messiah” comes from the Hebrew word “Mashiach,” meaning “anointed one.” In the Greek New Testament,

the equivalent term is “Christos,” from which we derive the English word “Christ.” The role of the Messiah encompasses various aspects, including prophetic fulfillment, kingship, priesthood, and redemptive work. . . . The Old Testament contains numerous prophecies concerning the coming of the Messiah. These prophecies outline the Messiah's lineage, birthplace, mission, and suffering. For instance, the Messiah is prophesied to be a descendant of David (2 Samuel 7:12-16), born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2), and a suffering servant (Isaiah 53). The New Testament writers identify Jesus of Nazareth as the fulfillment of these prophecies. . . . The Messiah is portrayed as a king who will reign with justice and righteousness. This aspect of the Messiah's role is rooted in the Davidic Covenant, where God promises David that his throne will be established forever (2 Samuel 7:16). . . . In the New Testament, Jesus is recognized as the King of Kings, a title that signifies His ultimate authority and dominion (Revelation 19:16). . . . The Messiah also fulfills a priestly role

Central to the Messiah's role is the work of redemption. The Messiah is seen as the one who will deliver humanity from sin and restore the broken relationship between God and His people. Isaiah 53 vividly describes the suffering servant who bears the iniquities of many. In the New Testament, Jesus' death and resurrection are presented as the fulfillment of this redemptive mission. . . . The New Testament speaks of the Messiah's return, when He will establish His kingdom in its fullness and execute final judgment. Acts 1:11 records the promise of His return: “Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen Him go into heaven.” The Book of Revelation further describes the Messiah's ultimate victory over evil and the establishment of a new heaven and earth (Revelation 21:1-4). In summary, the role of the Messiah is multifaceted, encompassing prophetic fulfillment, kingship, priesthood, redemptive work, and eschatological significance. These elements are intricately woven throughout the biblical narrative, culminating in the person and work of Jesus Christ as presented in the New Testament.⁵⁶⁴

As theologians Andreas J. Köstenberger and Alexander Stewart observe, according to the Old Testament:

Just like Israel, the Messiah would be tested in the desert. Just like Israel, the Messiah would be called to be a faithful son. Just like Israel, the Messiah would be called to be a light to the nations. Just like Israel, the Messiah would be called to suffer in service. Israel had failed in all these things. The Messiah would not. In short, the ancient prophecies spoke of a Messiah – their king – who would step in to represent Israel in finally fulfilling its purpose as a chosen people of God.⁵⁶⁵

The Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah demonstrably pre-date the birth of Jesus. For example, the famous Dead Sea Scrolls “contain partial or complete copies of every book in the Hebrew Bible except the book of Esther.”⁵⁶⁶ Notably, this includes an almost complete copy of Isaiah “Dating from ca. 125 BC. . . .”⁵⁶⁷ Moreover, the Greek translation of

⁵⁶⁴ “The Role of the Messiah.” https://biblehub.com/topical/t/the_role_of_the_messiah.htm.

⁵⁶⁵ Andreas J. Köstenberger and Alexander Stewart, *The First Days of Jesus: The Story of the Incarnation*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015. [Kindle Android version], 101.

⁵⁶⁶ Joe Carter, “9 Things You Should Know About The Dead Sea Scrolls.” <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/9-things-dead-sea-scrolls/>.

⁵⁶⁷ Joe Carter, “9 Things You Should Know About The Dead Sea Scrolls.” <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/9-things-dead-sea-scrolls/>.

the Old testament scriptures known as the “Septuagint” or “LXX” (which is Latin for 70, the traditional number of translators involved) was produced before the birth of Jesus:

On the basis of numerous historical and linguistic factors, the LXX Pentateuch was likely translated *ca.* 280–250 B.C. in Alexandria, Egypt. . . . The most likely scenario is that the rest of the LXX books—Historical, Prophetic, and Poetic—were translated *ca.* 200–100 B.C., chiefly in Palestine.⁵⁶⁸

Here are just 24 of the Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah that the New Testament writers say were fulfilled by Jesus:

- The Messiah would be a descendent of Abraham (Genesis 17:7-8, see Matthew 1:1; Acts 3:25–26; Galatians 3:16; Hebrews 2:16)
- The Messiah would be from seed of Isaac (Genesis 17:19, see Matthew 1:2,17; Romans 9:7; Hebrews 11:17–19)
- The Messiah would be from seed of Jacob (Genesis 28:13-14, Numbers 24:17-19, see Matthew 1:2; Luke 1:33; 3:23–38)
- The Messiah would be from the Jewish tribe of Judah the fourth son of Jacob (Micah 5:2, see Matthew 1:1–3; Hebrews 7:14; Revelation 5:5)
- The Messiah would be a descendant of David (Isaiah 9:7; 2 Samuel 7:12–13; Jeremiah 23:5–6 & 30:9), from the stem of Jesse (Isaiah 11:1–2, see Matthew 1:6; Acts 13:22–23): “Jesse was the father of David the king of Israel. Jewish commentators expected the Messiah to come from this genealogical line (Is. 11:1-3). The Apostle Paul affirms that Jesus descended from David (Rom. 1:1-3).”
- The Messiah would be preceded by a messenger sent to prepare his way: “According to some leading rabbinic commentators, Isaiah 40:3 describes the Messiah—the ‘Lord’—who would be preceded by a messenger. The Gospel of Mark begins by citing both Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3 to indicate John the Baptist is the messenger preparing the way for the Messiah.” (See Mark 1:2–4; Matthew 11:10; Luke 7:27–28; John 1:19–35.)
- The Messiah will be a firstborn son (Exodus 13:2; Numbers 3:13; 8:17, see Matthew 1:18–25; Luke 2:7,23)
- The Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, but would be pre-existent: “Micah 5:2 predicts that the Messiah—a ‘ruler’—shall come forth from Bethlehem ‘whose goings forth are from old, from everlasting.’ In other words, a future ruler would be everlasting, which means he must pre-exist. Col. 1:17 affirms that Jesus was ‘before all things.’”
- The Messiah would be endowed with a special presence of the Holy Spirit: “The Messiah was expected to have a special anointing of the Holy Spirit (Is. 11:2). In his baptism in the Jordan River, the Spirit of God uniquely descends on Jesus and the Father affirms he is His ‘beloved Son.’”
- The Messiah would minister in Galilee (Isaiah 9:1-2)
- The Messiah would perform healing miracles (Isaiah 61:1, 19:18, 29:18 & 35:5–6): “The prophet Isaiah predicted that when the Messiah comes, the blind shall

⁵⁶⁸ Kyle Dunham, “When and Where was the Septuagint Written?” <https://dbts.edu/2019/10/01/when-and-where-was-the-septuagint-written/>.

see, the deaf shall hear, the mute shall speak, and the lame shall walk again (Is. 35:5, 6). And this is exactly what Jesus did (Matt. 9:5).” (See also Mark 7:37; Matthew 11:5; Luke 7:19–22; John 9:39.)

- The Messiah will be a prophet: “Deuteronomy 18:18 describes a future prophet whom God would speak through. This prophet was expected to perform miracles like Moses and to lead people to follow God. Jesus was a miracle-working prophet like Moses (Matt. 21:11).” (See also Matthew 21:11; Luke 7:16; John 6:14; Acts 3:20–22; 7:37.)
- The Messiah would be a ‘Judge’: “The prophet Isaiah described a coming judge—the Lord—who would save Israel (Is. 33:22). The Messiah was to personally exercise judgment. And as the Apostle Paul explains, Jesus is ultimately that judge (2 Tim. 4:1).”
- The Messiah would be King: “Some leading rabbinic commentators who addressed Psalms 2:6 have claimed that it spoke first of David and then of the Messiah, both of whom were anointed king by God. Jesus was accused of being such a king, even though his kingdom was different than they expected (Matt. 27:37).”
- The Messiah would enter the Temple: “Malachi predicts that the Messiah will powerfully come to the Temple after God sends His messenger. Matthew describes how Jesus entered the Temple and overturned tables and drove out money-changers (Matt 21:12).”
- The Messiah would enter Jerusalem on a donkey (Zechariah 9:9): “The prophet Zechariah predicted that the Messiah would enter Jerusalem ‘mounted on a donkey.’ And according to Luke, this is exactly what Jesus did (Luke 19:35–37).”
- The Messiah would be rejected by rulers (Psalm 2:2, Psalm 118, see Matthew 12:14; 26:3–4,47; Luke 23:11–12; John 18 – 19.)
- The Messiah would be betrayed for thirty pieces of silver (Zechariah 11:12)
- The Messiah would suffer and serve as the representative of Israel (Isaiah 52, 53)
- The Messiah would be pierced/stabbed but vindicated (Psalm 22)
- The Messiah would be resurrected (Psalm 16:10, 30:3 & 41:9–10; Isaiah 53:9–10)
- The Messiah would establish a new/renewed covenant (Jeremiah 31:31)
- The Messiah would be called God’s Son (Psalm 2)
- The Messiah would be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Prince of Peace (Isaiah 7)⁵⁶⁹

Of course, when Jesus rode a donkey into Jerusalem (Zechariah 9:9; Matthew 21:4–5), or claimed to make a new covenant in his blood at his “last supper” with his disciples (Jeremiah 31:31–34; 1 Corinthians 10:16; 11:23–26; Mark 14:22–24; Matthew 26:26–29; Luke 22:19–20; John 6:54–56), he was in all probability *deliberately* fulfilling prophecy, and thereby making a messianic claim. However, there are many prophecies fulfilled by Jesus over which he could have had little to no control, humanly speaking. These prophecies include prophecies about his lineage, the place of his birth, his healings, his rejection by the

⁵⁶⁹ Sean McDowell, “10 Predictive Prophecies Fulfilled In Jesus.” <https://seanmcdowell.org/blog/10-predictive-prophecies-fulfilled-in-jesus>.

authorities, the circumstances of his death, and his resurrection from the dead. As philosopher Thomas V. Morris argues:

A [fulfilled] series of prophecies made by different people at different times and culminating in a single fulfilment by the life of so remarkable a person as Jesus cries out for an explanation of a quite extraordinary sort. . . the most reasonable explanation is that God was involved in the prophecy and fulfilment, thereby giving us an extra ground for accepting Jesus as the culmination of divine revelation.⁵⁷⁰

As philosopher Stuart C. Hackett comments: “I think it wholly reasonable to claim . . . that in the plethora of prophecies concerning Jesus, and in their evident fulfilment, predictive prophecy both meets and passes its decisive test.”⁵⁷¹

Q2: Episode two of this season portrays Joseph and the scripture reader drinking tea. Is this historically accurate?

A2:

Short:

No, it’s not historically accurate.
Tea was not consumed in 1st century Judea.
The scene is a modern storytelling device.

Summary:

The scene is fictional and not based on historical sources. The New Testament never mentions tea or similar drinks. In the 1st century, Jews typically drank: water, wine (often diluted), milk, and sometimes beer.

Tea, as we know it, comes from the *camellia sinensis* plant. It originated in China and spread gradually across Asia.

Although tea existed in China centuries earlier, it had not reached the Middle East in Jesus’ time. However, the purpose of the scene is not realism. It’s a narrative tool to communicate information.

Scholar:

This scene, which is an invention of the series used to convey information to the audience, and not something reported by the New Testament, is historically inaccurate. First century Jews did not drink tea.

First century Jews drank water, wine, beer, milk, fruit juices and syrups, as well as broths; but they did not drink tea until the 3rd century AD⁵⁷²:

⁵⁷⁰ Thomas V. Morris, *Making Sense Of It All*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992, 166.

⁵⁷¹ Stuart C. Hackett, *The Reconstruction of the Christian Revelation Claim*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008, 329.

⁵⁷² <https://amazingbibletimeline.com/blog/tea-first-mentioned-in-222-ad/>.

Traditional tea comes from the *camellia sinensis* plant, an evergreen shrub native to southwestern China and northern Myanmar. It includes a variety of types, including black, white, green, yellow, oolong, and yerba mate, and is prepared by pouring hot or boiling water over the dried or fresh tea leaves. . . . The custom spread throughout East Asia and ultimately arrived in Europe in the 1500s.⁵⁷³

The first documentary evidence for tea drinking comes from China in the 10th-8th centuries BC, and the first physical evidence of tea drinking comes from China in the 2nd century BC.⁵⁷⁴ From China, tea made its way to Japan, with “the first written records of tea drinking in Japan come from 815 (according to the Nihon Koki) when a monk named Eichu, who had studied in China, recommended tea to Japanese Emperor Saga.”⁵⁷⁵ Tea came to the Middle East along the so-called “Silk Road,” with tea drinking in Iran tracing back to the 16th century AD.⁵⁷⁶

Note that the tea-drinking portrayed in this episode is not something mentioned in the New Testament, but an incidental element of a scene the narrative point of which is to convey information about the Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah.

Recommended Resources for Episode 17

Randy Newman. “Did Jesus Fulfill Old Testament Prophecies of a Coming Messiah?”

<https://www.cslewisinstitute.org/resources/did-jesus-fulfill-old-testament-prophecies-of-a-coming-messiah/#:~:text=On%20the%20surface%2C%20some%20of,messiah%20who%20atones%20for%20ins.&text=These%20make%20up%20just%20a,do%20both—reign%20and%20suffer?>

Walter C. Kaiser Jr. *The Messiah in the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995.

Douglas D. Scott. *Is Jesus of Nazareth the Predicted Messiah? A Historical-Evidential Approach to Specific Old Testament Messianic Prophecies and Their New Testament Fulfillments*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2019.

Peter S. Williams. *Understanding Jesus: Five Ways to Spiritual Enlightenment*. Paternoster, 2013.

⁵⁷³ Carol Goodman Kaufman, “Tea for Jew, and Jews for Teas - Traveling With Jewish Taste.” <https://www.jewishberkshires.org/community-events/berkshire-jewish-voice/berkshire-jewish-voice-highlights/tea-for-jew-and-jews-for-teas-traveling-with-jewish-taste#:~:text=Then%20there%27s%20that%20Passover%20favorite,So%2C%20what%20actually%20is%20tea?>

⁵⁷⁴ “Tea Culture in Israel.” <https://www.myteadrop.com/blogs/news/116726212-tea-culture-in-israel>. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_tea#:~:text=The%20history%20of%20tea%20spreads,tea%20producti on%20to%20British%20India.

⁵⁷⁵ “The History of Japanese Tea.” <https://hokusan-trade.jp/about/history.php#:~:text=Long%20ago%2C%20Japan%20tried%20to,to%20dissolve%20in%20hot%20water>.

⁵⁷⁶ See “Arabic Tea.” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arabic_tea#:~:text=6%20References-.History%20of%20Arabic%20tea,popular%20across%20the%20Middle%20East; “The History and Importance of Tea in Middle Eastern Culture.” <https://www.munchery.com/blog/the-history-and-importance-of-tea-in-middle-eastern-culture/>.

Episode 18: Tax

Q1: Would the Romans really have required everyone to “travel to their own town and be registered”?

A1:

Short:

Yes, there is historical precedent for this kind of requirement. People sometimes had to return to their place of origin or property. Luke’s account is plausible, though debated.

Summary:

The idea of traveling for a census is not invented. We have extra-biblical evidence that similar practices existed. A Roman Egyptian papyrus (P. Lond. 3.904) instructs people: return to their home areas for registration. This shows that movement for census purposes did happen.

In Roman taxation, location mattered. Especially for property tax, tied to land ownership. If Joseph had family land in Bethlehem, that could explain why he had to go there.

Jewish culture strengthens this possibility. Land and tribal identity were preserved across generations. Genealogies were taken seriously and recorded. Josephus confirms this practice.

However, scholars still debate Luke’s exact description. Some argue it may not reflect standard empire-wide policy.

The strongest conclusion is this: Luke’s scenario is historically plausible, even if not universally practiced everywhere.

Scholar:

There is extra-biblical historical precedent for people travelling to their own towns for taxation.

According to journalist Michael Hesemann, “In Roman times, there were two taxes, a head tax and a property tax,” and “The place of taxation was always the place where the property was so that the property tax could be assessed at the same time.”⁵⁷⁷ As Theologians Andreas J. Köstenberger and Alexander Stewart note:

Parallels with Egyptian and Arabian census and property returns indicate that one could live away from one’s legal place of registration and would need to return there for either the census, a property return (if either Mary or Joseph owned or inherited property near Bethlehem), or both.⁵⁷⁸

⁵⁷⁷ Michael Hesemann, *Jesus of Nazareth: Archaeologists Retracing the Footsteps of Christ*. Ignatius Press, 2021. Kindle edition, 64.

⁵⁷⁸ Andreas J. Köstenberger and Alexander Stewart, *The First Days of Jesus: The Story of the Incarnation*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015. [Kindle Android version], 143.

A manuscript known as P. Lond. 3.904, a 2nd century papyrus manuscript from Alexandria Egypt,⁵⁷⁹ provides this description of a Roman census:

It is necessary that all persons who are not resident at home for one reason or another at this time return to their homeplaces in order to undergo the usual registration formalities and to attend to the cultivation of the land which is their concern.⁵⁸⁰

Theologian Raymond E. Brown thinks that the practice described in P. Lond. 3.904 may only apply to migrant workers, and would not have applied to Joseph. However, Brown also acknowledges that

one cannot rule out the possibility that, since the Romans often adapted their administration to local circumstances, a census conducted in Judea would respect the strong attachment of Jews to tribal and ancestral relationships. . . Even if Luke had little historical information about how the census of Quirinius had been conducted, he lived in the Roman Empire and may have undergone census enrollment himself. It is dangerous to assume that he described a process of registration that would have been patently opposed to everything that he and his readers knew.⁵⁸¹

Michael Hesemann draws attention to the discovery of

the private archive of a Jewish woman named Babatha carefully wrapped in linen, stowed in a leather pouch, and then untouched for 1800 years. One of the papyri she had so carefully stored was a certified copy of her tax declaration. It is dated December 2 to 4, 127, since even back then tax officers were not the fastest and needed two days to copy the document. In this year there was indeed a census by Emperor Hadrian, in the province of Arabia, where Babatha's property was located. From her account, we learn that the woman had walked twenty-five miles from her home in Maoza to Rabbath-Moab, because that was the place of the tax office with jurisdiction over her.⁵⁸²

Erik Manning comments that

The phrase "*his own city*" (Luke 2:3) would refer to a person's place of birth, legal residence, or recent home. The Greek (*polis heautou*) is used this way throughout Scripture (e.g., Josh. 20:6; 1 Sam. 8:22; Ezra 2:1; Neh. 7:6; Matt. 9:1). Most Jews still lived near their ancestral towns. Bethlehem may have been Joseph's legal or family seat. The census travel wasn't some crazy, empire-wide mass exile, it was normal administration.⁵⁸³

He also explains that

⁵⁷⁹ Wes Huff, <https://x.com/WesleyLHuff/status/1871195320102924468>.

⁵⁸⁰ Michael J. Kruger, "How to Face Apparent Contradictions in the Gospels: Does the Census Account in Luke 2 Contain Errors?" <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/apparent-contradictions-gospels/>.

⁵⁸¹ Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1977, 549, quoted by <https://thechristianthinker.com/bethlehem-the-birth-of-jesus-and-lukes-census/>.

⁵⁸² Michael Hesemann, *Jesus of Nazareth: Archaeologists Retracing the Footsteps of Christ*. Ignatius Press, 2021. Kindle edition, 65.

⁵⁸³ Erik Manning, "Did Luke Botch the Census? A Historical Look at Luke 2." <https://isjesusalive.com/did-luke-botch-the-census-a-historical-look-at-luke-2/>.

Jewish land laws weren't like ours. Under Levitical law (Leviticus 25), land stayed in the family. Even centuries later, Jewish families preserved tribal land identity. Genealogies weren't loose tradition, they were official records. Josephus even says they were stored and referenced (Against Apion 1.30). If Joseph's family had land in Bethlehem, even if he was living in Galilee, that's where Rome would have counted him.⁵⁸⁴

Q2: Did the pregnant Mary ride a Donkey to Bethlehem?

A2:

Short:

We don't know.

The Bible never says Mary rode a donkey.

Walking is at least as likely, maybe more.

Summary:

The image of Mary riding a donkey is traditional. But it is not found in the New Testament. Neither Matthew nor Luke mentions any animal. This detail likely comes from later tradition. Specifically from 2nd-century Christian writings.

Historically, both options are possible. The journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem was long. Roughly 90 miles using safer routes. Travel typically took about 7 to 10 days.

People walked 10–15 miles per day. Pregnant women could travel, but it was demanding. A donkey would make sense practically. But it would require access to one. Many people at the time simply walked. So walking is at least as plausible as riding.

The key point: the donkey is not historical data, but a later visual tradition that stuck.

Scholar:

The New Testament doesn't actually say how Mary travelled to Bethlehem. She may have ridden on a donkey, but she probably just walked.

Most nativity stories depict Mary riding on a donkey, yet the Gospels make “no mention of Mary and Joseph having a donkey, and it is equally (if not more) plausible that they walked the entire way. The notion that Mary rode a donkey actually stems from a mid-second-century Christian tradition.”⁵⁸⁵ Today, the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem is about 70 miles. However,

in biblical times, travelers would avoid the direct route through Samaria due to its difficult terrain and unfriendly people, opting for a longer, 90-mile route. This route went through the Jezreel Valley, followed the Jordan River south, and then ascended through the Judean Desert to Jerusalem before finally reaching Bethlehem. . . . In

⁵⁸⁴ Erik Manning, “Did Luke Botch the Census? A Historical Look at Luke 2.” <https://isjesusalive.com/did-luke-botch-the-census-a-historical-look-at-luke-2/>.

⁵⁸⁵ Andreas J. Köstenberger and Alexander Stewart, *The First Days of Jesus: The Story of the Incarnation*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015. [Kindle Android version], 140.

biblical times, walking from Nazareth to Bethlehem took 7 to 10 days, depending on factors like terrain, weather, and travel pace. Travelers covered 10-15 miles daily on rough paths, with rest stops and Sabbath observance adding to the journey time.⁵⁸⁶

Q3: Hasn't it been shown that the infancy story in Luke's Gospel is unreliable because he made a mistake in Luke 2:2 by affirming that the census that led Joseph and Mary to go to Bethlehem "was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria" (ESV)?

A3:

Short:

Not necessarily.

Luke's reference to Quirinius is debated, but not clearly an error.

There are several plausible historical explanations.

Summary:

This is one of the most discussed historical questions in the Gospels.

The issue is this: Josephus records a census under Quirinius in AD 6. But Jesus' birth is usually placed around 5–4 BC. So critics claim Luke made a mistake. However, several factors complicate that conclusion.

First, Luke clearly knows about the AD 6 census. He references it elsewhere (Acts 5:37). So he is likely distinguishing two events.

Second, Augustus initiated multiple censuses. These were not always simultaneous across the empire. Some took years, even decades, to complete regionally.

Third, the Greek wording allows flexibility. "Protos" can mean "before," not only "first." So Luke 2:2 could mean: "This census happened before Quirinius governed Syria."

Fourth, Quirinius may have held authority in Syria earlier. Not necessarily as official governor, but in some capacity. Roman administration was often messy and overlapping.

Fifth, local adaptation is likely. Herod may have implemented a Roman-style census adjusted to Jewish customs, including tribal ties.

The honest conclusion is this: There is tension in the data, but not enough to prove Luke is wrong. It remains historically plausible, though not fully resolved.

Scholar:

Luke's reference to Quirinius in connection to the census that leads Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem is historically plausible.

Because the Jewish historian Josephus mentions a census in Syria under the leadership of Quirinius that sparked a tax revolt led by Judas of Galilee in 6 AD, "Critics are quick to claim that Luke's reference to this census [at the time of Jesus' birth around 5 BC] represents a historical error, but such hasty claims go beyond the historical evidence."⁵⁸⁷ Indeed, in Acts

⁵⁸⁶ <https://www.artzabox.com/a/answers/travelling/how-many-days-would-it-take-to-walk-from-nazareth-to-bethlehem?srsltid=AfmBOoo2Ej7sEJihUpp7Cu4z0FfF953hJ1K5o8JrodhCrpXhg9xz88T0>.

⁵⁸⁷ Andreas J. Köstenberger and Alexander Stewart, *The First Days of Jesus: The Story of the Incarnation*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015. [Kindle Android version], 134.

5:37 Luke himself references “Judas the Galilean” who “rose up in the days of the census and drew away some of the people after him . . .” In other words, Luke was well aware of the AD 6 census, which he places in relation to other historical events of the first century, and which he thereby distinguishes from the earlier census mentioned in his Gospel’s nativity story.

The Roman Emperor Augustus describes ordering

multiple censuses in the *Res Gestae Divi Augusti* (section 8), stating: “I conducted three censuses alone . . . in which about 4,000,000 Roman citizens were registered.” The first of these began in 8 BC. Now, while these were primarily for Roman citizens, it shows that empire-wide census activity was already happening at the time Luke describes. And like most things Roman, the rollout would have been staggered, hitting different regions at different times.⁵⁸⁸

Theologian I. Howard Marshall notes one case in this period when a Roman census in Gaul took 40 years to complete!⁵⁸⁹ Given that Jesus was born in 5 BC, this could have been within two years of the census begun in 8 BC. This census would have been carried out in Syria under the leadership of Publius Quinctilius Varus, who governed the region from 7/6 BC to 4 BC. While the censuses mentioned in *Res Gestae Divi Augusti* seems to be focused on Roman citizens, Luke is probably not referring “to a single legal document issued by Augustus,” but rather to “a general policy established by Augustus to enroll the empire.”⁵⁹⁰ As historian Paul L. Maier suggests:

Luke rather intends here a provincial census of noncitizens for purposes of taxation, and many records of such provincial registrations under Augustus have survived, including Gaul, Sicily, Cilicia, Cyrene, and Egypt. Among these were client kingdoms such as that of Herod the Great; for example, Archelaus (unrelated to Herod), client king of Cappadocia, instructed a subject tribe “to render in Roman fashion an account of their revenue and submit to tribute.”⁵⁹¹

Theologians Andreas J. Köstenberger and Alexander Stewart note that

Augustus was very concerned with census taking, and his rule was marked by a great increase in census activity. This involved at least three censuses of Roman citizens in 28 BC, 8 BC, and AD 14, along with various censuses of all inhabitants (citizens and noncitizens) in the provinces. Since Judea was a client kingdom of Rome, Herod was responsible for collecting his own taxes and paying tribute to Rome. Nevertheless, Rome could still require censuses in client kingdoms.⁵⁹²

According to Köstenberger and Stewart,

⁵⁸⁸ Erik Manning, “Did Luke Botch the Census? A Historical Look at Luke 2.” <https://isjesusalive.com/did-luke-botch-the-census-a-historical-look-at-luke-2/>.

⁵⁸⁹ Jimmy Atkin, “The Enrollment of Jesus’ Birth.” <https://jimmyakin.com/2022/03/the-enrollment-of-jesus-birth.html>.

⁵⁹⁰ Jimmy Atkin, “The Enrollment of Jesus’ Birth.” <https://jimmyakin.com/2022/03/the-enrollment-of-jesus-birth.html>.

⁵⁹¹ Paul L. Maier, “The Date of the Nativity and the Chronology of Jesus’ Life.” <https://inchristus.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/12/maier-date-of-the-nativity.pdf>.

⁵⁹² Andreas J. Köstenberger and Alexander Stewart, *The First Days of Jesus: The Story of the Incarnation*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015. [Kindle Android version], 135.

Herod would certainly have employed some form of census and record keeping in order to facilitate accurate taxation. In fact, Josephus indicates that Herod had excellent records for this purpose, records that required some kind of census activity. Herod likely based such census activity on Roman precedent, modifying it to fit Jewish culture and expectations.⁵⁹³

Hence,

Herod may have modified a Roman-style census in an effort to avoid offending the Jewish population. He quite plausibly could have fulfilled the census requirement by allowing Jews to follow their tradition of associating with their tribe, which would explain why Mary and Joseph travelled to Bethlehem.⁵⁹⁴

Theologian N. T. Wright argues that the Greek preposition *protos* in Luke 2:2 can be translated “before” rather than “first,” making Luke 2:2 read: “This census took place *before* the time when Quirinius was governor of Syria.” As Köstenberger and Stewart comment:

Quirinius’s [AD 6] census and the resulting upheaval were so well known, if Luke was referring to a prior census, the translation of *prōtos* as “before” makes perfect sense. Luke also clearly knew that Jesus’s birth took place during the reign of Herod, so he could not have meant that Jesus was born during Quirinius’s census of AD 6. If he had, it would have made Jesus about twenty years old at the start of his ministry instead of “about thirty years of age,” as Luke claimed. These contextual historical factors support the translation of Luke’s reference as, “This was the registration before Quirinius governed Syria.”⁵⁹⁵

However, theologian Michael J. Kruger observes that

Justin Martyr . . . writing in Rome in the middle of the second century, refers to this [nativity era] census under Quirinius, whom he calls the “procurator” (*epitropos*) in Judea. He even challenges his readers to check out the census archives for themselves (something one could’ve easily done, as census record-keeping was meticulous). Such a challenge would be risky if there were no such records. . . . Justin doesn’t call Quirinius a “governor” but a “procurator” (*epitropos*)—a different office entirely. (Another term often used to refer to a procurator is *hegemon*.) A procurator was a lower office, typically involved in administering and implementing a census. Curiously, Luke appears to confirm this fact. He doesn’t describe Quirinius with the typical Greek word for “governor” but instead uses the participle *hegemonēon* (“to be a hegemon”).⁵⁹⁶

As Erik Manning observes:

⁵⁹³ Andreas J. Köstenberger and Alexander Stewart, *The First Days of Jesus: The Story of the Incarnation*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015. [Kindle Android version], 136.

⁵⁹⁴ Andreas J. Köstenberger and Alexander Stewart, *The First Days of Jesus: The Story of the Incarnation*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015. [Kindle Android version], 135.

⁵⁹⁵ Andreas J. Köstenberger and Alexander Stewart, *The First Days of Jesus: The Story of the Incarnation*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015. [Kindle Android version], 138.

⁵⁹⁶ Michael J. Kruger, “How to Face Apparent Contradictions in the Gospels: Does the Census Account in Luke 2 Contain Errors?” <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/apparent-contradictions-gospels/>.

Luke uses the Greek *hēgemoneuontos* (verb form of *hēgemōn*), which simply means “ruling” or “governing.” . . . and can refer to either provincial governors or other officials with regional oversight. Luke’s usage fits someone like Quirinius, who likely exercised administrative authority in Syria before his formal appointment as legate in AD 6. Tacitus (Annals 3.48) mentions Quirinius as having served in Syria, showing he had a presence there even earlier.⁵⁹⁷

Archaeologist Bryan Windle confirms that

Luke does not say that Quirinius was the Governor . . . of Syria. Despite the way it is translated in our English versions of the Bible, in the original Greek, it says he was *governing* in Syria. Luke uses the verb *ἡγεμονεύω* (*hēgemoneuō*), which means Quirinius was exercising authority in some capacity, but does not necessarily mean he was holding the specific office of governor.⁵⁹⁸

In short, Luke 2:2 could be read as saying either that “This was the registration before Quirinius was governor of Syria,” or that “This was the first registration when Quirinius was governing of Syria.” Either way, Luke’s reference to Quirinius is consistent with what we know about his career from extra-biblical sources, as summarized by I. Howard Marshall:

After holding a military command against the Marmaridae (in N. Africa?), Publius Sulpicius Quirinius became consul in 12 BC. At some point during the next 12 years he subjugated the Homonadenses, a race of brigands on the south border of Galatia. He acted as guide and supervisor of the young prince Gaius Caesar in Armenia, AD 3–4, and he was legate of Syria, AD 6–9; he died in AD 21.⁵⁹⁹

So why did Luke mention Quirinius in relation to the nativity era census rather than Publius Quinctilius Varus, who was governor at the time? Kruger suggests “The answer is simple: Quirinius would later become governor in AD 6 and would implement a better-known census. Luke knew his audience would be familiar with this later census and wanted to distinguish it from the earlier one Joseph participated in.”⁶⁰⁰

Q4: What is Micha’s prophecy about Bethlehem?

A4:

Short:

Micah prophesies that the Messiah will come from Bethlehem.

He will be a ruler in Israel.

And his origins are described as ancient or “from everlasting.”

⁵⁹⁷ <https://isjesusalive.com/did-luke-botch-the-census-a-historical-look-at-luke-2/>.

⁵⁹⁸ Bryan Windle, “Quirinius: An Archaeological Biography.”

<https://biblearchaeologyreport.com/2019/12/19/quirinius-an-archaeological-biography/>.

⁵⁹⁹ I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, quote by Jimmy Atkin, “The Enrollment of Jesus’ Birth.” <https://jimmyakin.com/2022/03/the-enrollment-of-jesus-birth.html>.

⁶⁰⁰ Michael J. Kruger, “How to Face Apparent Contradictions in the Gospels: Does the Census Account in Luke 2 Contain Errors?” <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/apparent-contradictions-gospels/>.

Summary:

Micah 5:2 is one of the clearest location-specific prophecies.

It names Bethlehem Ephrathah precisely.

This distinguishes it from other places called Bethlehem.

At the time, Bethlehem was a small, insignificant town.

That makes the prophecy counterintuitive.

The prophecy contains three key elements:

Place

The Messiah will come from Bethlehem in Judah.

Role

He will be a ruler in Israel.

This connects directly to the Davidic kingship.

Nature

His “origins are from of old, from everlasting.” This suggests something beyond an ordinary human king. In Jewish expectation, this pointed to a future Davidic ruler.

In the New Testament, Jesus is born in Bethlehem. This is presented as fulfillment of Micah’s prophecy. Theologically, it links:

David’s city

God’s promise of a king

A ruler with deeper, possibly eternal identity

So Micah 5:2 functions as both: a geographical marker and a theological claim.

Scholar:

In the eight century BC, the prophet Micha prophesied: “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to Me the One to be ruler in Israel, whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting.” (Micha 5:2).

Gordon Franz explains that

Toward the end of the eighth century BC, the superpower Assyria was threatening the Kingdom of Judah. The prophet Micah prophesied,

But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to Me the One to be ruler in Israel, whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting (5:2).

There are three points in this prophecy that should be noted. First, Micah singles out the *place* where the Messiah would be born, Bethlehem in Judah. At this time in Israel, there were two other Bethlehems in the land of Israel. One was in Lower Galilee in the tribal territory of Zebulun (Josh. 19:15). The other was in the territory of Benjamin, just north of Jerusalem. It was near this Bethlehem that Rachel was buried (Neh. 7:26; Gen. 35:16,19; 48:7; I Sam. 10:2; Jer. 13:4-7; 18:23; Hareuveni 1991:64-71). Second, Micah describes God’s *purpose* for the Messiah. He shall be a ruler in Israel. There is a day coming when the Messiah, the Lord Jesus, shall sit on the throne of His father David and reign over the House of Jacob forever (Luke 1:32,33, cf. II Sam. 7:12-17; Ps. 110). Third, Micah describes the *person* of the

Messiah. He was from of old, from everlasting. John begins his gospel with the eternality of the Lord Jesus (John 1:1-3,14).

The Lord Jesus was conceived in the virgin Mary by the Holy Spirit in Nazareth (Luke 1:35). In order for this prophecy to be fulfilled, Mary would have to go to Bethlehem. God, in His sovereignty, moved the heart of Caesar Augustus in Rome to declare a census in which all residents had to be enrolled in their own city [Luke 2:1-3]. Joseph, who was betrothed to Mary, had ancestral roots in Bethlehem. Micah's prophecy was marvelously fulfilled when Joseph returned with Mary to his ancestral home.⁶⁰¹

Q5: Was Bethlehem a real place in the first century?

A5:

Short:

Yes.

Bethlehem is well attested historically and archaeologically.

It was inhabited in the time of Jesus.

Summary:

Bethlehem is not just a biblical idea. It is a historically attested location.

First, literary evidence. It appears in Egyptian records as “Bit-Lahmi” (14th century BC). This shows the town existed long before Jesus.

Second, biblical continuity. Bethlehem is known as David’s hometown.

Third, archaeology. Excavations around the Church of the Nativity show habitation in the 1st century. This directly addresses earlier skepticism.

Fourth, inscriptions. A bulla (clay seal) from the 7th–8th century BC mentions Bethlehem in Hebrew. This confirms it as an administrative location.

So the evidence spans centuries. From Bronze Age texts to Roman-era occupation. The only real debate historically was whether it was inhabited in Jesus’ time. Current archaeology supports that it was.

Conclusion: Bethlehem was a real, continuously known settlement and very likely inhabited in the 1st century.

Scholar:

Both literary and archaeological evidence show that Bethlehem was a real place in the first century.

Bethlehem is, of course, a real town today. It is home to the Church of the Nativity, built in the early 4th century, which marks the traditional site of Jesus’ birth.⁶⁰² The earliest extra-biblical mention of Bethlehem comes in a letter from the 14th century BC found at the archaeological site of Amarna in Egypt.⁶⁰³ In this document a man named Abdi-Heba, the

⁶⁰¹ <https://biblearchaeology.org/research/chronological-categories/new-testament-era/3532-oh-little-town-of-bethlehem>.

⁶⁰² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church_of_the_Nativity

⁶⁰³ Gustavo Milano, “The city of Bethlehem: history and archaeology.” <https://www.omnesmag.com/en/resources-2/the-city-of-belen-history-and->

Egyptian governor of Jerusalem at the time, asks Pharaoh Amenhotep III to send him archers so that he could recapture “Bit-Lahmi.” This settlement was named after “Lahmo,” the Chaldean god of fertility, called by the Canaanites “Lahama,” a name that became transliterated in Hebrew as “Bethlehem.” Archaeologist Titus Kennedy comments that:

Many have. . . asserted that there is no archaeological evidence that Bethlehem was occupied in the 1st century BC and 1st century AD. . . . However, recent archaeological excavations in and around the Church of the Nativity have confirmed that the village was indeed occupied during. . . the time of Jesus.⁶⁰⁴

In May 2012, the Israel Antiquities Authority announced the discovery of a bulla (i.e., a small clay seal impression) bearing the name of Bethlehem and dated to the 7th or 8th century BC (see fig.). This was a “fiscal bulla” used to seal a tax shipment from Bethlehem to Jerusalem. As archeologist Eli Shukron commented:

Here we can read [the word Bethlehem] in a clear Hebrew inscription from the First Temple period on a bulla found in Israel that arrived from Bethlehem to Jerusalem maybe to pay some tax. This is the Bethlehem next to Jerusalem referred to in the Bible.⁶⁰⁵

Fig. Ancient Bethlehem Bulla (Armstrong Institute of Biblical Archaeology).⁶⁰⁶



[archeology/#:~:text=According%20to%20Cabello%2C%20%22it%20seems,with%20the%20city%20of%20Bethlehem.](#)

⁶⁰⁴ Titus Kennedy, *Excavating the Evidence for Jesus*. Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2022, 34.

⁶⁰⁵ “Israeli archaeologists find seal that mentions Bethlehem.” <http://www.pcusa.org/news/2012/6/19/israeli-archaeologists-find-ancient-seal-mentions-/>.

⁶⁰⁶ <https://armstronginstitute.org/255-bethlehem-seal-earliest-proof-of-king-davids-hometown/#:~:text=Bethlehem%20was%20a%20small%20city,of%20old%2C%20from%20ancient%20days.>

Q6: Who were “the star readers from Persia”?

A6:

Short:

They are the Magi, eastern scholars or astrologer-priests.

Likely from Persia, Babylon, or Arabia.

They interpreted a celestial sign as the birth of a king.

Summary:

“Star readers from Persia” is a modern way to describe the Magi. In Matthew 2:1 they are called “Magi from the east.”

The term *magoi* is broad. It can include priests, astrologers, scholars, or advisors. Historically, the Magi were associated with Persia. But similar roles existed in Babylon and Mesopotamia.

Babylon is especially plausible. It was a major center of astronomy. It also had a large Jewish population after the exile. So knowledge of Jewish prophecies could be present. For example, Numbers 24:17 speaks of a rising “star.”

The Magi likely interpreted celestial events symbolically. Possible triggers include:

A planetary conjunction (Jupiter and Saturn, 7 BC)

A nova or supernova (5–4 BC)

In ancient astrology, such events signaled royal births.

Their journey fits historical patterns. Eastern dignitaries sometimes traveled to honor rulers. Politically, this would alarm Herod. Magi had influence in royal succession in Persia.

So they were not random travelers. They were elite, educated figures responding to a perceived cosmic sign.

Scholar:

The “the star readers from Persia” are “Magi” (sometimes written “Magoi”) or “wise men” from the east.

The “the star readers from Persia” are “Magi” or “wise men” from the east. Although it is a traditional Christmas image, Matthew doesn’t actually mention that the “wise men” rode on camels, and they may well have travelled on horse-back. And although it is traditional Christmas imagery, Matthew also doesn’t say that there were three wise men (the idea that there were three comes from the three gifts Matthew says they gave), though there may have been. In the third episode of this season these wise men are called “the star readers from Persia.” In the fourth episode they are called “wise men.” In Matthew’s Gospel, they are called “. . . Magi from the east . . .” (Matthew 2:1.) Theologians A. J. Köstenberger and A. Stewart note that “depending on the context, the magoi could represent wise men, priests, interpreters of dreams, astrologers, or sorcerers.”⁶⁰⁷ From the fourth century B.C., Babylon was a center of astronomy, and “Magi” were important members of the Babylonian royal court in Mesopotamia. Babylon had contained a thriving Jewish colony since the time of the Jewish Exile, so Jewish prophecies of a Jewish saviour-king, the Messiah (e.g., Numbers 24:17), could well have been known to the Magi. Roger Highfield reports that “In the

⁶⁰⁷ Andreas J. Köstenberger and Alexander Stewart, *The First Days of Jesus: The Story of the Incarnation*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015. [Kindle Android version], 66.

