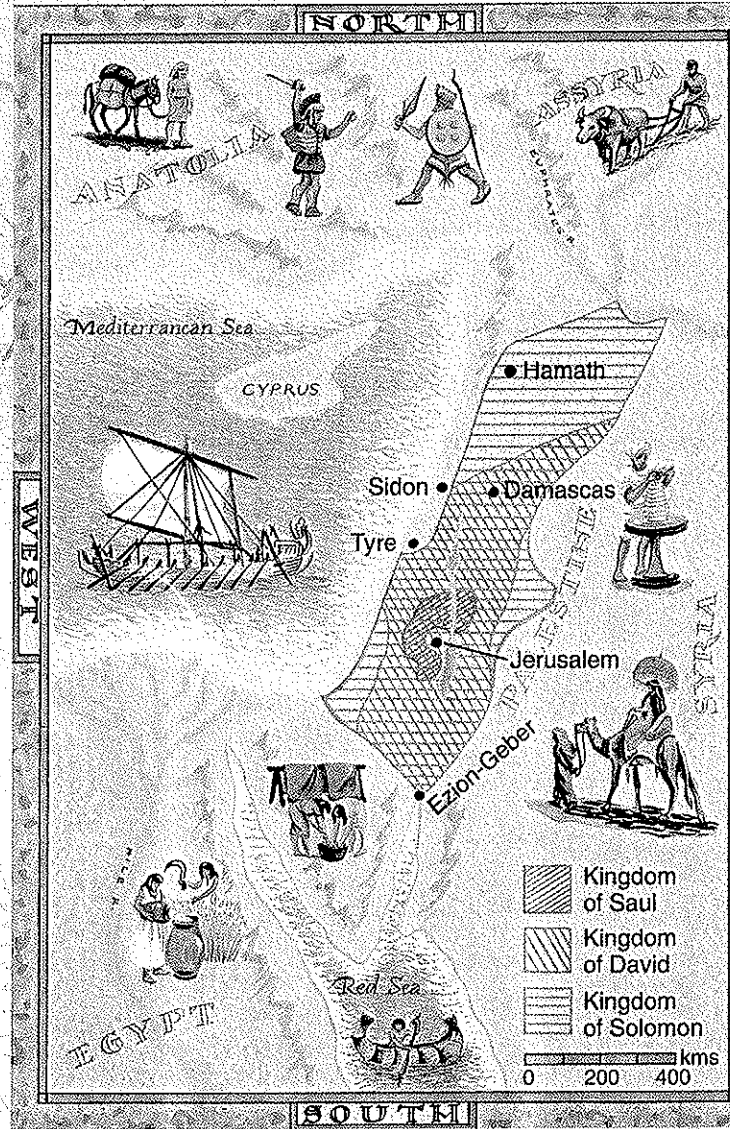


Chapter 1

Background to the Gospels



KEY IDEAS

Jesus was a faithful Jew

Understanding Jesus' Jewish background helps us to understand His teachings

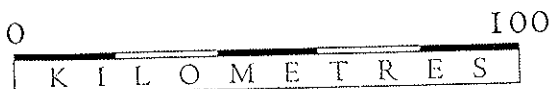
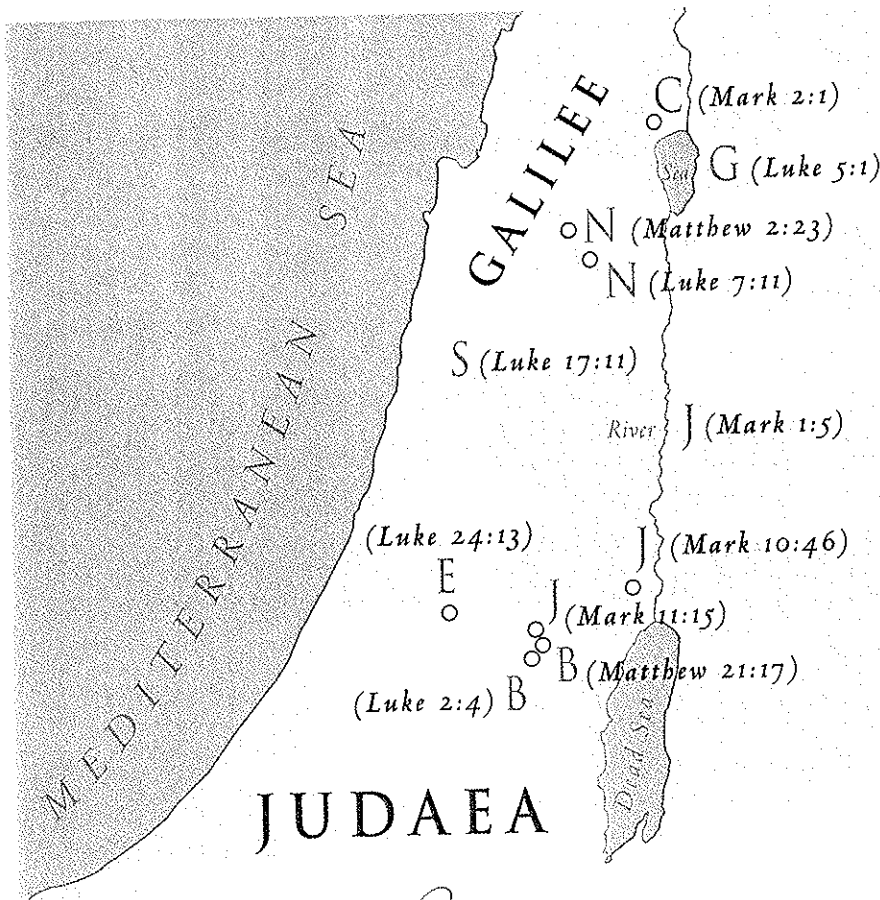
1.1 Jesus, the Faithful Jew

In order to understand Jesus we need to know something of his