Hellenistic age (i.e., 322-20 BC) some of the Magi left Babylon for neighboring countries, and by the time of Christ, they lived mainly in Persia, Mesopotamia and Arabia . . .”⁶⁰⁸ Matthew’s phrase about the Magi being “From the east” thus indicates

a homeland in either Persia, Babylon, or Arabia, most likely Babylon because the Babylonians had a great interest in astrology and a large Jewish community lived there as a result of the exile. However, the nature of the gifts—gold, frankincense, and myrrh—seems to indicate Arabia, while some have suggested Persia because the term magoi was originally associated with the Medes and Persians.⁶⁰⁹

In any case, the association between Magi, astronomy and a cultural familiarity with the Jews makes sense of the Magi’s presence in the nativity story in light of the famous “Star of Bethlehem.” Some think that Christmas “star” was a comet. We know from the records of Chinese and Korean astronomers that there was probably either a nova or supernova for some seventy days in March-May of either 5 or 4 BC, as recorded in “the Chinese book Ch’ien-han-shu and the Korean chronicle Samguk Sagi”⁶¹⁰ Moreover, the appearance of this nova followed a triple conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn took place in 7 BC during May/June, September/October, and December, in the zodiacal constellation of Pisces:

Pisces is a constellation sometimes associated with the last days and with the Hebrews, while Jupiter . . . was associated with the world ruler and Saturn was identified as the star of the Amorites of the Syria-Palestine region. The claim has been made that this conjunction might lead Parthian astrologers to predict that there would appear in Palestine among the Hebrews a world ruler of the last days. These astronomical events would certainly have led Eastern astrologers to the conclusion that something unusual was happening in the world.⁶¹¹

The conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in 7 BC may well have primed the Magi to interpret a comet or nova as indicating the birth of a new king of the Jews. Moreover, as Köstenberger and Stewart observe: “the magoi may have been familiar with the prophecy from Balaam that ‘a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel.’ [Numbers 24:17.] If so, they may have naturally connected this prophecy with the unusual astronomical phenomena they were observing.”⁶¹²

That a delegation of Magi would travel to Jerusalem to worship (i.e., pay homage to) a new king is plausible in light of the fact that when the Zoroastrian king Tiridates of Armenia visited Rome in 66 AD, his entourage included men that Pliny the Elder said were Magi.⁶¹³ King Tiridates came to Rome to “worship” Nero “in the same way as Matthew’s Magi came to worship the newborn Messiah of the Jews.”⁶¹⁴

The Magi’s role in the politics of the day explains why Herod would have been on edge at their appearance in Jerusalem. Ralph O. Muncaster recounts that:

⁶⁰⁸ Roger Highfield, *Can Reindeer Fly? The Science of Christmas*. London: Metro, 1998, 15.

⁶⁰⁹ Andreas J. Köstenberger and Alexander Stewart, *The First Days of Jesus: The Story of the Incarnation*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015. [Kindle Android version], 66.

⁶¹⁰ Michael Hesemann, *Jesus of Nazareth: Archaeologists Retracing the Footsteps of Christ*. Ignatius Press, 2021. Kindle edition, 78.

⁶¹¹ Andreas J. Köstenberger and Alexander Stewart, *The First Days of Jesus: The Story of the Incarnation*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015. [Kindle Android version], 67.

⁶¹² Andreas J. Köstenberger and Alexander Stewart, *The First Days of Jesus: The Story of the Incarnation*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015. [Kindle Android version], 68.

⁶¹³ See Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 30:6, 16-17.

⁶¹⁴ Geza Vermes, *The Nativity: History and Legend*. London: Penguin, 112.

During the years preceding the birth of Jesus, there were numerous struggles between Rome and Persia. Palestine was essentially a “buffer state.” Herod was granted the title “king of the Jews” three full years before he was able to occupy his own capital city (he had previously been driven out by the Persians). Hence, Herod (a half Jew) was extremely insecure in his role. Furthermore, “full” Jews looked down on Herod. So the potential existed for Herod to be attacked from many directions, including through potential collusion between the Jews and Persians.

Add to this the fact that the ruler of Persia was aging and in ill health. The magi were given great power in Persia and often played key roles in governmental affairs. Their duties included selecting the kings of Persia. Hence, circumstances were in place that would certainly have “greatly troubled” the insecure Herod and the people of Jerusalem when the magi arrived (Matthew 2:3).⁶¹⁵

Fig. “*The Three Magi*, Byzantine mosaic, c. 565, Basilica of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna, Italy (restored during the 19th century). As here, Byzantine art usually depicts the Magi in Persian clothing, which includes breeches, capes, and Phrygian caps.”⁶¹⁶



Recommended Resources for Episode 18

David Armitage. “Was Luke wrong about the census?” <https://tyndalehouse.com/2022/12/21/was-luke-wrong-about-the-census/>

Andrew D. Edwards, “The Gospel of Luke and the Quirinius' Governorship.” <https://www.christianpublishers.org/post/the-gospel-of-luke-and-the-quirinius-governorship>

⁶¹⁵ Ralph O. Muncaster, *Examine the Evidence: Birth of Christ: What Really Happened Christmas Morning?* Eugene OR: Harvest House, 2000, 34.

⁶¹⁶ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Magi_\(1\).jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Magi_(1).jpg).

Bryan Windle. "O Little Town of Bethlehem." <https://biblearchaeologyreport.com/2021/12/10/o-little-town-of-bethlehem-2/#:~:text=The%20biblical%20text%2C%20written%20tradition,the%20Church%20of%20the%20Nativity>

Bryan Windle. "Quirinius: An Archaeological Biography." <https://biblearchaeologyreport.com/2019/12/19/quirinius-an-archaeological-biography/>

Mark Kidger. *The Star of Bethlehem: An Astronomer's View*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999.

Andreas J. Köstenberger and Alexander Stewart. *The First Days of Jesus: The Story of the Incarnation*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015.

J. Gresham Machen. *The Virgin Birth of Christ*. James Clarke & Co Ltd, 2022.

Michel R. Molnar. *The Star of Bethlehem: The Legacy of the Magi*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000.

Colin R. Nicholl. *The Great Christ Comet: Revealing the True Star of Bethlehem*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015.

Episode 19: Proclaim

Q1: When was Jesus born?

A1:

Short:

Jesus was most likely born around 6–4 BC.

A common estimate is late 5 BC.

Our calendar is slightly off.

Summary:

Dating Jesus' birth is approximate, not exact. The key anchor is Luke 3. It places Jesus' ministry around AD 28–29. Luke says Jesus was "about thirty." That suggests a birth around 6–4 BC.

Another important factor is Herod the Great. He died in 4 BC. Since Jesus was born during Herod's reign, his birth must be before 4 BC. This narrows the range to about 6–4 BC. Many scholars land around 5 BC.

Luke's wording allows some flexibility. "About thirty" is not precise. So late 5 BC is a reasonable estimate. Even a winter birth is possible, though not certain.

Conclusion: We can't pinpoint the exact date, but the historical window is fairly tight.

Scholar:

While it is hard to be precise in dating Jesus' birth, it was probably late in 5 BC.

As theologians Andreas J. Köstenberger and Alexander Stewart point out:

Luke precisely dates the beginning of John the Baptist's ministry to the "fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar," which would have been AD 28/29. Later in the chapter, Luke states that Jesus began his public ministry when he was "about thirty years of age," most likely in the fall of AD 29. The key word in Luke's statement is "about," which indicates his use of approximate or round numbers. . . . Presumably, if Jesus had been over thirty-five years old at the start of his ministry, Luke would have rounded up . . . There was no year 0 between 1 BC and AD 1, so Luke's estimate of Jesus's age could not easily push his birth back farther than 6 or 7 BC at the most. On the other hand, Luke's comment allows us to date Jesus's birth late in 5 BC, making even a November or December birth possible.⁶¹⁷

Readers may wonder how Jesus managed to have been born in 5 BC, "Before Christ"?! The calendar system of dividing history into BC ("Before Christ") and AD ("Anno Domini," that is, "The year of our Lord") was invented in what we now call the sixth century AD by a monk and astronomer called Dionysius Exiguus. Working with limited documentation, Dionysius unfortunately got his calculation wrong by a few years.

⁶¹⁷ Andreas J. Köstenberger and Alexander Stewart, *The First Days of Jesus: The Story of the Incarnation*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015. [Kindle Android version], 65.

Q2: Why doesn't this episode show Mary giving birth to Jesus under a palm-tree?

A2:

Short:

Because the Gospels don't mention a palm tree.
That detail comes from later, non-canonical traditions.
The episode follows the earlier biblical accounts.

Summary:

The New Testament gives the earliest accounts of Jesus' birth. These are found in Matthew and Luke. Neither mentions a palm tree. They place the birth in Bethlehem, not a desert setting. The palm tree story comes from the Qur'an (Surah 19). However, that version appears to draw from later traditions. Specifically from apocryphal Christian texts. Two key sources are:

- The *Protoevangelium of James* (2nd century)
- The *Infancy Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew* (later tradition)

These texts are not part of the New Testament canon. They include additional details not found in earlier sources. For example:

- Birth in a cave
- Miraculous provisions like a palm tree and water

Interestingly, in Pseudo-Matthew, the palm tree appears later. It happens during the flight to Egypt, not at the birth. So the Qur'anic version seems to combine traditions.

From a historical perspective: Matthew and Luke are earlier sources (1st century). The others appear later and expand the story. That's why the episode follows the Gospel version.

Scholar:

The Qur'anic depiction of Jesus' birth under a palm tree draws upon apocryphal Christian traditions that post-date the first century testimony conveyed by the Gospels of Matthew and Luke.

According to the Qur'an, Mary gave birth to Jesus under "a palm tree" in an unspecified "distant place." (Sura 19:22-26.) However, this account of Jesus' birth seems to be pulled together from the apocryphal second century *Protoevangelium of James* and a tradition reflected in the seventh/eighth century *Infancy Gospel of Matthew* (also known as The Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew), a tradition that traces back to a third century story about Mary's death.⁶¹⁸ All of these traditions post-date the first century testimony of the canonical Gospels according to Matthew and Luke.

From the *Protoevangelium of James*, the Qur'an takes the idea that Mary gave birth to Jesus in a "cave" that was not in Bethlehem but rather somewhere in the "desert," along with the idea that she gave birth without anyone to help her. From the *Infancy Gospel of Matthew* the Qur'an takes the idea of Mary eating from a date-palm tree and drinking from a miraculous spring of water, though in Pseudo-Matthew this is an event that happens as Mary, Joseph and Jesus were travelling to Egypt to escape from the murderous intent of King

⁶¹⁸ See Stephen J. Shoemaker, "Christmas in the Qur'an: The Qur'anic Account of Jesus' Nativity and Palestinian Local Tradition." https://islamspring2012.voices.wooster.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/192/2018/10/Shoemaker_christmas-in-the-Qur'an.pdf.

Herod. Stephen J. Shoemaker traces the influence of both traditions on the fifth-century Kathisma church,⁶¹⁹ a pilgrimage site between Jerusalem and Bethlehem, and which was originally

an important Nativity shrine . . . which owed its significance to the account of the Nativity related by the second-century Protevanglium of James, a Christian apocryphon whose traditions have strongly influenced the Qur'an. Once the basilica of the Nativity in the city of Bethlehem had emerged as the dominant Nativity shrine, with the authoritative support of the canonical gospels, new significance had to be found for the church of the Kathisma that would supplant its dissonant . . . Nativity traditions. It would seem that this was the reason behind the later attempt to identify the Kathisma with the tradition of Mary and the palm tree from the legend of the Holy Family's flight into Egypt. The Kathisma's Nativity traditions did not evaporate, however, and they continued to attach themselves to this shrine even after this effort to redefine its significance. Thus we have in the Kathisma church a likely source for the Qur'anic tradition of Jesus' Nativity: not only is it the only place in the Christian tradition where the two legends that were the Qur'an's sources meet, but the importance of Jerusalem in earliest Islamic history provides a likely context for their adoption by the Muslim invaders. . . . We know that this Christian shrine was converted into a mosque rather soon after the Arabs took control of Jerusalem, sometime before the early eighth century, indicating that the Kathisma was important to the early Muslims. Moreover, the impact of the Kathisma church on the formation of Islamic culture is dramatically seen in the Kathisma's connection with the Dome of the Rock; not only does the Kathisma appear to have served as the Dome of the Rock's architectural model, but the unusual mosaics found in both shrines attest to the strong links between them. In view of the Kathisma's significance for early Islam, we should not be surprised at all to find that its traditions have influenced the Qur'an.⁶²⁰

As Nicolai Sinai comments:

the Qur'anic retelling of the Nativity of Jesus in Q 19: 16–33 draws upon a combination of narrative traditions that was linked to a Christian pilgrimage sanctuary located between Jerusalem and Jericho, the church of the 'Kathisma', or seat, of the 'God-Bearer' Mary. The early Muslim conquerors seem to have attached sufficient significance to this church in order to eventually turn it into a mosque and to use it as an architectural blueprint for the Dome of the Rock. Historical probability thus suggests that surah 19's account of the Nativity stands in some relationship to the Palestinian Kathisma sanctuary. The most straightforward model for how this could be the case, given the demonstrable importance of the Kathisma church to the Arab conquerors, would be to assume that the passage in question, or perhaps the entire surah to which it belongs, originated in post-conquest Palestine. Yet a less direct link remains possible: nothing precludes that traditions associated with the Kathisma sanctuary could have radiated further afield already prior to the Arab conquest of

⁶¹⁹ See <https://www.seetheholyland.net/kathisma/>.

⁶²⁰ Stephen J. Shoemaker, "Christmas in the Qur'an: The Qur'anic Account of Jesus' Nativity and Palestinian Local Tradition." https://islamspring2012.voices.wooster.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/192/2018/10/Shoemaker_christmas-in-the-Qur'an.pdf.

Palestine and that they could have penetrated the Qur'anic milieu (wherever we choose to locate the latter) via several stages of oral dissemination.⁶²¹

Q3: Where exactly was Jesus born?

A3:

Short:

Jesus was born in Bethlehem.

Likely in a private home, not a public inn.

He was placed in a manger, probably in a cave or lower animal area.

Summary:

The Gospels clearly locate Jesus' birth in Bethlehem. That part is not disputed. The question is the *setting*.

Traditional nativity scenes show a stable. But the text suggests something slightly different.

Luke uses the word *kataluma*. This usually means "guest room," not "inn." So the most likely scenario is this: Joseph and Mary stayed with family or relatives. But the guest room was already full. In 1st-century homes, animals were often kept inside. Either in a lower section or an adjoining space. These spaces were sometimes caves. Especially in areas like Bethlehem. That explains the manger. It's a feeding trough for animals.

Early Christian sources (2nd–4th century) consistently point to a cave in Bethlehem. This tradition is very early and widely known.

So, combining all evidence:

- Bethlehem is certain
- A private home is likely
- A cave or animal space fits both text and archaeology

Conclusion: Not a wooden stable behind an inn, but a crowded home with an attached animal area.

Scholar:

Jesus was probably born in a home in Bethlehem where the guest room was already full, and he was laid in the manger of a natural or man-made cave adjoining the house that was used for sheltering animals.

Michael Hesemann reports that "The cave below the Church of the Nativity has been venerated since the earliest years, which suggests that it is authentically the site of Christ's birth. It is mentioned as early as the second century in the Protoevangelium."⁶²² Writing around 220 AD, Origen of Alexandria recounted that

⁶²¹ Nicolai Sinai, *The Qur'an: A Historical-Critical Introduction*, 48, https://www.reddit.com/r/AcademicQur'an/comments/10ngrbi/any_opinions_on_shoemakerdyes_thesis_on_the/.

⁶²² Michael Hesemann, *Jesus of Nazareth: Archaeologists Retracing the Footsteps of Christ*. Ignatius Press, 2021. Kindle edition, 69.

In Bethlehem the grotto was shown where, according to the Gospels, Jesus was born, as well as the manger in which, wrapped in swaddling clothes, he was laid. What was shown to me is familiar to everyone in the area. The heathens themselves tell everyone who is willing to listen that in the said grotto there a certain Jesus was born whom the Christians revered.⁶²³

Then again, writing around 315 AD, the early Church historian Eusebius confirms that “Up till the present day the local population [of Bethlehem] bears witness to the ancestral tradition and proceeds to show visitors the grotto in which the Virgin gave birth to the Child.”⁶²⁴

Bethlehem was probably too small to have an inn, and the traditional “nativity play” portrayal of Joseph and Mary staying in the stables of an inn on account of the inn being full stems from a mistranslation of the Greek word for the “guest room,” i.e., the *kataluma*: “a room, mostly on the second floor, which a host places at the disposal of his guests.”⁶²⁵ As theologian Joel B. Green explains:

The term Luke employs here [κατάλυμα] for “guest room” [or “upper room”] is often translated in English as “inn.” However, the same term appears in 22:11 with the meaning “guest room,” and the verbal form occurs in 9:12 and 19:7 with the sense of “find lodging” or “be a guest.” Moreover, in 10:34, where a commercial inn is clearly demanded by the text, Luke draws on different vocabulary. It is doubtful whether a commercial inn actually existed in Bethlehem, which stood on no major roads. It may be that Luke has in mind a “khan or caravansary where large groups of travelers found shelter under one roof,” but this does not help our understanding of Mary’s placing the child in a manger. That “guest room” is the more plausible meaning here is urged by the realization that in peasant homes in the ancient Near East the family and animals slept in one enclosed space, with the animals located on a lower level. Mary and Joseph, then, would have been the guests of family or friends, but their home would have been so overcrowded that the baby was placed in a feeding trough.⁶²⁶

The evidence suggests that Jesus was born in a home where the guest room was already occupied, leading to the baby Jesus being placed in the manger of the home’s integrated animal enclosure, which was likely in a natural or man-made cave. Fr. Dwight Longenecker points out that:

Bethlehem is one of the areas where cave houses were. . . most common. . . . Bethlehem at the time of Jesus’ birth was most likely a community of homes carved out of the soft limestone of the area—with stone or timber built additions on the front or on top.⁶²⁷

⁶²³ Michael Hesemann, *Jesus of Nazareth: Archaeologists Retracing the Footsteps of Christ*. Ignatius Press, 2021. Kindle edition, 70.

⁶²⁴ Michael Hesemann, *Jesus of Nazareth: Archaeologists Retracing the Footsteps of Christ*. Ignatius Press, 2021. Kindle edition, 70.

⁶²⁵ Michael Hesemann, *Jesus of Nazareth: Archaeologists Retracing the Footsteps of Christ*. Ignatius Press, 2021. Kindle edition, 69.

⁶²⁶ Joel B. Green. *The Gospel of Luke*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997, 178.

⁶²⁷ Fr. Dwight Longenecker, “The Cave of Our Re-Birth.” <https://dwightlongenecker.com/the-cave-of-our-re-birth/>.

According to Mike McGarry: “The people of Bethlehem were known to keep their flocks in an adjoining cave to their homes. There is archaeological evidence for animals being housed in caves.”⁶²⁸

As Michael Hesemann explains,

The cave below the Church of the Nativity has been venerated since the earliest years, which suggests that it is authentically the site of Christ’s birth. It is mentioned as early as the second century in the Protoevangelium. Around A.D. 135, Justin Martyr, who was from Neapolis (now Nablus) in Samaria and thus very familiar with local tradition, wrote in his Dialogue with Trypho: “But, when the Child was born in Bethlehem, since Joseph could not find a lodging in that village he took up his quarters in a certain cave near the village.” . . . Around 220, Origen reports: “In Bethlehem the grotto was shown where, according to the Gospels, Jesus was born, as well as the manger in which, wrapped in swaddling clothes, he was laid. What was shown to me is familiar to everyone in the area. [They] tell everyone who is willing to listen that in the said grotto there a certain Jesus was born whom the Christians revered.” Around 315, that is, ten years prior to the visit of Saint Helena, the Church historian Eusebius confirms: “Up till the present day the local population [of Bethlehem] bears witness to the ancestral tradition and proceeds to show visitors the grotto in which the Virgin gave birth to the Child.”⁶²⁹

Hesemann points out the irony that it is thanks to

the pagan Roman Emperor Hadrian, of all people, that this site was preserved . . . After he had quelled the uprising of the Jewish rebel Simon Bar Kochba in 135, as a preventive measure he took action against all messianic movements in Judaism. Not only did he drive the Jews out of Jerusalem and the vicinity, he also had the most important Jewish and Jewish-Christian sanctuaries paganized, i.e., converted into heathen places of worship. This happened in Jerusalem on the Temple Mount, with the Pool of Bethesda, and the rock of Golgotha and, furthermore, on the Samaritan Mount Garizim and in Bethlehem. Here he commissioned a cultic grove to be designed over the Grotto of Jesus’ Nativity, in honor of the Syrian Tammuz (Greek: Adonis). Tammuz was a shepherd god who annually in winter, when life dies, descended into the underworld, only to reemerge from it in spring, bringing new life.⁶³⁰

Q4: Was king Herod a real historical figure?

A4:

Short:

⁶²⁸ Mike McGarry, “Where Was Jesus Born: A Barn, a Cave or a House?”

<https://www.youthpastortheologian.com/blog/where-was-jesus-born-a-barn-cave-or-house#:~:text=The%20question%20‘Where%20was%20Jesus,%2C%20‘Not%20so%20much.>

⁶²⁹ Michael Hesemann, *Jesus of Nazareth: Archaeologists Retracing the Footsteps of Christ*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2021, 70.

⁶³⁰ Michael Hesemann, *Jesus of Nazareth: Archaeologists Retracing the Footsteps of Christ*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2021, 70.

Yes, Herod the Great is firmly historical.
He is well documented in multiple independent sources.
Archaeology also confirms his reign.

Summary:

Herod the Great is one of the best-attested figures in the New Testament period.

First, literary sources. The Jewish historian Josephus writes extensively about him. Roman sources also mention him.

Second, archaeology. Coins bearing his name and title have been found. Inscriptions confirm he was called “King of the Jews,” matching the Gospels.

His massive building projects still exist today. For example:

- Caesarea Maritima
- Masada
- Expansion of the Jerusalem Temple

These are not minor remains. They show a powerful, historically real ruler.

Third, character. Josephus describes him as paranoid and brutal. He executed family members and political rivals. This matches the Gospel portrayal of Herod.

The “slaughter of the innocents” is debated. It is not mentioned by Josephus. But given Bethlehem’s small size, the number of victims would have been small. And Herod’s known behavior makes it plausible.

Herod is unquestionably historical.

Scholar:

King Herod the Great was a real historical figure who features in the archaeological record and extra-biblical historical literature of the first century.

As described by *Encyclopaedia Britannica*:

Herod (born 73 BCE—died March/April, 4 BCE, Jericho, Judaea) was the Roman-appointed king of Judaea (37–4 BCE), who built many fortresses, aqueducts, theaters, and other public buildings and generally raised the prosperity of his land but who was the center of political and family intrigues in his later years.⁶³¹

Below left is a bronze coin from Herod the Great’s reign. On the obverse side is a tripod and ceremonial bowl with the inscription “of Herod king”.

Fig. Coin of Herod the Great.⁶³²



⁶³¹ <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Herod-king-of-Judaea>.

⁶³² https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Herod_coin.jpg.

Archaeologists have also discovered an *amphora* or storage vessel, probably used for transporting wine, dated to c. 19 BC, bearing a Latin inscription that reads, “Herod the Great King of the Jews [or Judea].” This was the first such inscription that mentions the full title of King Herod used in Luke 1:5.⁶³³

What about Herod’s “slaughter of the innocents” at Bethlehem, reported in Matthew 2:16–18? Theologians Alex Köstenberger and A. Stewart conjecture:

Perhaps Herod suspected that if the magoi had allied with this rival king, then the villagers may have also allied with him and would have lied to protect him. Herod, or his representatives, may have distrusted their claim that the family and child had disappeared in the middle of the night. So Herod took the path of “better safe than sorry.” This tyrannical response completely accords with what we know about Herod’s cruel and paranoid character near the end of his life.⁶³⁴

According to Michael Hesemann:

the results of archaeological excavations in Bethlehem lead to the conclusion that only three hundred to one thousand people were living in the city of David during the time of Jesus. If Herod had indeed killed all “boys who were two years old or under” [a phrase that, in the Greek, may not specify those who had *completed* two years and down, but those *entering* the second year and down⁶³⁵], the number of his victims might perhaps have been ten to twenty, or thirty at the very most. That is terrible, but it would have gone unnoticed in the bloody frenzy that marked the last years of the paranoid tyrant.⁶³⁶

Ordering the murder of 10-30 babies certainly wasn’t out of character for Herod. As Jewish New testament scholar Geza Vermes writes: “Is this story consistent with what we know about Herod’s character and volatile temperament? Without any doubt it is.”⁶³⁷ According to the first century Jewish historian Josephus: “Herod inflicted such outrages upon (the Jews) as not even a beast could have done if it possessed the power to rule over men.” (*Antiquities of the Jews* 17:310). Josephus tells that Herod murdered his *favorite* wife’s father, drowned her brother, and killed her! He executed one of his most trusted friends (his barber) and 300 military leaders. He slew three of his sons (suspecting them of treason). And as Andreas J. Köstenberger and Alexander Stewart observe:

Herod’s character, at least near the end of his life, is illustrated by one of the last stories Josephus recounts of his reign. When Herod knew that he was near death, he summoned notable Jews from the entire nation to the hippodrome and instructed his sister, Salome, and her husband, Alexas, to have soldiers slaughter everyone in the hippodrome upon his death. He did this because he knew that the majority of Jews

⁶³³ See “Herod Potsherd, c. 19 BCE.” https://cojs.org/herod_potsherd_c-19_bce/#:~:text=Potsherd%20with%20the%20Latin%20inscription,%20BAR%20Nov%2DDec%201996.

⁶³⁴ Andreas J. Köstenberger and Alexander Stewart, *The First Days of Jesus: The Story of the Incarnation* (2015) [Kindle Android version], 83.

⁶³⁵ <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/matthew/2-16.htm>.

⁶³⁶ Michael Hesemann, *Jesus of Nazareth: Archaeologists Retracing the Footsteps of Christ*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2021, 81.

⁶³⁷ Geza Vermes, *The Nativity: History and Legend*. London: Penguin, 120.

would rejoice at his death (because of his heavy taxation and tyranny), and he wanted to ensure that genuine mourning gripped the entire nation at his funeral. Fortunately for the Jews at the time, Salome and Alexas did not carry out Herod's instructions.⁶³⁸

Köstenberger and Stewart also report that there is a possible extrabiblical reference to Herod's massacre a Bethlehem that doesn't depend on Matthew's account:

Macrobius, an early fifth-century (likely pagan) philosopher, recorded a quip attributed to Caesar Augustus: "When he heard that Herod king of the Jews had ordered boys in Syria under the age of two years to be put to death and that the king's son was among those killed, he said: 'I'd rather be Herod's pig than Herod's son.'" Many assume that this comment relies on Matthew's Gospel because it postdates it by several centuries, but Macrobius, a Neoplatonist, displays no explicit knowledge of Christianity in his writings. The author obviously mixes up historical events as he locates the massacre in Syria (the Romans would have viewed Judea as part of the larger province of Syria) and includes Herod's own son in the slaughter (Herod killed his son around the same time period). But these very errors may indicate that Macrobius derived his information from the same Roman sources from which he drew all his other information about Caesar. What is more, he could not have discovered the information about Herod's son, the main point of his comment, from Matthew's Gospel. Thus, this reference may well indicate knowledge of Herod's slaughter of the Bethlehem infants rooted in the non-Christian Roman world.⁶³⁹

Recommended Resources for Episode 19

Stephen J. Shoemaker. "Christmas in the Qur'an: The Qur'anic Account of Jesus' Nativity and Palestinian Local Tradition." https://islamspring2012.voices.wooster.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/192/2018/10/Shoemaker_christmas-in-the-Qur'an.pdf

Bryan Windle. "O Little Town of Bethlehem." <https://biblearchaeologyreport.com/2021/12/10/o-little-town-of-bethlehem-2/#:~:text=The%20biblical%20text%2C%20written%20tradition,the%20Church%20of%20the%20Nativity>

Andreas J. Köstenberger and Alexander Stewart, *The First Days of Jesus: The Story of the Incarnation*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015.

Paul Maier, "The Date of the Nativity and the Chronology of Jesus' Life," in *Chronos, Kairos, Christos: Nativity and Chronological Studies Presented to Paul Finegan*, ed. Jerry Vardaman and Edwin M. Yamauchi (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1989), 113–130, <https://inchristus.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/12/maier-date-of-the-nativity.pdf>

⁶³⁸ Andreas J. Köstenberger and Alexander Stewart, *The First Days of Jesus: The Story of the Incarnation*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015. [Kindle Android version], 63.

⁶³⁹ Andreas J. Köstenberger and Alexander Stewart, *The First Days of Jesus: The Story of the Incarnation*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015. [Kindle Android version], 84.

Episode 20: Myrrh

Q1: What is the significance of the angels saying the baby Jesus would be found “wrapped in cloths”?

A1:

Short:

It simply shows Jesus was a newborn baby.
Swaddling cloths were normal care for infants.
There’s no special symbolic meaning in the detail itself.

Summary:

The phrase “wrapped in cloths” (swaddling cloths) reflects standard ancient childcare. So the detail is not unusual or symbolic on its own. Its main function is identification. The angels give the shepherds a specific sign. “A baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” The unusual part is not the cloths. It’s the manger.

Scholar:

The cloths simply emphasises that Jesus was a new-born baby.

According to Andreas J. Köstenberger and Alexander Stewart, the angel’s specification that the shepherds will “find a baby wrapped in cloths” simply emphasises the new-born status of this child:

The swaddling cloths simply indicate that Mary was taking care of Jesus in the same way that any other responsible woman at that time would have taken care of a newborn child. The strips of cloth indicate neither poverty nor any other spiritual significance but were the common means by which mothers kept newborn babies warm.⁶⁴⁰

Q2: What does the name Jesus have to do with saving people?

A2:

Short:

The name “Jesus” means “God saves.”
It comes from the Hebrew name Joshua.
So his name directly expresses his mission.

Summary:

The name “Jesus” has a layered linguistic history.

⁶⁴⁰ Andreas J. Köstenberger and Alexander Stewart, *The First Days of Jesus: The Story of the Incarnation*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015. [Kindle Android version], 141.

Hebrew: **Yehoshua / Yeshua**

Greek: **Iēsous**

Latin: **Iesus**

English: **Jesus**

The original meaning is: “Yahweh saves” or “God saves.” This is explicitly linked to his role. Matthew 1:21 says: “He will save his people from their sins.” So the name is not random. It’s a statement of purpose.

It also connects to Joshua in the Old Testament. Joshua led Israel into the promised land. That creates a parallel:

- Joshua leads into physical land
- Jesus leads into spiritual restoration

The name was common at the time. Many parents used it, hoping for deliverance. But the New Testament claims Jesus uniquely fulfills that meaning. So the connection is direct: His name describes his mission.

Scholar:

The English name Jesus is a transliteration of the Latin transliteration of the Greek transliteration of Jesus’ Aramaic name – Joshua - which means “God saves.”

The New Testament was written in first century Greek. About a hundred years later, it was translated into Latin. These Latin manuscripts transliterated the Greek name *Iēsous* as *Iesus*. When the New Testament was first translated into English, this was transliterated as “Jesus.” As Andreas J. Köstenberger and Alexander Stewart explain:

The Greek name Jesus is equivalent to the Hebrew name Joshua, which, reflecting the angel’s comment, means “Yahweh saves.” The name Jesus therefore points to Yahweh’s willingness and ability to save his people and recalls Joshua’s role in leading God’s people into the possession of the land that God had promised. Jesus was a common name in first-century Palestine, and parents often named their sons Jesus as an expression of their hope that God would one day act to save and deliver his people . . . ⁶⁴¹

As theologian Benjamin L. Gladd comments:

Though I understand why modern translations preserve the name Jesus, I fear they’ve obscured an important dimension to Jesus’s identity. . . . Joshua means “the Lord saves,” and it appears to be the sixth most popular name in Palestine during the first century. This name is pregnant with meaning for at least two reasons.

First, “the Lord saves” encapsulates the whole of Jesus’s ministry, because, as the angel proclaims, “he will save his people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21). The apostles never lose sight of this meaning when they invoke the name Joshua/Jesus.

Second, the name Joshua also evokes Moses’s successor, the one who led Israel into the promised land (Josh. 1:1–5:12). Joshua’s entrance into the land and his partial victory over the Canaanites prophetically foreshadow Jesus’s entrance into the new creational promised land and complete victory over the spiritual Canaanites. In

⁶⁴¹ Andreas J. Köstenberger and Alexander Stewart, *The First Days of Jesus: The Story of the Incarnation*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015. [Kindle Android version], 50.

bearing the name Jesus/Joshua, Jesus of Nazareth will exterminate Israel's longtime foes—sin, death, and Satan—and bring about an unparalleled act of redemption: the salvation of individuals from sin's bondage.⁶⁴²

Q3: What is the significance of the gifts the wise men give Jesus?

A3:

Short:

They are royal and religious gifts.

They honor Jesus as king and more than a king.

They were standard high-status offerings in the ancient world.

Summary:

The gifts are: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. All three were valuable and culturally significant.

Gold is obvious. It represents wealth and royalty.

Frankincense is incense. It was used in worship and temple rituals.

Myrrh is a resin. Used in perfume, medicine, and burial practices.

In the ancient world, such gifts were appropriate for honoring kings or divine figures. So at a basic level, the gifts signal status. This is not an ordinary child.

There is also a deeper layer often noted:

- Gold → kingship
- Frankincense → divinity or worship
- Myrrh → suffering or mortality

That interpretation is theological, not explicit in Matthew.

Also important: The text never says there were three wise men. That comes from the number of gifts.

Conclusion: The gifts function as recognition of greatness, whether understood politically, religiously, or both.

Scholar:

The gold, frankincense and myrrh given by the wise men were standard gifts in the ancient world for honouring a king or deity.

The magi give three gifts, of gold, frankincense and myrrh: “These valuable items were standard gifts to honor a king or deity in the ancient world: gold as a precious metal, frankincense as perfume or incense, and myrrh as anointing oil.”⁶⁴³ The fact that there were three gifts became the basis of the traditional view that there were three wise men, each of whom gave one of the gifts. However, Matthew does not explicitly say that there were three wise men. Myrrh resin

⁶⁴² Benjamin L. Gladd, “Wait, His Name Isn’t Jesus?” <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/name-isnt-jesus/>.

⁶⁴³ BAS, “Why Did the Magi Bring Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh?” <https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/people-cultures-in-the-bible/jesus-historical-jesus/why-did-the-magi-bring-gold-frankincense-and-myrrh/>.

has a long history of use as a flavoring agent, as an aromatic ingredient in cosmetics, and in traditional medicine. . . . Myrrh was highly esteemed by the ancients; in the Middle East and Mediterranean regions, it was an ingredient of costly incenses, perfumes, and cosmetics and was used in medicines for local applications and in embalming.⁶⁴⁴

In the bible, we find several references to myrrh as a perfume (Psalm 45:8; Song of Songs 3:6; Esther 2:12). Jesus would be embalmed with myrrh after his crucifixion (John 19:39).

Fig. The three gifts of the magi, left to right: gold, frankincense and myrrh.⁶⁴⁵



Recommended Resources for Episode 20

BAS, “Why Did the Magi Bring Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh?”

<https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/people-cultures-in-the-bible/jesus-historical-jesus/why-did-the-magi-bring-gold-frankincense-and-myrrh/>

Benjamin L. Gladd. “Wait, His Name Isn’t Jesus?” <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/name-isnt-jesus/>

Bryan Windle. “O Little Town of Bethlehem.” <https://biblearchaeologyreport.com/2021/12/10/o-little-town-of-bethlehem-2/#:~:text=The%20biblical%20text%2C%20written%20tradition,the%20Church%20of%20the%20Nativity>

Andreas J. Köstenberger and Alexander Stewart, *The First Days of Jesus: The Story of the Incarnation*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015.

⁶⁴⁴ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/myrrh>.

⁶⁴⁵ See

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biblical_Magi#:~:text=In%20Christianity%2C%20the%20Biblical%20Magi%20\('me%20C9%AA%CA%92a%20C9%AA%20MAY%20Djy.frankincense%2C%20and%20myrrh%20in%20homage%20to%20him.](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biblical_Magi#:~:text=In%20Christianity%2C%20the%20Biblical%20Magi%20('me%20C9%AA%CA%92a%20C9%AA%20MAY%20Djy.frankincense%2C%20and%20myrrh%20in%20homage%20to%20him.)

Episode 21: Jerusalem

Q1: How and why did Jesus’s disciples misunderstand his intentions as Messiah?

A1:

Short:

People expected a political, conquering Messiah.
They focused on victory passages and ignored suffering ones.
This led to widespread misunderstanding of Jesus.

Summary:

The Old Testament presents two main Messiah “profiles.”

1. A suffering servant (Isaiah 53)
2. A victorious king (Isaiah 11)

These were both present in the texts.

But in the 1st century, context mattered. Israel was under Roman occupation. So expectations became political. People wanted liberation and national restoration. This shaped how prophecies were read. Victory texts were emphasized. Suffering texts were minimized or reinterpreted.

Some Jewish traditions solved this by proposing: two different Messiahs. The New Testament takes another route. One Messiah, but two comings. First: suffering, redemption, sacrifice. Second: judgment, victory, restoration.

Even Jesus’ disciples struggled with this. They expected power, not crucifixion. That’s why they didn’t understand his predictions. So the misunderstanding is not random. It’s a selective reading shaped by political pressure.

Conclusion: They had the right texts, but the wrong expectations about timing and method.

Scholar:

Under the pressure of Roman occupation, 1st century Jews, including Jesus’s disciples, were focused upon some of the prophetic data about the Messiah in the Jewish scriptures at the expense of the rest.

As the narrator says in this episode, Jesus “is the heir to the throne of King David, fulfilment of the promise to Abraham, and the promised Messiah.” However, as the first century Gospels of the New Testament make clear, people often misunderstood Jesus’s teaching and his intentions because they had their own preconceived ideas about how the Messiah should behave. As Rich Robinson observes, in the Jewish Old Testament scriptures:

Sometimes the prophets describe a humble man, rejected by his own people and suffering quietly, yet whose death has salutary effects for the spiritual health of the Jewish people. Isaiah 52:13–53:12 is the most prominent such passage. Another portrayal comes from Zechariah 9:9, where the “king”—understood to be the Messiah—comes into town riding on a donkey, showing his humility. But at other

times, the prophets describe a victorious warrior-king who brings justice to a world transformed. . . . Isaiah 11:1–9 is one such example.⁶⁴⁶

How are these two strands of prophecy to be understood? Robinson explains that

several streams of rabbinic tradition have interpreted these prophetic portraits as describing two different messiahs. . . . modern Judaism tends to toss out the portrait of the suffering Messiah and keep only the portrait of the warrior But the Jewish writers of the New Testament accepted both options in a different way. Rather than opting for two Messiahs, they saw a picture of a single Messiah who appears twice on the stage of Jewish—and human—history.⁶⁴⁷

Jesus’s disciples came to see Jesus as the one and only Messiah who was discussed by both strands of Old Testament prophecy, a Messiah whose first coming was focused on his role as a servant-king suffering for the salvation of Jews and Gentiles alike, and thereby establishing the kingdom of God in their midst, and whose future “second coming” would initiate God’s end-time victory over sin and establish the culmination of God’s kingdom-rule in the “new heavens and earth” (see Isaiah 65:17; Isaiah 66:22 ; Romans 8:21; 2 Peter 3:13; Revelation 21:1).

However, under the pressure of Roman occupation, 1st century Jews were understandably focused upon some of the scriptural data about the Messiah at the expense of the rest:

One of the most significant misunderstandings among the disciples was regarding the nature of the Kingdom of God. The disciples, like many Jews of their time, anticipated a political and earthly kingdom that would overthrow Roman rule and restore Israel’s national sovereignty [see, for example, Mark 10:37-45].⁶⁴⁸

As a bystander says in this episode: “Perhaps he is the king who will beat the Romans?” This misunderstanding was held by Jesus’ own disciples at first. As John the disciple says in this episode: “We can change things; we can finally get a good king.” This is why

the crowds hailed Jesus as the “King of Israel” (John 12:13), laying palm branches before Him in a gesture of honor and expectation of deliverance. However, Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey, fulfilling Zechariah 9:9 and symbolizing a mission of peace rather than military conquest. The crowd’s acclamation was sincere but based on a misunderstanding of the nature of His kingship.⁶⁴⁹

Since they sharing the same misunderstanding as the crowd,

⁶⁴⁶ Rich Robinson, “Can Jesus Be Messiah if He Didn’t Bring Peace?” <https://jewsforjesus.org/answers/jesus-cant-be-the-messiah-he-didnt-bring-peace>.

⁶⁴⁷ Rich Robinson, “Can Jesus Be Messiah if He Didn’t Bring Peace?” <https://jewsforjesus.org/answers/jesus-cant-be-the-messiah-he-didnt-bring-peace>.

⁶⁴⁸ https://biblehub.com/topical/m/misunderstanding_of_the_disciples.htm.

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https://biblehub.com/topical/t/the_misunderstanding_of_jesus%27_mission.htm#:~:text=However%2C%20Jesus%20entered%20Jerusalem%20on,the%20nature%20of%20His%20kingship.&text=The%20religious%20leader%20also%20misunderstood,the%20spiritual%20salvation%20Jesus%20offered.&text=The%20misunderstanding%20of%20Jesus%27%20mission%20is%20a%20central%20theme%20in,deeper%20understanding%20of%20God%27s%20plan.

The disciples frequently failed to understand Jesus' predictions about His death and resurrection. In Mark 9:31-32, Jesus tells them, "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill Him, and after three days He will rise." Yet, the disciples did not comprehend this, and "they were afraid to ask Him about it." Their misunderstanding is further highlighted in John 20:9, where it is noted that "they still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead."⁶⁵⁰

Q2: What does Jesus's use of the phrase "Son of Man" mean?

A2:

Short:

"Son of Man" means both human and divine authority.

Jesus uses it to point to Daniel 7's heavenly ruler.

It reveals his identity while correcting wrong expectations about the Messiah.

Summary:

"Son of Man" has two layers in Jewish context.

First, it simply means "human being." It's used widely in the Old Testament, especially in Ezekiel. So on the surface, it sounds humble. But there is a second, much deeper meaning.

In Daniel 7, "one like a son of man" comes with the clouds. He is given eternal authority, kingdom, and worship. This is not just a human figure. He shares in God's rule and authority.

Many Jewish interpreters before Jesus saw this as the Messiah. So when Jesus uses this title about himself, he is doing something very deliberate. He combines humility and divine authority in one phrase. He can speak indirectly about his identity, while still making a strong claim.

This becomes clear in moments like Mark 14:62. There, he links himself directly to Daniel 7. That's why the high priest reacts strongly.

Jesus also uses the title in unexpected ways. He speaks of suffering, rejection, and death. This clashes with common expectations.

So the title works on two fronts: it reveals who he is, and corrects what people thought the Messiah would be.

Scholar:

Jesus uses the "Son of Man" phrase to link himself with a significant figure in a vision recorded by the Old Testament prophet Daniel.

In this episode, Jesus's disciple Peter asks, "Son of Man? What does he mean?" In the Gospels, Jesus frequently refers to himself as "*ho huios tou anthrōpou*," which is typically translated "the Son of Man." Most interpreters "think that this Greek phrase translates an

⁶⁵⁰ https://biblehub.com/topical/m/misunderstanding_of_the_disciples.htm.

Aramaic phrase like *bar nash*, which may be translated as ‘a son of man.’”⁶⁵¹ As Benjamin E. Reynolds explains:

Throughout Israel’s Scriptures, similar phrases are used to speak of human beings (e.g., Gen 11:5; Deut 32:8; Ps 8:4; Eccl 1:13). The plural phrase “sons of men/man” is one of the most common uses, and God calls Ezekiel a “son of man” over ninety times (e.g., Ezek 2:1). Yet, nowhere in the Hebrew Scriptures do we have an example of “son of man” used as a self-reference.⁶⁵²

By using “son of man” as a self-reference, Jesus used this Old Testament phrase in a unique way. While the phrase “son of man” is often used in the Old Testament, and in other Jewish writings, “to refer to a human being or a mere mortal (Num. 23:19, Job 25:6, Psalms 8:4, Sirach 17:30),”⁶⁵³ including prophets such as Ezekiel and Daniel, it is also used by these prophets to refer to a figure they see in visions of heaven. For example, the prophet Daniel reports:

I saw in the night visions,
and behold, with the clouds of heaven
there came one like a son of man,
and he came to the Ancient of Days
and was presented before him.
And to him was given dominion
and glory and a kingdom,
that all peoples, nations, and languages
should serve him
[the Hebrew term translated as ‘serve’ can also be translated as ‘worship’];
his dominion is an everlasting dominion,
which shall not pass away,
and his kingdom one
that shall not be destroyed. (Daniel 7:13-14, ESV.)

Traditional Jewish interpreters considered this passage to be messianic:

The identification of the Son of Man with the Messiah is evident in every Jewish commentary on this chapter. Even the earliest Jewish interpreters concede that the Son of Man is King Messiah . . . Rabbinic sages identified him with Messiah [Sanhedrin 98a; Numbers Rabbah 13:14], and . . . Rashi notes that the “one like a man” coming is King Messiah. . . . Rashi says this man is also Israel . . . insofar as he is the unified head of the nation; hence why he is contrasted against the Gentile kings who represent their own nations in the form of beasts.⁶⁵⁴

Moreover,

⁶⁵¹ Benjamin E. Reynolds, “The Son of Man.” https://www.bibleodyssey.org/articles/the-son-of-man/#google_vignette.

⁶⁵² Benjamin E. Reynolds, “The Son of Man.” https://www.bibleodyssey.org/articles/the-son-of-man/#google_vignette.

⁶⁵³ Tom Nash, “Biblical Meaning of ‘Son of Man’.” <https://www.catholic.com/qa/biblical-meaning-of-son-of-man>.

⁶⁵⁴ Gloria Veritatis, “How Jesus Christ Fulfills the Prophecy in Daniel 7.” <https://medium.com/@Gloria.Veritatis/how-jesus-christ-fulfills-the-prophecy-in-daniel-7-b63d30cd77c4>.

The three Jewish apocalypses known to interpret this passage all present the son of man figure as a royal or messianic figure who will judge the wicked and redeem the righteous (see Parables of Enoch 46-48, Parables of Enoch 62; 4 Ezra 13; and 2 Bar 29-30; 2 Bar 70-74). This Jewish apocalyptic interpretation suggests that Jesus used the phrase to identify himself as the “one like a son of man” from Daniel, that is, “*the Son of Man*.”⁶⁵⁵

The prophet Ezekiel also had visions of the heavenly throne, and in his visions the throne was occupied by a “figure like that of a man” (Ezekiel 1:26, 8:2). Daniel Boyarin, professor of Talmudic culture at UC Berkeley, notes that Ezekiel’s phrase is a Hebrew equivalent of the Aramaic used in Daniel 7:13. As Nick Meader, principal research associate at Newcastle University, observes:

This is significant because Ezekiel 1:28 then confirmed “This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. When I saw it, I fell facedown...” The one like a man bears the likeness of the glory of the Lord . . .⁶⁵⁶

Furthermore, when Daniel speaks of the “one like a son of man” coming “with the clouds of heaven,” the latter phrase is also one commonly used in the Hebrew Bible. According to Boyarin, this Hebrew phrase is used 70 times (for example, in Deuteronomy 33:26–27), and in every other instance, it refers to God.⁶⁵⁷ Hence, when Jesus used Daniel’s language about the “son of man” in self-reference, and especially when he told the Jewish leaders that they would “see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven” (Mark 14:62), he was portraying himself not merely as a human Messiah, but as the heavenly one to whom God the Father gives

dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve [or “worship”] him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed (Daniel 7:13-14, ESV).

This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah said:

to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this. (Isaiah 9:6-7)

As Meader argues,

Even before the time of Jesus . . . many followers of Judaism considered the Son of Man to be divine. A “second power” who sits on a throne next to the Ancient of Days.

⁶⁵⁵ Benjamin E. Reynolds, “The Son of Man.” https://www.bibleodyssey.org/articles/the-son-of-man/#google_vignette.

⁶⁵⁶ Nick Meader, “Daniel 7: Is the Son of Man Divine, Human, or Both?” <https://medium.com/interfaith-now/daniel-7-is-the-son-of-man-divine-human-or-both-27708b23d89c>.

⁶⁵⁷ Nick Meader, “Daniel 7: Is the Son of Man Divine, Human, or Both?” <https://medium.com/interfaith-now/daniel-7-is-the-son-of-man-divine-human-or-both-27708b23d89c>.

These earlier followers had good reason to conclude this from the text of Daniel 7. So it is no surprise that the high priest cried “blasphemy!” when Jesus defines himself as the Son of Man [since] he is claiming to be the Messiah, both fully human and fully divine, who will rule alongside the Ancient Days for all eternity.⁶⁵⁸

That this was Jesus’s intent is underlined by the fact that he repeatedly used the “son of man” self-designation “to illustrate he has divine prerogatives, including the authority to forgive sins (Mark 2:10), suspend the Sabbath (Mark 2:28), judge men (John 5:27), and even provide eternal life . . . (John 6:53-54).”⁶⁵⁹ As theologian Oscar Cullmann concludes, by his use of the “son of man” phrase, “Jesus spoke of his divine heavenly character . . .”⁶⁶⁰

Rylie Fine lays out how Jesus’ language built upon but stretched the messianic expectations of his contemporaries:

When Jesus referred to himself as the Son of Man, he claimed to be the Messiah and King of the world. . . . In the words of Jesus, we see echoes of the imagery from Daniel’s vision. Passages like Matthew 26:64 and Mark 16:26 describe Jesus, the Son of Man, coming gloriously on the clouds of heaven at his second coming. There will be no question when the Son of Man comes again; it will be as obvious as lightning in the sky (Matthew 24:27, Luke 17:24). When he returns, he will judge the righteous and the unrighteous. At that time, the righteous will inherit the kingdom of God (Matthew 16:27; Matthew 25:31-36).

But not all of what Jesus said about being the Son of Man fulfilled the Jew’s expectations. As mentioned above, the Jews believed the Son of Man represented the Messiah, but they did not believe the Messiah was divine. So when Jesus came claiming that he, as the Son of Man, was the Lord of the Sabbath (Matthew 12:8) and had the authority to forgive sins (Mk 2:10), it did not sit well, particularly with the religious leaders.

Another way Jesus reversed their expectations was by coming first to suffer and die. Using the Son of Man title, Jesus predicted that he would be arrested by the chief priests and scribes, beaten and crucified, and then rise from the dead (Luke 17:24-25, Matthew 17:22-23; Matthew 20:18-19). These predictions went entirely against the general expectation that the Messiah would be a glorious military leader who would defeat Rome⁶⁶¹

Hence,

Jesus used the title Son of Man to communicate an important truth about himself. At the same time, he used it to correct the misconceptions surrounding him. By calling himself the Son of Man, Jesus indicated to listeners that he was the Messiah they had been seeking. However, by using it in conjunction with statements about his humility

⁶⁵⁸ Nick Meader, “Daniel 7, Jesus, and the Son of Man.” <https://medium.com/interfaith-now/daniel-7-is-the-son-of-man-divine-human-or-both-27708b23d89c>.

<https://medium.com/interfaith-now/daniel-7-is-the-son-of-man-divine-human-or-both-27708b23d89c>.

⁶⁵⁹ Tom Nash, “Biblical Meaning of ‘Son of Man’.” <https://www.catholic.com/qa/biblical-meaning-of-son-of-man>.

⁶⁶⁰ Oscar Cullmann, quoted by Terry L. Miethe and Gary R. Habermas, *Why Believe?* College Press, 1993, 278 & 280.

⁶⁶¹ Rylie Fine, “Why Did Jesus Say He Was the Son of Man?” <https://www.christianity.com/wiki/christian-terms/why-did-jesus-call-himself-the-son-of-man.html>.

as well as his deity, he completely shattered and reshaped the preconceived notions of who he was and what he had come to do.⁶⁶²

Q3: Why did Jesus ride into Jerusalem on a donkey?

A3:

Short:

Jesus rode a donkey to deliberately fulfill Zechariah 9:9.
It signaled humility and peace, not military conquest.
He presented himself as king, but not the kind people expected.

Summary:

In the ancient world, kings didn't always ride war horses. A horse signaled war and conquest. A donkey signaled peace and legitimacy.

In Israel's own tradition, kings like Solomon rode donkeys. Zechariah 9:9 explicitly says: the king will come "humble and riding on a donkey." By doing this, Jesus publicly claims: "I am that king." But he defines kingship differently.

The donkey is not a weakness. It's a deliberate redefinition of what kind of king he is.

Scholar:

By riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, Jesus fulfills the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9, and indicates that he is a humble Messiah.

Riding on a donkey doesn't seem very kingly, but according to the Jewish prophet Zechariah, the Messiah would enter Jerusalem on a donkey (Zechariah 9:9). By entering Jerusalem on a donkey, Jesus was fulfilling this prophecy:

the crowds hailed Jesus as the "King of Israel" (John 12:13), laying palm branches before Him in a gesture of honor and expectation of deliverance. However, Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey, fulfilling Zechariah 9:9 and symbolizing a mission of peace rather than military conquest. The crowd's acclamation was sincere but based on a misunderstanding of the nature of His kingship.⁶⁶³

⁶⁶² Rylie Fine, "Why Did Jesus Say He Was the Son of Man?" <https://www.christianity.com/wiki/christian-terms/why-did-jesus-call-himself-the-son-of-man.html>.

⁶⁶³

https://biblehub.com/topical/t/the_misunderstanding_of_jesus%27_mission.htm#:~:text=However%2C%20Jesus%20entered%20Jerusalem%20on,the%20nature%20of%20His%20kingship.&text=The%20religious%20leader%20also%20misunderstood,the%20spiritual%20salvation%20Jesus%20offered.&text=The%20misunderstanding%20of%20Jesus%27%20mission%20is%20a%20central%20theme%20in,deeper%20understanding%20of%20God%27s%20plan.

Q4: Why did people wave palm branches at Jesus?

A4:

Short:

Palm branches were used to celebrate kings and victories. The crowd treated Jesus like a conquering Messiah. But they misunderstood the kind of king he actually was.

Summary:

Palm branches had strong symbolic meaning in the ancient world. They were associated with victory, celebration, and kingship. In Greek culture, victors in games received palm branches. In Jewish context, they had even deeper meaning.

During the Maccabean revolt, Judas Maccabeus was welcomed with palm branches. That event represented national liberation. A foreign power defeated. So by Jesus' time, palm branches had political weight. They symbolized hope for freedom from oppression.

When the crowd waves palms, they are making a statement. Not just celebration, but expectation. They shout "King of Israel." This is loaded language. It implies a coming overthrow of Rome. So their actions are not neutral. They are proclaiming Jesus as a national liberator.

But Jesus rides a donkey. Not a war horse. So you get a clash of expectations. The crowd celebrates a conqueror. Jesus presents himself as a peaceful king.

Scholar:

Waving palm branches was a traditional way to celebrate kings in the ancient world.

The Gospel according to John specifies that the branches used by the crowd in welcoming Jesus into Jerusalem were palm branches:

The next day the large crowd that had come to the feast heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, crying out, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!" (John 12:12-13)

As Steve Shirley observes,

history tells us that waving palm branches was done to celebrate kings and conquerors. We also know that in Greek athletic competitions, victors were often given a palm branch, which they would wave to celebrate their "victory."⁶⁶⁴

Moreover, the events of what Christians now call "Palm Sunday" contains echoes of events in the Maccabean revolt of 167–160 BC, and in particular of Jerusalem's reception of Judas Maccabeus, the Jewish priest who led that revolt:

⁶⁶⁴ Steve Shirley, "Why did the Jews wave palm branches when Jesus entered Jerusalem?" <https://jesusalive.cc/palm-branches-waved-for-jesus/#:~:text=Today%2C%20many%20Christians%20celebrate%20this,therefore%20they%20turned%20on%20Him.>

This was, and is, one of the key events in Jewish history. Fighting a war to regain Jerusalem from the Seleucid Empire, who had conquered it, and had desecrated God's Temple, the forces of Judas Maccabeus prevailed in 164 B.C. (The war to regain more Jewish territory continued for a few more years, with Judas Maccabeus being killed near the end.) In the [Jewish] book of Maccabees . . . we see Judas Maccabeus being celebrated "with praise and palm branches" by the Jews as he entered Jerusalem . . .

⁶⁶⁵

Maccabee reportedly entered Jerusalem "with thanksgiving, and branches of palm trees, and with harps, and cymbals . . . and songs, because there was destroyed a great enemy out of Israel" (1 Mac. 13:49-51). It is against this historical background that

the crowds hailed Jesus as the "King of Israel" (John 12:13), laying palm branches before Him in a gesture of honor and expectation of deliverance. However, Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey, fulfilling Zechariah 9:9 and symbolizing a mission of peace rather than military conquest. The crowd's acclamation was sincere but based on a misunderstanding of the nature of His kingship.⁶⁶⁶

Shane Rosenthal points out that

According to Josephus, the Roman forces eventually cut down all the trees in Jerusalem and the surrounding suburbs during the Jewish War . . . which perhaps explains why there aren't as many date palms in or around Jerusalem at the present day. But when Vespasian ultimately conquered the Jewish capital, he minted his famous "Judea Capta" coin commemorating his victory, and as you can see in the image below, one side of this coin features the image of—you guessed it—a *palm* tree.⁶⁶⁷

⁶⁶⁵ Steve Shirley, "Why did the Jews wave palm branches when Jesus entered Jerusalem?"

<https://jesusalive.cc/palm-branches-waved-for-jesus/#:~:text=Today%2C%20many%20Christians%20celebrate%20this,therefore%20they%20turned%20on%20Him.>

⁶⁶⁶

https://biblehub.com/topical/t/the_misunderstanding_of_jesus%27_mission.htm#:~:text=However%2C%20Jesus%20entered%20Jerusalem%20on,the%20nature%20of%20His%20kingship.&text=The%20religious%20leaders%20also%20misunderstood,the%20spiritual%20salvation%20Jesus%20offered.&text=The%20misunderstanding%20of%20Jesus%27%20mission%20is%20a%20central%20theme%20in,deeper%20understanding%20of%20God%27s%20plan.

⁶⁶⁷ Shane Rosenthal, "Did Palm Trees Grow in Jerusalem at the Time of Jesus?"

<https://www.humbleskeptic.com/p/did-palm-trees-grow-in-jerusalem.>

Fig. “Judea Capta” sestertius coin of Vespasian, struck in AD 71 to celebrate victory over the Jewish Revolt. The inscription on the reverse says: *IVDEA CAPTA*, “Judaea conquered.”⁶⁶⁸



Q5: Why is Jesus angry with the people in the Temple?

A5:

Short:

Jesus is angry because the Temple is corrupt and misused. It excludes non-Jews and exploits worshippers financially. He also challenges the whole system as no longer fulfilling its purpose.

Summary:

Jesus’ reaction in the Temple is multi-layered.

First, there is corruption. Money changers and sellers were exploiting pilgrims. People had to use a specific currency. This opened the door for unfair exchange rates.

Second, there is exclusion. This happens in the Court of the Gentiles. It was the only place non-Jews could worship. Yet it had been turned into a marketplace. So access to God was being blocked. This directly contradicts Isaiah’s vision. A house of prayer for all nations.

Third, there is political distortion. The Temple had become tied to nationalism and power. Not just worship, but identity and control.

Fourth, there is symbolic judgment. Jesus is not just cleansing, he is confronting the system itself. His actions echo prophetic tradition. Like earlier reforming kings and prophets.

Jesus is not losing control. He is making a deliberate, prophetic statement about corruption, exclusion, and coming judgment.

Scholar:

Jesus is angry at a number of things, including financial corruption and how non-Jews are being excluded from the area of the Temple meant to allow them access.

⁶⁶⁸ See Wikipedia, “Judaea Capta coinage.” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Judaea_Capta_coinage, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Sestertius_-_Vespasiano_-_Judaea_Capta-RIC_0424.jpg.

Jesus's provocative actions in Jerusalem's Temple had several different motivations. For one thing, there was his critique of how non-Jews were being excluded from the Temple:

Jesus' action took place in the Court of the Gentiles (recently developed by Herod's builders). Isaiah's vision of the Temple as a "place of prayer for *all nations*" (Isaiah 56:7) . . . was being flouted by the money-changers using the Gentiles court as a place for their dealings. It was the only place the Gentiles could worship the God of Israel, it was a scandal that it had been turned into a place of trade . . . This was a comparatively recent innovation, instigated some twenty years earlier by Caiaphas the high priest; but this abuse of the Gentile's court had to stop: Israel's God, Jesus was insisting, was to be accessible to all.⁶⁶⁹

Then again, there was the financial (and spiritual) corruption indicated by Jesus's accusation that the Temple had become "a den of robbers" (Mark 11:17, Matthew 21:13; Luke 19:46).⁶⁷⁰ As Peter Walker comments,

Worshippers were required to pay for their sacrificial animals in a unique currency (the "Tyrian shekel"). There was plenty of room for corruption here, with the charge of high exchange rates.⁶⁷¹

Moreover,

there was a political dimension. The Temple was increasingly becoming the symbolic focus for a hot-headed Jewish nationalism The place of divine worship was not to be desecrated by becoming no more than a political pawn.⁶⁷²

Finally, in temporarily suspending the functioning of the Temple, Jesus was highlighting how he saw himself as the fulfilment of the purposes of God that were symbolized by the Temple.⁶⁷³

In the Gospel of John, Jesus dramatically intervenes in the Temple *before* he begins his public ministry in Galilee (John 2:13–22, 3:24 & 4:3; cf. Mark 1:14). However, the only such event reported in the Synoptic Gospels – an event about which John remains silent – takes place at the *end* of Jesus' ministry (e.g., Mark 11:15–18). Ancient authors would sometimes select and arrange material thematically or topically rather than chronologically, so some Christians conclude that John has moved Jesus' actions in the Temple from the last week of his life to the beginning of his account, for theological reasons. However, as theologian Allan Chapple points out,

The differences between the accounts are considerable, and can be summarized as follows. The actions Jesus took

⁶⁶⁹ Peter Walker, *In the Steps of Jesus*, Second Edition. Oxford: Lion Scholar, 2009, 189-190.

⁶⁷⁰ See Craig Evans, "Why Jesus Overturned Temple Tables."

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CWIr5_MTXtc.

⁶⁷¹ Peter Walker, *In the Steps of Jesus*, Second Edition. Oxford: Lion Scholar, 2009, 190.

⁶⁷² Peter Walker, *In the Steps of Jesus*, Second Edition. Oxford: Lion Scholar, 2009, 190.

⁶⁷³ See N. T. Wright, "What is the significance of Jesus cleansing the Temple?"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U1rTG9MMWN4>.

- affected different *groups*: sellers and buyers *versus* sellers;
- by different *methods*: expelling sellers and buyers *versus* driving out animals with a whip;
- affected different *objects*: tables and chairs *versus* money and tables;
- involved different *bans*: prohibiting anyone carrying any vessel through the Temple courts *versus* instructing dove-sellers to remove their goods;
- were accompanied by different *complaints*: the house of prayer for all nations turned into a robbers' den *versus* his Father's house turned into a market; and
- were linked with different *biblical texts*: Isa 56:7 and Jer 7:11 *versus* Ps 69:9. . . . had a different *impact*: planning to destroy him (leaders), and stunned by his teaching (crowd) *versus* recalling a Scripture text (disciples), and demanding a sign (the "Jews");
- on different *groups*: the leaders and the crowd *versus* his disciples and the leaders (the "Jews").⁶⁷⁴

It therefore seems that Jesus probably intervened in the Temple, in somewhat different ways, both at the beginning and at the end of his ministry.⁶⁷⁵

There is a theological symbolism of Jesus's double intervention at the Temple that reflects the Old Testament's instructions for dealing with housing that has a fungal infection, which is metaphorically called "leprosy" (the biblical term for a broad class of human skin diseases). In Leviticus 14, God tells Moses and Aaron that when there is

a case of leprous disease in a house in the land of your possession, then he who owns the house shall come and tell the priest, "There seems to me to be some case of disease in my house." Then the priest shall command that they empty the house before the priest goes to examine the disease, lest all that is in the house be declared unclean. And afterward the priest shall go in to see the house. And he shall examine the disease. And if the disease is in the walls of the house with greenish or reddish spots, and if it appears to be deeper than the surface, then the priest shall go out of the house to the door of the house and shut up the house seven days. And the priest shall come again on the seventh day, and look. . . (Leviticus 14:34–39a, ESV).⁶⁷⁶

⁶⁷⁴ Allan Chapple, "Jesus' Intervention In The Temple: One Or Twice?" JETS 58/3 (2015) 545–69, https://etsjets.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/files_JETS-PDFs_58_58-3_JETS_58-3_545-69_Chapple.pdf, 549-550.

⁶⁷⁵ See InspiringPhilosophy, "When Did Jesus Cleanse the Temple? Supposed Contradiction #35." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-MzlpqcxTzE>.

⁶⁷⁶ As an article biblehub.com observes: "Ancient Israelite houses were built of sun-dried mudbrick, fieldstone, or hewn limestone coated with lime plaster. Archaeological digs at Jericho, Hazor, and Tell Beit Mirsim reveal thick plaster layers that readily trapped moisture, a perfect medium for fungal colonies. Spores of *Aspergillus*, *Penicillium*, and *Stachybotrys* have been recovered from plaster fragments stored in the Rockefeller Museum, Jerusalem. Modern mycologists note these molds emit mycotoxins capable of respiratory damage—an empirical confirmation of the Mosaic concern for public health millennia before germ theory." - https://biblehub.com/q/Mold_s_role_in_Leviticus_14_35.htm. A related article notes: "Excavations at Tel Beersheba, Lachish (Level III), Hazor, Shiloh, and Megiddo show walls of soft limestone blocks coated with lime or clay plaster—an ideal substrate for hygroscopic salts and microorganism colonies. (Y. Aharoni, "Arad and Lachish," 1975; Y. Yadin, "Hazor, The Rediscovery," 1975). Repairs visible in these walls frequently involve entire stones removed and replaced with fresh blocks differing in tooling or size—field-evidence for the very practice Leviticus mandates. Refuse mounds just outside city limits at Tell en-Naşbeh, Lachish, and the City of David contain mixed limestone, plaster flakes, and soil rich in nitrates—compatible with discarded, moisture-laden building debris (E. Mazar, "Excavations in the City of David," 2010)." - https://biblehub.com/q/Evidence_for_Leviticus_14_40_practices.htm. In cases where the repaired house was pronounced clean, "the priest performed the same twin-bird rite used for healed lepers (14:49-53). One bird was

If the fungal outbreak had spread, the priest would order the affected fabric stripped out and safely disposed of, and the house would then be repaired.⁶⁷⁷ However, should the “infection” re-appear again after this initial “treatment,” the law required the house to be torn down and re-built:

If the disease breaks out again in the house, after he has taken out the stones and scraped the house and plastered it, then the priest shall go and look. And if the disease has spread in the house, it is a persistent leprous disease in the house; it is unclean. And he shall break down the house, its stones and timber and all the plaster of the house, and he shall carry them out of the city to an unclean place. (Leviticus 14:43-65, ESV).

In an echo of this Levitical procedure, Jesus visited the Temple in Jerusalem early in his ministry, as reported by John:

The Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the money-changers sitting there. And making a whip of cords, he drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and oxen. And he poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. And he told those who sold the pigeons, “Take these things away; do not make my Father’s house a house of trade.” His disciples remembered that it was written, “Zeal for your house will consume me.” So the Jews said to him, “What sign do you show us for doing these things?” Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” The Jews then said, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple [Or *This temple was built forty-six years ago*], and will you raise it up in three days?” But he was speaking about the temple of his body. When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken. (John 2:13–22).

During this first “inspection” Jesus identified that the temple was infected by sin, and symbolically purged it (a kingly action in the reforming tradition of kings Hezekiah and Josiah in the Old Testament⁶⁷⁸). Then, analogous to the way in which the law required an infected house be re-inspected to see if the “leprosy” was gone, Jesus performed a second priestly inspection of the Temple in the week before his death:

And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who sold and those who bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. And he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. And he was teaching them and saying to them, “Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations’? But you have made it

slain over fresh water; the living bird, cedar wood, scarlet yarn, and hyssop were dipped in the blood-water mixture and the house was seven-times sprinkled. The live bird then flew free ‘outside the city,’ signifying atonement accomplished and impurity removed. Blood, water, wood, scarlet, and hyssop prefigure the cross (John 19:29), the water and blood from Christ’s side (John 19:34), and the scarlet thread of redemption [Joshua 2:18].” - https://biblehub.com/q/Mold_s_role_in_Leviticus_14_35.htm.

⁶⁷⁷ Although Leviticus 14:40 only mentions “stones,” this is representative, rather than exhaustive, and doesn’t exclude mud bricks, which were actually more common as a building material.

⁶⁷⁸ Brad Orr, “Cleansing the Temple - Then and Now.” <https://www.shadyoaks.org/blog/cleansing-the-temple-then-and-now>.

a den of robbers.” And the chief priests and the scribes heard it and were seeking a way to destroy him, for they feared him, because all the crowd was astonished at his teaching. (Mark 11:15 b–18, ESV).

In this second “inspection,” Jesus saw that the “infection” was persistent. Consequently, he prophesied the destruction of this unclean “house of God” (e.g., Mark 13:1–2), a prophecy that was fulfilled in AD 70 when the Romans literally tore down the Temple and threw its stones off the temple mount.

The new Temple would be Jesus’s own resurrected human body (see John 2:21, Mark 14:58 & Matthew 26:61) *and* the community of Christ’s followers, a community the apostle Paul called “the body of Christ” (e.g., 1 Corinthians 6:15, Ephesians 4:12). As Paul wrote to the first century church in Corinth: “Don’t you realize that all of you together are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God lives in you? . . . All of you together are Christ’s body, and each of you is a part of it.” (1 Corinthians 3:16 & 12:27 NLT).

Q6: What is the coin that Jesus uses when his opponents try to trick him?

A6:

Short:

It was a Roman silver coin called a denarius.

It bore the image of the emperor.

Jesus used it to expose their hypocrisy and make a deeper point.

Summary:

The coin in question is a Roman denarius. It was the standard daily wage for a worker. This coin typically carried the image of the emperor, along with an inscription affirming his authority. That detail is crucial.

Jesus asks: “Whose image is on the coin?” They answer: Caesar’s. This exposes something. They are already using Roman currency. So they are already participating in the system.

Their question is a trap. If Jesus rejects the tax, he looks rebellious. If he accepts it, he looks disloyal to Israel.

Jesus avoids the trap. He says: “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s.” Meaning: the structures of the present world order, including its economic systems, belong to a fallen human domain, not to God’s ultimate kingdom. But he adds: “Give to God what is God’s.” That shifts the discussion. Humans bear God’s image. So ultimate allegiance belongs to God.

Conclusion: The coin is not just a prop. It exposes hypocrisy and reframes authority at a deeper level.

Scholar:

Jesus’s makes his point in response to his opponents by bringing their attention to the imagery on a silver denarius.

Jesus’ opponent flattered Jesus by saying that “You treat all men equal and teach the way of God in accordance with the truth.” Their question, which was designed to get Jesus into trouble, assumed that the real Messiah would side with Jews over against Gentiles, especially

a Gentile such as the Roman Emperor. However, the Messiah is the fulfilment of the Old Testament promise to Abraham that God would bless all the nations through his seed. We know that

A number of coins were in circulation in Judea at the time of Jesus Christ. The standard unit of Roman currency was the silver denarius (Drachma in Greek units). A denarius is suppose to be equivalent to the daily wage of a labourer.⁶⁷⁹

As the theologian Albert Barnes (1798-1870) commented:

The tribute for the temple service was paid in the Jewish shekel; that for the Roman government in foreign coin. Their having that coin about them, and using it, was proof that they themselves held it lawful to pay the tribute; and their pretensions, therefore, were mere hypocrisy.⁶⁸⁰

Fig. Example of a 1st century Roman denarius coin, bearing the words “Caesar Augustus Tiberius , son of the Divine Augustus” around the image of his head (14 – 37 AD).⁶⁸¹



Recommended Resources for Episode 21

Craig A. Evans, “Why Jesus Overturned Temple Tables.” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CWIr5_MTXTe

InspiringPhilosophy, “When Did Jesus Cleanse the Temple? Supposed Contradiction #35.”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-MzlpqcxTzE>

Peter S. Williams, “Archaeological Evidence for Jesus” (FOCLOnline, 2025),

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ESOpqrxsBzU&t=6s>

YouTube playlist, “The Islamic Dilemma.” YouTube playlist.

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLQhh3qcwVEWiY5DeYrxP-uTnxrQjjWboV>

⁶⁷⁹ “The Silver Denarius.”

https://www.onepagebiblesummary.com/bat/bat_07.php#:~:text=The%20coin%20most%20in%20demand,the%20things%20that%20are%20God%27s.%22.

⁶⁸⁰ <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/barnes/matthew/22.htm>.

⁶⁸¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Emperor_Tiberius_Denarius_-_Tribute_Penny.jpg.

- . “Textual Reliability of the New Testament.” YouTube playlist.
https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLQhh3qcwVEWhx61s1CiNf9_CATxat5bn8
- . “The Reliability of the New Testament.” YouTube playlist.
www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLQhh3qcwVEWj04HUUH7t9yqIiFKKuAkjh
- . “Christianity and Archaeology.” YouTube playlist.
<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLQhh3qcwVEWjh9aRRWF1kYZIVCPc5iCcw>
- . “The Historical Jesus.” YouTube playlist.
https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLQhh3qcwVEWg0CpSQPAr5cy_InXpeQMNk
- . “Who Wrote the NT Gospels?” YouTube playlist.
<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLQhh3qcwVEWg2vHjaH7hwE3BdtZao15CS>
- N. T. Wright, “What is the significance of Jesus cleansing the Temple?”
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U1rTG9MMWN4>
- Biblehub, “Did Jesus ride one or two animals?”
https://biblehub.com/q/did_jesus_ride_one_or_two_animals.htm
- Allan Chapple, “Jesus’ Intervention In The Temple: One Or Twice?” *JETS* 58/3 (2015) 545–69,
https://etsjets.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/files_JETS-PDFs_58_58-3_JETS_58-3_545-69_Chapple.pdf
- Gary R. Habermas. “Recent Perspectives on the Reliability of the Gospels.”
<https://www.equip.org/articles/recent-perspectives-on-the-reliability-of-the-gospels/>
- . “Why I Believe the New Testament Is Historically Reliable.”
<https://www.monergism.com/threshold/sdg/Why%20I%20Believe%20the%20New%20Testament%20is%20Historically%20Reliable%281%29.pdf>
- Eric Lyons, “Chronology and the Cleansing of the Temple.” <https://apologeticspress.org/chronology-and-the-cleansing-of-the-temple-660/>
- J. P. Moreland. “The Historicity of the New Testament.” <https://www.bethinking.org/is-the-bible-reliable/the-historicity-of-the-new-testament>
- Randy Newman. “Did Jesus Fulfil Old Testament Prophecies of a Coming Messiah?”
<https://www.cslewisinstitute.org/resources/did-jesus-fulfill-old-testament-prophecies-of-a-coming-messiah/#:~:text=On%20the%20surface%2C%20some%20of,messiah%20who%20atones%20for%20sins.&text=These%20make%20up%20just%20a,do%20both—reign%20and%20suffer?>
- Benjamin E. Reynolds, “The Son of Man.” https://www.bibleodyssey.org/articles/the-son-of-man/#google_vignette
- Rich Robinson, “Can Jesus Be Messiah if He Didn’t Bring Peace?” <https://jewsforjesus.org/answers/jesus-cant-be-the-messiah-he-didnt-bring-peace>
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<https://www.bethinking.org/islam/textual-histories-of-Qur’an-and-nt>
- Got Questions, “How many times did Jesus cleanse the temple?” <https://www.gotquestions.org/temple-cleanse.html>
- Sam Shamoun, “The Qur’an and the Holy Trinity.” http://answering-islam.org.uk/Shamoun/Our’an_trinity.htm
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- Lydia McGrew. *Hidden in Plain View: Undesigned Coincidences in the Gospels and Acts*. Tampa, FL: DeWard, 2017.
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- . *Digging for Evidence*. Christian Evidence Society.
https://christianevidence.org/booklet/digging_for_evidence/

Episode 22: Wine and Bread

Q1: Why does the Jewish council member ask Jesus about the greatest command?

A1:

Short:

It was likely a sincere theological question.
Jews debated which commandment was most important.
Jesus answers by summarizing the whole Law in love.

Summary:

This question reflects a real debate in Jewish thought. The Law contained hundreds of commandments. Some were seen as more important than others. Different groups emphasized different things. Sacrifices, circumcision, purity laws, etc. So asking for the “greatest” commandment was normal.

Jesus gives a clear and structured answer. First: Love God fully. This comes from Deuteronomy 6:5. It emphasizes total loyalty. Heart, soul, and mind. Second: Love your neighbor as yourself. From Leviticus 19:18.

Then Jesus does something important. He says everything else depends on these two. So he’s not picking one rule. He’s summarizing the entire Law.

This reframes the discussion. Instead of ranking rules, he gives the foundation behind all rules.

Scholar:

Unlike the question put to Jesus about paying tax to the Roman Emperor, this appears to have been a genuine question, rather than an attempt to trick Jesus.

Matthew 22:36-39 records the following exchange with Jesus:

“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.” (ESV)

According to theologian Albert Barnes (1798-1870):

The Jews are said to have divided the law into “greater and smaller” commandments. Which was of the greatest importance they had not determined. Some held that it was the law respecting sacrifice; others, that respecting circumcision; others, that pertaining to washings and purifying, etc.⁶⁸²

Jesus says that the greatest commandment is the commandment to love God with a whole, undivided loyalty.

⁶⁸² <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/barnes/matthew/22.htm>.

With respect to Jesus's comment about the second greatest commandment, theologian Albert Barnes (1798–1870) comments:

The second is like unto it - Leviticus 19:18. That is, it resembles it in importance, dignity, purity, and usefulness. This had not been asked by the lawyer, but Jesus took occasion to acquaint him with the substance of the whole law. . . . Compare Romans 13:9. Mark [in his Gospel's account of this incident] adds, "there is none other commandment greater than these." None respecting circumcision or sacrifice is greater. They are the fountain of all.⁶⁸³

Q2: What does Jesus mean when he talks about "God's kingdom?"

A2:

Short:

God's kingdom means God's rule becoming reality.
It begins now through Jesus and his followers.
It will be fully completed in the future.

Summary:

The "kingdom of God" is not mainly a place. It's about rule and authority. It means God's will being done. Jesus presents it as both present and future.

Present: The kingdom is "near" and "among you." This is seen in his actions. Healing, casting out demons, teaching. These are signs of God's rule breaking in. It also happens internally. In changed hearts and lives. But it's not political. Not a rival empire to Rome. Jesus makes that clear. No armies, no revolt. His kingdom operates differently. Through transformation, not force.

Future: The kingdom will come fully. This includes restoration of creation. Justice, peace, and complete alignment with God.

So there's a tension. Already here, but not yet complete.

Scholar:

The kingdom of God is a phrase that describes the world flourishing in obedience to God, whether in part here and now in and through the faithful community of his followers, or in fullness due to Jesus's prophesied second-coming.

Jesus tells that man who had asked him about the greatest commandment "You are not far from God's kingdom!," but what is "the kingdom of God"? Christian philosopher Richard Shumack explains that "The idea of the Kingdom of God (or Kingdom of Heaven) is central to the Christian Gospels. It describes the ideal situation where the universe flourishes obediently under God's rule."⁶⁸⁴ The kingdom of God is described as coming "near" in the ministry of Jesus (Luke 10:9). Jesus described the kingdom of God as existing "in the midst of" the Jewish Pharisees (Luke 17:21):

⁶⁸³ <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/barnes/matthew/22.htm>.

⁶⁸⁴ Richard Shumack, *Jesus through Muslim Eyes*. SPCK Publishing, 2020. Kindle edition, 109.

Jesus was telling the Pharisees that He brought the kingdom of God to earth. Jesus' presence in their midst gave them a taste of the kingdom life, as attested by the miracles that Jesus performed. Elsewhere, Jesus mentions His miracles as definitive proof of the kingdom: "If I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Luke 11:20). . . . Jesus was inaugurating the kingdom as He changed the hearts of men, one at a time.⁶⁸⁵

For the time being, Christ's kingdom is "not of this world" (John 18:36), that is, not a political power alongside and in competition with human kingdoms. As theologian Albert Barnes (1798–1870) comments:

The charge on which Jesus was arraigned was that of laying claim to the office of a king. He here substantially admits that he did claim to be a king, but not in the sense in which the Jews understood it. They charged him with attempting to set up an earthly kingdom, and of exciting sedition against Caesar. In reply to this, Jesus says that his kingdom is not of this world - that is, it is not of the same nature as earthly kingdoms. It was not originated for the same purpose, or conducted on the same plan. He immediately adds a circumstance in which they differ. The kingdoms of the world are defended by arms; they maintain armies and engage in wars. If the kingdom of Jesus had been of this kind, he would have excited the multitudes that followed him to prepare for battle. He would have armed the hosts that attended him to Jerusalem. He would not have been alone and unarmed in the garden of Gethsemane. But though he was a king, yet his dominion was over the heart, subduing evil passions and corrupt desires, and bringing the soul to the love of peace and unity.⁶⁸⁶

One day, however, the kingdom of God will be manifest in "the new heavens and earth" (Isaiah 65:17; Isaiah 66:22 ; Romans 8:21; 2 Peter 3:13; Revelation 21:1):

For Jesus, while the kingdom of God was happening in the present, it was also yet to come in all its fullness in the future. Through Jesus, God had *inaugurated* the kingdom on earth, but he would *consummate* it one day in the future.⁶⁸⁷

Q3: What is the meaning behind Jesus's "The Last Supper" with his disciples?

A3:

Short:

Jesus reinterprets the Passover meal around himself.
Bread and wine point to his coming death.
It marks the start of a new covenant.

⁶⁸⁵ "What did Jesus mean when He said, "The kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17:21, KJV)?"

<https://www.gotquestions.org/kingdom-of-God-within-you.html>.

⁶⁸⁶ Barnes' Notes on the Bible, <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/barnes/john/18.htm>.

⁶⁸⁷ "What Is The Kingdom? | The Now And The Not Yet Of The Kingdom." <https://vineyardusa.org/what-is-the-kingdom-the-now-and-the-not-yet-of-the-kingdom/#:~:text=The%20Kingdom%20Not%20Yet&text=For%20Jesus%2C%20while%20the%20kingdom,o ne%20day%20in%20the%20future>.

Summary:

The Last Supper happens during Passover. Passover remembers Israel's rescue from Egypt. It centers on sacrifice and deliverance. Jesus takes this existing framework. And redefines it.

He uses bread and wine as symbols. Bread represents his body. Wine represents his blood. This points forward to his death.

So the meaning shifts. From past rescue (Egypt) to a new kind of rescue. He introduces a new covenant.

The old covenant involved: laws and repeated sacrifices.

The new covenant centers on: his own self-offering. This is a one-time act.

The language is symbolic. Rooted in covenant traditions. It expresses total commitment.

For the disciples, this is confusing. They expected victory, not sacrifice.

Scholar:

Jesus takes the key symbols of the Jewish Passover feast that celebrates how God rescued Israel from slavery in Egypt, and imbues them with new meaning to reflect how his sacrificial death will inaugurate the new covenant prophesied by the Jewish scriptures.

Surah 5 of the Qur'an contains a passage that most scholars believe refers to Jesus's so-called "last supper," his celebration of the traditional Jewish Passover meal with his followers shortly before his arrest and crucifixion:

When the disciples said, "O Jesus, son of Mary, is thy Lord able to send down to us a table spread with food from heaven?" he said, "Fear Allah, if you are believers." They said, "We desire that we may eat of it, and that our hearts be at rest and that we may know that thou hast spoken truth to us, and that we may be witnesses thereto." Said Jesus, son of Mary, "O Allah, our Lord, send down to us a table from heaven spread with food that it may be to us a festival, to the first of us and to the last of us, and a Sign from Thee; and provide sustenance for us, for Thou art the Best of sustainers." Allah said, "Surely, I will send it down to you, but whosoever of you disbelieves afterwards — I will surely punish them with a punishment wherewith I will not punish any other of the peoples." (Surah 5:113-116.)⁶⁸⁸

As philosopher Richard Shumack comments:

Virtually all scholars understand the Qur'an here to be describing Jesus' last supper with his disciples. Moreover, the festival (Eid) referred to in the prayer is almost certainly the Christian communion/eucharist – a ritual meal that operates as a remembrance of that original supper. If this is correct, we are left with a conundrum: How does such a festival fit within Islam? This is a conundrum because in Christianity the last supper (and the eucharist) is not simply a sign of God's provision of food, but of salvation. It refers both backward to the Jewish Passover salvation festival, and forward to Jesus' saving death. In fact, the biblical last supper describes

⁶⁸⁸ <https://www.alislam.org/Qur'an/app/5:120>.

Jesus reimagining, or reinterpreting, the original Passover meal in light of his own ministry.⁶⁸⁹

Legacy of Adam producer Roger Gihlemon explains that

The Passover meal remembered how God rescued Israel from slavery in Egypt. By using bread and wine, Jesus connects the old story to what is about to happen. The episode shows that Jesus is giving new meaning to an ancient meal, pointing to a greater rescue that is coming.

After God rescued Israel from Egypt, he established a covenantal relationship with them. As Gihlemon explains,

A covenant is a binding promise. The old covenant was built around laws and repeated sacrifices. Jesus explains that a new covenant is coming, one that will be sealed not with animal sacrifice, but through what he himself is about to do. This marks a turning point in the story.

This is the symbolic meaning behind Jesus's description of the bread and wine as his "body" and "blood":

this language is symbolic, not literal. It comes from ancient covenant traditions, where a promise was sealed with sacrifice. Jesus uses strong language to show that he is offering his life completely. The phrase does not teach violence or cannibalism, but self-giving love and commitment.

Even Jesus's own disciples find this confusing at first. As Gihlemon observes,

Following Jesus is not what they expected. The disciples hoped for victory and change, not suffering and loss. When Jesus speaks about sacrifice, their understanding of what it means to follow him begins to fall apart.

Recommended Resources for Episode 22

Richard Shumack, *Jesus through Muslim Eyes*. SPCK Publishing, 2020.

⁶⁸⁹ Richard Shumack, *Jesus through Muslim Eyes*. SPCK Publishing, 2020. Kindle edition, 106.

Episode 23: The Arrest

Q1: What does Jesus mean by saying “This is the first time I am alone . . . without Father”?

A1:

Short:

It reflects a feeling of abandonment, not an actual separation from God.

It echoes Psalm 22, which moves from anguish to trust.

The relationship between Jesus and the Father remains intact.

Summary:

This line is not a direct quote from the Gospels.

It reflects a common interpretation of Jesus’ suffering.

On the cross, Jesus quotes Psalm 22:

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

At first glance, this sounds like abandonment.

But Psalm 22 as a whole tells a larger story.

It begins in anguish.

But ends in trust and vindication.

Importantly, it says:

God has not hidden his face.

So the “forsakenness” is experiential.

Not literal separation.

Jesus feels abandoned.

But is not actually abandoned.

This fits with other statements.

Jesus says:

“I am not alone, for the Father is with me.”

The unity between Father and Son remains.

So what is happening?

Jesus is expressing real human suffering.

Including the emotional weight of bearing sin.

But without breaking divine relationship.

Scholar:

This is an artistic interpretation of what Jesus might have felt. These words, which are not a quotation from the New Testament, appear to anticipate a popular interpretation of Jesus’s experience on the cross.

This statement, heard on the lips of Jesus as he is comforted by an angel in the garden of gethsemane in episode 23, is not a quotation from the New Testament. It appears to be an anticipation of an idea some Christians infer from the report (found in the Gospels according to Mark and Matthew) that while he was on the cross, Jesus quoted the opening of Psalm 22, which reads “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” (see Mark 15:34, Matthew 27:46). As theologian Stephen D. Morrison explains,

Growing up I often heard Matthew 27:46 quoted in presenting the Gospel. The preacher would say something along these lines: “God is too holy to look at sin. When Jesus died on the cross, the Father turned His back on Him. He abandoned Jesus, and forsake Him to die . . .” But did the Father *really* forsake His Son on the cross? Absolutely not! And this is ultimately how I know that the Father *did not* forsake Jesus on the cross: Psalms 22 clearly says so! Check out verse 24: “*For he has not despised or scorned the suffering of the afflicted one; he has not hidden his face from him but has listened to his cry for help.*” Jesus was not forsaken by God! The perfect union of Father, Son, and Spirit remained unbroken! God did not forsake His Son on the cross. As Paul writes, “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself.”⁶⁹⁰

Indeed, John 16:32 reports Jesus speaking to the disciples about his approaching crucifixion and affirming that *he will not be abandoned by God*:

Behold, the hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home, and will leave me alone. Yet I am not alone, for the Father is with me.

The idea that God is literally “too holy to look on sin” contradicts the doctrine of God’s omniscience. The idea stems from a misinterpretation of Old Testament language about God being too pure to “look upon” sin (Habakkuk 1:13), language which in context means that God is too pure to *approve* of sin (the Hebrew word *raah* means both to behold and to approve of or respect⁶⁹¹).

Theologian John Gill (1697-1771) suggests that Jesus’ quotation of Psalm 22:1

is to be understood, not as if the hypostatical or personal union of the divine and human natures were dissolved, or that the one was now separated from the other: for the fulness of the Godhead still dwelt bodily in him; nor that he ceased to be the object of the Father's love; for so he was in the midst of all his sufferings, yea, his Father loved him because he laid down his life for the sheep; nor that the principle of joy and comfort was lost in him, only the act and sense of it; he was now deprived of the gracious presence of God, of the manifestations of his love to his human soul, and had a sense of divine wrath, not for his own sins, but for the sins of his people, and was for a while destitute of help and comfort. . .⁶⁹²

It should be noted that God is still claimed by the Psalmist (i.e., king David) as “My God,” even as he expresses his feelings of temporary abandonment; and it is important to recognise that the “abandonment” discussed in Psalm 22 is not an abandonment of the Psalmist by God simpliciter, but an “abandonment” *to the oppression of King Saul*. As many theologians have observed,

even in his desolation, David prays, “My God, my God,” acknowledging his faith in God and dependence on Him, despite the Lord’s perceived distance and silence. Later, David declares outright his trust in the Lord: “Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One; you are the one Israel praises. In you our ancestors put their trust; they

⁶⁹⁰ Stephen D. Morrison, ““Jesus Was Forsaken by God” – Disgrace to Grace #3.” <https://www.sdmorrison.org/jesus-forsaken-god-disgrace-grace-3/>.

⁶⁹¹ See <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/benson/habakkuk/1.htm>.

⁶⁹² <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/gill/psalms/22.htm>.

trusted and you delivered them. To you they cried out and were saved; in you they trusted and were not put to shame” (Psalm 22:3–5; see also verses 9–10). David knows that God never forsakes His people (verses 22–24).⁶⁹³

Given that David clearly knows God as “My God,” it follows that David also knows God as the one who has not forsaken him. Christian pastor Josh Cramer comments that

in Psalm 22, the Psalmist looks and feels forsaken, but the result is salvation that leads to universal – including all nations and all generations – praise of God. The Psalmist cries out in anguish but the result of the cry of anguish is the reminder that God is faithful. Anguish and praise go back-and-forth in the Psalm: forsakenness to reminder of God’s faithfulness to feelings of being undeserving to reminders of God’s creation to feeling surrounded to cry for God to be near to praise. It’s not an easy or straightforward Psalm that moves from lament to praise. Psalm 22 takes us through the experience of struggle to get to praise. But the Psalmist finally gets to a universal and complete vision of praise. The end does not resolve with the resolution of the Psalmist’s immediate situation but with an eschatological and fulfilled vision, including all nations and generations. The Psalm moves from forsakenness to total shalom [i.e., wholeness].

Verse 24 is key to that vision: “For he has not despised or scorned/the suffering of the afflicted one;/he has not hidden his face from him/but has listened to his cry for help.” Despite the sense of alienation and abandonment that the Psalmist experiences, God has not in fact abandoned him. The “afflicted one” is, in reality, “not despised or scorned” nor is God’s “face” “hidden.” Instead, God “has listened to his cry.” (Just a note: the Hebrew term for “listen” always carries the weight of action with it; one cannot “listen” and not be moved to action. “Listen” might as well be translated “listen and obey.”) So, God is near to the afflicted one who suffers. Though a person might be afflicted and experience suffering, God is near, listening and acting on behalf of the sufferer. . .

Jesus cries out in anguish, “My God my God, why have you forsaken me?” but this cry quotes from Psalm 22, where the initial feeling of forsakenness leads to eschatological salvation. Jesus cries out as a way of expressing both his sense of anguish but also his faith in God’s ultimate victory.⁶⁹⁴

As theologian Albert Barnes (1798–1870) observes in his commentary on Psalm 22:24:

As applicable to the Redeemer on the cross, this means that though the darkness seemed to continue until death, yet it was not an utter forsaking. His prayer was heard; his work was accepted; the great object for which he came into the world would be accomplished; he himself would rise triumphantly from his sufferings; and the cause which he came to establish, and for which he died, would finally prevail in the world.⁶⁹⁵

⁶⁹³ “Why does the psalmist ask, “Why have you forsaken me” (Psalm 22:1)?”

<https://www.gotquestions.org/why-have-you-forsaken-me.html>.

⁶⁹⁴ Josh Cramer, “Psalm 22 and Jesus’ Cry from the Cross.” <https://www.resurrectionboise.org/blog/psalm22>.

⁶⁹⁵ Barnes’ *Notes on the Bible*, Psalm 22:24, <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/barnes/psalms/22.htm>.

Q2: Did Jesus literally sweat blood in the Garden of Gethsemane?

A2:

Short:

Probably not literal, but a vivid description of extreme distress.

Some manuscripts question the verse's originality.

If literal, it could reflect a rare medical condition under stress.

Summary:

The key phrase is: "his sweat became like drops of blood."

That wording matters. "Like" suggests a comparison. Not necessarily literal blood.

So the simplest reading is metaphorical.

It describes intensity. Extreme anguish, physical and emotional.

However, some take it literally.

There is a rare condition called hematohidrosis, where people can sweat blood under extreme stress. So it's medically possible. But it is extremely rare.

There is also a textual issue: Some early manuscripts include the verse. Others omit it.

Scholar:

There is some discussion as to whether the verse describing Jesus' sweat being "like great drops of blood" may be one of a few scribal additions to the original manuscript of Luke. However, even if it is not original, it may well be an early and historical tradition. Either way, the verse is probably *not* saying that Jesus actually sweat literal blood, but that his sweat was metaphorically "*like* great drops of blood falling down upon the ground."

As Jesus is praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, Luke 22:44 states:

And having been in agony, He was praying more earnestly. And His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down upon the ground. (Berean Literal Bible.)

This statement appears to be a metaphorical description, but some Christians understand it literally. If one takes this verse literally, it would be describing a case of "bloody sweating" known as "hematohidrosis," which is "a very rare condition in which an individual sweats blood. It may occur in an individual who is suffering from extreme levels of stress."⁶⁹⁶

That said, theologian Robert H. Stein reports that

Whether [Luke 22:43-44] were part of the original text of Luke is debated. They are found in several significant manuscripts . . . and many of the early church fathers. Yet they are not found in the best manuscript tradition . . .⁶⁹⁷

⁶⁹⁶ Saugato Biswas et al, "A Curious Case of Sweating Blood." *Indian Journal of Dermatology*. 2013 Nov-Dec; 58(6): 478-480,

<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC3827523/#:~:text=Hematohidrosis%20is%20a%20very%20rare.%2C%20and%20unknown%20causes.>

⁶⁹⁷ Robert H. Stein, *The New American Commentary: Volume 24: Luke*. Nashville, Tennessee: B&H, 1992, 559.

Stein argues that “Because these verses do not fit particularly well the present context and are lacking in the best manuscript tradition, they should not be regarded as part of the original Gospel of Luke.”⁶⁹⁸ On the other hand, theologian Leon Morris argues that although some very good manuscripts of Luke do indeed omit these two verses,

the probability is that they should be included. In a day when scribes were sure of the deity of their Lord, some would find difficulty in the thought of his being strengthened by an angel, and they would see the striking details of the agony as pointing to a Jesus all too human. There would be every reason for omitting the words if they were original, but it is difficult indeed to imagine an early scribe inserting them in a text that lacked them.⁶⁹⁹

The NET Bible includes the following, judicious text-critical note on Luke 22:43-44:

Several important Greek mss (Ì75 1¸ A B N T W 579 1071*) along with diverse and widespread versional witnesses lack 22:43-44. In addition, the verses are placed after Matt 26:39 by Ë13. Floating texts typically suggest both spuriousness and early scribal impulses to regard the verses as *historically* authentic. These verses are included in 2,*¸ D L Θ Ψ 0171 Æ1 Ĩ lat Ju Ir Hipp Eus. However, a number of mss mark the text with an asterisk or obelisk, indicating the scribe’s assessment of the verses as inauthentic. At the same time, these verses generally fit Luke’s style. Arguments can be given on both sides about whether scribes would tend to include or omit such comments about Jesus’ humanity and an angel’s help. But even if the verses are not *literarily* authentic, they are probably *historically* authentic. This is due to the fact that this text was well known in several different locales from a very early period. Since there are no synoptic parallels to this account and since there is no obvious reason for adding these words here, it is very likely that such verses recount a part of the actual suffering of our Lord. Nevertheless, because of the serious doubts as to these verses’ authenticity, they have been put in brackets.⁷⁰⁰

Q3: Why does Jesus pray? Does he pray to himself?

A3:

Short:

Jesus prays to the Father, not to himself.
He relates to God as a human while still being divine.
His prayer shows dependence, not contradiction.

Summary:

Jesus’ prayer only makes sense within a Trinitarian framework.
He is not praying to himself, because he is not identical with the Father.
Within the one divine being, there are distinct persons who relate to one another.
Jesus, as the Son, speaks to the Father in a real interpersonal relationship.
This is not symbolic language, but reflects genuine distinction within God.

⁶⁹⁸ Robert H. Stein, *The New American Commentary: Volume 24: Luke*. Nashville, Tennessee: B&H, 1992, 559.

⁶⁹⁹ Leon Morris, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Luke*. Nottingham: IVP, 1988, 330.

⁷⁰⁰ NET Bible, Luke 22, <https://classic.net.bible.org/bible.php?book=Luk&chapter=22#n14>.

At the same time, through the incarnation, Jesus lives a fully human life. Prayer therefore expresses both his human dependence and his eternal relationship with the Father.

His struggle in prayer shows that obedience does not remove difficulty.

It reveals trust within a relationship.

Conclusion:

Jesus' prayer reveals that God is not solitary, but relational, and that true obedience flows from trust within that relationship.

Scholar:

Although Jesus is divine as well as human, he is not praying to himself, but to “God the Father.”

Jesus prays to his “heavenly father” because although he is the divine “Word” and “Son of God,” he has chosen to also be fully human through his incarnation, and thus to relate to “God the Father” through prayer in both the good and bad experiences of his life. *Legacy of Adam* producer Roger Gihlemon explains that

Jesus . . . does not pray to himself, but to the Father. The episode shows that Jesus experiences fear, pressure, and struggle like any other human being. . . . Even while carrying divine authority, Jesus chooses dependence and obedience. . . . Jesus knows what is coming. The episode shows him struggling, because the path ahead involves suffering. His prayer reveals that obedience does not remove fear. Instead, Jesus chooses to trust God even when the cost is high.

Those wanting to explore the metaphysical relationship between “God the Father,” “God the Son” and “God the Holy Spirit” within the Christian conception of God as a Trinity of divine persons in One divine personal being are directed to the recommended resources for this episode.

Q4: Why does Judas betray Jesus with a kiss?

A4:

Short:

A kiss was a normal greeting between close friends.

Judas uses it to identify Jesus to the soldiers.

It makes the betrayal more personal and deceptive.

Summary:

In 1st century Jewish culture, a kiss was common.

It signaled friendship, respect, and loyalty.

Men would greet each other this way.

So the act itself was not unusual.

What makes it striking is how it's used.

The arrest happens at night.
In a crowded, dimly lit setting.
The soldiers likely didn't know Jesus by sight.
So Judas gives them a clear signal.
"The one I kiss is the man."
He chooses a sign of intimacy.
To carry out betrayal.
A gesture of loyalty becomes a tool of deception.
It's not just functional.
It's symbolic.
Judas hides betrayal behind familiarity.

Scholar:

A kiss like this was a standard social greeting between friends in Jewish culture, and Judas uses it as a sign so that the soldiers know which man to arrest.

A kiss on the cheek, beard, or hand was a standard social greeting between family or close friends in 1st century Jewish culture (see Luke 7:45, Acts 20:37, Romans 16:16, 1 Corinthians 16:20, 2 Corinthians 13:12, 1 Thessalonians 5:26 and 1 Peter 5:14), which "communicated peace, respect, and loyalty—much like a heartfelt handshake or hug does today."⁷⁰¹ Indeed, even in contemporary Israel, "it's not uncommon for men to kiss one another on the cheek. . . the number of times one kisses varies, but the most common variant is once per cheek."⁷⁰² Judas uses this kiss as a sign so that the soldiers will know which man to arrest. *Legacy of Adam* producer Roger Gihlemoen explains:

The garden was dark and the captors did not know which one to arrest, they needed a sign. A kiss was a sign of friendship and trust. By using it, Judas hides his betrayal behind something familiar and gentle.

Q5: Why does God allow Jesus to be arrested? Why doesn't Jesus resist arrest or allow his followers to fight for him?

A5:

Short:

Jesus allows the arrest because it is part of his mission.
He rejects violence because his kingdom is not built by force.
His surrender is intentional, not weakness.

⁷⁰¹ "Meaning of 'holy kiss' in 1 Thess. 5:26?"

https://biblehub.com/q/Meaning_of_holy_kiss_in_1_Thess_5_26.htm#:~:text=Setting%20the%20Scene:%20%20Thessalonians.with%20a%20kiss%20of%20love.

⁷⁰² HebrewPod101.com, "Hebrew Body Language: The Top 32 Gestures You'll Need." (2019), <https://www.hebrewpod101.com/blog/2019/08/16/hebrew-body-gestures/#:~:text=Kisses%20on%20the%20cheek,also%20alternating%20back%20and%20forth>).

Summary:

From a narrative standpoint, nothing here is accidental.

Jesus repeatedly predicts this outcome.

The arrest is accepted.

Why no resistance?

Because his mission is not political.

If it were, he would fight.

Or allow his followers to fight.

But he explicitly rejects that path.

“My kingdom is not of this world.”

Meaning:

It doesn't operate by power, armies, or revolt.

Jesus stops violence.

Even when his followers try to defend him.

So what looks like defeat is actually alignment with his purpose.

He embraces suffering instead of avoiding it.

Not because he is powerless.

But because he chooses that path.

Scholar:

Jesus's humiliation is not a sign of failure, but an integral, though temporary, part of his humble identification with the human condition as the prophesied Messiah.

The Qur'an admits that God permits his prophets to be rejected and even killed by those to whom they are sent. Surah 2:61 talks of people “rejecting Allah's signs and unjustly killing the prophets.” According to Surah 2:87:

Indeed, We gave Moses the Book and sent after him successive messengers. And We gave Jesus, son of Mary, clear proofs and supported him with the holy spirit. Why is it that every time a messenger comes to you 'Israelites' with something you do not like, you become arrogant, rejecting some and killing others?⁷⁰³

At his trial, Jesus explains that his kingdom “is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world.” (John 18:36). As theologian Albert Barnes (1798–1870) comments:

The charge on which Jesus was arraigned was that of laying claim to the office of a king. He here substantially admits that he did claim to be a king, but not in the sense in which the Jews understood it. They charged him with attempting to set up an earthly kingdom, and of exciting sedition against Caesar. In reply to this, Jesus says that his kingdom is not of this world - that is, it is not of the same nature as earthly kingdoms. It was not originated for the same purpose, or conducted on the same plan. He immediately adds a circumstance in which they differ. The kingdoms of the world are defended by arms; they maintain armies and engage in wars. If the kingdom of Jesus had been of this kind, he would have excited the multitudes that followed him to

⁷⁰³ <https://Qur'an.com/al-baqarah/87>.

prepare for battle. He would have armed the hosts that attended him to Jerusalem. He would not have been alone and unarmed in the garden of Gethsemane. But though he was a king, yet his dominion was over the heart, subduing evil passions and corrupt desires, and bringing the soul to the love of peace and unity.⁷⁰⁴

As *Legacy of Adam* producer Roger Gihlemon explains:

Jesus stops violence instead of encouraging it. The episode shows that his mission is not achieved through force. By choosing not to fight, Jesus stays faithful to the path he spoke about earlier—one that leads through suffering, not domination. . . . In Christianity, truth is strong enough to be revealed through weakness. Jesus is not humiliated because he fails, he is humiliated because he chooses to share the human condition fully.

Recommended Resources for Episode 23

Spirit & Truth, “My God, My God, Why Have You Forsaken Me?”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hncQ9BIzT2g&list=PLQhh3qcwVEWimeGJ4DsEDI3QvpKNbIg5f&index=16>

YouTube Playlist, “The Trinity.”

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLQhh3qcwVEWhlDMYNYyenLkqdeQMMtMY0>

Andy Bannister and Keith Small, “Allah vs. Yahweh / Tawhid vs. Trinity’.”

<https://www.bethinking.org/islam/allah-vs-yahweh-tawhid-vs-trinity>

NET Bible, Luke 22, <https://classic.net.bible.org/bible.php?book=Luk&chapter=22#n14>

Saugato Biswas et al, “A Curious Case of Sweating Blood.” *Indian Journal of Dermatology*. 2013 Nov-Dec; 58(6): 478–480,

<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC3827523/#:~:text=Hematohidrosis%20is%20a%20very%20rare.%2C%20psychogenic%2C%20and%20unknown%20causes>

Francis J. Beckwith, “The Trinity: A Short Introduction.” <https://www.answering-islam.org/Trinity/beckwith.html>

Jeffrey E. Browder & Michael C. Rea, “Understanding the Trinity.”

<https://andrewmbailey.com/trinity/Understanding%20the%20Trinity.pdf>

Sally Hope, “No God did not Turn his Face from Jesus on the Cross.”

<https://alwayshopeful.org.uk/2024/03/29/no-god-did-not-turn-his-face-from-jesus-on-the-cross/#:~:text=It%20was%20a%20promise%20for,darkness%2C%20planning%20our%20resurrection%20morning>

Stephen D. Morrison, “‘Jesus Was Forsaken by God’ – Disgrace to Grace #3.”

<https://www.sdmorrison.org/jesus-forsaken-god-disgrace-grace-3/>

Theology Project, “Why God Did Not Forsake Jesus On the Cross // The Logic of Psalm 22 in Mark 15.”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NMbYmsO29vA&t=27s>

Sam Shamoun, “The Qur’an and the Holy Trinity.” http://answering-islam.org.uk/Shamoun/Our’an_trinity.htm

Peter S. Williams. “Understanding The Trinity.” <https://www.peterswilliams.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Trinity.pdf>

J.P. Moreland & William Lane Craig. *Philosophical Foundations For A Christian Worldview*. 2nd edition. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2017.

Richard Shumack. *Jesus through Muslim Eyes*. London: SPCK Publishing, 2020.

⁷⁰⁴ Barnes’ Notes on the Bible, <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/barnes/john/18.htm>.

Richard Swinburne. *Was Jesus God?* Oxford University Press, 2008.

James E. Taylor. *Introducing Apologetics: Cultivating Christian Commitment*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2006.

Keith Ward. *Religion & Creation*. Oxford University Press, 1996.

Episode 24: Accusation

Q1: Who is the High Priest who asks Jesus if he is the Son of God?

A1:

Short:

It is Joseph Caiaphas, the High Priest at the time.
He led the Jewish council that questioned Jesus.
He is confirmed by historical and archaeological evidence

Summary:

The High Priest is Joseph Caiaphas, he served roughly AD 18–36.
That places him exactly at the time of Jesus.
He appears in multiple Gospel accounts.
Especially during Jesus’ trial and he presides over the Sanhedrin. This was the highest Jewish council, his role is both religious and political.
He operates under Roman authority, so his position is sensitive.
Outside the Bible, he is mentioned by Josephus and this confirms he is a real historical figure along with archaeological finds.
In 1990, an ossuary was discovered that bears the inscription:
“Joseph son of Caiaphas.”
Dated to the 1st century. This likely refers to the same person.
Other family-related ossuaries have also been found.

Scholar:

This is Joseph Caiaphas, who was the Jewish High Priest from AD 18-36.

Caiaphas was the Jewish high priest at the time of Jesus’s death. He plays a prominent role in the Gospels, during the interrogation and trial of Jesus before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish council. The Jewish historian Josephus tells us that he was high priest from AD 18 to 36. Archaeologist David E. Graves notes that “While the Bible only speaks of him as Caiaphas (Matt 26: 3, 57; Luke 3: 2; John 11: 49; 18: 13, 14, 24, 28; Acts 4: 6), Josephus mentions his full name as “Joseph Caiaphas” (A. J. 18.35; 18.95).”⁷⁰⁵

In 1990, workers widening a road to the south of Jerusalem discovered a large, ancient burial cave. Twelve ossuaries (or bone boxes) were discovered, one of which was highly decorated and containing the bones of a 60 year old man. Many scholars believe them to be the bones of Caiaphas. On the side and back of the ossuary is the inscription: “Yosef bar Caifa,” which means “Joseph, son of Caiaphas.” As Graves reports:

From the intact tombs, coins and the style of writing, the box was reliably dated to the first century AD . . . On both ends of the box, the Aramaic inscription read: “Qafa”

⁷⁰⁵ David E. Graves, *The Archaeology of the New Testament: 75 Discoveries That Support the Reliability of the Bible*: B&W (Biblical Archaeology Book 3), 2024. Kindle edition, 191.

and “Yosef Bar Kayafa” (“Caiaphas,” “Joseph, son of Caiaphas”) and dates to AD 36–37. Several scholars argue that this is the Caiaphas of the NT and Josephus . . .⁷⁰⁶

Fig. The Caiaphas ossuary. Credit: BRBurton. For a video of his ossuary, see: Zahi Shaked. “Ossuary of the high priest Joseph Caiaphas from the time of Jesus, Israel Museum, Jerusalem.”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0bHTcFe5Gyk&list=PLQhh3qewVEWjh9aRRWF1kYZIVCPe5iCcw&index=30>



Six years before the 1990 discovery, another ossuary was acquired by the Israel Antiquities Authority, bearing the inscription, “Yehohanah, daughter of Yehohanan, son of Theophilus the high priest.” Theophilus was the brother-in-law of Caiaphas and succeeded him as high priest in AD 37.

In June 2011, another ossuary came to light relating to the family of Caiaphas. The Israel Antiquities Authority announced the recovery of a looted ossuary bearing the inscription: “Miriam, daughter of Yeshua, son of Qayapha, priest of Ma’aziah, from Beth ‘Imri.” As Theologian Craig A Evans observes: “If the name of this priest is vocalized ‘Qayapha (instead of Qopha or Qupha), then we could have a match with Caiaphas. Indeed, we may have the ossuary of the granddaughter of the high priest who condemned Jesus.”⁷⁰⁷

⁷⁰⁶ David E. Graves, *The Archaeology of the New Testament: 75 Discoveries That Support the Reliability of the Bible*: B&W (Biblical Archaeology Book 3), 2024. Kindle edition, 190.

⁷⁰⁷ Craig A Evans, *Jesus and His World: The Archaeological Evidence*. London: SPCK, 2012, 101.

Q2: Why does Jesus speak so little while he is being accused?

A2:

Short:

Jesus stays silent to fulfill prophecy.
He does not try to defend himself.
His silence shows acceptance, not weakness.

Summary:

The Gospel writers present Jesus' behavior in light of Isaiah 53, where the suffering servant is described as one who is oppressed and afflicted, yet does not open his mouth, like a lamb led to the slaughter.

By remaining silent, Jesus aligns himself with this prophetic pattern, signaling that his suffering is not accidental but anticipated within the scriptural framework.

At the same time, the narrative context makes it clear that the trial is not a genuine search for truth, but a process with a predetermined outcome.

Jesus' silence therefore reflects an awareness of the situation, rather than a failure to engage with it.

More importantly, his mission does not involve preserving his own life through argument or resistance. This gives his silence a distinct character: it is not resignation under pressure, but controlled restraint in line with a larger purpose.

In this way, silence becomes a form of communication. It signals that the events unfolding are not derailing his mission, but are in fact part of it.

Rather than attempting to overturn the process, Jesus allows it to proceed, thereby embodying the role of one who suffers unjustly yet willingly.

Scholar:

In line with messianic prophecy, Jesus doesn't try to save himself from the false accusations of the Jewish leaders.

In the messianic prophecy of Isaiah 53, we read that the suffering servant of God "was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth." (Isaiah 53:7, ESV.) As the Joseph Benson wrote in his 1857 commentary on the Old and New Testaments, Jesus "neither murmured against God for giving him up to suffer for other men's sins, nor reviled men for punishing him without cause, nor used apologies or endeavours to save his own life . . ." ⁷⁰⁸ As *Legacy of Adam* producer Roger Gihlemon explains:

Jesus does not defend himself because the outcome of the accusations has already been decided. The silence echoes an ancient prophecy that described the servant of God as being silent like a lamb led to slaughter. By remaining silent, Jesus shows that he willingly accepts what must happen and fulfills what was spoken long before.

⁷⁰⁸ Benson Commentary, <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/benson/isaiah/53.htm>.

Q3: Why are Jesus's captors so angry when he says "But from now on the Son of Man shall sit at the right hand of God."

A3:

Short:

Because Jesus is making an explicit divine claim.
He identifies himself with Daniel 7 and Psalm 110.
To them, this sounds like blasphemy.

Summary:

The reaction only makes sense in its Jewish context. Jesus is not making a vague statement. He is combining two highly loaded texts.

First, Daniel 7.

The "Son of Man" comes with the clouds.

This figure receives authority, glory, and an eternal kingdom.

Second, Psalm 110:

"Sitting at the right hand of God."

The texts implies shared authority with God.

In that context, Jesus is doing three things at once.

He identifies himself as the Messiah, he places himself in a divine role and he reverses the courtroom.

They think they are judging him.

He claims he will judge them.

Because in Jewish thought, cloud-riding and divine enthronement belong to God.

So this is not just a title claim, it is a claim to divine status and authority. That is why the reaction is immediate and the high priest tears his clothes. This is the traditional response to blasphemy.

Conclusion:

Jesus is not misunderstood here.

He is understood very clearly, and that is exactly the problem.

Scholar:

Jesus's captors were angered because they recognized Jesus's self-description as using language from the Jewish scriptures that spoke of his divine character.

Jesus' preferred self-designation in the gospels is "Son of Man" (the title features in multiple early sources), "and this title is central for spelling out Jesus' relation to the coming kingdom."⁷⁰⁹ As Michael Licona explains:

Many sceptical scholars believe that Jesus referred to Himself as the Son of Man, because it is unlikely to have been an invention of the early Church. For example, in the Gospels, "Son of Man" is Jesus' favourite self-designation. Yet in the epistles, it is never used of Jesus. In fact, the term appears in the New Testament only 4 times outside of the Gospels and never in extra-biblical Christian writings during the first

⁷⁰⁹ William Lane Craig, "Jesus the Son of God."
<http://www.reasonablefaith.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=6247>, 26.

120 years following Jesus. The point is: How likely is it that the Church originated the title Son of Man as Jesus' favourite self-description, when the Church itself did not refer to him in this manner?⁷¹⁰

Theologian Oscar Cullmann concludes that “by means of this very term Jesus spoke of his divine heavenly character . . .”⁷¹¹

Robert H. Stein, a renowned scholar of the Synoptic Gospels who is senior professor emeritus of New Testament interpretation at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, affirms the authenticity of Jesus' self-designation as *the* (not merely “a”) “Son of Man,” and notes that: “The only clear instance of this title in contemporary Judaism in the sense in which Jesus used it is found in [Daniel] 7:13.”⁷¹² The prophet Daniel wrote:

In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed. (Daniel 7: 13-14)

Here, God the Father (“the Ancient of Days”) receives “one like a son of man” who “was given authority, glory and sovereign power,” who is described as the appropriate recipient of worship, who has an “everlasting dominion” and a “kingdom” (i.e., *the kingdom of God*) that “will never be destroyed.” In the light of this prophetic background, consider the report of Jesus's trial included within Mark's Gospel:

They took Jesus to the high priest, and all the chief priests, the elders and the teachers of the law came together. Peter followed him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest. There he sat with the guards and warmed himself at the fire. The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death, but they did not find any. Many testified falsely against him, but their statements did not agree. Then some stood up and gave this false testimony against him: ‘We heard him say, “I will destroy this temple made with human hands and in three days will build another, not made with hands.”’ Yet even then their testimony did not agree. Then the high priest stood up before them and asked Jesus, “Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?” But Jesus remained silent and gave no answer. (Mark 14:53-61)

As philosopher and theologian William Lane Craig explains:

In Jewish thinking God is the one who built the temple . . . and who threatens the destruction of the temple . . . The charges brought against Jesus, that he threatened the destruction of the temple and promised to rebuild it, show that he was being charged with arrogating to himself divine roles.⁷¹³

⁷¹⁰ Michael Licona, “Jesus – the Son of Man?” <https://www.bethinking.org/jesus/jesus-the-son-of-man>.

⁷¹¹ Quoted by Terry L. Miethe and Gary R. Habermas, *Why Believe?* College Press, 1993, 278 & 280.

⁷¹² Robert H. Stein, “Criteria for the Gospel's Authenticity.” In *Contending With Christianity's Critics: Answering New Atheists & Other Objectors*, edited by Paul Copan and William Lane Craig. Nashville, Tennessee: B&H Academic, 2009, 95.

⁷¹³ William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, third edition. Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2008, 307.

However, with the witnesses' testimony failing to cohere, the trial seems to be going well for Jesus. So the high priest gambles upon a more direct approach:

Again the high priest asked him, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?" "I am," said Jesus. "And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven." (Mark 14:61-62.)

Jesus' response to the high priest is made in terms of theologically charged symbolic images:

- Jesus identifies himself as the Son of Man from Daniel 7.
- Furthermore: "it was one thing to enter God's presence and yet another to sit in it. But to sit *at God's right side* was another matter altogether. In the religious and cultural milieu of Jesus' day, to claim to sit at God's right hand was tantamount to claiming equality with God [see Psalm 110:1] . . ." ⁷¹⁴
- "In other Old Testament writings, the image of riding on clouds was used exclusively of divinity [Exodus 14:20; 34:5; Numbers 10:34; Psalm 104:3; Isaiah 19:1]. Daniel employed this image, and Jesus embraced it as his own." ⁷¹⁵
- Jesus "claimed to exercise the authority of God, implying that he would sit in judgment over the Jewish council – not the other way around." ⁷¹⁶

As New Testament scholar Craig L. Evans explains:

Jesus had claimed that the day will come when Caiaphas and company will see Jesus, the "Son of Man," seated at God's right hand, on God's chariot throne, thundering through heaven and coming in judgement. That a man would dare claim such a thing was indeed blasphemous. ⁷¹⁷

Jesus' self-designation here coheres with "Documents like 4 *Ezra* and Parts of 1 *Enoch*, probably written in the same century in which Jesus lived, [which] clearly make the Son of Man a messianic figure." ⁷¹⁸ In short, Jesus *deliberately incriminated himself in the council's eyes*:

The high priest tore his clothes. 'Why do we need any more witnesses?' he asked. 'You have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?' They all condemned him as worthy of death. (Mark 14:63-64)

As Overman explains, "In Jewish tradition the high priest was to tear his garments if he ever heard blasphemy." ⁷¹⁹ In other words, with his reply to the high priest:

⁷¹⁴ Rob Bowman and J. Ed Komoszewski, *Putting Jesus In His Place: The Case for the Deity of Christ*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel, 2007, 244.

⁷¹⁵ Komoszewski, J. Ed et al. *Reinventing Jesus: How Contemporary Skeptics Miss The Real Jesus And Mislead Popular Culture*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel, 2006, 179.

⁷¹⁶ Komoszewski, J. Ed et al. *Reinventing Jesus: How Contemporary Skeptics Miss The Real Jesus And Mislead Popular Culture*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel, 2006, 179.

⁷¹⁷ Craig A. Evans, "The Jesus of History and the Christ of Faith: Toward Jewish-Christian Dialogue." In *Who Was Jesus? A Jewish-Christian Dialogue*. Paul Copan and Craig A. Evans, ed's. WJK, 2001, 66.

⁷¹⁸ Michael Bird in *How Did Christianity Begin? A believer and non-believer examine the evidence*. London: SPCK, 2008, 27.

⁷¹⁹ Dean L. Overman, *A Case for the Divinity of Jesus: Examining the Earliest Evidence*. Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009, 59.

Jesus affirms that he is the Messiah, the Son of God, and the coming Son of Man. He compounds his crime by adding that he is to be seated at God's right hand, a claim that is truly blasphemous in Jewish ears. The trial scene beautifully illustrates how in Jesus' self-understanding all the diverse claims blend together, thereby taking on connotations that outstrip any single term taken out of context.⁷²⁰

People sometimes wonder what the source could have been for this conversation between Jesus and the high priest, but several relevant sources were available to the gospel writers. Since the trial was "probably carried out at Herod's palace,"⁷²¹ Luke's mention that one of the women who supported Jesus financially was Joanna, *the wife of Herod's steward* (see Luke 8:3 & 24:10), has an obvious relevance. Moreover, "The texts say that the 'whole' council was gathered. This would have included Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus. They could easily have given eyewitness testimony to what happened."⁷²² Then again, "Some court records were public, and therefore available to those willing to do some research (such as Luke: See Luke 1:1-4)."⁷²³ Finally, it should be remembered that John the apostle was known personally to the High Priest (see John 18:15).

Q4: Was Pilate a real historical figure?

A4:

Short:

Yes, Pontius Pilate was a real historical figure.
He is confirmed by multiple ancient writers and archaeology.
He served as Roman governor during Jesus' time.

Summary:

Pontius Pilate is one of the better-attested figures in the New Testament when it comes to external historical confirmation, since he appears not only in the Gospels but also in multiple independent sources from the first and second centuries.

He served as Roman prefect of Judea from approximately AD 26 to 36, placing him precisely within the timeframe of Jesus' public ministry and execution.

Jewish sources such as Josephus describe Pilate as the governor appointed by Emperor Tiberius, and explicitly mention his role in condemning Jesus to crucifixion, while the Roman historian Tacitus independently confirms that "Christus" was executed under Pontius Pilate during Tiberius' reign.

In addition to these literary references, there is also archaeological evidence that directly names him, which is relatively rare for figures mentioned in the New Testament.

The most important find is the so-called Pilate Stone, discovered in Caesarea in 1961, which contains a partially preserved Latin inscription referring to "[Pont]ius Pilatus" and identifying him as prefect of Judea.

⁷²⁰ William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, third edition. Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2008, 317.

⁷²¹ *Archaeological Study Bible: An Illustrated Walk Through Biblical History and Culture*. Grand Rapids: MI: Zondervan, 2005, 1714.

⁷²² Josh McDowell and Don Wilson, *He Walked Among Us: Evidence for the Historical Jesus*. Carlisle: Alpha, 2000, 334.

⁷²³ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*. Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1991, 587.

This inscription is especially significant because it is contemporary with Pilate's lifetime and aligns closely with what we know from written sources about his title and position.

The fact that Caesarea was the administrative capital of Judea further strengthens the identification, since it would have been the natural location for a Roman governor's official inscriptions.

Additional references from writers such as Philo of Alexandria also describe Pilate's governance, often portraying him as a harsh and inflexible ruler, which fits the general picture emerging from both Jewish and Roman accounts.

Taken together, these sources provide a consistent and mutually reinforcing picture of Pilate as a historical Roman official with real political authority in Judea..

Scholar:

Pontius Pilate was a real historical figure who is known to us from multiple literary and archaeological sources.

Pontius Pilate was the Roman Prefect of Judea from 26-36 AD. As archaeologist Bryan Windle reports:

Numerous ancient texts provide information about him, including the New Testament gospels, [Jewish philosopher] Philo's *On the Embassy to Gaius*, [Jewish historian] Josephus' *Antiquities of the Jews* and *The Jewish Wars*, as well as *The Annals*, by [Roman historian] Tacitus. . . . Josephus, says that Pilate was "sent by Tiberius as prefect to Judaea" and that he condemned Jesus "to the cross." The Roman historian, Tacitus, records how "Christus . . . suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of . . . Pontius Pilatus."⁷²⁴

A partially damaged limestone block bearing an inscription that mentions the Pontius Pilate was discovered in June 1961 by Italian archaeologist Maria Teresa Fortuna Canivet.

This inscribed stone block was found during excavations of the coastal city of Caesarea, which was the capital of Judaea Province during the time Pilate was Roman governor. The artefact is a fragment of a dedicatory inscription, possibly from a temple or other building constructed in the 1st century AD and dedicated to the Roman Emperor Tiberius. The stone had then been reused in the 4th century as a building block for a set of stairs in a structure erected behind the stage house of the Herodian era theatre. The extant and legible inscription on this block reads as follows:

S TIBERIEUM
IUS PILATUS
ECTUS IUDA

In translation from Latin to English, with conjectured elements in brackets, the inscription reads:

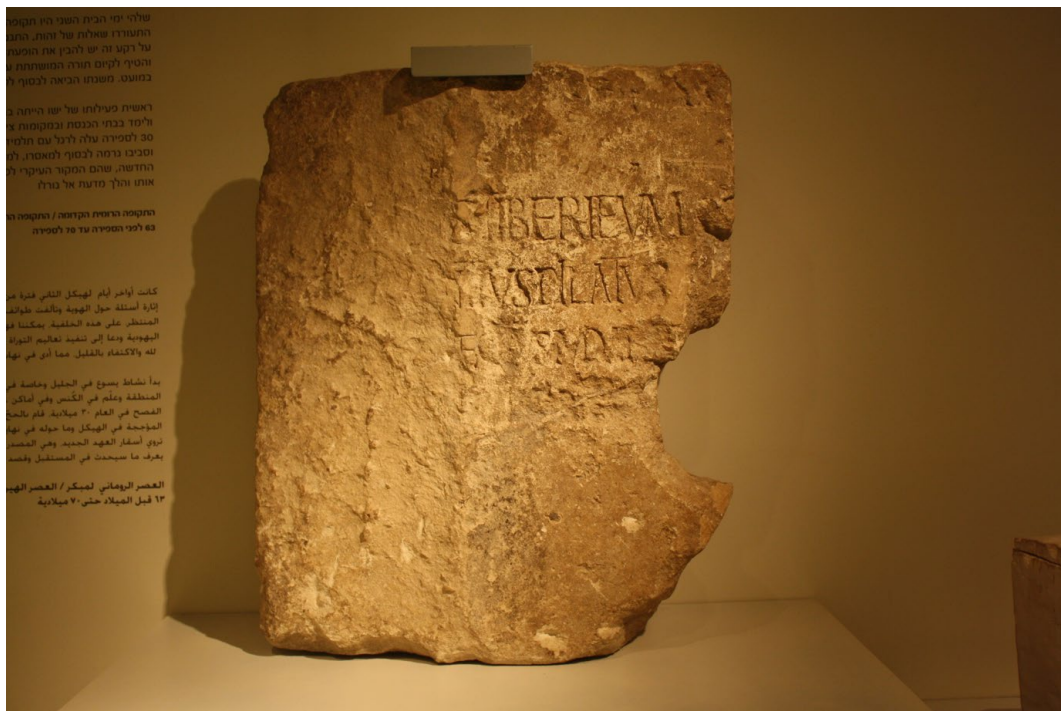
. . . [this] Tiberieum
. . . [Pont]ius Pilate

⁷²⁴ Bryan Windle. "Pontius Pilate: An Archaeological Biography."
<https://biblearchaeologyreport.com/2019/10/11/pontius-pilate-an-archaeological-biography/>.

. . . prefect of Judea
. . . has dedicated [this]⁷²⁵

The artefact is significant because it is an archaeological find of an authentic 1st-century Roman inscription mentioning the name “[Pon]tius Pilatus.” This inscription is contemporary to Pilate’s lifetime, and fits with what is known of his career as reported in literary sources. As archaeologist David E. Graves comments, “The mention of Pilate with Tiberius (42 BC–37 AD) puts Pontius Pilate in the same time period as Jesus . . .”⁷²⁶

Fig. The Pontius Pilate Stone.⁷²⁷ For video of this inscription, see: Gospel and Spade, “The Pontius Pilate Inscription: Evidence for the Roman Governor of Judea.” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xYpF2zD9oAs>



Writing in *Biblical Archaeological Review*, Nathan Steinmeyer comments:

the historical evidence for a Roman prefect by the name of Pontius Pilate is substantial. Beyond New Testament references (and the above mentioned Pilate Stone), Pilate is known through the work of the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria (*Embassy to Gaius* 304–305), the writings of the Jewish historian Josephus (*Jewish Wars* 2.169–177), as well as many second-century texts.⁷²⁸

⁷²⁵ “Pilate stone.” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pilate_stone.

⁷²⁶ Graves, David E. *The Archaeology of the New Testament: 75 Discoveries That Support the Reliability of the Bible*: B&W (Biblical Archaeology Book 3), 2024. Kindle edition, 177.

⁷²⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Pontius_Pilate_Inscription.JPG.

⁷²⁸ Nathan Steinmeyer, “Pontius Pilate’s Ring Reexamined.” (BAR, April 24, 2023)

<https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/ancient-cultures/ancient-israel/pontius-pilates-ring-reexamined/>.

Q5: Why does the crowd choose Barabbas instead of Jesus?

A5:

Short:

The crowd is influenced by the chief priests.
Barabbas represents a familiar, political solution.
Jesus represents something they do not understand.

Summary:

The decision to release Barabbas instead of Jesus is not best explained as a spontaneous, grassroots preference for violence, but rather as the result of influence and expectation operating together within a volatile setting.

The Gospel accounts explicitly note that the chief priests and leaders stirred up the crowd to ask for Barabbas, which suggests that the choice was at least partially shaped, if not orchestrated, by those with authority and persuasive power.

At the same time, Barabbas himself represents a type of figure that would have made immediate sense to many people living under Roman occupation, since he was associated with rebellion and had taken part in violent resistance against Rome.

Scholar:

The crowds choose Barabbas to be released because they are persuaded to do so by the chief priests.

Barabbas (i.e., “son of Abba”) was an insurrectionist who had killed someone during a riot in Jerusalem. The bandits/insurrectionists crucified alongside Jesus had probably been involved in the same riot.⁷²⁹ Theologian Eckhard J. Schnabel observes that “The Gospel writer do not say that the crowd asked for Barabbas because they were champions of his cause. Rather, they wanted Barabbas released because they were incited by the chief priests to do so (Matt 27:20, Mark 15:11).”⁷³⁰ *Legacy of Adam* producer Roger Gihlemon explains:

Barabbas is a violent rebel who tries to free Israel from Roman rule. He represents a solution people can understand and support. Jesus speaks about a different kind of kingdom—one that is spiritual, not political. The episode shows that people often choose what feels practical and familiar, even if it is violent, rather than a truth that challenges their expectations.

⁷²⁹ See Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Jesus In Jerusalem: The Last Days*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018, 98.

⁷³⁰ See Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Jesus In Jerusalem: The Last Days*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018, 99.

Q6: Why does Pilate say Jesus is innocent, yet allow his execution and wash his hands of the matter?

A6:

Short:

Pilate knows Jesus is innocent but prioritizes political stability.
He gives in to pressure from the crowd and leaders.
Washing his hands is symbolic, but does not remove responsibility.

Summary:

As a Roman prefect, Pilate's primary responsibility was not abstract justice, but maintaining order in a volatile province, and the situation described in the Gospels shows a rapidly escalating crowd that could easily turn into unrest or even rebellion. In this context, the pressure exerted by the chief priests and the crowd becomes decisive, since any disturbance during a major festival like Passover would have posed a serious threat to his position and could have led to consequences from Rome. Although Pilate attempts to navigate the situation by offering alternatives, such as releasing Jesus under customary practices, these efforts fail to resolve the tension, leaving him with a choice between enforcing his judgment or preserving public order. He ultimately chooses the latter, allowing the execution to proceed despite his stated conclusion that Jesus has committed no crime. The act of washing his hands draws on a known Jewish symbolic gesture used to declare innocence, and in performing it publicly, Pilate attempts to shift responsibility onto the crowd and their leaders.

Scholar:

Pilate sees Jesus as innocent before Roman law, but he also sees it is expedient for him to allow the Jews to have their way with Jesus. Pilate tries to deny his responsibility for what happens next.

Matthew 27:24 reports that

When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. "I am innocent of this man's blood," he said. "It is your responsibility!" (NIV.)

Theologian Albert Barnes (1798–1870) comments:

The Jews were accustomed to wash their hands when they wished to show that they were innocent of a crime committed by others. See Deuteronomy 21:6; Psalm 26:6. Pilate, in doing this, meant to denote that they were guilty of his death, but that he was innocent. But the mere washing of his hands did not free him from guilt. He was "bound" as a magistrate to free an innocent man; and whatever might be the clamour of the Jews, "he" was guilty at the bar of God for suffering the holy Saviour to be led to execution, in order to gratify the malice of enraged priests and the clamors of a tumultuous populace.⁷³¹

⁷³¹ Barnes Notes' on the Bible, Matthew 7, <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/barnes/matthew/27.htm>

As *Legacy of Adam* producer Roger Gihlemon explains: “Pilate sees that Jesus has committed no crime. However, he fears unrest and pressure from the crowd and religious leaders.” Having given in to the mob, “Pilate tries to remove himself from responsibility. The episode shows that symbolic gestures cannot erase real choices. Even when Pilate claims innocence, he still allows injustice to happen.”

Q7: Why does Jesus say that Pilate’s power comes “from above”?

A7:

Short:

Jesus means Pilate’s authority is not ultimate.
It exists because God allows it.
Pilate acts freely, but within a larger framework.

Summary:

Jesus tells Pilate that his authority is not ultimate. Any power Pilate has exists only because God allows it for a greater purpose.
This does not remove Pilate’s responsibility, since he still makes a genuine choice, but it does place that choice within a broader framework in which human authority is derivative rather than absolute, all power is given from God.

Scholar:

Pilate only has the freedom and power to act as he does because God permits him that freedom and power.

As *Legacy of Adam* producer Roger Gihlemon explains:

Jesus tells Pilate that his authority is not ultimate. Any power Pilate has exists only because God allows it for a greater purpose. The episode shows that Pilate is not truly in control—he is part of a larger plan unfolding beyond his understanding. Without God’s permission, Pilate would have no power at all.

Q8: Why doesn’t God protect Jesus from the humiliation of being beaten and mocked?

A8:

Short:

Jesus’ humiliation is not prevented because it is part of his mission.
Even within Islamic sources, prophets are not fully shielded from suffering.
In Christianity, his suffering reveals, rather than diminishes, his authority.

Summary:

The idea that God must protect His messengers from all forms of humiliation in the Qur'an, is not as consistent as it is sometimes presented, even within Islamic sources, where prophets are in fact shown experiencing both moral struggle and public hardship.

The Qur'an itself records figures such as Adam, Moses, and Abraham acknowledging fault or seeking forgiveness, while Muhammad is repeatedly instructed to ask for forgiveness, which suggests that prophetic status does not exclude human limitation or vulnerability.

In addition, Islamic tradition preserves accounts of prophets, including Muhammad, being mocked, rejected, physically harmed, and publicly humiliated, most notably in events such as Ta'if and various battles, which indicates that suffering is not incompatible with being chosen by God.

Even in some classical tafsir traditions concerning Jesus, there are descriptions of him being opposed, seized, or mistreated prior to later events, which further complicates the idea of total protection from humiliation.

Taken together, this broader pattern suggests that divine approval is not demonstrated by the absence of suffering, but can coexist with rejection, injustice, and apparent defeat.

Within the Christian framework, this pattern reaches its fullest expression in Jesus, who does not merely endure suffering as an unavoidable consequence of his mission, but actively embraces it as central to that mission.

This is where the logic shifts, since the humiliation of Jesus is not something that needs to be explained away, but something that is presented as meaningful in itself.

The concept of incarnation implies that God does not remain distant from human suffering, but enters into it, which reframes humiliation from being a contradiction of divine authority into being a vehicle through which that authority is revealed.

Rather than asserting power through force, avoidance, or visible protection, Jesus' path emphasizes endurance, obedience, and self-giving, which stands in contrast to more conventional expectations of how divine authority should manifest.

The resurrection, in turn, functions as the vindication of this path, indicating that the suffering is neither final nor decisive, but part of a larger movement toward restoration.

Scholar:

A common claim is that God would not allow a true prophet to experience humiliation. However, the Qur'an and Hadith themselves present a more complex picture.

Several prophets are shown acknowledging fault or seeking forgiveness: Adam admits wrongdoing (7:23), Moses confesses his sin after killing a man (28:15–16), and Abraham asks for forgiveness (26:82). Even Muhammad is instructed multiple times to seek forgiveness (e.g., 47:19; 48:2). This suggests that prophetic dignity in Islam does not mean a complete absence of human weakness or public hardship.

Likewise, prophets are not consistently shielded from physical humiliation. Islamic tradition records that Muhammad was mocked, stoned, and driven out of Ta'if, and seriously injured in battle. If suffering and humiliation were incompatible with prophethood, these events would be difficult to explain.

Even in discussions about Jesus, some classical tafsir traditions (Ibn Kathir) still describe him being seized, mocked, or mistreated prior to that event. This indicates that the idea of total protection from humiliation is not uniformly applied, even within Islamic sources.

Taken together, the argument that God must prevent all forms of humiliation for His prophets is not consistently supported by the Qur'an or Hadith. Rather, the pattern seems to

be that prophets may endure suffering, opposition, and even apparent disgrace, without this diminishing their status before God.

This is precisely where Jesus stands apart. He is not merely a prophet preserved from suffering, but one who willingly enters into it. As fully God and fully man, he experiences the full weight of human pain, rejection, and injustice. As theologians like Athanasius and later John Stott have emphasized, the incarnation means that God does not remain distant from human suffering, but takes it upon Himself. The humiliation of Jesus is therefore not a contradiction of his authority, but the very means through which it is revealed.

As the suffering servant of prophecy, Jesus allows himself to be humiliated; but he is ultimately vindicated by his resurrection.

Muslims believe that prophets are protected from *ultimate* humiliation, not that they never suffer humiliation. As Ahmed Hammuda acknowledges,

Insulting God and His Prophets is not an invention of the contemporary world. For eons [people] have levelled abuse at the Divine and His notable representatives on Earth, not least of all at the Prophets of God.⁷³²

Although Jesus willingly suffered humiliation, he was ultimately vindicated by his resurrection from the dead. *Legacy of Adam* producer Roger Gihlemon comments:

In this episode, Jesus is humiliated and mistreated. Christianity presents this not as God abandoning Jesus, but as Jesus willingly stepping into injustice. His authority is not protected by power, but revealed through endurance and obedience.

As Christian apologist David Wood observes, “The gospel does not point to a prophet who advanced his cause through force, privilege, or coercion, but to a Savior who conquered through humility, suffering, and self-sacrifice.”⁷³³

Recommended Resources for Episode 24

Zahi Shaked. “Ossuary of the high priest Joseph Caiaphas from the time of Jesus, Israel Museum, Jerusalem.” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0bHTcFe5Gyk&list=PLQhh3qcwVEWjh9aRRWF1kYZIVCPe5iCcw&index=30>

YouTube Playlist, “Pontius Pilate.” <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLQhh3qcwVEWj06pSR-O1zeRUDyvT25B3b>

“What trials did Jesus face before His crucifixion?” <https://www.gotquestions.org/trials-of-Jesus.html>

“Who killed Jesus?” <https://zondervanacademic.com/blog/who-killed-jesus-the-historical-context-of-jesus-crucifixion>

J. P. Holding, “On the Trial of Jesus.” <https://tektonics.org/gk/jesustrial.php>

Austen, Michael W. *Humility: Rediscovering the Way of Love and Life in Christ*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2024.

⁷³² Ahmed Hammuda, “How Allah Dealt With Those Who Insulted His Prophet.”

<https://www.islam21c.com/theology/how-allah-dealt-with-those-who-insulted-his-prophet/>.

⁷³³ David Wood, *Why Christians Should Understand Islam: A Critical Examination of Beliefs, History, and Truth Claims*. Kindle, 2025, 43.

Episode 25: The Cross

Q1: Doesn't the Qur'an say that Jesus did not die by being crucified?

A:

Short:

Surah 4:157 is often read as denying the crucifixion, but that reading is debated.

Some scholars argue the Qur'an allows for Jesus' death.

Historically, the crucifixion is very well established.

Summary:

Surah 4:157 states that Jesus was not killed or crucified, "but it was made to appear so," and many interpret this as a denial of the crucifixion, yet this is not the only plausible reading of the text.

Mahmoud Ayoub argues that the Qur'an does not deny Jesus' death, pointing to verses such as 3:55, 5:117, and 19:33, where the verb *tawaffa* is used, which in normal usage means "to cause to die." On this view, the phrase "made to appear so" need not imply deception or substitution, but can instead refer to the mistaken belief that Jesus' enemies had defeated him by their own power. This aligns with the broader Qur'anic theme of divine sovereignty, where human actions unfold under God's permission rather than independent control.

Gabriel Said Reynolds similarly argues that the Qur'an itself may affirm Jesus' death, while later tafsīr traditions develop the clearer denial of crucifixion.

Sulaiman Mourad likewise suggests that the concern of the text is theological, namely to deny that Jesus' death represents a defeat of God, rather than to deny the event itself.

By contrast, substitution theories are not explicitly found in the Qur'an and emerge more clearly in later sources such as the Gospel of Barnabas or earlier Gnostic traditions. These sources are widely regarded as late and historically unreliable, often reflecting theological agendas rather than eyewitness testimony.

From a historical standpoint, the crucifixion of Jesus is one of the most widely accepted facts about his life, supported by both Christian and non-Christian sources such as Tacitus and Josephus.

Scholar:

A plausible reading of Surah 4:157 is consistent with the historical evidence that shows Jesus was in fact crucified.

Surah 4 of the Qur'an says that the Jews were condemned

for breaking their covenant, rejecting Allah's signs, killing the prophets unjustly, and for saying, "Our hearts are unreceptive!" . . . and for boasting, "We killed the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, the messenger of Allah." But they neither killed nor crucified him—though it was made to appear like that to them. And those who differ therein are in doubt. They have no knowledge whatsoever—only conjecture. They certainly did not kill him. (Surah 4:155 & 157.⁷³⁴)

⁷³⁴ See <https://Qur'an.com/an-nisa> & <https://myislam.org/surah-an-nisa/ayat-157/>.

Many modern-day Muslims interpret these verses to be saying that the Jews did not crucify Jesus. However, this is not necessarily the correct interpretation of what these verses are saying. In his paper “Towards an Islamic christology, II: The death of Jesus, reality or delusion (A study of the death of Jesus in tafsīr literature),” in *The Muslim World* 70 (1980), 91-121, Mahmoud Ayoub surveyed Muslim commentary on Q 4:157:

Ayoub argued that the Qur’an does not deny the death of the Messiah. He supported this by stating that the Qur’an asserts Jesus’ death at Q 3:55, 5:117, and 19:33. In particular, Ayoub claimed the Arabic verb *tawaffa* means “to cause to die” in general usage. Therefore, the difficult wording of Q 4:157 does not mean to deny the death of Jesus, but is rather an accusation against human pride and ignorance.⁷³⁵

“Though it was made to appear like that to them”. The Jews who wanted Jesus dead meant that their solemn actions were what caused the crucifixion of Jesus, yet it was not. They were allowed by God, to fulfill a prophecy and deliver Jesus to the Roman authorities for crucifixion, but by no means were they capable of doing this by their own force, if God had not allowed it. Thus, the sentence; “though it was made to appear like that to them”, speak about their self-bolstering, not the actual crucifixion.

In 2009, Gabriel Said Reynolds published a paper entitled “The Muslim Jesus: Dead or alive?” in the *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 72 (2009), 237-58. As Gordon Nickel explains,

Gabriel Said Reynolds answered his title question by asserting that the Qur’an says Jesus died. Tafsīr—but not the Qur’an—denies that Jesus died. The key to the confusion, explained Reynolds, is the rhetoric of the larger passage surrounding Q 4:157, which contains the two themes of Jewish infidelity and perfidy, and divine control over life and death.⁷³⁶

Likewise, according to Sulaiman A. Mourad,

the Qur’an means to say Jesus was crucified and God raised him from the dead. The concern of the Qur’an was to be clear that Jesus’ crucifixion does not represent a defeat of God. Rather, God showed himself the ultimate victor by resurrecting Jesus from the dead.⁷³⁷

Understanding Surah 4:157 to be affirming simply that Jesus’s death by crucifixion was not a case of humans defeating God’s plan is a charitable reading of the Qur’an because to read Surah 4:157 as affirming that Jesus was not killed by being crucified is to place the Qur’an in contradiction to the mass of historical evidence showing that crucifixion is exactly how Jesus did in fact die.

⁷³⁵ Gordon Nickel, *The Gentle Answer to the Muslim Accusation of Biblical Falsification*. Bruton Gate, 2016. Kindle edition, 228.

⁷³⁶ Gordon Nickel, *The Gentle Answer to the Muslim Accusation of Biblical Falsification*. Bruton Gate, 2016. Kindle edition, 226.

⁷³⁷ Suleiman A. Mourad, “Does the Qur’ān deny or assert Jesus’s crucifixion and death?” in *New perspectives on the Qur’ān: The Qur’ān in its historical context 2*, ed. Gabriel Said Reynolds. London: Routledge, 2011, 349-357, quoted by Gordon Nickel, *The Gentle Answer to the Muslim Accusation of Biblical Falsification*. Bruton Gate, 2016. Kindle edition, 228.

Some Muslims mistakenly believe evidence supporting a rejection of Jesus's crucifixion, and thus supporting an interpretation of Surah 4 that denies Jesus's crucifixion, is to be found in the pseudepigraphical *Gospel of Barnabas*, in which Judas Iscariot is crucified in Jesus' stead (having been transformed by God "in speech and in face to be like Jesus"⁷³⁸) and some of the disciples steal his entombed corpse under the mistaken impression that it is the corpse of Jesus (who, meanwhile, has been miraculously removed from the world).

However, as Islamic scholar Sheikh Imran Hosein observes, such an interpretation of Surah 4:157 means "attributing injustice to Allah."⁷³⁹ Quite apart from the intrinsic implausibility of this conspiracy theory, the plain fact of the matter is that the *Gospel of Barnabas* "is a medieval forgery" that dates "to the thirteenth or 14th century"⁷⁴⁰ (and is known to us through two later manuscripts). As Gordon Nickel explains:

The "Gospel of Barnabas" is the name given to a pseudepigraphic Islamic book written in the late Middle Ages, or early modern period. The book is not a Gospel in the sense of a good-news account of Jesus based on eyewitness testimony and written during the years following his death and resurrection. Rather, a European Muslim composed the book more than 1500 years later, some 900 years after the rise of Islam.⁷⁴¹

As John Oaks observes, this fake "gospel" is in fact "a compilation of the four canonical gospels, with the principle difference being interpolations rather obviously placed there in an attempt to reverse engineer the gospel to make room for statements about Jesus in the Qu'ran."⁷⁴² Theologians James A. Beverley and Craig A. Evans report that "Scholars readily recognize the lateness of the *Gospel of Barnabas* and its unreliability because of its many historical errors and anachronisms."⁷⁴³ At best, the medieval author of *Barnabas* may have drawn on some earlier apocryphal sources (e.g., gnostic sources) and upon the *Diatessaron* (a second century harmony of the four canonical Gospels), albeit "edited to conform to Islam."⁷⁴⁴

The rejection of Jesus' death by crucifixion in the *Gospel of Barnabas* may ultimately derive from the second century gnostic *Gospel of Basilides*. Ignatius reports Basilides falsely teaching that:

Christ did not himself suffer death, but Simon, a certain man of Cyrene, being compelled, bore the cross in his stead; so that this latter being transfigured by him, that he might be thought to be Jesus, was crucified, through ignorance and error, while Jesus himself received the form of Simon, and, standing by, laughed at them.⁷⁴⁵

⁷³⁸ *Gospel of Barnabas* (chap. 216-217), quoted by Samuel Green, "The Gospel of Barnabas."

<http://www.answering-islam.org/Green/barnabas.htm>.

⁷³⁹ Apologetics Roadshow, "Muslim Scholar SHOCKS Christians, Says Jesus Was Crucified and Resurrected!" (2023),

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oYYmAQxjaQc&list=PLOhh3qewVEWjXGICNq08jcoNAXYnyDNoa&index=11> (see 4:22-4:44).

⁷⁴⁰ James A. Beverley and Craig A. Evans, *Getting Jesus Right: How Muslims Get Jesus And Islam Wrong*. Lagoon City, Brechin, Ontario: Castle Quay Books, 2015, 174.

⁷⁴¹ Gordon Nickel, *The Gentle Answer to the Muslim Accusation of Biblical Falsification*. Bruton Gate, 2016. Kindle edition, 285.

⁷⁴² John Oaks, "A Response to Recent False Claims by Muslims About the Gospel of Barnabas."

⁷⁴³ James A. Beverley and Craig A. Evans, *Getting Jesus Right: How Muslims Get Jesus And Islam Wrong*. Lagoon City, Brechin, Ontario: Castle Quay Books, 2015, 174.

⁷⁴⁴ Hashim, Hasrol. "The Gospel of Barnabas" <http://www.slideshare.net/hasrulkhat/the-gospel-of-barnabas>.

⁷⁴⁵ See Nabeel Qureshi, *No God But One: A Former Muslim Investigates the Evidence for Islam and Christianity*. HarperChristian Resources, 2016, 179.

The general hypothesis of a miraculous “switch” between Jesus and someone else is *ad hoc*, and any specific hypotheses concerning Simon of Cyrene or Judas are *disconfirmed* by our historical evidence about the actual fates of these men.

Neither the medieval *Gospel of Barnabas*, nor the 7th century Qur’an, nor even the 2nd century *Gospel of Basilides*, can plausibly claim on historical grounds to provide more reliable information about the fate of Jesus than the 1st century testimony gathered into the New Testament (not to mention the multiple 1st and 2nd century extra-biblical sources that report Jesus’ execution). Basilides’s gnostic “gospel” is no more a rival source of historical information about Jesus than is the apocryphal *Gospel of Barnabas*. Rather, it’s a late work of fiction concerned to propagate a pagan worldview.

The *ad hoc* suggestion that the man who died on the cross wasn’t Jesus is flatly contradicted not only by the historical evidence showing that Jesus was crucified, but the historical evidence showing that he was interred in a tomb discovered to be empty on the third day, and the historical evidence showing that his disciples believed they met with a resurrected Jesus. Notwithstanding assertions in much later sources with anti-Christian agendas to the effect that Jesus was not crucified, there is simply no credible historical evidence to the contrary.

Q2: What do we know about the man who takes over carrying Jesus’s cross-beam?

A2:

Short:

The man was Simon of Cyrene, likely a Jewish pilgrim in Jerusalem. He was forced by Roman soldiers to carry Jesus’ cross-beam. His family may later have become part of the early Christian movement.

Summary:

The man who is compelled to carry Jesus’ cross-beam is identified in the Gospels as Simon of Cyrene, a city in North Africa, most likely corresponding to modern-day Libya, which had a significant Jewish population and maintained close ties with Jerusalem.

Simon was probably in the city as a pilgrim for the Passover festival, although Mark and Luke note that he was “coming in from the countryside,” which may indicate that he lived in or near Jerusalem, possibly as part of the Cyrenian Jewish community mentioned in Acts 6:9.

Mark’s Gospel provides an unusual detail by naming Simon’s sons, Alexander and Rufus, which strongly suggests that they were known to the early Christian audience, most likely within the Roman church.

This connection is often linked to Paul’s greeting to “Rufus” and his mother in Romans 16:13, which may indicate that Simon’s family later became part of the Christian movement.

Scholar:

The man forced to carry’s the cross-beam of Jesus’ cross is Simon of Cyrene (Matthew 27:32, Luke 23:26). Simon was probably a Jewish man visiting Jerusalem for the Passover festival (see Acts 2:10). The Gospel according to Mark tells us that Simon had sons called Alexander and Rufus (Mark 15:21), and archaeology has discovered a tomb in Jerusalem containing the remains of several people with names

common amongst Cyrenians, including the remains of one “Alexandros (son of) Simon.” In the series he is depicted with East African features.

When Jesus was on the way to be crucified the soldiers forced a man called Simon from Cyrene to carry his cross-beam (Mat. 27:32, Luke 23:26). Cyrene was a colony in Libya, in North Africa, founded c. 631 BCE by a group of emigrants from the Greek island of Thera in the Aegean. In 96 BC Cyrenaica came under Roman rule, and in 67 BC it was united with Crete to form a senatorial province, with Cyrene as local capital. Two centuries of relative prosperity under the Romans, though broken by a revolt of the Cyrenian Jews in 115 AD, were followed by steady decline. The city ceased to exist when it was conquered by Arabs in 642 AD.⁷⁴⁶ There was a synagogue of the Cyrenians in Jerusalem (Acts 6:9), and Simon may have belonged to this local community. As theologian Eckhard J. Schnabel observes, “The comment that Simon was coming in from the countryside [Mark 15:21, Luke 23:26] could mean that Simon owned land in the area . . .”⁷⁴⁷

We learn from the Gospel according to Mark that Simon’s sons were Alexander and Rufus (Mark 15:21). This suggests that Alexander and Rufus were known to Mark’s original audience, and given that Mark is generally thought to have been first published in Rome, it would seem that when the apostle Paul sends greetings in his letter to the Roman church to “Rufus” and to “his mother,” he probably has in mind the wife and one of the sons of Simon (Romans 16:13).

The existence of both Simon and Alexander has been corroborated by archaeology. In 1941, Israeli archaeologist Eleazar Sukenik discovered a tomb in the Kidron valley in eastern Jerusalem. Pottery dated it to the 1st century AD. The tomb contained eleven ossuaries bearing twelve names in fifteen inscriptions. Some of the names were particularly common in Cyrenaica. An inscription on one of these ossuaries says: “Alexandros (son of) Simon.” The lid of this ossuary bears an inscription with the name Alexandros in Greek, followed by the Hebrew *QRNYT*. The meaning of this isn’t clear, but one possibility is that the person making the inscription meant to write *QRNYH* - the Hebrew for “Cyrenian.” Writing in *Biblical Archaeological Review*, Tom Powers comments:

When we consider how uncommon the name Alexander was, and note that the ossuary inscription lists him in the same relationship to Simon as the New Testament does and recall that the burial cave contains the remains of people from Cyrenaica, the chance that the Simon on the ossuary refers to the Simon of Cyrene mentioned in the Gospels seems very likely.⁷⁴⁸

Hence it would seem that Simon’s son Alexander died in the area of Jerusalem, where the family lived in the 30’s AD, and that Simon later moved with his wife and remaining son, Rufus, to Rome.

⁷⁴⁶ “Cyrene.” <https://www.britannica.com/place/Cyrene-ancient-Greek-colony-Libya>.

⁷⁴⁷ Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Jesus In Jerusalem: The Last Days*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018, 99.

⁷⁴⁸ Tom Powers in the July/August 2003 issue of *Biblical Archaeology Review*, 51.

Q3: Was Jesus really crucified?

A3:

Short:

Yes, Jesus' crucifixion is one of the best-attested facts in ancient history. It is supported by multiple early sources, both Christian and non-Christian. Even sceptical scholars widely agree that it happened.

Summary:

The crucifixion of Jesus is supported by a wide range of early and independent sources, making it one of the most secure conclusions in historical research on antiquity. Within the New Testament itself, the event is reported in multiple independent traditions, including the Gospels, Paul's letters, and early preaching in Acts, with some material, such as 1 Corinthians 11 and 15, likely tracing back to within a few years of Jesus' death.

This is reinforced by non-Christian sources, including Tacitus, who records that "Christus" was executed under Pontius Pilate, and Josephus, who also refers to Jesus' execution, providing external corroboration.

Additional early references appear in writers such as Mara Bar-Serapion, Ignatius, and Lucian, indicating that the tradition of Jesus' crucifixion was widely known across different regions and communities.

From a historical method standpoint, the crucifixion meets the criterion of multiple attestation, appearing across different types of sources and genres, both sympathetic and hostile.

It also meets the criterion of embarrassment, since crucifixion was a shameful and degrading form of execution in the Roman world, making it highly unlikely that Jesus' followers would invent such a claim about their Messiah.

Even critical and non-Christian scholars, including Bart Ehrman and John Dominic Crossan, affirm that Jesus was crucified, showing broad consensus across theological perspectives. Alternative theories, such as substitution or survival hypotheses, lack early evidence and depend on much later sources, which are not considered historically reliable.

Scholar:

The crucifixion of Jesus is one of the best attested facts in ancient history.

As theologian Robert L. Webb observes, "the ancient sources with reference to the death of Jesus are numerous and varied – not only that he was executed, but that the means of execution was crucifixion."⁷⁴⁹ In the words of theologian Hugh Montefiore:

There is . . . quite sufficient evidence from the gospels for us to conclude that Jesus did indeed die upon the cross. His death is corroborated by St Paul in his Epistles . . . and also by Peter's speeches in Acts shortly after Pentecost.⁷⁵⁰

⁷⁴⁹ Robert L. Webb, "The Roman Examination and Crucifixion of Jesus." In *Key Events In The Life of the Historical Jesus*, edited by Darrell L. Bock and Robert L. Webb. Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2009, 671.

⁷⁵⁰ Hugh Monefiore, *The Womb And The Tomb*. London: Fount, 1992, 104.

It is important to realise that in Greco-Roman culture, crucifixion was such an embarrassing fate that, as agnostic New Testament scholar Bart Erhman observes, “it is highly improbable that the earliest Palestinian Jewish followers of Jesus would have made up the claim that the messiah was crucified.”⁷⁵¹

Jesus’s death by crucifixion is confirmed by both first and second century sources. The apostle Paul’s letter to the Galatians, written around 50 AD, mentions how Christians are spiritually “crucified with Christ” (Galatians 2:9). In a letter written at some time between 74 and 165 AD, the Syrian Stoic philosopher Mara Bar-Serapion refers to the death of Jesus when he asks: “What advantage did the Jews gain from executing their wise King?”⁷⁵² Writing in about 108 AD, Ignatius encouraged the Trallian church about “Jesus Christ, who died for us,”⁷⁵³ going on to affirm that Jesus “was truly persecuted under Pontius Pilate, truly crucified and died.”⁷⁵⁴ The second century Greek satirist Lucian of Samosata wrote of Christians as those who “worship the crucified sage.”⁷⁵⁵ Philosopher Gary R. Habermas points out that

Of all the events in Jesus’ life, more ancient sources specifically mention his death than any other single occurrence . . . twenty-two [ancient sources] relate this fact, often with details. Eleven of these sources are non-Christian, which exhibits an incredible amount of interest in this event.⁷⁵⁶

Jesus’ publicly falsifiable death by crucifixion is thus confirmed by multiple early sources, including antagonistic sources:

within approximately the first 100 years after Jesus’ death there are six witnesses that are certainly independent and another five that are probably independent. And of these witnesses, three of them are non-Christian, and of these three, two of them are explicitly anti-Christian. There are witnesses to the specific fact of Jesus’ execution by crucifixion. If one were to broaden the scope to include references to Jesus’ death more generally, the number of independent witnesses, both Christian and non-Christian would increase. Thus, of all the events and/or sayings of Jesus, there is probably no other that has such an extensive collection of witnesses that meets the criterion of multiple attestation.⁷⁵⁷

Again, in the second century Jewish Babylonian Talmud, in a tradition the core of which David Instone Brewer argues goes back to “the actual court records from the time of Jesus,”⁷⁵⁸ it is stated: “On the eve of Passover they hung Yeshu [i.e. Jesus] for sorcery and enticing Israel [to idolatry].” One version of the text actually says that they hung “Yeshu the

⁷⁵¹ Bart Erhman, *Did Jesus Exist?* New York: HarperOne, 2012, 188.

⁷⁵² See: “A Letter of Mara, Son of Serapion.” <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0863.htm>.

⁷⁵³ Robert L. Webb, “The Roman Examination and Crucifixion of Jesus.” In *Key Events In The Life of the Historical Jesus*, edited by Darrell L. Bock and Robert L. Webb. Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2009, 44.

⁷⁵⁴ Robert L. Webb, “The Roman Examination and Crucifixion of Jesus.” In *Key Events In The Life of the Historical Jesus*, edited by Darrell L. Bock and Robert L. Webb. Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2009, 44.

⁷⁵⁵ Lucian, “The Death of Peregrine,” 11-13, cited in Gary R. Habermas, *The Historical Jesus: Ancient Evidence for the Life of Christ*. College Press, 2023, 206.

⁷⁵⁶ Gary R. Habermas, *The Verdict of History: Conclusive Evidence From Beyond the Bible for the Life of Jesus*. Eastbourne: Monarch, 1990, 178.

⁷⁵⁷ Robert L. Webb, “The Roman Examination and Crucifixion of Jesus.” In *Key Events In The Life of the Historical Jesus*, edited by Darrell L. Bock and Robert L. Webb. Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2009, 689-690.

⁷⁵⁸ David Instone Brewer, “Jesus of Nazareth’s Trial in Sanhedrin 43a.” <http://www.tyndale.cam.ac.uk/Tyndale/staff/Instone-Brewer/prepub/Sanhedrin%2043a%20censored.pdf>.

Notzarine” (i.e. Jesus the Nazarene). The term “hung/hanged” (*kremannumi*) can be applied to crucifixion, as shown by its use in Luke 23:39, Acts 5:30, Acts 10:39 and Galatians 3:13.

Writing to the Corinthian church around 54 AD, Paul describes Jesus’ institution of the “last supper” in wording that closely parallels the synoptic gospel reports of the same event (1 Corinthians 11:23-26, see Luke 22:14-20, Matthew 26:26-29 and Mark 14:22-25). Paul is once again quoting a piece of oral tradition that he had “received” and had in turn already “passed on” to the Corinthians c. AD 51:

For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.” For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes. (1 Corinthians 11:23-26)

This discussion of the “last supper” contains extremely early testimony to the death of Jesus. Atheist Gerd Lüdemann accepts that “the elements in the tradition are to be dated . . . not later than three years after the death of Jesus . . .”⁷⁵⁹

Then again, Paul’s letter to the Galatians talks about believers’ sinful natures being metaphorically “crucified with Christ” (Galatians 2:20, see also Galatians 5:24) c. AD 49. These references to Jesus’ death are theological reflections in pastoral letters that complement the biographical reportage of the gospels and so pass the criterion of *multiple forms*.

That Jesus was crucified is probably the most widely accepted historical fact about him:

- Reza Aslan: “Jesus was most definitely crucified.”⁷⁶⁰
- S. G. F. Brandon: “[Jesus] was crucified by the Romans . . .”⁷⁶¹
- James H. Charlesworth: “Roman soldiers, following the command of the prefect, Pontius Pilate, crucified Jesus.”⁷⁶²
- John Crossan: “There is not the slightest doubt about the *fact* of Jesus’ crucifixion under Pontius Pilate.”⁷⁶³
- Stephen T. Davis: “It cannot sensibly be denied that there existed a man Jesus who was crucified.”⁷⁶⁴
- C. H. Dodd: “Jesus was led to the place of execution [and] crucified, after the brutal Roman practice.”⁷⁶⁵
- Bart Ehrman: “Jesus . . . was crucified (a Roman form of execution) in Jerusalem during the reign of the Roman emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of

⁷⁵⁹ Gerd Lüdemann, quoted by Gary R. Habermas, *The Risen Jesus & Future Hope*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2000, 79.

⁷⁶⁰ Reza Aslan, interviewed by Lauren Green, https://youtu.be/H7UU6FQoU_g.

⁷⁶¹ S. G. F. Brandon, *Jesus and the Zealots*. New York: Charles Scribner’s, 1976, 13.

⁷⁶² James H. Charlesworth, *The Historical Jesus: An Essential Guide*. Nashville: Abingdon, 2008, 118.

⁷⁶³ John D. Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992, 375.

⁷⁶⁴ Stephen T. Davis, *Christian Philosophical Theology*. Oxford, 2016, 92.

⁷⁶⁵ C. H. Dodd, *The Founder of Christianity*. London: Collins Fontana, 1973, 167.

Judea.”⁷⁶⁶ According to Ehrman: “the claim that the messiah was crucified . . . is a claim found multiply attested throughout our tradition (Mark, M, L, John, Paul, Josephus, Tacitus) . . . this is a highly probable tradition.”⁷⁶⁷

- Craig A. Evans states the proposition that Jesus “was condemned to death and crucified” is “disputed by almost no one.”⁷⁶⁸
- Jean-Pierre Isbouts: “Jesus . . . was crucified.”⁷⁶⁹
- Matthew Kneale: “Jesus endured the slow horror of crucifixion . . .”⁷⁷⁰
- Amy-Jill Levine: “Jesus . . . was crucified by Roman Soldiers during the governorship of Pontius Pilate.”⁷⁷¹
- Howard I. Marshall says Jesus “was arrested, tried . . . and crucified.”⁷⁷²
- Simon Seabag Montefiore: “Jesus, like most crucifixion victims, was scourged with a leather whip tipped with either bone or metal, a torment so savage that it often killed the victim.”⁷⁷³
- John Romer: “Jesus [was] crucified by the Roman authorities.”⁷⁷⁴
- Michael Ruse: “Jesus . . . got himself crucified by the Romans . . .”⁷⁷⁵
- Christopher Tuckett: “The fact that Jesus existed, that he was crucified under Pontius Pilate . . . seems to be part of the bedrock of historical tradition. If nothing else, the non-Christian evidence can provide us with certainty on that score.”⁷⁷⁶
- N. T. Wright: “The crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth is one of the best attested facts in ancient history.”⁷⁷⁷

Q4: What is being represented by the dark shadows that assail Jesus on the cross?

A4:

Short:

The shadows represent sin, evil, and human brokenness being placed on Jesus.

They visualize what Christianity teaches about his sacrificial death.

What looks like defeat is portrayed as a decisive spiritual victory.

⁷⁶⁶ Bart Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist? The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth*. New York: HarperOne, 2012, 12.

⁷⁶⁷ Bart Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist? The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth*. New York: HarperOne, 2012, 188.

⁷⁶⁸ Stephen C. Evans, “The Christ of Faith is the Jesus of History.” In *Debating Christian Theism*. Oxford University Press, 2013, 464.

⁷⁶⁹ Jean-Pierre Isbouts, *Jesus and the Origins of Christianity*. New York: National Geographic, 2016.

⁷⁷⁰ Matthew Kneale, *An Atheist’s History of Belief*. London: Vintage, 2014, 78-79.

⁷⁷¹ Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew* as quoted by Kessler, *Jesus: Pocket Giants*. Stroud: The History Press, 2016, 22.

⁷⁷² I Howard Marshall, *I Believe in the Historical Jesus*. London: Hodder And Stoughton, 1977, 216.

⁷⁷³ Simon Seabag Montefiore, *Jerusalem: The Biography*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2011, 127.

⁷⁷⁴ John Romer, *Testament: The Bible And History*. London: Michael O’Mara, 1988, 171.

⁷⁷⁵ Michael Ruse, *Atheism: What Everyone Needs To Know*. Oxford University Press, 2015, 135.

⁷⁷⁶ Christopher Tuckett, “Sources and Methods.” In *The Cambridge Companion to Jesus*, edited by Markus Bockmuehl. Cambridge University Press, 2001, 24.

⁷⁷⁷ N. T. Wright quoted by Justin Brierley, *Unbelievable?* London: SPCK, 2017, 114.

Summary:

The dark shadows in the scene are not meant to be taken literally, but function as a visual metaphor for sin, evil, and the accumulated weight of human wrongdoing being directed toward Jesus in his death.

This artistic choice reflects the Christian belief that the crucifixion is not merely a physical execution, but a unique act in which Jesus takes upon himself the consequences of human sin. Rather than depicting this in abstract theological terms, the episode translates it into visual language, showing evil as something active, invasive, and personal, which converges on Jesus at the cross.

Within the New Testament, Jesus himself interprets his death in sacrificial terms, particularly in connection with the Passover meal, where he identifies the bread and wine with his body and blood, signaling the inauguration of a new covenant.

This draws on Old Testament imagery, where covenant relationships were established through sacrifice, and where the Passover lamb symbolized deliverance through substitutionary death.

In this framework, Jesus' death is not accidental or purely tragic, but purposeful, marking a transition from the old covenant to a new one centered on forgiveness and restoration.

The shadows, then, visually represent what theology later describes as "atonement," though the New Testament itself presents this through multiple images rather than a single technical explanation.

Importantly, this is not portrayed as God being persuaded to love humanity, but as an expression of a love that already exists, where God, in Christ, takes responsibility for the cost of reconciliation.

Seen this way, the cross becomes not a moment of divine absence, but of intense divine involvement, where suffering is absorbed rather than avoided.

Scholar:

This is an artistic representation of the Christian belief that Jesus died as a sacrifice for human sin.

As Jesus is on the cross, dark shadows are depicted rushing through the sky and dashing into him. Each shadow shouts bad words like "I hate you" or "Take her, kill her" or "I'm prettier than you, get out of here!" This is an artistic representation of Jesus's claim that his death was a unique act of sacrifice for sin. As *Legacy of Adam* producer Roger Gihlemon comments:

What looks like quiet defeat on earth is presented as a decisive moment in the unseen realm, where evil is confronted and broken. . . . Jesus' death is shown as God taking responsibility for the problem himself. Instead of demanding payment from humanity, God carries the cost. . . . The episode shows this with visual language.

In light of the divine vindication provided by his later resurrection, Jesus's re-purposing of the Passover meal during his "last supper" with his disciples (see 1 Corinthians 10:16 & 11:23-26; Mark 14:22-24; Matthew 26:26-29; Luke 22:19-20 & John 6:54-56) shows that his crucifixion starts the "new covenant" predicted by the Old Testament (see Isaiah 11:11-16, 35:1-10, 40:1-5; Jeremiah 23:5-8; etc). Just as the act of a properly authorised personage breaking a bottle of Champaign on the side of a ship whilst uttering the words "I name this ship . . ." *brings about the naming of a ship*, so Jesus' death in light of a)

his interpretation thereof, and b) the fact that his resurrection shows him to be someone with the requisite authority to issue this interpretation, *brings about the existence of a new covenant*, a covenant of forgiveness for sin through faith in Jesus that is open to both Jews and Gentiles.

As theologian Mark L. Strauss explains, Jesus's "last supper" was a Passover celebration with a twist:

this is no ordinary Passover but the establishment of a new Passover for the new age of salvation – the kingdom of God. The original Passover represented God's greatest act of deliverance in the Hebrew scriptures and the creation of Israel as a nation . . . Yahweh . . . delivered his people through the sacrificial blood of the Passover lamb, and brought them out of slavery in Egypt. Giving them his law at Mount Sinai, he established a covenant relationship with them. When Israel was later oppressed and defeated by her enemies, the prophets would predict the day when Yahweh would return to Zion to accomplish a new and greater exodus [Isaiah 11:11-16, 35:1-10, 40:1-5; Jeremiah 23:5-8; etc]. Jesus' eucharistic words recall and transform the rich symbols of Passover . . . The unleavened bread of the Passover meal represents Jesus' body, given for his disciples. The implication is that he is the new Passover lamb [1 Corinthians 5:7]. The Passover wine represents the blood of the new covenant. Jesus' words in Mark 14:24, "This is my blood of the covenant," echo Exodus 24:8 . . . Jesus speaks explicitly of the *new* covenant, a clear allusion to Jeremiah 31 . . . Jesus' words at the Last Supper thus fit well his preaching about the kingdom of God . . . They also provide important clues as to how he viewed his approaching death. Drawing symbolism from the Passover meal, the covenant at Sinai, and the new exodus and new covenant imagery in the prophets, Jesus inaugurates a new Passover meal celebrating the new covenant and the arrival of the kingdom of God. While the first covenant was instituted with the blood of sacrificial animals, this new covenant will be established through his own blood. It seems likely, therefore, that Jesus viewed his death as a sacrifice of atonement, leading his people in a new exodus from bondage to sin and death.⁷⁷⁸

In short, Jesus's death and resurrection both bring about, and advertise the existence of, a new form of covenantal relationship between God and humanity.

Exactly *how* God bridges the gulf between sinful human beings and his own perfect nature so as to permit the "at-one-ment" of this new covenant is the subject matter for theological theories of "atonement." British theologian Alister E. McGrath explains that:

the New Testament is not . . . concerned with the detailed and intricate mechanics of redemption. The New Testament actually presents us with a series of images of what Christ achieved for us through his death and resurrection. It is dominated by proclamation of the *fact* that the cross and resurrection have the power to change us, along with a number of superb illustrations of the ways in which we can visualize this potential.⁷⁷⁹

McGrath explores these biblical illustrations in his book *Making Sense of the Cross* (Leicester: IVP, 1992). Christian philosopher C. Stephen Evans concurs with McGrath that

⁷⁷⁸ Mark L. Strauss, *Four Portraits, One Jesus: An Introduction to Jesus and the Gospels*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2007, 504-505.

⁷⁷⁹ Alister E. McGrath, *Making Sense of the Cross*. Leicester: IVP, 1992, 43.

it is the *fact* of atonement that Christians are asked to believe, not any particular *theory* as to how this is achieved by Christ's death and resurrection. Indeed, Christians have over the centuries held a variety of theories about how this occurred.⁷⁸⁰

Readers wishing to explore these theories should see the recommended resources for this episode.

Certainly, Jesus' death doesn't convince God either to love humans or to offer them forgiveness. As theologians Joel B. Green and Mark D. Baker affirm, "Whatever meaning atonement might have, it would be a grave error to imagine that it focused on assuaging God's anger or winning God's merciful attention."⁷⁸¹ Rather, Jesus died for us *because God already loved us*: "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 John 4:10). The apostle Paul likewise states that "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).

Christian philosopher Richard Shumack highlights the fact that Christian theology understands the atonement within a Trinitarian framework:

Under a trinitarian framework, Jesus is not simply some innocent representative human being punished by an angry God for other people's sin. Instead, since Jesus is the Second Person of the Trinity, whatever was happening on the cross was all happening, in a sense, "within" God. Care is needed here, and crude parodies of what the Bible describes will not suffice. Nevertheless, it is fair to say that, under a trinitarian understanding, the cross of Christ involves God, alone, sorting out atonement for human sin. Since Jesus is both divine and human, his death on the cross operates as God (appropriately) expressing his anger at human sin and censuring humanity, yet doing so in such a way that he, himself, bears the full destructive force of that expression.

This is, I suggest, sensible in the way that any true forgiveness involves the forgiver bearing pain and anguish. I know, for example, of a woman who discovered her husband had been betraying her for many years. Upon being discovered, he pleaded for forgiveness. Astonishingly, she chose to forgive him and allowed him to be restored to a full loving relationship. This act of forgiveness, however, was profoundly painful. It involved the wife internally wrestling and anguishing over how to avoid relinquishing graciously treating her husband with love and instead justly punishing him for his infidelity. I can imagine the painful, internal trinitarian struggle to atone for human sin working, perhaps, a little similarly.⁷⁸²

Christian philosopher Keith Ward has this to say about God's self-sacrificial suffering of sin displayed on the cross:

Sin, we might well say, causes a change in the divine nature – the realization of anger, even when transformed by compassion, the frustration of divine purpose, and the frustration of joy. These are costs that God [freely] bears whenever sin impairs a possible divine-creaturely relationship. The crucifixion of Jesus, in so far as it is an act

⁷⁸⁰ C. Stephen Evans, *Why Believe? Reason and Mystery as Pointers to God*, revised edition. Leicester: IVP, 1996, 130-131.

⁷⁸¹ Joel B. Green & Mark D. Baker, *Recovering The Scandal Of The Cross: Atonement In New Testament And Contemporary Contexts*. Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000, 51.

⁷⁸² Richard Shumack, *The Wisdom of Islam and the Foolishness of Christianity: A Christian Response to Nine Objections to Christianity by Muslim Philosophers*. Island View, 2014.

of God as well as the self-offering of a human life, is the particular and definitive historical expression of the universal sacrifice of God in bearing the cost of sin. Sin is a harm done to God, inasmuch as it causes God to know, and to share, the suffering and reality of evil. The “ransom” God pays is to accept this cost, to bear with evil, in order that it should be redeemed, transfigured, in God . . . The patience of God, bearing the cost of sin, takes the life and death and resurrection of Jesus as its own self-manifestation, and makes it the means by which the liberating life of God is made available in its essential form to the world.⁷⁸³

After all, what is forgiveness, in our experience, but the loving willingness of a wronged individual to suffer and absorb the wrong done to them for the sake of relationship with the person who wronged them? As philosopher C. Stephen Evans comments:

In the death and resurrection of Jesus, God shows us how complete his love for us is . . . He takes on human form and suffers the consequences of sin, expressing both the seriousness with which he views our sin and the exuberant love with which he is willing to forgive our sins.⁷⁸⁴

As Evans advises,

The critical question is not whether you fully understand God’s action in suffering on your behalf. It is whether you are moved by his suffering to “turn around,” to repent. Then the power of God that conquered death in Jesus will be at work in your life as well.⁷⁸⁵

In other words, whether or not you understand *how* a medicine works, the main thing is to trust the doctor who testifies *that* it works *by taking your medicine*.

Q5: Why does Jesus shout out “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” and “It is finished!” on the cross?

A5:

Short:

Jesus quotes Psalm 22 to express both real anguish and deep trust in God.

“It is finished” declares that his mission has been completed.

Together, the statements reveal suffering that leads to fulfillment, not defeat.

Summary:

When Jesus cries out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” he is quoting the opening line of Psalm 22, a well-known passage that begins in anguish but ultimately moves toward vindication, trust, and global praise of God.

⁷⁸³ Keith Ward, *What The Bible Really Teaches: A Challenge For Fundamentalists*. London: SPCK, 2004, 109-110.

⁷⁸⁴ C. Stephen Evans, *Why Believe? Reason and Mystery as Pointers to God*, revised edition. Leicester: IVP, 1996, 131-132.

⁷⁸⁵ C. Stephen Evans, *Why Believe? Reason and Mystery as Pointers to God*, revised edition. Leicester: IVP, 1996, 133.

This means the statement should not be understood as a simple declaration of abandonment, but as a deliberate reference to a larger scriptural context, where the one who feels forsaken is, in fact, not abandoned by God.

Within that Psalm, the sufferer continues to address God as “My God,” affirming relationship even in the midst of distress, and later explicitly declares that God has not hidden His face or ignored the cry for help.

This aligns with Jesus’ own earlier statement in John 16:32, where he insists that even though he will be left alone by others, he is not alone because the Father is with him.

Theologically, this has led many to conclude that the unity between Father and Son is not broken on the cross, even though Jesus fully experiences the depth of human suffering, including the felt absence of comfort and presence.

In this sense, the cry expresses genuine human anguish, while at the same time pointing forward to the resolution already embedded in Psalm 22, where suffering leads to deliverance and restoration.

By contrast, the statement “It is finished” (John 19:30) serves as a declaration that the work Jesus came to accomplish has reached its completion, not that his life ends in defeat, but that his mission has been fulfilled.

This includes the establishment of the new covenant and the completion of the purpose he associated with his death throughout his ministry.

Taken together, these two statements hold both tension and resolution, as one expresses the depth of suffering and the other affirms the completion and meaning of that suffering.

Scholar:

Jesus is quoting from an Old Testament Psalm of David.

Whilst he is on the cross, Jesus shouts out “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” and “It is finished!” Jesus is quoting from Psalm 22, a Psalm of David from the Old Testament. As theologian Stephen D. Morrison comments,

Growing up I often heard Matthew 27:46 quoted in presenting the Gospel. The preacher would say something along these lines: “God is too holy to look at sin. When Jesus died on the cross, the Father turned His back on Him. He abandoned Jesus, and forsake Him to die . . .” But did the Father *really* forsake His Son on the cross? Absolutely not! And this is ultimately how I know that the Father *did not* forsake Jesus on the cross: Psalms 22 clearly says so! Check out verse 24: “*For he has not despised or scorned the suffering of the afflicted one; he has not hidden his face from him but has listened to his cry for help.*” Jesus was not forsaken by God! The perfect union of Father, Son, and Spirit remained unbroken! God did not forsake His Son on the cross. As Paul writes, “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself.”⁷⁸⁶

⁷⁸⁶ Stephen D. Morrison, ““Jesus Was Forsaken by God” – Disgrace to Grace #3.”

<https://www.sdmorrison.org/jesus-forsaken-god-disgrace-grace-3/>. The idea that “God is too holy to look on sin” is a theologically problematic idea (one that contradicts the doctrine of God’s omniscience) that stems from a misinterpretation of Old Testament language about God being too pure to look upon sin (Habakkuk 1:13), language which means that God is too pure to *approve* of sin (the Hebrew word *raah* means both to behold and to approve or respect); see <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/benson/habakkuk/1.htm>).

Indeed, in John 16:32, Jesus speaks to the disciples about his approaching crucifixion, affirming that *he will not be abandoned by God*:

Behold, the hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home, and will leave me alone. Yet I am not alone, for the Father is with me.

Hence theologian John Gill (1697-1771) argues that Jesus' quotation of Psalm 22:1

is to be understood, not as if the hypostatical or personal union of the divine and human natures were dissolved, or that the one was now separated from the other: for the fulness of the Godhead still dwelt bodily in him; nor that he ceased to be the object of the Father's love; for so he was in the midst of all his sufferings, yea, his Father loved him because he laid down his life for the sheep; nor that the principle of joy and comfort was lost in him, only the act and sense of it; he was now deprived of the gracious presence of God, of the manifestations of his love to his human soul, and had a sense of divine wrath, not for his own sins, but for the sins of his people, and was for a while destitute of help and comfort. . .⁷⁸⁷

God is still claimed by the Psalmist (i.e., king David) as "My God," even as he expresses his feelings of temporary abandonment to his oppression of King Saul. As many theologians have observed,

even in his desolation, David prays, "My God, my God," acknowledging his faith in God and dependence on Him, despite the Lord's perceived distance and silence. Later, David declares outright his trust in the Lord: "Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One; you are the one Israel praises. In you our ancestors put their trust; they trusted and you delivered them. To you they cried out and were saved; in you they trusted and were not put to shame" (Psalm 22:3–5; see also verses 9–10). David knows that God never forsakes His people (verses 22–24).⁷⁸⁸

As Christian pastor Josh Cramer comments,

in Psalm 22, the Psalmist looks and feels forsaken, but the result is salvation that leads to universal – including all nations and all generations – praise of God. The Psalmist cries out in anguish but the result of the cry of anguish is the reminder that God is faithful. Anguish and praise go back-and-forth in the Psalm: forsakenness to reminder of God's faithfulness to feelings of being undeserving to reminders of God's creation to feeling surrounded to cry for God to be near to praise. It's not an easy or straightforward Psalm that moves from lament to praise. Psalm 22 takes us through the experience of struggle to get to praise. But the Psalmist finally gets to a universal and complete vision of praise. The end does not resolve with the resolution of the Psalmist's immediate situation but with an eschatological and fulfilled vision, including all nations and generations. The Psalm moves from forsakenness to total shalom.

Verse 24 is key to that vision: "For he has not despised or scorned/the suffering of the afflicted one;/he has not hidden his face from him/but has listened to his cry for help." Despite the sense of alienation and abandonment that the Psalmist

⁷⁸⁷ <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/gill/psalms/22.htm>.

⁷⁸⁸ "Why does the psalmist ask, "Why have you forsaken me" (Psalm 22:1)?" <https://www.gotquestions.org/why-have-you-forsaken-me.html>.

experiences, God has not in fact abandoned him. The “afflicted one” is, in reality, “not despised or scorned” nor is God’s “face” “hidden.” Instead, God “has listened to his cry.” (Just a note: the Hebrew term for “listen” always carries the weight of action with it; one cannot “listen” and not be moved to action. “Listen” might as well be translated “listen and obey.”) So, God is near to the afflicted one who suffers. Though a person might be afflicted and experience suffering, God is near, listening and acting on behalf of the sufferer. . .

Jesus cries out in anguish, “My God my God, why have you forsaken me?” but this cry quotes from Psalm 22, where the initial feeling of forsakenness leads to eschatological salvation. Jesus cries out as a way of expressing both his sense of anguish but also his faith in God’s ultimate victory.⁷⁸⁹

Q6: Did Jesus die on the cross?

A6:

Short:

Yes, all available evidence indicates that Jesus died on the cross.

Roman crucifixion was designed to ensure death.

This conclusion is accepted by virtually all historians.

Summary:

While the crucifixion itself is widely accepted, the question of whether Jesus actually died on the cross is also addressed by examining Roman practices, medical factors, and the convergence of historical testimony.

Roman crucifixion was a highly efficient method of execution, and soldiers were trained and legally responsible to ensure that victims did not survive, with severe penalties for failure.

The process itself, involving scourging, blood loss, shock, and eventual asphyxiation, made survival extremely unlikely, and in recorded history there are no reliable cases of someone surviving a full Roman crucifixion.

In Jesus’ case, the Gospels report that his legs were not broken, a procedure normally used to hasten death, which indicates that the soldiers were already confident he was dead.

To remove any doubt, a soldier pierced his side with a spear, and the description of “blood and water” is consistent with modern medical understanding of fluid accumulation around the heart and lungs following death.

This detail is significant because it reflects an observation that the original witness would not have had the medical knowledge to fabricate, suggesting authenticity rather than invention.

Additionally, multiple groups had opportunity and motivation to verify his death, including Roman executioners, Jewish authorities, and those who prepared his body for burial, all of whom acted on the assumption that he was dead.

The burial practices of the time further reinforce this, as bodies were carefully handled and inspected before being placed in tombs.

From a historical standpoint, early sources unanimously present Jesus as having died, and even hostile or sceptical scholars accept this conclusion.

⁷⁸⁹ Josh Cramer, “Psalm 22 and Jesus’ Cry from the Cross.” <https://www.resurrectionboise.org/blog/psalm22>.

Scholar:

All the evidence indicates that Jesus died on the cross.

As Charles Foster reports, attempts to deny the historical reality of Jesus' crucifixion

have been laughed out of court by serious scholars . . . The overwhelming conclusion of the mainstream literature, even that written by virulent opponents of Christianity, is that Jesus did indeed die on the cross.⁷⁹⁰

Hence, for example, American atheist Jerry Coyne admits that: "Jesus was crucified, ending everyone's hope of glory."⁷⁹¹

Although evidence of Jesus' crucifixion doesn't in itself absolutely guarantee his death by crucifixion, the overwhelming historical evidence for the former is nevertheless a strong indication of the latter. Jesus' death by crucifixion passes the *criterion of historical verisimilitude*, for as Nabeel Qureshi points out: "never in recorded history has anyone survived a full Roman crucifixion."⁷⁹² Roman law placed a death penalty "on any soldier who let a capital prisoner escape in any way, including bungling a crucifixion."⁷⁹³ Roman executioners were thus highly motivated and knew what they were doing. Not that their job was particularly complicated. Crucifixion was, in general terms, a cruel, slow death by asphyxiation:

Since the muscles used for inhaling are stronger than the muscles used for exhaling, carbon dioxide would build up and the victim would die an uncomfortable death. Experiments on live volunteers, suspended with the inability to touch the ground, revealed that one could not remain conscious longer than twelve minutes in this position, as long as their arms were at a 45-degree angle or less. Breaking the legs of a crucified victim would prevent them from pushing up against the nail in their feet, an excruciating move, in order to make it easier to breathe, albeit temporarily. It is the opinion of my two ER physician friends that, due to the trauma already experienced by a crucified victim, once He had died on a cross from a lack of oxygen, and had remained dead in that position for five minutes, there would be no chance of resuscitating Him.⁷⁹⁴

The fact that the soldiers didn't bother to break Jesus' legs in order to expedite death by crucifixion (a practice confirmed by ancient sources including Cicero's *Orations*) shows that they were sure he was already dead. Archaeologist Shimon Gibson notes that the earlier scourging suffered by Jesus "would undoubtedly have led to a massive loss of blood . . . Hence, it is not surprising that Jesus did not last very long on the cross, perhaps 3 to 6 hours at the most."⁷⁹⁵

⁷⁹⁰ Charles Foster, *The Jesus Inquest*. Oxford: Monarch, 2006, 72 & 220.

⁷⁹¹ Jerry Coyne, *Faith vs. Fact*. London: Penguin, 2016, 123.

⁷⁹² Nabeel Qureshi, *No God But One: A Former Muslim Investigates the Evidence for Islam and Christianity*. HarperChristian Resources, 2016, 167.

⁷⁹³ Peter Kreeft and Ronald K. Tacelli, *Handbook of Christian Apologetics*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1994, 183.

⁷⁹⁴ Michael Licona, "Can We Be Certain that Jesus Died On A Cross?" In *Evidence for God*, edited by William A. Dembski and Michael R. Licona. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker 2010.

⁷⁹⁵ Shimon Gibson, *The Final Days of Jesus*. Harper Collins, 2009, 123.

Nevertheless, to eliminate all doubt, one of the soldiers stabbed Jesus' corpse with a spear, a *coup-de-grace* mentioned by the first century Roman author Quintilian. The Gospel according to John provides an *eyewitness* report of "blood and water" coming out of the spear-wound (John 19:34). Truman Davis M.D. argues that this is "conclusive post-mortem evidence" that Jesus actually died "of heart failure . . ." ⁷⁹⁶ As Alexander Metherall M.D. explains:

hypovolemic shock would have caused a sustained rapid heart rate that would have contributed to heart failure, resulting in the collection of fluid in the membrane around the heart, called a pericardial effusion, as well as around the lungs, which is called a pleural effusion [sometimes referred to as "water on the lungs"] . . . The spear apparently went through the right lung and into the heart, so when the spear was pulled out, some fluid – the pericardial effusion and the pleural effusion – came out. This would have had the appearance of a clear fluid, like water, followed by a large volume of blood, as the eyewitness John described . . . ⁷⁹⁷

John wouldn't have known these medical details in the first century, and so had no reason for reporting them besides conveying something unusual that he saw (hence his *eyewitness* report passes the historical "*Criterion of Unintentional Signs of History*"). The weight of historical and medical evidence thus indicates that Jesus was dead before the wound to his side was inflicted and that the soldier's spear likely perforated not only Jesus's right lung, but also his pericardium and heart, which would have ensured his death if he had still been alive. Since it bears the hallmark of an unintentional sign of historicity, John's eyewitness report of blood and water emerging from Jesus' spear-wound counts as a demonstrably independent witness to the fact of Jesus' death by crucifixion, meaning that *Jesus' death by crucifixion passes the criteria of independent testimony in its most stringent form.*

It's worth noting at this juncture that "Tannaitic sources repeatedly emphasize that it is forbidden to treat a person as dead until it is clearly ascertained that he has expired (Semahoth I)." ⁷⁹⁸ Simon Seabag Montefiore observes: "Jewish dead were not buried in the earth during the first century but laid in a shroud in a rock tomb, which [was] always checked, partly to ensure that the deceased were indeed dead and not merely comatose . . ." ⁷⁹⁹ Thus, as A. Rendle Short comments: "The Roman soldiers, the priests and His friends who buried Him would all look carefully to make certain that He was dead." ⁸⁰⁰ Homicide detective J. Warner Wallace comments:

Three conditions become apparent in the bodies of dead people: temperature loss, rigidity, and lividity . . . dead bodies look, feel, and respond differently from living, breathing humans . . . Is it reasonable to believe that those who removed Jesus from the cross, took possession of His body, carried him to the grave, and spent time treating and wrapping His body for burial would not have noticed any of these conditions common to dead bodies? ⁸⁰¹

⁷⁹⁶ Truman Davis, "The Crucifixion of Jesus. The Passion of Christ from a Medical Point of View," *Arizona Medicine* 22:3 (March 1965).

⁷⁹⁷ Alexander Metherall in Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998, 199.

⁷⁹⁸ Shemuel Safrai, *The Jewish People in the First Century*. Van Goreum Fortress, 1976, 773.

⁷⁹⁹ Simon Seabag Montefiore, *Jerusalem: Jerusalem: The Biography*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2011, 130.

⁸⁰⁰ A. Rendle Short, *Why Believe?* London: Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1962, 48–9.

⁸⁰¹ J. Warner Wallace, *Cold-Case Christianity: A Homicide Detective Investigates The Claims Of The Gospels*. Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2013, 42.

Apparently, the people who a) crucified Jesus, or saw him crucified,⁸⁰² b) took Jesus's corpse down from the cross, c) prepared his corpse for burial, and d) entombed his corpse, *all* thought he was dead. Likewise, the antagonistic Jewish authorities at whose behest Jesus had been executed conceded that Jesus had died when they accused the disciples of stealing his *corpse* away from his tomb, a conspiracy theory discussed in Matthew 28:12–14 and reflected in Jewish tradition (as gathered into the fifth century AD *Toledoth Jesu*).

The synoptic gospel accounts of Jesus' death mention people that the audience would have been able to check facts with. For example, they all mention Simon of Cyrene, who is compelled to carry Jesus' crossbeam after Jesus (suffering from blood loss, dehydration and shock consequent to his scourging) stumbles under the load (see Mark 15:21; Matthew 27:32; Luke 23:26). Simon's sons Alexander and Rufus were known within the early church and are mentioned by the pre-Markan passion account, as if to say "if you don't believe this, go and check with them" (see Mark 15:21 & Romans 16:13).

The existence of Simon and Alexander has been corroborated by archaeology.⁸⁰³ In 1941, Israeli archaeologist Eleazar Sukenik discovered a tomb in the Kidron valley in eastern Jerusalem. Pottery dated it to the 1st century AD. The tomb contained eleven ossuaries bearing twelve names in fifteen inscriptions. Some of the names were particularly common in Cyrenaica. An inscription on one of these ossuaries says: "Alexandros (son of) Simon." The lid of this ossuary bears an inscription with the name Alexandros in Greek, followed by the Hebrew *QRNYT*. The meaning of this isn't clear, but one possibility is that the person making the inscription meant to write *QRNYH* - the Hebrew for "Cyrenian." Writing in *Biblical Archaeological Review* Tom Powers comments:

When we consider how uncommon the name Alexander was, and note that the ossuary inscription lists him in the same relationship to Simon as the New Testament does and recall that the burial cave contains the remains of people from Cyrenaica, the chance that the Simon on the ossuary refers to the Simon of Cyrene mentioned in the Gospels seems very likely.⁸⁰⁴

Finally, Jesus' death by crucifixion would have been so *embarrassing* to Jesus' followers (who expected him to destroy the Romans and who mostly ran away when he didn't) that they wouldn't have made it up. As theologian Craig A. Evans asks:

Had Jesus not been executed, had Jesus not been crucified, why make up such a preposterous story? No, the death of Jesus is no fiction. It is a grim historical reality. It was known to non-Christians, and it was demoralizing even for Jesus' followers – at least at initially – and an ongoing embarrassment as the church proclaimed Jesus as Savior and Son of God throughout the Roman Empire. There can be no doubt that Jesus was executed.⁸⁰⁵

Likewise, archaeologist John Romer comments:

⁸⁰² Those who saw him crucified include: John, Jesus' mother, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, Mary the wife of Clopas and Salome the mother of the sons of Zebedee (see Matthew 27:56; Mark 15:40-41; Luke 23:49 and John 20:1-18).

⁸⁰³ See Good Answers with Dr. Culley, "Simon of Cyrene." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=78SdNTHKC-A&list=PLQhh3qcwVEWjh9aRRWF1kYZIVCPc5iCcw&index=38&t=172s>.

⁸⁰⁴ Tom Powers, in the July/August 2003 issue of *Biblical Archaeology Review*, 51.

⁸⁰⁵ Craig A. Evans, *Jesus and the Remains of His Day: Studies in Jesus and the Evidence of Material Culture*. Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 2015, 148.

the act of Jesus' crucifixion convinces because of its extremely degrading nature. In the Roman Empire crucifixion was a most shameful death, even in the minds of the early Christian congregations, as Paul's letters make clear . . . Crucifixion was considered to be one of the most severe Roman punishments, worse than decapitation, burning, or exposure to wild beasts . . .⁸⁰⁶

As Graham Veale writes: "Crucifixion was such a way to die that it is absurd to suppose that any group would *pretend* that their leader had been crucified!"⁸⁰⁷ Historian Michael Grant agrees that "no one would have invented such a degraded end, a fatal objection to Jesus' Messiahship in Jewish eyes."⁸⁰⁸

Gary R. Habermas confirms that "Almost no scholar today questions Jesus' death by crucifixion"⁸⁰⁹ since it is "is one of the best attested facts in ancient history."⁸¹⁰ Likewise, philosopher Francis J. Beckwith reports that "nearly all scholars agree that Jesus died by crucifixion . . ."⁸¹¹ For example:

- Reza Aslan: "Jesus was executed by the Roman state for the crime of sedition."⁸¹²
- Raymond E. Brown: "most scholars accept the uniform testimony of the Gospels that Jesus died . . ."⁸¹³
- James H. Charlesworth: "Jesus died by Roman execution . . ."⁸¹⁴
- John Dominic Crossan: "Jesus' death by crucifixion under Pontius Pilate is as sure as anything historical can ever be."⁸¹⁵
- Adam S. Francisco: "The evidence from history is quite clear about certain facts pertaining to Jesus. He was crucified and died on a Roman cross."⁸¹⁶
- Paula Fredriksen: "The single most solid fact about Jesus' life is his death; he was executed by the Roman prefect Pilate, on or around Passover, in the manner Rome reserved particularly for political insurrectionists, namely, crucifixion."⁸¹⁷
- Michael Grant: "Jesus . . . was arrested by the high-priest and Sanhedrin and handed over to the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, who found him guilty of seditious designs and had him executed by crucifixion."⁸¹⁸
- Luke Timothy Johnson: "Even the most critical historian can confidently assert that a Jew named Jesus . . . was executed by crucifixion under the prefect Pontius Pilate and

⁸⁰⁶ John Romer, *Testament: The Bible And History*. London: Michael O'Mara, 1988, 178-179.

⁸⁰⁷ Graham Veale, *New Atheism: A Survival Guide*. Fearn: Christian Focus, 2013, 80.

⁸⁰⁸ Michael Grant, *Jesus: An Historian's Review Of The Gospels*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1977, 166.

⁸⁰⁹ Gary R. Habermas in *Did the Resurrection Happen?, A Conversation with Gary Habermas and Antony Flew*, edited by David Baggett. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2009, 26.

⁸¹⁰ Gary R. Habermas, *The Verdict of History: Conclusive Evidence From Beyond the Bible for the Life of Jesus*. Eastbourne: Monarch, 1990, 178.

⁸¹¹ Francis J. Beckwith, *David Hume's Argument Against Miracles: A Critical Analysis*. Lanham: University Press of America, 1989, 65.

⁸¹² Reza Aslan, *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth*. New York: Westbourne, 2014, 156.

⁸¹³ Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, 2 vols. New York: Doubleday, 1994, 2:1373.

⁸¹⁴ James H. Charlesworth, *The Historical Jesus: An Essential Guide*. Nashville: Abingdon, 2008, 111.

⁸¹⁵ John Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*. Harper, 2009, 145.

⁸¹⁶ Adam S. Francisco, "Explaining the empty tomb with the resurrection." In *The Resurrection Fact: Responding to Modern Critics*, edited by John J. Bombaro and Adam S. Francisco. Irvine, California: NRP, 2016, 56.

⁸¹⁷ Paula Fredriksen, *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews*. New York: Vintage, 2002, 8.

⁸¹⁸ Michael Grant, *Jesus: An Historian's Review Of The Gospels*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1977, 10.

continued to have followers after his death.”⁸¹⁹

- Craig Keener: “that Jesus died by crucifixion is also not controversial . . .”⁸²⁰
- Pinchas Lapide: “the death of Jesus of Nazareth on the cross . . . may be considered historically certain.”⁸²¹
- Gerd Lüdemann: “Jesus’ death as a consequence of crucifixion is indisputable.”⁸²²
- Alexander Metherell: “There was absolutely no doubt that Jesus was dead.”⁸²³
- John Warwick Montgomery: “Jesus surely died on the cross . . .”⁸²⁴
- Hugh Montefiore: “Jesus did indeed die upon the cross.”⁸²⁵
- Nabeel Qureshi: “Jesus died by crucifixion.”⁸²⁶
- Mark D. Smith: “The trial of Jesus may have been private, but his execution was ruthlessly public. Naked, humiliated, and riven with agony, Jesus was lifted up to public scrutiny and public ridicule. Some of the sources mention the presence of some of his friends and family members, as well as mockers, including the ‘chief priests’ . . . Jesus seems to have died quickly and in great agony.”⁸²⁷
- Geza Vermes: “The passion of Jesus is part of history.”⁸²⁸
- Robert L. Webb: “on the basis of the diverse multiple attestation to this event and the actual evidence that this event was a source of embarrassment for the early Christian movement, it is reasonable to conclude that Jesus’ execution by crucifixion is one of the more probable events that can be established in ancient history . . .”⁸²⁹
- A. N. Wilson: “The Cross, and the Crucifixion, are at the very centre of this religious vision, not as an airy concept or a metaphor, but as a bloody death actually recollected.”⁸³⁰

In sum:

the historical evidence is very strong that Jesus died by crucifixion. It is attested to by a number of ancient sources, some of which are non-Christian . . . the chances of surviving crucifixion were very bleak; the unanimous professional medical opinion is that Jesus certainly died due to the rigors of crucifixion, and even if Jesus somehow managed to survive crucifixion, it would not have resulted in the disciples’ belief that he had been resurrected.⁸³¹

⁸¹⁹ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus*. New York: Harper One, 1997, 123.

⁸²⁰ Craig Keener, *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels*. Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2009, 323.

⁸²¹ Pinchas Lapide, *The Resurrection of Jesus*. London: SPCK, 1984, 32.

⁸²² Gerd Lüdemann, *The Resurrection of Christ: A Historical Inquiry*. New York: Prometheus, 2004, 50.

⁸²³ Alexander Metherell in Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998, 216.

⁸²⁴ John Warwick Montgomery, *History, Law, and Christianity*. Corona, California: NRP Books, 2014, 42.

⁸²⁵ Hugh Montefiore, *The Womb And The Tomb*. London: Fount, 1992, 104.

⁸²⁶ Nabeel Qureshi, *No God But One. A Former Muslim Investigates the Evidence for Islam and Christianity*. HarperChristian Resources, 2016, 162.

⁸²⁷ Mark D. Smith, *The Final Days of Jesus: The Thrill of Defeat, The Agony of Victory. A Classical Historian Explores Jesus’s Arrest, Trial, and Execution*. Cambridge: Lutterworth, 2018, 195 & 196.

⁸²⁸ Geza Vermes, *The Passion: The True Story of an Event That Changed Human History*. New York: Penguin: 2006, 9.

⁸²⁹ Robert L. Webb, “The Roman Examination and Crucifixion of Jesus.” In *Key Events In The Life of the Historical Jesus*, edited by Darrell L. Bock and Robert L. Webb. Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2009, 693.

⁸³⁰ A. N. Wilson, *Paul: The Mind Of The Apostle*. London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1997, 117.

⁸³¹ Michael Licona, “Can We Be Certain that Jesus Died on a Cross?” In *Evidence for God*, edited by William A. Dembski and Michael R. Licona. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker 2010, 167.

Q7: Was Jesus really interred in a tomb by Joseph of Arimathea?

A7:

Short:

Yes, there are good historical reasons to think Jesus was buried in a tomb. The burial by Joseph of Arimathea fits known Jewish and Roman practices. Many scholars accept the burial as historical.

Summary:

The claim that Jesus was buried in a tomb by Joseph of Arimathea is supported by multiple lines of historical and cultural evidence, and is widely regarded as plausible by scholars. Although some critics argue that crucified victims were typically left unburied, archaeological findings, such as the remains of the crucified man Yehohanan, demonstrate that burial after crucifixion did occur in first-century Judea.

Jewish law strongly required burial before sunset, even for executed criminals, and sources like Josephus confirm that Jews were careful to ensure proper burial in such cases. Roman practice, while sometimes harsh, generally allowed local customs to be followed, especially in regions like Judea during peacetime, making it likely that Jewish burial traditions were respected.

The Gospel accounts align closely with what we know about these customs, and archaeologists such as Jodi Magness affirm that the descriptions of Jesus' burial are consistent with the historical and cultural context.

The figure of Joseph of Arimathea is also significant, since he is described as a member of the Sanhedrin, a detail that would have been risky to invent given the public nature of that body and its known members.

This lends credibility to the account, as early Christians would be unlikely to fabricate a specific, identifiable individual in such a role.

Additionally, the burial is attested in multiple early sources, including early creedal material in 1 Corinthians 15, which strengthens its historical reliability.

The fact that even critics had to explain the empty tomb tradition suggests that the location of Jesus' burial was known and publicly accessible.

Scholar:

There is good reason to think that Jesus was interred in a tomb just outside Jerusalem by Joseph of Arimathea.

French atheist Michael Onfray asserts that, as a victim of crucifixion, Jesus “would have been left hanging there, at the mercy of wild beasts. There was no question of bodies being laid to rest in tombs.”⁸³² While there are indeed historical records of crucifixion victims being left “hanging on a cross to feed the crows,”⁸³³ Onfray's blanket claim is contradicted by archaeology. The *entombed* remains of Yehohanan came complete with the nail that had been

⁸³² Michael Onfray, *Atheist Manifesto*. Serpent, 128.

⁸³³ Horace, *Epistles*, 1.16.48.

driven through the heel bone of his left foot during crucifixion.⁸³⁴ Furthermore, theologian Craig A. Evans points out that “138 iron nails have been recovered from [Jewish] tombs and many of them have imbedded in the rust human bone and calcium. So there we’ve got . . . evidence probably of dozens of crucifixion victims who were properly buried.”⁸³⁵ For example, archaeologists have recently re-assessed the skeletal materials and nails from the ossuary in Abba Cave in Jerusalem, concluding that the deceased – identified by an inscription in the cave as “Mattathias son of Judah” - was the man known in Greek as Aristobulus II, the last Hasmonean ruler, whom Marcus Antonius had crucified. Three nails, still bearing traces of human calcium, were recovered from his ossuary.

In first century Israel:

The commands of Scripture, taken with traditions regarding piety (as especially exemplified in Tobit), corpse impurity, and the avoidance of the defilement of the land, strongly suggest that under normal circumstances (i.e., peacetime) no corpse would remain unburied - neither Jew nor Gentile, neither innocent nor guilty. All were to be buried.⁸³⁶

Indeed, Josephus commented: “Jews are so careful about funeral rights that even malefactors who have been sentenced to crucifixion are taken down and buried before sunset.”⁸³⁷

Mark D. Smith, a historian of Rome, observes that:

According to Roman law, criminals condemned to death must be buried. Only in the case of the highest form of treason . . . was denial of burial permitted (but not required). Roman cultural values combined with Roman law to demand that even the destitute and abandoned, even executed criminals, most of whom, then as now, were from the lower classes, would not rot in the streets or the places reserved for executions, but would receive at least the minimal burial or cremation . . . these factors, combined with the traditional Roman respect for the autonomy of the cultural practices of provincials, suggest that standard Roman procedure would be to allow Jews to handle their dead as they wished, including those who were executed.⁸³⁸

Hence, contrary to Onfray, reports of Jesus’ burial pass the *criterion of historical verisimilitude*: “Jews buried all dead, including the executed, and the Romans complied with Jewish customs – at least during peacetime.”⁸³⁹ Jewish archaeologist Jodi Magness, an expert on burial traditions in Jerusalem in the late Second Temple period, states that “The Gospel

⁸³⁴ See: Biblical Archaeological Society Staff, “A Tomb in Jerusalem Reveals the History of Crucifixion and Roman Crucifixion Methods” <https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-topics/crucifixion/a-tomb-in-jerusalem-reveals-the-history-of-crucifixion-and-roman-crucifixion-methods/>.

⁸³⁵ Craig A. Evans, “The burial and empty tomb traditions.” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZKvy9e5UMKE>.

⁸³⁶ Craig A. Evans, “Jewish Burial Traditions and the Resurrection of Jesus.” http://craigaejans.com/Burial_Traditions.pdf.

⁸³⁷ Josephus, *Jewish War*, quoted by Evans, “Jewish Burial Traditions and the Resurrection of Jesus.” http://craigaejans.com/Burial_Traditions.pdf.

⁸³⁸ Mark D. Smith, *The Final Days of Jesus: The Thrill of Defeat, The Agony of Victory. A Classical Historian Explores Jesus’s Arrest, Trial, and Execution*. Cambridge: Lutterworth, 2018, 204 & 206.

⁸³⁹ Stephen C. Evans, “The Christ of Faith is the Jesus of History,” In *Debating Christian Theism*, edited by J.P. Moreland, Chad Meister and Khaldoun A. Sweis. Oxford University Press, 2013, 464.

accounts describing Jesus' removal from the cross and burial are consistent with archaeological evidence and with Jewish law."⁸⁴⁰

The 1 Corinthians 15 creed and the passion source used by the gospel of Mark provide exceptionally early sources of testimony to Jesus' burial. Early testimony to Jesus' burial is also provided by the special sources used by Luke and John in their gospels. The sermons recorded in Acts 2:29-31 and 13:36-37 likewise provide early testimony to Jesus' burial. Finally, Paul alludes to Jesus' burial when he speaks of believers being metaphorically "buried with" Jesus in Romans 6:4 and as "having been buried with him in baptism" in Colossians 2:13. We can therefore note that the burial passes the criterion of *multiple forms*.

Although a few critics have suggested that the specific burial place of Jesus may have been unknown, theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg observes that "this is a pure invention of modern scholarship without the slightest evidence."⁸⁴¹ The gospels contain multiple early reports of multiple individuals (both friend and foe) who knew the specific burial place of Jesus (e.g. Mary the mother of Jesus, the female disciples including Mary Magdalene, the Jewish authorities, the guards, the cemetery groundskeeper, John, Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea).

As philosopher and theologian William Lane Craig observes:

Even the most skeptical scholars acknowledge that Joseph was probably the genuine, historical individual who buried Jesus, since it is unlikely that early Christian believers would invent an individual, give him a name and nearby town of origin, and place that fictional character on the historical council of the Sanhedrin, whose members were well known.⁸⁴²

J. P. Holding notes that "Arimathea" can be identified with ancient Ramah, which was later named as Ramathaim or Aramathaim (see Josephus *Antiquities* 13.4.9). Joseph's coming from Aramathaim would have very naturally led to a pun on the Greek phrase "best disciple" (*aristos mathetes*). "Metheia" is said to mean "disciple town" and "ari" is a common Greek prefix denoting superiority:

Far from suggesting that Joseph was a fiction, the punning implies that Joseph's role as a "best disciple" was an early and well-known figure, recognized by the Greek-speakers of the church who, in line with the Jewish tendency to make puns, came up with this clever joke which became implanted in the diverse Gospel tradition.⁸⁴³

C. Marvin Pate reports that: "Even the most sceptical biblical scholars agree that Joseph of Arimathea was a historical person, actually a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin . . . it is highly unlikely that [Christians] would invent such an individual who would do the right thing regarding the burial of Jesus."⁸⁴⁴ Indeed, as Michael Grant observes, the absence of Jesus' circle of male disciples from his burial is "too unfortunate, indeed disgraceful, to have been voluntarily invented by the evangelists at a later date."⁸⁴⁵

⁸⁴⁰ Jodi Magness in Lee Strobel, *The Case for Miracles: A Journalist Investigates Evidence for the Supernatural*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2018, 205.

⁸⁴¹ Wolfhart Pannenberg, "History and the Reality of the Resurrection," In Gavin D'Costa ed., *Resurrection Reconsidered*. Oxford: OneWorld, 1996, 69.

⁸⁴² William Lane Craig, *The Son Rises: The Historical Evidence For The Resurrection Of Jesus*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2000, 3.

⁸⁴³ J. P. Holding, "Was Joseph of Arimathea a Myth?" In *Defending the Resurrection*. xulon, 2010, 286.

⁸⁴⁴ C. Marvin Pate, *40 Questions About The Historical Jesus*. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2015, 258.

⁸⁴⁵ Michael Grant, *Jesus: An Historian's Review Of The Gospels*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1977, 175.

Finally, Jesus' somewhat *publicly falsifiable* burial is implicitly conceded by the *enemy attestation* of the Jewish polemic concerning the empty tomb that lies behind Matthew 27:62-66 & 28:11-15. There would have been no need to explain the emptiness of the tomb had it not been occupied in the first place: "The fact that the enemies of Christianity felt obliged to explain away the empty tomb by the theft hypothesis shows . . . that the tomb was known (confirmation of the burial story) . . ." ⁸⁴⁶

Robert J. Hutchinson reports that:

many scholars, and not merely Christian ones, insist that Jesus' body was almost certainly taken down from the cross and buried, in deference to the Jewish holiday of Passover . . . contemporary historians and archaeologists – such as Shimon Gibson, Jodi Magness, James Dunn, N.T. Wright, Raymond Brown, E.P. Sanders, James Tabor, Michael Grant and Craig Evans – believe that Jesus was indeed given a proper burial. ⁸⁴⁷

Again:

- Rudolph Bultmann called the burial story: "an historical account which creates no impression of being a legend . . ." ⁸⁴⁸
- Raymond Brown: "That Jesus was buried is historically certain." ⁸⁴⁹
- C. H. Dodd: "Jesus . . . was given decent, though hasty, burial through the good offices of a well-to-do sympathizer." ⁸⁵⁰
- Gerd Lüdemann: "Jesus was obviously buried . . . There is the tradition of the burial in Paul; it's a very old tradition, and it's likely to be historical." ⁸⁵¹
- Simon Seabag Montefiore: "It is likely that the present Church of the Holy Sepulchre, which encloses both the place of crucifixion and the tomb, is the genuine site since its tradition was kept alive by local Christians for the next three centuries." ⁸⁵²
- John A. T. Robinson states that the burial of Jesus is: "one of the earliest and best attested facts about Jesus." ⁸⁵³
- Mark D. Smith: "Our evidence consistently supports the conclusion that Jesus was buried in the new family tomb of Joseph of Arimathea." ⁸⁵⁴
- Geza Vermes: "The Bible orders that a person condemned to death by a court should be buried on the day of his execution before sunset [Deuteronomy 21:22-23], as happened to Jesus, too." ⁸⁵⁵

⁸⁴⁶ William Lane Craig, "The Empty Tomb of Jesus."

<http://www.reasonablefaith.org/the-historicity-of-the-empty-tomb-of-jesus#ixzz4YZdlDxR6>.

⁸⁴⁷ Robert J. Hutchinson, *Searching For Jesus: New Discoveries In The Quest For Jesus Of Nazareth – And How They Confirm The Gospel Accounts*. Nashville, Tennessee: Nelson, 2015, 232-233.

⁸⁴⁸ Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*. Trans. John Marsh; Oxford: Blackwell, 1972, 274.

⁸⁴⁹ Raymond Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, vol. 2. New York: Doubleday, 1994, 1240.

⁸⁵⁰ C. H. Dodd, *The Founder of Christianity. The Founder of Christianity*.

⁸⁵¹ Gerd Lüdemann in *Jesus' Resurrection: Fact or Figment?* Edited by Paul Copan and Ronald K. Tacelli. IVP Academic, 2009, 52.

⁸⁵² Simon Seabag Montefiore, *Jerusalem: The Biography*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2011, 30.

⁸⁵³ J. A. T. Robinson, *The Human Face of God*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1973, 31.

⁸⁵⁴ Mark D. Smith, *The Final Days of Jesus: The Thrill of Defeat, The Agony of Victory. A Classical Historian Explores Jesus's Arrest, Trial, and Execution*. Cambridge: Lutterworth, 2018, 207.

⁸⁵⁵ Geza Vermes, *The Resurrection*. London: Penguin, 2008, 22.

Recommended Resources for Episode 25

- Good Answers with Dr. Culley. "Simon of Cyrene." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=78SdNTHKC-A&list=PLQhh3qcwVEWjh9aRRWF1kYZIVCPc5iCcw&index=38&t=172s>
- YouTube Playlist, "Atonement." <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLQhh3qcwVEWimeGJ4DsEDI3QvpKNbIg5f>
- . "Jesus died on the cross." <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLQhh3qcwVEWjXG1CNq08jcoNAXYnyDNoa>
- . "Jesus was buried in a tomb." YouTube playlist. https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLQhh3qcwVEWjOA69as_NWtHsBRBLY_a3Y
- Apologetics Roadshow. "The Qur'an DOESN'T Say What Muslims Think It Says!" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=fMe9tCCs2h8>
- Dr Gerald Culley, "Simon of Cyrene." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=78SdNTHKC-A&list=PLQhh3qcwVEWjh9aRRWF1kYZIVCPc5iCcw&index=36>
- Craig A. Evans. "The burial and empty tomb traditions." <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZKvy9e5UMKE>
- Peter S. Williams, "Jesus died on a cross." YouTube playlist. <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLQhh3qcwVEWjXG1CNq08jcoNAXYnyDNoa>
- Biblical Archaeological Society Staff, "A Tomb in Jerusalem Reveals the History of Crucifixion and Roman Crucifixion Methods." www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-topics/crucifixion/a-tomb-in-jerusalem-reveals-the-history-of-crucifixion-and-roman-crucifixion-methods/
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Episode 26: I am

Q1: Was there really an earthquake when Jesus died?

A1:

Short:

Matthew reports an earthquake at Jesus' death.
Geological data shows an earthquake in the same period.
This makes the account plausible, though not provable.

Summary:

The Gospel of Matthew uniquely reports that an earthquake occurred at the time of Jesus' crucifixion, presenting it as part of the dramatic events surrounding his death. While this cannot be directly verified as the exact same event, geological research provides evidence that an earthquake did occur in the region within the relevant timeframe. Studies of sediment layers from the Dead Sea area, particularly near Ein Gedi, have identified seismic disturbances that can be dated with reasonable precision. These studies indicate a significant earthquake event sometime between 26 and 36 AD, which aligns closely with the estimated date of Jesus' crucifixion.

Scholar:

The report of an earthquake at the time of Jesus's crucifixion is consistent with the geological evidence for an earthquake occurring in Israel sometime between 26 and 36 AD.

In addition to the testimony of the Gospel according to Matthew, there is geological evidence for an earthquake in Judea around the time of Jesus's crucifixion:

geologist Jefferson Williams . . . and colleagues Markus Schwab and Achim Brauer of the German Research Center for Geosciences studied three cores from the beach of the Ein Gedi Spa adjacent to the Dead Sea. Varves, which are annual layers of deposition in the sediments, reveal that at least two major earthquakes affected the core: a widespread earthquake in 31 B.C. and an early first century seismic event that happened sometime between 26 A.D. and 36 A.D.⁸⁵⁶

⁸⁵⁶ Jennifer Viegas, "Day of Jesus" Crucifixion Believed Determined." <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna47596864>. See: Williams, Schwab & Brauer "An early first-century earthquake in the Dead Sea", *International Geology Review*, www.academia.edu/6108262/Quake_Article.

Q2: Did first century Jews really use rock-cut tombs that were sealed by large stones?

A2:

Short:

Yes, rock-cut tombs sealed with stones were common in first-century Judea.

Most tombs used square stones, not round ones.

The Gospel descriptions fit well with archaeological evidence.

Summary:

Archaeology strongly confirms that first-century Jews commonly used rock-cut tombs sealed with large stones, known as *golel*, which served to protect the tomb from impurity, animals, and theft.

Hundreds of such tombs have been discovered in and around Jerusalem, showing that this burial practice was widespread and well established in the time of Jesus.

While modern depictions often show round, disk-shaped stones, archaeological evidence indicates that these were relatively rare and typically associated with wealthy or royal individuals.

The majority of tombs instead used large, roughly square stones, which were simpler to produce and more common among ordinary people, even those of some means.

This fits well with the description of Joseph of Arimathea, who is portrayed as wealthy but not necessarily part of the highest elite, making a square sealing stone more historically likely.

The Gospel language describing the stone as being “rolled” does not require a perfectly round shape, since the Greek verb used can also mean “moved” or “dislodged,” and square stones could in fact be shifted or “rolled” with considerable effort.

Scholar:

First century Jews really did use rock-cut tombs that were sealed by large stones, either round or (more often) square.⁸⁵⁷

As archaeologist Jeremy Stein explains:

A common aspect of first-century tombs was the large stone which covered the mouth of tombs, known as “*golel*” in Hebrew. The primary purpose of the *golel* was to prevent ritual impurities and mask the scent of the decay in a tomb. It would have also kept out animals or robbers who sought to steal the funeral gifts often left in a tomb. With that being said, the *golel* would have been a very common aspect of the world of Jesus, leaving a significant amount behind for archaeologists to continue to discover today.

From what has been uncovered, it becomes apparent that the *golel* stones came in a few different shapes — round or disk-shaped, and square being the most notable. But when considering them in the light of archaeological evidence, the reality of the situation becomes significantly clearer.

⁸⁵⁷ See Zahi Shaked, “Jewish graves really caves sealed with rolling stones.” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qCdIeFwxOuU>.

To date, over 900 different intact first-century tombs have been found in Jerusalem, yet only four of them have circular stones covering the entrance, three of which have been identified with royalty.

Round stones were significantly easier to move and, much like today, created a cleaner “picturesque” tomb. However in crafting them, a mason would need to contribute a significantly higher amount of man hours (compared to a “square,” which is often seen as large, modified field stone), increasing the cost of an already costly tomb, and almost definitely the reason why we see this attached so closely to royal elites of Jesus’ day.

Although Joseph of Arimathea was a wealthy man, he was still a “relatively ordinary man.” His wealth clearly was not that of the level of royalty, and therefore it is more probable that his tomb was not one of the “top four” tombs in Jerusalem, making it much more likely that what covered the tomb was the more common square stone.

The archaeological evidence pointing to the square *golel* in front of the tomb of Jesus, however, leads to big questions for students of the Gospels: “How was the stone ‘rolled’ away? Don’t you need a round to stone in order for it to be rolled?”

The answer to this is found both in the wording as well as the reality of the technique used in the burial practices of the day. In the texts of the Synoptic Greek, the word verb “*kulio*,” which commonly means “rolled,” can also mean “dislodged” or “moved back” as well. Although a square is not simple to roll, it still can be rolled.

There appears to have been two ways used to roll traditional square stones (mostly without the cork-style protrusion) in the Second Temple period. The first appears to be with two ropes tied together, which would be wrapped around the square stone with one rope coming out of each of the four vertical sides. Individuals could then use their strength and their gravitation force from their weight to counter act the stone and “roll” it this way. This method would seemingly be used for the larger of stones (as the average “rolling stone” would be roughly 4 feet in diameter), which could serve as a possibility for the stone spoken of in the Gospels as both Matthew 27:60 and Mark 16:3-4 state that the stone for Jesus’ tomb was seemingly larger than the average stone as both includes the Greek descriptor “*megan*,” meaning “great” or “big.”

The second way someone could “roll” the stone would be by sheer force. About 15 years ago, a friend and colleague of mine, archaeologist Shimon Gibson, happened across one of the hundreds of Second Temple period square stones in front of a tomb during an excavation in Jerusalem and rolled it with members of his team. Although the stone was able to be “rolled,” he stated it was backbreaking work.

Regardless of the method of how the stone was rolled, the word *kulio* could easily be applied to either a square stone or the much-easier-to-move circular stone. The biblical text seems to allude to the difficulty connected to the square stone as the three women who come to the grave in Mark’s account ask the question, “Who will roll away the stone from the entrance of the tomb?” (16:3), showing the assumption that the three women working together did not expect to be able to move the stone.⁸⁵⁸

⁸⁵⁸ Jeremy Stein, “The Rolling Stone Tomb.” (2020), <https://thechls.org/en/resources/israel/the-rolling-stone-tomb>.

Q3: Why did the authorities think that Jesus might “rise from the grave,” and what did they understand by this?

A3:

Short:

They took Jesus’ words about “rising” seriously, but misunderstood them. They likely expected deception or symbolic “rising,” not resurrection. This is why they feared the disciples might fake it.

Summary:

When the authorities heard Jesus speak about “rising,” they would not have understood this in the later Christian sense of a bodily resurrection within history, since that concept did not fit neatly into common Jewish expectations of the time.

Instead, Jewish thought generally associated “rising” with either the final resurrection at the end of time, as seen in passages like John 11:24, or with rare stories of individuals being taken up or “assumed” into heaven, such as Elijah in 2 Kings.

Another possibility within their framework would have been a form of resuscitation, like the raising of Lazarus, though this would not explain how someone could raise himself after death.

Because of these categories, the authorities likely interpreted Jesus’ statements in a vague or suspicious way, rather than as a clear prediction of immediate resurrection.

This helps explain why their primary concern, as recorded in Matthew 27:64, was not that Jesus would literally rise, but that his disciples might steal the body and claim that he had risen.

The wording used suggests a general idea of being “raised” or “lifted,” which could easily be interpreted as a claim of vindication or heavenly exaltation rather than a physical return to life.

Later Jewish polemic traditions also reflect this kind of thinking, suggesting that early explanations focused on claims of removal or ascension rather than resurrection in the Christian sense.

In other words, the authorities’ actions show that they were responding to the potential for a claim about Jesus, not to an expectation that such an event would actually occur.

Scholar:

The authorities probably thought Jesus had predicted his assumption into heaven.

If Jesus’ contemporaries made anything of his predictions about “the Son of Man” (i.e., himself) “rising,” they wouldn’t have understood his comments *in a Christian manner*. Instead, they’d have thought in terms of a) the resurrection of the dead *at the last judgement* (see Mark 12:25 & John 11:24), b) *resuscitation* to earthly life (as with Jesus resuscitating Lazarus – though they probably assumed a dead man couldn’t resuscitate *himself*), or c) stories about prophets who “rose up” and were “assumed” into the heavenly presence of God (e.g. 2 Kings 2:1-12).

The dominance of these cultural assumptions is seen in the Jewish Sanhedrin’s reason for having Jesus’ tomb guarded, namely: “lest his disciples go and steal him away and tell the people, ‘He has risen from the dead’” (Matthew 27:64, ESV). The Greek translated as “risen

from the dead” here isn’t *anastēsetai* (resurrected) but the more general *ēgerthē* (lifted). Interestingly, the later Jewish polemic *Toledot Yeshu* inaccurately claims that:

On the first day of the week [Jesus’s] bold followers came to Queen Helene with the report that he who was slain was truly the Messiah and that he was not in his grave; *he had ascended to heaven as he prophesied.*⁸⁵⁹

Hence, as J. P. Holding surmises, the Sanhedrin’s concern was most likely “that the disciples would steal the body and claim it had ascended to heaven.”⁸⁶⁰

Consider the fact that it was against this Jewish background, in the very city just outside of which he’d recently been publicly executed and entombed, that Jesus’ dispirited Jewish disciples suddenly risked their lives to proclaim *Jesus’s physical resurrection within history* as the fulcrum at the heart of God’s relationship with humanity! Jesus may have predicted that he would die and be resurrected soon thereafter, but his disciples were too in-thrall to their cultural expectations to understand him. And yet, despite Jesus’ humiliating public execution, and despite the persecution that would obviously ensue, the disciples swiftly embraced belief in Jesus’ *resurrection* and re-orientated their religious identity accordingly.

Q4: Why does Joseph quote Jesus; “I will die, and on the third day rise again.”

A4:

Short:

Jesus predicts his resurrection, but the “third day” idea comes from older Jewish patterns. It reflects scriptural themes about God acting quickly to restore. The language points to expectation rooted in the Old Testament.

Summary:

When Joseph repeats Jesus’ claim that he will rise on the third day, the statement reflects not only Jesus’ own prediction, but also a broader pattern of scriptural language and expectation already present within the Old Testament.

One key passage is Hosea 6:2, which speaks of God reviving His people “after two days” and raising them “on the third day,” where the time reference functions as a poetic way of describing a swift and decisive act of restoration rather than a strict timeline.

In the Old Testament, “death” and “resurrection” are often used metaphorically to describe national exile and return, especially in relation to Israel’s restoration, which would shape how such language was understood.

There is also a recurring pattern of significant divine action occurring on the “third day,” such as God’s revelation at Sinai in Exodus 19, reinforcing the symbolic weight of this timeframe.

The story of Jonah is particularly important, as his three days in the fish becomes a narrative pattern later explicitly connected by Jesus himself to his coming death and return.

Isaiah 53 adds another dimension, describing a suffering figure who is “cut off” yet continues to “see his offspring” and “prolong his days,” creating a tension that later readers interpret in light of resurrection.

⁸⁵⁹ My italics.

⁸⁶⁰ J. P. Holding, “Hallucinations and Expectations.” In *Defending the Resurrection*. xulon, 2010, 69.

Taken together, these elements form a network of themes rather than a single direct prophecy, combining suffering, restoration, and divine vindication.

Scholar:

Though not something Joseph says in any of the New Testament Gospels, what Joseph says here draws upon Old Testament prophecy and using traditional language from the Jewish scriptures that refers to significant and imminent acts of God.

Speaking to the Jewish nation in exile, the Old Testament prophet Hosea encourages them to “return to the LORD” with the encouragement that if they do so “After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him.” (Hosea 6:2, ESV.) The language of “after two days . . . on the third day” is not a literal chronology here, but a poetic parallelism (both “two” and “three” basically meaning “few”) indicating that God will act “soon.” As *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: “The expression of time here employed denotes a comparatively short period, and implies that Israel's revival would be speedily as well as certainly accomplished.”⁸⁶¹ Then again, as death is used in the Old Testament a metaphorical representation of the Jewish exile in Babylon, so resurrection from the dead is used by Hosea as a metaphorical representation of return from exile. As the influential Bible commentator Joseph Benson (1748-1821) explains:

A deliverance from miseries or calamities, from which men had despaired of a recovery, is often represented as restoring them to life after death: see Psalm 30:3; Psalm 71:20; Psalm 86:13; particularly the restoration of the Jewish nation is often described, as if it were a resurrection from the dead . . .⁸⁶²

Moreover, the Old Testament arguably contains a pattern of God doing major things on the literal “third day” (for example, revealing himself at Mount Saini, as described in Exodus 19:10–11). It is of particular significance that the reluctant Old Testament prophet Jonah “was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights” (Jonah 1:17) before being deposited on the shore (Jonah 2:10).⁸⁶³ Jesus told the Jewish scribes and Pharisees that “just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.” (Matthew 12:40, see also Luke 11:30).

Finally, it is worth noting that in a highly significant passage about God’s suffering servant, the Old Testament prophet Isaiah wrote:

By oppression and judgment he was taken away;
and as for his generation, who considered
that he was cut off out of the land of the living,
stricken for the transgression of my people?
And they made his grave with the wicked

⁸⁶¹ <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/pulpit/hosea/6.htm>.

⁸⁶² <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/benson/hosea/6.htm>.

⁸⁶³ William P. Cheshire, “Has Science Swallowed the Myth of Jonah’s Whale?” *Christian Research Journal*, Volume 48, number 03 (2025), <https://www.equip.org/articles/has-science-swallowed-the-myth-of-jonahs-whale/#:~:text=The%20text%20of%20Jonah%20presents%20itself%20as%20historical%20narrative%20in%20recounting%20that%20Jonah&text=Hugh%20Ross%2C%20Rescuing%20Inerrancy%20A%20Scientific%20Defense%20>

and with a rich man in his death,
 although he had done no violence,
 and there was no deceit in his mouth.
 Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him;
 he has put him to grief;
 when his soul makes an offering for guilt,
 he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days;
 the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand.
 Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied;
 by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant,
 make many to be accounted righteous,
 and he shall bear their iniquities.
 Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many,
 and he shall divide the spoil with the strong,
 because he poured out his soul to death
 and was numbered with the transgressors;
 yet he bore the sin of many,
 and makes intercession for the transgressors.
 (ESV, Isaiah 53:8-12)

Note how the suffering servant “was cut off out of the land of the living,” and yet “shall see his offspring” and “prolong his days . . .” As the *Pulpit Commentary* observes of Isaiah 53:10:

He shall prolong his days. A seeming contradiction to the statement (ver. 8) that he should be “cut off” out of the land of the living; and the more surprising because his death is made the condition of this long life: “{When thou shalt make his soul an offering [or, ‘sacrifice’] for sin,” then “he shall prolong his days.” But the resurrection of Christ, and his entrance upon an immortal life (Romans 6:9), after offering himself as a Sacrifice upon the cross, exactly meets the difficulty and solves the riddle (comp. Revelation 1:18).

As theologian Albert Barnes (1798–1870) comments:

The meaning here is, that the Messiah, though he should be put to death, would yet see great multitudes who should be his spiritual children. Though he should die, yet he would live again, and his days should be lengthened out. It is fulfilled in the reign of the Redeemer on earth and in his eternal existence and glory in heaven.⁸⁶⁴

Q5: Why does Mary bring myrrh to the tomb?

A5:

Short:

Mary brings myrrh to complete Jesus’ burial preparation.
 This followed normal Jewish burial customs.
 The work had been interrupted by the Sabbath.

⁸⁶⁴ Barnes’ *Notes on the Bible*, Isaiah 53:10, <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/barnes/isaiah/53.htm>.

Summary:

Mary brings myrrh and other spices to the tomb in order to complete the burial process, which had been interrupted due to the arrival of the Sabbath shortly after Jesus' death.

In first-century Jewish practice, bodies were typically wrapped in linen along with spices, both as a sign of honor and to help reduce the odor of decomposition.

Because Jesus died late on Friday, there was limited time to carry out a full burial before the Sabbath began at sunset, when all work was required to cease.

Myrrh is a fragrant gum resin used to cloak odors.

Scholar:

Mary brings myrrh to Jesus's tomb to finish anointing his body for burial.

As an article at Bible Hub explains:

In first-century Judea, it was customary to wrap the deceased's body with linen and spices (see John 19:39-40) to honor the dead and help mitigate the odor of decomposition. Women often took part in this care for loved ones. . . The Sabbath restricted work of any kind (cf. Exodus 20:8-10). When Jesus died on Friday afternoon, preparations had to be rushed. After observing the Sabbath rest (Friday evening to Saturday evening), the women completed their burial tasks at dawn on Sunday.⁸⁶⁵

Q6: Was Jesus' tomb really empty on the third day?

A6:

Short:

There is strong historical evidence that Jesus' tomb was empty.

Multiple independent sources report it.

Even opponents focused on explaining the empty tomb, not denying it.

Summary:

There is good historical reason to think that Jesus' tomb was found empty on the third day, based on multiple independent lines of evidence.

All four Gospels report the empty tomb in forms that show signs of independence, and John's account is often linked to an eyewitness source, the "Beloved Disciple."

The detail about the grave clothes (John 20:7) is widely seen as an unintentional sign of authenticity rather than a theological invention.

Importantly, the discovery is attributed to women, whose testimony was considered weak in first-century Jewish culture, making this detail unlikely to be fabricated.

The early Jewish response also supports this: the debate was over how the tomb became empty, not whether it was empty, implying enemy acknowledgment of the core claim.

⁸⁶⁵ "Why did women visit Jesus' tomb?" https://biblehub.com/q/why_did_women_visit_jesus%27_tomb.htm.

The resurrection was proclaimed in Jerusalem shortly after the events, in the very place where the tomb was known, making it easily falsifiable if a body had remained.

Archaeology confirms that the type of tomb described in the Gospels fits known first-century burial practices in Jerusalem.

Scholar:

There is good evidence for the claim that Jesus's tomb was empty on the third day.

German New Testament critic Klaus Berger states that "The reports about the empty tomb are related by all four Gospels (and other writings of early Christianity) in a form independent of one another".⁸⁶⁶ Moreover, as philosopher and theologian William Lane Craig points out:

Behind the fourth gospel stands the Beloved Disciple, whose reminiscences fill out the traditions employed. The visit of the disciples to the empty tomb [see John 20:1-10] is therefore attested not only in tradition but by this disciple.⁸⁶⁷

That is, the *publicly falsifiable* claim that Jesus' tomb was empty enjoys *eyewitness attestation*. Moreover, John's observation of the positioning of the grave clothes in the tomb (John 20:7) is an *unintentional sign of historicity*. Furthermore, testimony to the empty tomb comes from both the women (see Mark 16:6 and Luke 24:3) and from the disciples (see John 20:1-10).

Philosopher J. P. Moreland notes that within the pages of the NT the main debate between the disciples and the Jewish establishment "was over why [the tomb] was empty, not whether it was empty."⁸⁶⁸ The reality of the empty tomb (and hence the burial) is thereby implicitly conceded by the *enemy source* of the Jewish establishment, who focus upon trying to explain *why the tomb was empty*. Moreland also notes that:

the resurrection was preached in Jerusalem just a few weeks after the crucifixion. If the tomb had not been empty, such preaching could not have occurred. The body of Jesus could have been produced, and since it is likely that the location of Joseph of Arimathea's tomb was well known (he was a respected member of the Sanhedrin), it would not have been difficult to find where Jesus was buried.⁸⁶⁹

As J. P. Holding writes: "That such an important personage buried Jesus in his personal tomb is taken to be a failsafe for the historicity of the burial, for it is assumed to be impossible that the New Testament could make such an important person or his role up and get away with it."⁸⁷⁰

Positing that Jesus' corpse would have been unrecognizable by the time the disciple's publicly proclaimed the resurrection doesn't work. Philosopher Stephen T. Davis comments:

⁸⁶⁶ Quoted by Craig in: *Jesus' Resurrection: Fact or Figment?* Edited by Paul Copan and Ronald K. Tacelli. IVP Academic, 2009, 35.

⁸⁶⁷ William Lane Craig, "The Empty Tomb of Jesus." In *Gospel Perspectives: Studies of History and Tradition in the Gospels*, edited by R.T. France and David Wenham. Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1981, 192.

⁸⁶⁸ J. P. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City*. Baker, 1987, 163.

⁸⁶⁹ J. P. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City*. Baker, 1987, 161.

⁸⁷⁰ J. P. Holding, "Was Joseph of Arimathea a Myth?" In *Defending the Resurrection*. xulon, 2010, 285.

I do not agree that Jesus' corpse would have been unrecognizable after seven weeks . . . I myself also checked with an eminent pathologist on this point, who told me that when a body is in fact buried, and the climate is dry and fairly cool, a corpse can be readily identified for much longer than that. Moreover, we must note that any body that was found in Jesus' tomb and put on display, even an unrecognizable one, would have spelled disaster for the Christian movement.⁸⁷¹

The gospel reports that it was Jesus' *female* disciples who discovered the empty tomb all pass the criteria of *embarrassment*. In first-century Jewish culture women were considered so unreliable that their testimony was automatically suspect. The *Mishnah* states that women are "unsuitable to bear witness."⁸⁷² The first century Jewish historian Josephus writes of not allowing women to be witnesses "on account of the levity and boldness of their sex."⁸⁷³ Rabbi Ben Herman explains that

The Talmud, in Shevuot 30a and Gittin 46a, states that a woman cannot be a witness because her place is at home and not in court. As a result, women were only used as witnesses in matters related to them (things involving their families or their bodies), for identification of people or for events regarding places frequented only by women.⁸⁷⁴

It is, then, highly significant that the gospels relate that women first discovered the empty tomb. As theologian Gerald O'Collins observes:

Surprisingly, women enjoy a witness function in both the passion and resurrection narratives . . . they could testify both to the fact of his burial and the location of his grave. Subsequently they discover that grave to be empty. If the discovery story were simply a legend created by the early Christians, it remains difficult to explain why women find a place in the story. In Jewish society they did not count as valid witnesses . . . The role of the women in the story provides a sound argument for its historical reliability.⁸⁷⁵

Furthermore, although it coheres with prevailing patriarchal attitudes, the male disciples' failure to believe the women's report of the empty tomb is, at least in terms of Christian tradition, likewise rather embarrassing: "they would not believe it", ruminates Mark (16:8), while Luke narrates that the women's report to the male disciples "seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them." (Luke 24:11.) Hence: "the fact that it is women, rather than men, who are the chief witnesses to the empty tomb is best explained by the historical facticity of the narrative in this regard."⁸⁷⁶ As theologian Craig A. Evans comments:

The story of the women who witness Jesus' burial and then return early Sunday to

⁸⁷¹ Stephen T. Davis, *Disputed issues: Contending for Christian Faith in Today's Academic Setting*. Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2009, 67.

⁸⁷² *Mishnah Shabot* 4.1 quoted by John Dickson, *Investigating Jesus: An Historian's Quest*. Oxford: Lion, 2010, 130.

⁸⁷³ Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, (4.8.15).

⁸⁷⁴ Ben Herman, "Jewish Witnesses: Who Qualifies?" <https://rabbibenhernan.com/2015/08/23/jewish-witnesses-who-qualifies/>.

⁸⁷⁵ Gerald O'Collins, *The Resurrection of Jesus Christ*. Pennsylvania: Judson, 1973, 42-43.

⁸⁷⁶ William Lane Craig and Sinnott-Armstrong, *God? A Debate between a Christian and an Atheist*. Oxford University Press, 2004, 23.

anoint his body smacks of historicity. It is hard to see why relatively unknown women would feature so prominently in such an important story, if what we have here is fiction. But if the women's intention is to mourn privately, as Jewish law and custom allowed, and, even more importantly, to note the precise location of Jesus' tomb, so that the later gathering of his remains for burial in his family tomb is possible, then we have a story that fits Jewish customs, on the one hand, and stands in tension with resurrection expectations and supporting apologetics, on the other.⁸⁷⁷

An objection often raised against the women being witnesses to the empty tomb is that the different gospels report slightly different lists of women on the scene. However, all four gospels agree on the primary (and culturally embarrassing) point that it was *some women* who discovered the empty tomb. Besides, the overlapping lists of names are in fact compatible with one another; it's just that none of the lists is exhaustive. If this lack of unanimity has any significance, it actually lies in indicating the *independence* of these reports, which adds to their historical value!

Atheist Jerry A. Coyne complains that "despite ardent searching" archaeologists have not "found such a tomb."⁸⁷⁸ In point of fact, archaeologists have found over a thousand such rock-cut tombs in Jerusalem:

What is clear is that the kind of tomb suggested by the Gospel accounts *is* consistent with what is now known of contemporary practice in the Jerusalem area: i.e. a rock-cut tomb, a low entrance closed by a moveable stone, and a raised burial couch within.⁸⁷⁹

Moreover, according to archaeologist John McRay, "the archaeological and early literary evidence argues strongly for those who associate [Jesus' tomb] with the Church of the Holy Sepulchre."⁸⁸⁰ Theologian James D. G. Dunn allows that "the site has about as much plausibility as could be hoped for. Other sites for the original tomb of Jesus have been suggested, but hardly with the same credibility."⁸⁸¹ Historian Simon Seabag Montefiore affirms: "It is likely that the present Church of the Holy Sepulchre, which encloses both the place of crucifixion and the tomb, is the genuine site since its tradition was kept alive by Christians for the next three centuries."⁸⁸² Dan Bahat, former City Archaeologist of Jerusalem, concludes: "We may not be absolutely certain that the site of the Holy Sepulchre Church is the site of Jesus' burial, but we certainly have no other site that can lay a claim nearly as weighty, and we really have no reason to reject the authenticity of the site."⁸⁸³

In 2016 a conservation team from the National Technical University of Athens set to work on restoring the shrine within the Holy Sepulchre Church and "the marble covering protecting the original limestone slab upon which Jesus was believed to have been laid [was] temporarily removed for restoration and cleaning, thereby exposing to view the original slab, [not] seen since 1555."⁸⁸⁴ According to National Geographic's archaeologist-in-residence,

⁸⁷⁷ Craig A. Evans, "Jewish Burial Customs and the Resurrection of Jesus." http://craigaeans.com/Burial_Traditions.pdf.

⁸⁷⁸ Jerry A. Coyne, *Faith vs. Fact*. London: Penguin, 2016, 121.

⁸⁷⁹ Martin Biddle, *The Tomb Of Christ*. Stroud, Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing, 1999, 55.

⁸⁸⁰ John McRay, *Archaeology & the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2008, 216.

⁸⁸¹ James D. G. Dunn, *Why Believe in Jesus' Resurrection?* London: SPCK, 2016, 32.

⁸⁸² Hugh Montefiore, *Jerusalem: The Biography*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2011, 130.

⁸⁸³ Dan Bahat, "Does the Holy Sepulchre Church Mark the Burial of Jesus?" *Biblical Archaeological Review* 12.3, 1986, 26-45.

⁸⁸⁴ William Lane Craig, "Excavating the Tomb of Jesus." <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/excavating-the-tomb-of-jesus#ixzz4Q3vk6rxS>.

Fredrik Hiebert, this “appears to be visible proof that the location of the tomb has not shifted through time, something that scientists and historians have wondered for decades.”⁸⁸⁵ As archaeologist Jodi Magness observes:

All of this is perfectly consistent with what we know about how wealthy Jews disposed of their dead in the time of Jesus. This does not, of course, prove that the event was historical. But what it does suggest is that whatever the sources were for the gospel accounts, they were familiar with this tradition and these burial customs.⁸⁸⁶

At the very least, then, archaeology demonstrates that the NT reports of an empty tomb pass the criterion of *historical verisimilitude*. However, one might well argue that *we have the tomb of Jesus, and it is empty!*

We may also note that discovering the tomb of one’s recently interned rabbi to be unexpectedly empty is certainly the sort of thing that would prove *memorable*.

Theologian Craig A. Evans recounts that “the consensus of scholarship affirms the historicity of the empty tomb of Jesus.”⁸⁸⁷ For example:

- Klaus Berger: “Without a doubt the grave of Jesus was found to be empty . . .”⁸⁸⁸
- D. H. Van Dallen: “It is extremely difficult to object to the empty tomb on historical grounds; those who deny it do so on the basis of theological or philosophical assumptions.”⁸⁸⁹
- John Dickson: “Most experts accept that Jesus’ tomb was empty within days of his burial.”⁸⁹⁰
- C. H. Dodd: “I should be disposed to conclude that . . . tradition . . . preserved also a genuine memory that on that Sunday morning [Jesus’] tomb was found broken open and to all appearance empty.”⁸⁹¹
- Michael Grant: “The historian cannot justifiably deny the empty tomb . . . the evidence necessitates the conclusion the tomb was found empty.”⁸⁹²
- Michael Green: “There can be no doubt that the tomb of Jesus was, in fact, empty on the first Easter day.”⁸⁹³
- Jacob Kremer: “By far most exegetes hold firmly to the reliability of the biblical statements concerning the empty tomb.”⁸⁹⁴

⁸⁸⁵ Quoted by Kristen Romey, “Unsealing of Christ’s Reputed Tomb Turns Up New Revelations.” *National Geographic*, October 31, 2016.

⁸⁸⁶ Jodi Magness, quoted by Kristen Romey, “Unsealing of Christ’s Reputed Tomb Turns Up New Revelations.” *National Geographic*, October 31, 2016.

⁸⁸⁷ Craig A. Evans, “Who Was Jesus? A Christian Perspective” In *Who Was Jesus? A Jewish-Christian Dialogue*, edited by Paul Copan and Craig A. Evans. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001, 25.

⁸⁸⁸ Berger quoted by William Lane Craig, *A Reasonable Response*. Chicago: Moody, 2013, 300.

⁸⁸⁹ Quoted by William Lane Craig, “Contemporary Scholarship and the Resurrection of Jesus.”

[https://www.bethinking.org/did-jesus-rise-from-the-dead/contemporary-scholarship-and-the-resurrection-of-jesus#:~:text=\(iii\)%20Nor%20can%20hallucinations%20account,morning%20a%20divine%20miracle%20occurred.](https://www.bethinking.org/did-jesus-rise-from-the-dead/contemporary-scholarship-and-the-resurrection-of-jesus#:~:text=(iii)%20Nor%20can%20hallucinations%20account,morning%20a%20divine%20miracle%20occurred.)

⁸⁹⁰ John Dickson and Greg Clarke. *Life of Jesus*. Sydney: CPX, 2009, 117.

⁸⁹¹ C. H. Dodd, *The Founder of Christianity*. London: Collins Fontana, 1973, 173.

⁸⁹² Michael Grant, *Jesus: An Historian’s Review Of The Gospels*. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1977, 176.

⁸⁹³ Michael Green quoted by Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999, 245.

⁸⁹⁴ Jacob Kremer, in Craig A. Evans, “Who Was Jesus? A Christian Perspective” In *Who Was Jesus? A Jewish-Christian Dialogue*, edited by Paul Copan and Craig A. Evans. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001, 25.

- Alister McGrath: “the empty tomb . . . is such a major element in each of the four gospels . . . that it must be considered to have a basis in historical fact.”⁸⁹⁵
- Jeffrey L. Morrow: “The empty tomb is almost certainly pre-Markan and historical.”⁸⁹⁶
- Jake H. O’Connell concludes it is “certainly more probable than not [that] Jesus’ *tomb* was discovered empty.”⁸⁹⁷
- Mark D. Smith: “some women among the disciples visited the tomb of Jesus to provide for a fuller preparation of the body . . . When they arrived, they found the tomb empty.”⁸⁹⁸
- Geza Vermes: “the women belonging to the entourage of Jesus discovered an empty tomb and were definite that it was the tomb [in which Jesus had been placed].”⁸⁹⁹

As Eric Metaxas writes: “it’s clear that Jesus really lived and was crucified and lain in a tomb and that on the third day, that tomb was found to be empty. On those points there is almost zero doubt.”⁹⁰⁰

Recommended Resources for Episode 26

YouTube Playlist, “Jesus’ Tomb was Empty.”

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLQhh3qcwVEWhqraAeJ8gVcSlbXhZR2R6p>

William Lane Craig, “The Disciples’ Inspection of the Empty Tomb.”

<https://www.reasonablefaith.org/writings/scholarly-writings/historical-jesus/the-disciples-inspection-of-the-empty-tomb>

———. “The Historicity of the Empty Tomb of Jesus.” <https://www.reasonablefaith.org/writings/scholarly-writings/historical-jesus/the-historicity-of-the-empty-tomb-of-jesus>

———. “Reply to Evan Fales: On the Empty Tomb of Jesus”

<https://www.reasonablefaith.org/writings/scholarly-writings/historical-jesus/reply-to-evan-fales-on-the-empty-tomb-of-jesus>

William P. Cheshire, “Has Science Swallowed the Myth of Jonah’s Whale?” *Christian Research Journal*, Volume 48, number 03 (2025),

<https://www.equip.org/articles/has-science-swallowed-the-myth-of-jonahs-whale/#:~:text=The%20text%20of%20Jonah%20presents%20itself%20as%20historical%20narrative%20in%20recounting%20that%20Jonah&text=Hugh%20Ross%2C%20Rescuing%20Inerrancy:%20A%20Scientific%20Defense%20>

Jeremy Stein, “The Rolling Stone Tomb.” (2020), <https://thechls.org/en/resources/israel/the-rolling-stone-tomb>

Jennifer Viegas, “Day of Jesus” Crucifixion Believed Determined.”

<https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna47596864>.

Zondervan *Handbook of Biblical Archaeology*, “Sealing the Tomb of Jesus.”

<https://www.olivetree.com/blog/sealing-tomb-jesus/>

Peter S. Williams. *Behold the Man: Essays on the Historical Jesus*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2024.

⁸⁹⁵ Alister McGrath, *Jesus: Who He Is and Why He Matters*. IVP, 1992, 89.

⁸⁹⁶ Jeffrey L. Morrow, *Jesus’ Resurrection: A Jewish Convert Examines the Evidence*. Toledo, Ohio: Principium Institute, 2017, 59.

⁸⁹⁷ Jake H. O’Connell, *Jesus’ Resurrection and Apparitions: A Bayesian Analysis*. Eugene, OR: Resource Publications, 2016, 150.

⁸⁹⁸ Mark D. Smith, *The Final Days of Jesus: The Thrill of Defeat, The Agony of Victory. A Classical Historian Explores Jesus’s Arrest, Trial, and Execution*. Cambridge: Lutterworth, 2018, 210.

⁸⁹⁹ Geza Vermes, *Jesus the Jew*. SCM, 2014, 40.

⁹⁰⁰ Eric Metaxas, *Miracles*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2014, 100.

———. *Getting at Jesus: A Comprehensive Critique of Neo-Atheist Nonsense About the Jesus of History*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2019.

Episode 27: Home

Q1: Why does Mary Magdalene not recognize Jesus at first?

A1:

Short:

Mary does not recognize Jesus because she is overwhelmed with grief and not expecting a resurrection.

She assumes he is the gardener.

Recognition only comes when Jesus speaks her name.

Summary:

Mary Magdalene's failure to recognize Jesus is best explained by a combination of emotional, psychological, and contextual factors rather than any physical impossibility. She is described as weeping outside the tomb, already convinced that Jesus' body has been taken, not that he has risen.

Within that expectation, she interprets the man she sees as the gardener, a reasonable assumption given that the tomb was located in a garden setting.

Recognition in the narrative is triggered not by sight alone, but by personal address, when Jesus speaks her name, "Mary," which immediately reframes her understanding of the situation.

This suggests that her initial non-recognition is tied to expectation and perception, not necessarily to any change in Jesus' appearance.

Scholar:

Mary is crying, and is not expecting Jesus's resurrection, and so she assumes that the man addressing her is the gardener.

The fourth Gospel reports:

Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb. And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned and said to him in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"—and that he had said these things to her. (ESV, John 20: 11-18)

As *Legacy of Adam* producer Roger Gihlemon comments: “Mary Magdalene is overwhelmed by grief and shock. She is not expecting Jesus to be alive. The episode shows that resurrection is not something people are prepared for—it breaks normal expectations.”

Note that the fourth Gospel’s depiction of Mary meeting the resurrected Jesus presupposes its own earlier report that “Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid. So because of the Jewish day of Preparation, since the tomb was close at hand, they laid Jesus there.” (John 19:41-42, ESV.) Interestingly, in 2025, a group of archaeologists led by Professor Francesca Romana Stasolla of La Sapienza University showed that

As the quarry ceased to be exploited and before the church [of the Holy Sepulcher] was built, [as well as for several tombs] part of the area was used for agriculture. “Low stone walls were erected, and the space between them was filled with dirt . . .” The presence of olive trees and grapevines was identified through archaeobotanical and pollen analysis on samples retrieved from the excavations under the floor of the ancient basilica. From the archaeological context and strata, it belongs to the pre-Christian era . . . “The archaeobotanical findings have been especially interesting for us, in light of what is mentioned in the Gospel of John, whose information is considered written or collected by someone familiar with Jerusalem at the time. The Gospel mentions a green area between the Calvary and the tomb, and we identified these cultivated fields.⁹⁰¹

Q2: Why Does Jesus tell Mary Magdalene not to touch him?

A2:

Short:

Jesus is not rejecting Mary.
He is telling her not to cling to him as before.
A new phase has begun, leading to his ascension.

Summary:

When Jesus tells Mary Magdalene not to touch him, the Greek wording is better understood as “Do not cling to me” rather than a strict prohibition of physical contact. This suggests that the issue is not touch itself, but Mary’s attempt to hold on to Jesus in the same way as before his death. The statement reflects a transition: Jesus is alive, but his relationship with his followers is changing as he prepares to ascend to the Father. Rather than remaining physically present in the same way, his presence will soon take on a different form. This moment marks a shift from earthly companionship to a new mode of presence and mission.

Scholar:

Jesus is telling Mary Magdalene that she can’t hold onto him as before because he will soon ascend to God the Father.

⁹⁰¹ Francesca Romana Stasolla, quoted by Rosella Tercatin, “Echoing Gospel account, traces of ancient garden found under Church of Holy Sepulchre.” *Times of Israel*, 22nd March 2025, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/echoing-gospel-account-traces-of-ancient-garden-found-under-church-of-holy-sepulchre/>.

In this episode, in an incident based on the fourth Gospel, Jesus says to Mary Magdalene: “Wait, do not touch me yet, for I have not yet risen to my father.” However, the Greek of the report in John 20:17 would be better translated as “Do not cling to me” or “Do not hold on to me.” As *Legacy of Adam* producer Roger Gihlemon explains:

Jesus is not rejecting Mary. He is showing that something has changed. She wants to hold on to him as before, but Jesus explains that a new phase has begun. He is alive, yet his presence will no longer be limited to one place. This moment marks the transition from Jesus being physically with his followers to being present in a new way.

Q3: Why do the disciples still talk about overthrowing the Romans?

A3:

Short:

The disciples still expect a political kingdom.
They have not yet understood Jesus’ teaching.
Their expectations are shaped by their cultural context.

Summary:

The disciples’ expectation of overthrowing the Romans reflects a common first-century Jewish hope for a political Messiah who would restore Israel’s national independence.

Even after the resurrection, they have not yet fully grasped that Jesus’ kingdom is not an earthly political power competing with Rome.

This aligns with the broader historical context, where many Jews anticipated a deliverer who would bring political liberation.

Scholar:

The disciples have yet to come to terms with Jesus’s teaching about his kingdom not being an earthly political power in competition with other earthly political powers.

As *Legacy of Adam* producer Roger Gihlemon explains:

Even after the resurrection, some disciples still expect a political kingdom. The episode shows that understanding takes time. Resurrection does not instantly correct all expectations, but it begins a process of learning what God’s kingdom truly is.

Q4: Is there good reason to believe Jesus was really resurrected from the dead?

A4:

Short:

There is a strong historical case for Jesus' resurrection.

Key facts are widely accepted across scholars.

The main debate is how to explain those facts.

Summary:

Many scholars, regardless of worldview, agree on a core set of facts: Jesus died by crucifixion, his followers were initially devastated, and soon after believed they had encountered the risen Jesus.

These experiences, whether interpreted as real appearances or not, transformed the disciples and led to the rapid emergence of the early Christian movement.

Even skeptical figures like Paul and James are reported to have become convinced after such experiences.

Most scholars also hold that the tomb was likely found empty, though this point has slightly less universal agreement than the others.

Reports of post-mortem appearances are early, multiple, and include both individuals and groups, which is significant for historical analysis.

Historians typically evaluate such data using inference to the best explanation, comparing competing theories like hallucination, deception, or resurrection.

Scholar:

There is a strong historical case for the resurrection of Jesus.

Christian philosopher Gary R. Habermas lists some of the relevant facts that are generally acknowledged by the relevant scholars, regardless of their personal worldview:

The vast majority of critical scholars . . . whatever their personal beliefs . . . at least concede that Jesus died by Roman crucifixion and that his disciples experienced grief and disillusionment at his death, usually allowing that Jesus' burial tomb was later found empty. Then, due to experiences that they believed were appearances of the risen Jesus, the disciples were transformed, even to the point of being willing to die for their faith. At a very early date they began to proclaim the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the church was born shortly afterward, founded on this gospel message. Even a few former sceptics, such as James, the brother of Jesus, and Paul, became believers after they, too, believed that they had seen the risen Jesus.⁹⁰²

Writing with New Testament historian Michael L.icona, Habermas notes that:

⁹⁰² Gary R. Habermas, "The Resurrection and Agnosticism," in *Reasons for Faith: Making a Case for the Christian Faith*, ed. Norman L. Geisler and Chad V. Meister. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007, 281–82.

although the empty tomb lacks the nearly universal acceptance by critical scholars that these other events enjoy, the majority of scholars still clearly seem to think that it is probably also a historical fact.⁹⁰³

With respect to the testimony concerning purported resurrection appearances, Licona comments:

that subsequent to Jesus’ execution, a number of his followers had experiences, in individual and group settings, that convinced them that Jesus had risen from the dead and had appeared to them in some manner . . . is granted by a nearly unanimous consensus of modern scholars. . . . Scholars differ, however, on the perceived nature of the experiences.⁹⁰⁴

The figure below lists specific post-burial appearances of Jesus referenced by the NT in their apparent historical order and notes the sensory modes reportedly involved in these appearances.⁹⁰⁵

Fig. Post-burial Appearances of Jesus.

Resurrection Witnesses	Location	Senses Involved	Sources
Mary Magdalene	Empty Tomb	Saw and talked with Jesus (perhaps touching him)	John 20:11-18
At least five other women, including Joanna & Mary the mother of James	Jerusalem	Saw, heard and touched Jesus	Matt 28:1-10 (see Luke 24:8-11)
Cleopas & Mary	Emmaus Road	Saw and talked with Jesus	Luke 24:13-32
Peter	Unspecified	Saw Jesus	1 Cor 15:5a; Mark 16:7 & Luke 24:34
Ten disciples (and others)	Unspecified room in Jerusalem	Saw and talked with Jesus	John 20:19-23 & Luke 24:36-44

⁹⁰³ Gary R. Habermas and Michael Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*. Kregel, 2004, 74. See Peter S. Williams, “Jesus’ Tomb Was Empty.” YouTube playlist. <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLQhh3qcvVEWhqraAeJ8gVcSlbXhZR2R6p>; William Lane Craig, “The Historicity of the Empty Tomb of Jesus.” <https://www.reasonablefaith.org/writings/scholarly-writings/historical-jesus/the-historicity-of-the-empty-tomb-of-jesus>; “The Disciples’ Inspection of the Empty Tomb.” <https://www.reasonablefaith.org/writings/scholarly-writings/historical-jesus/the-disciples-inspection-of-the-empty-tomb>; and “Reply to Evan Fales: On the Empty Tomb of Jesus” <https://www.reasonablefaith.org/writings/scholarly-writings/historical-jesus/reply-to-evan-fales-on-the-empty-tomb-of-jesus>; Gary R. Habermas, “Empty Tomb of Jesus”; National Geographic Partners, “Unsealing of Christ’s Reputed Tomb.” <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/premium/article/jesus-christ-tomb-burial-church-holy-sepulchre>; Peter S. Williams, *Getting at Jesus: A Comprehensive Critique of Neo-Atheist Nonsense About the Jesus of History*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2019, 272–78.

⁹⁰⁴ Michael Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus, A New Historiographical Approach*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2010, 372–73.

⁹⁰⁵ Based on Thomas A. Miller, *Did Jesus Really Rise From The Dead? A Surgeon-Scientist Examines the Evidence*. Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2013, 106; Michael Wilkins, “Gospel of Matthew.” In *The Gospel and Acts. The Holman Apologetics Commentary on the Bible*, edited by Jeremy Royal Howard, 7–198. Nashville: Holman Reference, 2013, 190–91.

Eleven disciples including Thomas	Unspecified room	Saw, talked with and touched Jesus	John 20:24-29; see 1 Cor 15:5b
Seven disciples	Along the sea of Galilee (Tiberius)	Saw and talked with Jesus	John 21:1-23
500 individuals at once	Unspecified/Galilee	Saw Jesus	1 Cor 15:6; Mark 16:7
Eleven disciples	Galilee	Saw and heard Jesus	Matt 28:16-20
Eleven disciples	Jerusalem	Saw and heard Jesus	Luke 24:45-49 & Acts 1:4-5
Eleven disciples	Jerusalem & Mount of Olives	Saw and heard/talked with Jesus	Luke 24:50-53 & Acts 1:6-11
Saul	Road to Damascus	Saul saw a bright light and talked with Jesus, seeing Jesus within the light, in the presence of companions who saw the light and heard, but did not understand, Jesus' voice ⁹⁰⁶	1 Cor 1:9; 1 Cor 9:1 & 15:8; Acts 9:1-19, 22:1-21 & 26:1-32

From this data, it appears we should take notice of eleven or twelve distinct reports of post-mortem appearance events (depending on whether the appearance to the five hundred is the same event as the appearance to the eleven disciples in Galilee):

- We have *multiple early, independent sources*⁹⁰⁷ for at least one individual and three group appearances.
- The appearance to Peter is *multiply attested in different forms*⁹⁰⁸ and additionally passes the criterion of *historical verisimilitude*⁹⁰⁹ (see 1 Cor 15:5's use of the Aramaic *Cephus* instead of the Greek *Petros*⁹¹⁰).
- The appearance to Mary Magdalene passes the criteria of *embarrassment*⁹¹¹ and *historical verisimilitude* (note the popularity of the name *Mary*, and the Aramaic *Rabboni* in John 20:16).

⁹⁰⁶ See Gary R. Habermas and Antony Flew, "Did Paul actually see the risen Jesus, or did he simply have some sort of vision?" (YouTube video) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8yNdywqtWJ>; BeliefMap, "Did Paul Simply Hallucinate Jesus's Appearing to Him?" <https://beliefmap.org/paul/believe/jesus/appear/hallucination>; Charles Quarles, "Paul as a Witness to the Resurrection of Jesus"; I. Howard Marshall, *Acts*. Nottingham: IVP, 2008, 178–79 and 375; Peter S. Williams, *Getting at Jesus: A Comprehensive Critique of Neo-Atheist Nonsense About the Jesus of History*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2019, 282–87.

⁹⁰⁷ For a discussion of the nature of independence between sources, see Peter S. Williams, *Getting at Jesus: A Comprehensive Critique of Neo-Atheist Nonsense About the Jesus of History*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2019, 243–45.

⁹⁰⁸ According to John P. Meier: "The criterion of multiple attestation focuses on those saying or deeds of Jesus that are attested in more than one independent literary source and/or in more than one literary form or genre. The force of this criterion is increased if a given motif or theme is found in both literary sources and different literary forms" *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus. Vol. 1 The Roots of the Problem and the Person*. New York: Doubleday, 1991, 175.

⁹⁰⁹ According to Thomas R. Yoder Neufeld, the criterion of verisimilitude includes "linguistic and cultural features that fit what we know of first-century Palestine" *Recovering Jesus: The Witness of the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: SPCK, 2007, 44.

⁹¹⁰ Both names mean "rock."

⁹¹¹ As Graham Stanton notes: "traditions which would have been an embarrassment to followers of Jesus in the post-Easter period are unlikely to have been invented" *Gospels and Jesus*. Oxford University Press, 1993, 175. On why testimony from female witness passes the criterion of embarrassment, see Peter S. Williams, *Getting at*

- The *group* appearance to the other women passes the criteria of *embarrassment* and *historical verisimilitude* (the most common female name at the time was *Mary*).
- The appearance to the two disciples on the Road to Emmaus (husband and wife Cleopas and Mary⁹¹²) also passes the criteria of *embarrassment* (Luke 24:25) and *historical verisimilitude*.⁹¹³
- The appearance to the *group* of ten male disciples⁹¹⁴ (plus others) is *multiply attested in different forms*, and is reported by an *eyewitness* (i.e., John).
- The *multiply attested* group appearance to the eleven including Thomas passes the criteria of *embarrassment*, and is likewise reported by an *eyewitness* (i.e., John).
- The *group* appearance to seven disciples by the Sea of Galilee is reported by an *eyewitness* (i.e., John). Moreover, the specific count of fish (John 20:11) is an *unintentional sign of historicity*.⁹¹⁵
- The group appearance to the eleven disciples (or more) in Galilee passes the criteria of *embarrassment* due to its mention that although “they worshiped [Jesus], some doubted” (Matt 28:17).
- The appearance to Saul is *multiply attested in different forms*, including a source containing the Aramaic of Saul’s name (“Saoul, Saoul, why do you persecute me?” Acts 9:4; 22:7; 26:14), and the *eyewitness* testimony of the formerly hostile Saul himself. This testimony reaches us second-hand through Paul’s sometime travelling companion Luke in his book of “Acts,” but also first-hand (albeit without the details given in Acts) through the first of Paul’s undisputed letters to the Corinthians (i.e. 1 Cor 9:1; 1 Cor 15:8).

As for the multi-sensory content of these reports:

- Jesus was reportedly *seen* on at least eleven occasions.⁹¹⁶
- At least nine reports concern appearances to *groups* of two, four, seven, ten, eleven, and even five hundred people.
- While Jesus purportedly appeared to Saul rather than to his travelling companions, they nevertheless both saw the bright light and *heard a voice without understanding it* (perhaps they didn’t speak Aramaic - see Acts 26:14; or perhaps they simply couldn’t make out what the voice said).⁹¹⁷

Jesus: A Comprehensive Critique of Neo-Atheist Nonsense About the Jesus of History. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2019, 273–74.

⁹¹² James Boice, “Who Were the Disciples on the Road to Emmaus?” <https://www.christianity.com/jesus/death-and-resurrection/resurrection/who-were-the-disciples-on-the-road-to-emmaus.html>.

⁹¹³ Note the hospitality culture and the meal etiquette of prayer and bread breaking.

⁹¹⁴ Luke employs a figurative synecdoche when he writes that “the eleven” were assembled with those with them: “because Judas was now gone from them, and dead; and this being their whole number, it is used, though every one might not be present, as particularly Thomas was not; see John 20:19” *Gill’s Exposition of the Entire Bible*, “Luke 24:33.” See also Wayne Jackson, “Does the Expression “the Eleven” (Luke 24:33) Constitute an Error?” <https://christiancourier.com/articles/does-the-expression-the-eleven-luke-24-33-constitute-an-error>.

⁹¹⁵ This criterion “argues that particularly vivid details of an eyewitness can demonstrate accurate knowledge of the environment and the event. This contributes to the credibility of a text” James A. Beverley and Craig A. Evans, *Getting Jesus Right: How Muslims Get Jesus and Islam Wrong*. BayRidge Books, 2015, 201.

⁹¹⁶ See Stephen T. Davis, *Christian Philosophical Theology*. Oxford, 2016, 136–37.

⁹¹⁷ See I. Howard Marshall, *Acts*. Nottingham: IVP, 2008, 178–79 and 375; Peter S. Williams, *Behold the Man: Essays on the Historical Jesus*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2024, 175–78, 189–236 and *Getting at Jesus: A Comprehensive Critique of Neo-Atheist Nonsense About the Jesus of History*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2019, 282–87.

- On ten separate occasions, it is reported that people either *heard* Jesus or *talked with Jesus* (i.e., held a conversation involving both hearing and speaking to Jesus).
- Matthew reports an appearance in which the women *touch* Jesus.
- Luke and John narrate additional appearances in which various people might be taken to touch Jesus.

Fig. Criteria of authenticity that nine reported resurrection appearances pass *in addition* to being *early*, historically *coherent* reports of *memorable* events.

Appearance witnesses	Report	Eyewitness Testimony	Multiple Literarily Independent Sources	Multiple Forms	Embarrassment	Verisimilitude	Unintentional Signs of History
Mary Magdalene	John 20:11-18				X	X	X
At least five other women (incl. Joanna, Salome & Mary the mother of James)	Matt 28:1-10 (see Luke 24:8-11)		X		X	X	
Cleopas and Mary	Luke 24:13-32				X	X	
Peter	1 Cor 15:5; Luke 24:34		X	X		X	X
Ten disciples (and others)	John 20:19-23 & Luke 24:36-44	X	X				
Eleven disciples including Thomas	John 20:24-29; 1 Cor 15:5b	X	X	X	X		
Seven disciples	John 21:1-25	X					X
Eleven disciples (at least)	Matt 28:16-20				X		
Saul (& others)	1 Cor 15:8 & Acts 9:1-19; 22:1-21 & 26:1-32	X	X	X		X	

Using criteria of authenticity to validate specific historical evidence like this is compatible with thinking that the sources containing that evidence are generally unreliable.⁹¹⁸ However, *the greater application these criteria find in those sources, the more they indicate their general reliability.*

With the evidence in hand, one can turn to the task of assessing different competing theories of how best to explain that evidence. Were the disciples deceivers, deceived, or deluded? Did someone steal Jesus's body from the tomb? Were Jesus's reported post-mortem appearances hallucinations? And so on. As philosopher Angus Menuge explains:

Historians do not use *induction* (which applies to generalizations of repeatable effects) but *abduction*, an inference to the best explanation of a singular event.

⁹¹⁸ Note that a source being unreliable is not necessarily the same thing as its being deliberately misleading.

According to the logic of abduction, given the available data, we are to select the best of competing explanations.⁹¹⁹

The warrant of any historical explanation (including the Christian doctrine of Jesus's resurrection) depends on a combination of explanatory factors, including its *simplicity*, *explanatory scope* (covering the relevant facts), *explanatory power* (the degree to which it raises the probability of the facts to be explained), *explanatory plausibility* (the degree to which our background knowledge implies an explanatory hypothesis), degree of *explanatory disconfirmation* (avoiding conflict with our background knowledge), and degree of *explanatory ad hoc-ness* (the fewer contrived, un-evidenced hypotheses, the better).⁹²⁰

For example, the resurrection hypothesis offers a relatively simple⁹²¹ explanation of the historical evidence pertaining to Jesus's death, burial, empty tomb, reported appearances, and the origins of Christianity; an explanation that combines excellent explanatory scope (i.e., *if* the resurrection happened, it would explain “why the tomb was found empty, why the disciples saw post-mortem appearances of Jesus, and why the Christian faith came into being”⁹²²) and power (i.e., *if* God chose to resurrect Jesus, *then* his empty tomb, reported post-mortem appearances, and the early origin of belief in Jesus's resurrection all become highly probable) with a *fair* degree of plausibility and *low* degrees of *disconfirmation* and *ad hoc-ness* (especially if one already accepts theism). In a careful comparative analysis with alternative explanations, the relevant evidence is best explained by the hypothesis that *Jesus was resurrected by God*.⁹²³ As noted theologian N. T. Wright argues, the resurrection hypothesis “possesses unrivalled power to explain the historical data at the heart of early Christianity.”⁹²⁴

Q5: What is the meaning of Jesus rising up into the sky and disappearing into the clouds?

A5:

Short:

The ascension shows that Jesus is no longer physically present on earth.

It marks his return to the Father.

The event functions as a visible sign for the disciples.

Summary:

The ascension of Jesus is reported in multiple early sources, most clearly in Luke and Acts, and is also referenced elsewhere in the New Testament. This gives the event a degree of historical grounding through multiple attestation across different writings.

⁹¹⁹ Angus Menuge, “Justified Belief in the Resurrection,” In *The Resurrection Fact: Responding to Modern Critics*, edited by John J. Bombaro and Adam S. Francisco, 117–46. Irvine, CA: NRP, 2016, 131.

⁹²⁰ See Peter S. Williams, *Getting at Jesus: A Comprehensive Critique of Neo-Atheist Nonsense About the Jesus of History*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2019, Chapter 5.

⁹²¹ See Jay Wesley Richards, “Divine Simplicity: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly” in James K. Beilby ed., *Faith And Clarity: Philosophical Contributions to Christian Theology*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2006.

⁹²² William Lane Craig, “The Resurrection of Jesus.” <https://www.reasonablefaith.org/writings/popular-writings/jesus-of-nazareth/the-resurrection-of-jesus>.

⁹²³ See the relevant recommended resources for this episode.

⁹²⁴ N. T. Wright, *Resurrection of the Son of God*. London: SPCK, 2003, 718.

At the same time, the way it is described, rising and disappearing into the clouds, likely carries symbolic meaning for the disciples. In ancient Jewish thought, clouds and upward movement were associated with divine presence and the heavenly realm. Thus, the physical movement can be understood as a visible expression of a deeper reality: Jesus' transition from earthly ministry to being with the Father.

Rather than describing a change of location in a modern, physical sense, the event communicates a change in status and mode of presence.

Scholar:

Jesus rising up into the sky and disappearing into the clouds is a multiply attested historical event that symbolised to the disciples that Jesus was no longer physically present on earth, but was now with God the Father.

The so-called "ascension" of Jesus is narrated twice by Luke (in Luke 24:50-53 and Acts 1:9-10), and it is also mentioned by the apostles John and Paul (see John 20:17 and 1 Timothy 3:16). This event therefore passes the historical criteria of *multiple independent attestation*, in *multiple forms*, and at an *early* date after the reported event (the fourth Gospel is from the end of the first century,⁹²⁵ Luke's works are both from the middle of the mid-century,⁹²⁶ and Paul's first letter to Timothy being traditionally dated around 64/65 AD⁹²⁷).

Christian philosopher Stephen T. Davis sees Jesus's physical motion into the sky as an enacted symbol of his spiritual ascension into the non-physical heavenly realm: "a symbolic act performed for the sake of the disciples. . . . The ascension of Jesus . . . was visibly symbolized for the disciples by a change of location."⁹²⁸ As *Legacy of Adam* producer Roger Gihlemon explains:

The ascension shows that Jesus' work on earth is complete . . . He returns to the Father for a coronation and to be seated next to God. The episode presents this as the moment when Jesus is fully revealed as the Savior of the world.

Q6: Why believe that Jesus is the incarnate Son of God?

A6:

Short:

There is a cumulative case for Jesus' divinity.

His claims, character, and impact must be explained together.

The main question is how best to account for them.

⁹²⁵ See Peter S. Williams, *Behold the Man: Essays on the Historical Jesus*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2024.

⁹²⁶ See Peter S. Williams *Getting at Jesus: A Comprehensive Critique of Neo-Atheist Nonsense About the Jesus of History*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2019.

⁹²⁷ "Did Paul truly write 1 Timothy 1?" https://biblehub.com/q/did_paul_truly_write_1_timothy_1.htm; "Who Wrote 1 Timothy?" <https://www.thomasonbibles.com/blog/who-wrote-1-timothy/>.

⁹²⁸ Stephen T. Davis in *Jesus's Resurrection: Fact or Figment? A Debate between William Lane Craig and Gerd Lüdemann*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2000.

Summary:

One classical argument is that Jesus' claims about himself force a choice: if false, he would be either deceptive or deluded, yet his character does not fit either category.

Many scholars, including critics, agree that Jesus appears morally serious, coherent, and sincere, making the "mad or bad" options difficult to sustain.

This leads to the well-known "Mad, Bad, or God" framework, which argues that if Jesus truly made divine claims and was neither insane nor deceptive, those claims deserve serious consideration.

The main point of debate is whether Jesus actually made such claims, but even skeptics often concede that at least some evidence points in that direction.

Beyond this argument, the case is cumulative: it includes Jesus' teachings, reported miracles, perceived fulfillment of earlier traditions, and especially the early belief in his resurrection.

Taken together, these factors form a historically grounded argument that has persuaded many, though it remains contested.

Conclusion:

Belief in Jesus as the Son of God rests not on a single proof, but on how one explains the total pattern of evidence surrounding his life and legacy.

Scholar:

There is a reasonable cumulative case for the Christian view that Jesus is the incarnate Son of God.

Why believe that Jesus really is the incarnate Son of God? One reason is, as philosopher and theologian William Lane Craig argues, "If Jesus was not who he claimed to be, then he was either a charlatan or a madman, neither of which is plausible."⁹²⁹ Jesus' claims about himself were astonishing enough to invite charges of insanity (if his claim was sincere) or blasphemy (if his claim was insincere). But the evidence appears to show that Jesus was *both sane and sincere*. This paradox, which is more to be expected on the hypothesis of the incarnation than its denial, lies at the heart of an ancient argument for the divinity of Jesus summarized in Latin as "*aut deus aut malus homo*," that is "either God or a bad man." As philosopher Peter Kreeft explains:

The first premise is that Christ must be either God, as he claims to be, or a bad man, if he wasn't who he claims to be. The second premise is that he isn't a bad man. The conclusion is that he is God . . . he either believes his claim to be God, or he doesn't. If he does [and the claim is false], then he is intellectually bad . . . because that's a pretty large confusion! And if he does not believe his claim, then he is morally bad: a deceiver and a terrible blasphemer.⁹³⁰

Philosopher Stephen T. Davis comments:

Virtually everyone who reads the Gospels . . . comes away with the conviction that Jesus was a wise and good man . . . Jesus shows none of the character traits usually associated with those who have delusions of grandeur or "divinity complexes." Such

⁹²⁹ William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, third edition. Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2008, 327.

⁹³⁰ Peter Kreeft, *Between Heaven and Hell*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2021, 38–39.

people are easily recognizable by their egotism, narcissism, inflexibility, predictable behaviour, and inability to relate understandingly and lovingly to others . . . We live in an age when scholars confidently make all sorts of bizarre claims about the historical Jesus. But few scripture scholars of any theological stripe seriously entertain the possibility that Jesus was either a lunatic or a liar.⁹³¹

Davis formalizes these observations into what he calls the “Mad, Bad, or God” argument:

1. Jesus claimed, either explicitly or implicitly, to be divine
2. Jesus was either right or wrong in claiming to be divine
3. If Jesus was wrong in claiming to be divine, Jesus was either mad or bad
4. Jesus was not bad
5. Jesus was not mad
6. Therefore, Jesus was not wrong in claiming to be divine
7. Therefore, Jesus was right in claiming to be divine
8. Therefore, Jesus was divine.⁹³²

The main challenge to this argument comes from those who question the first premise. For example, while British atheist Richard Dawkins affirms that Jesus was “a great moral teacher,”⁹³³ and concedes that “there’s no evidence Jesus himself was barking mad,” he reckons “the evidence that Jesus claimed any sort of divine status is minimal.”⁹³⁴ Note that even Dawkins doesn’t deny there is *some* evidence that Jesus claimed *some sort of* divine status! Contra Dawkins, sufficient warrant for accepting that Jesus did indeed claim “either explicitly or implicitly, to be divine” (premise 1 of the “Mad, Bad, or God” argument) comes from a combination of direct evidence, concerning Jesus’s explicit and implicit claims *about himself*, and indirect evidence, concerning the need to explain what other people believed *about Jesus*.

Dawkins’ risible suggestion that the “Mad, Bad, or God” argument overlooks the possibility that Jesus was merely “honestly mistaken”⁹³⁵ about his divinity constitutes a backhanded compliment to the strength of the argument. As Davis comments: “It is not easy to see how any sane religious first-century Jew could sincerely but mistakenly hold the belief: *I am divine*.”⁹³⁶

At the very least, then, the “Mad, Bad, or God” argument seems to provide *some* warrant for the conclusion that Jesus “was . . . who he claimed to be.”⁹³⁷ In other words, the argument should at least chip away a certain amount of skepticism about the Christian view of Jesus, making those who know the argument more open to additional arguments for the same conclusion. The paradox of Jesus’ claims in the context of his character should be considered in the context of arguments for and from his fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy, arguments about the historical evidence for his exorcisms and miracles, and most especially arguments for the miracle of his resurrection from the dead. These arguments combine to form a *cumulative*, historically grounded case for the Christian view of Jesus.

⁹³¹ Stephen T. Davis, *Christian Philosophical Theology*. Oxford University Press, 2016, 154.

⁹³² Stephen T. Davis, *Christian Philosophical Theology*. Oxford University Press, 2016, 152.

⁹³³ Richard Dawkins, “Sorry Liberal Christians, But Jesus Is Dead to Me.” *Richard Dawkins Foundation*, Feb 24, 2014. <https://richarddawkins.net/2014/02/sorry-liberal-christians-but-jesus-is-dead-to-me-2/>, §6.

⁹³⁴ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*. London: Bantam, 2006, 117.

⁹³⁵ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*. London: Bantam, 2006, 117.

⁹³⁶ Stephen T. Davis, “The Mad/Bad/God Trilemma: A Reply to Daniel Howard Snyder.” *Faith and Philosophy* (Oct 1, 2004), 480–92. <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol21/iss4/4/>.

⁹³⁷ William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, third edition. Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2008, 327.

According to theologian Robert M. Bowman Jr., Muslim’s rejection of the Christian understanding of Jesus as the incarnate divine “Son of God” largely stems from misunderstandings:

For example, since the objections in the Qur’an to Jesus being God’s “son” come in the context of his human birth from Mary, those objections assume that the idea involves God physically procreating someone. At one point it even asks rhetorically, “How can He have a son when He hath no consort?” (6:101). According to Muslim apologist Shabir Ally, since “God is not a physical being,” he does not have sons or daughters [Shabir Ally, *Is Jesus God? The Bible Says No* (Toronto: Al-Attique Publishers, 1997), 33]. Of course, Christianity teaches that Christ has been the Son of God from eternity past and that this title expresses his likeness and relationship to God, not a physical origin. Related to this mistake is the fact that the Qur’an appears to understand the three members of the Trinity to be Allah, Jesus, and Mary [see Surah 5:116]. Christians need only assure Muslims that Christianity does not teach these false ideas.

Muslims sometimes misunderstand the doctrine of the incarnation—that Jesus is God incarnate—to teach that Jesus is the Father. Ally, for example, argues from Matthew 23:9 that Jesus “is not the Father.” [Shabir Ally, *Is Jesus God? The Bible Says No* (Toronto: Al-Attique Publishers, 1997), 32.] Quite so—but orthodox Christians agree. . . . According to Ally, *all* of the biblical passages in which Jesus is called the “Son” of God, or where he calls God “Father,” were the result of changes in the biblical text. [Shabir Ally, *Is Jesus God? The Bible Says No* (Toronto: Al-Attique Publishers, 1997), 38.] Frankly, this claim has no credibility whatsoever. Even if we omit the few places in the New Testament where some manuscripts omit the title “Son of God” (e.g., Mark 1:1), there are still hundreds of places where the text uniformly calls Jesus the Son or refers to God as the Father. In fact, every book of the New Testament except the very short epistle of 3 John refers to the Father, and 19 of the 27 New Testament writings explicitly refer to Jesus as God’s “Son” (all of the exceptions are short epistles). This evidence cannot be explained away by appealing to the possibility of mistakes in the copies (or by blaming Paul for introducing the idea of Jesus as God’s Son into Christianity, as some Muslims do).

The New Testament teaches that Jesus Christ is worthy of all divine honors including worship (e.g., Matt. 28:17–19; Luke 24:50–51; John 5:23; Phil. 2:10–11; 2 Tim. 4:18; Heb. 1:6; 1 Peter 3:14–16; 2 Peter 3:18; Rev. 5:14). Muslims are right in saying that no creature should be associated with God in religious honors. However, the New Testament explains that Jesus is not merely a creature, but is the eternal, divine Son who humbled himself to share in our humanity to redeem us by his death (Phil. 2:5–8). This teaching, far from detracting from the glory due to God, magnifies God’s glory (Phil. 2:9–11).⁹³⁸

Recommended Resources for Episode 27

YouTube Playlist. “The Resurrection of Jesus.” <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLQhh3qcwVEWjF0VbpQ9sPUUivlyF5n0wB>.

⁹³⁸ Robert M. Bowman Jr., “The Secondhand Theism of Islam and the Misunderstood Deity of Christ.” <https://worldviewbulletin.substack.com>

- . “Debating the Resurrection.” YouTube playlist. <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLQhh3qcwVEWhAPCkcpFsSwEXrYKuBhoaq>.
- . “The Lunatic, Liar, Lord Argument.” YouTube playlist. https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLQhh3qcwVEWiCA7mwy67RLgGt_2n4jzra
- . “Defending Early High Christology with Archaeology and New Testament Letters.” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vUha7-4Puy8&list=PLQhh3qcwVEWjh9aRRWF1kYZIVCPc5iCcw&index=24>
- Andy Bannister. “The Resurrection of Jesus: A harmony of the resurrection accounts.” <https://www.answering-islam.org/Andy/Resurrection/harmony.html>.
- William Lane Craig. “The Bodily Resurrection of Jesus.” <https://www.reasonablefaith.org/writings/scholarlywritings/historical-jesus/the-bodily-resurrection-of-jesus>.
- . “The Disciples’ Inspection of the Empty Tomb.” <https://www.reasonablefaith.org/writings/scholarly-writings/historical-jesus/the-disciples-inspection-of-the-empty-tomb>
- . “The Historicity of the Empty Tomb of Jesus.” <https://www.reasonablefaith.org/writings/scholarly-writings/historical-jesus/the-historicity-of-the-empty-tomb-of-jesus>
- . “Reply to Evan Fales: On the Empty Tomb of Jesus” <https://www.reasonablefaith.org/writings/scholarly-writings/historical-jesus/reply-to-evan-fales-on-the-empty-tomb-of-jesus>
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- Stephen T. Davis, “The Mad/Bad/God Trilemma: A Reply to Daniel Howard Snyder.” *Faith and Philosophy* (Oct 1, 2004), p 480–92. <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol21/iss4/4/>
- Gary R. Habermas. “Recent Perspectives on the Reliability of the Gospels.” <https://www.equip.org/articles/recent-perspectives-on-the-reliability-of-the-gospels/>
- . “Why I Believe the New Testament Is Historically Reliable.” <https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/sdg/Why%20I%20Believe%20the%20New%20Testament%20is%20Historically%20Reliable%281%29.pdf>
- J. P. Moreland. “The Historicity of the New Testament.” <https://www.bethinking.org/is-the-bible-reliable/the-historicity-of-the-new-testament>
- Randy Newman. “Did Jesus Fulfil Old Testament Prophecies of a Coming Messiah?” <https://www.cslewisinstitute.org/resources/did-jesus-fulfill-old-testament-prophecies-of-a-coming-messiah/#:~:text=On%20the%20surface%2C%20some%20of,messiah%20who%20atones%20for%20ins.&text=These%20make%20up%20just%20a,do%20both—reign%20and%20suffer>
- David Baggett, ed. *Did the Resurrection Happen? A Conversation with Gary Habermas and Antony Flew*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009.
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