background. Jesus was born in Bethlehem but grew up in the Galilean town of Nazareth. Knowing the locations mentioned in the Gospels helps us to follow the story of Jesus' life.



Activity

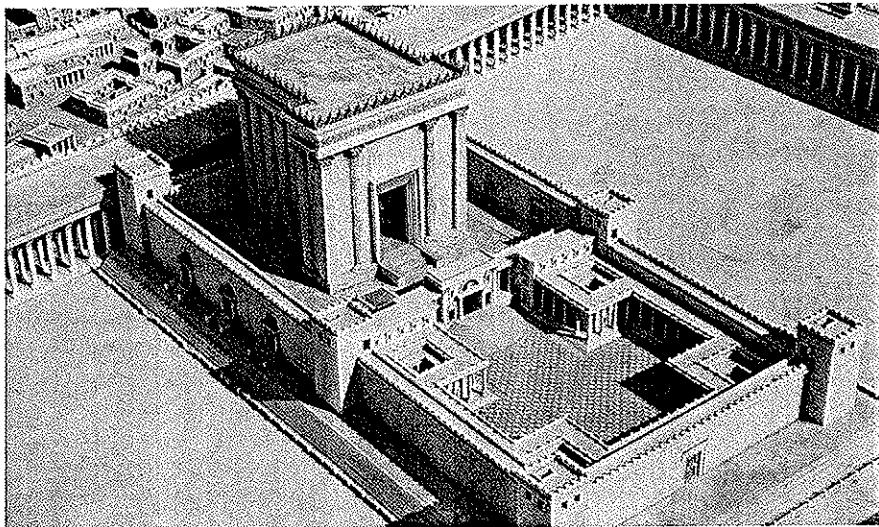
Draw the map on a full page in your workbook. Use the Scripture references given to write the names of the places referred to.



Jesus the Galilean

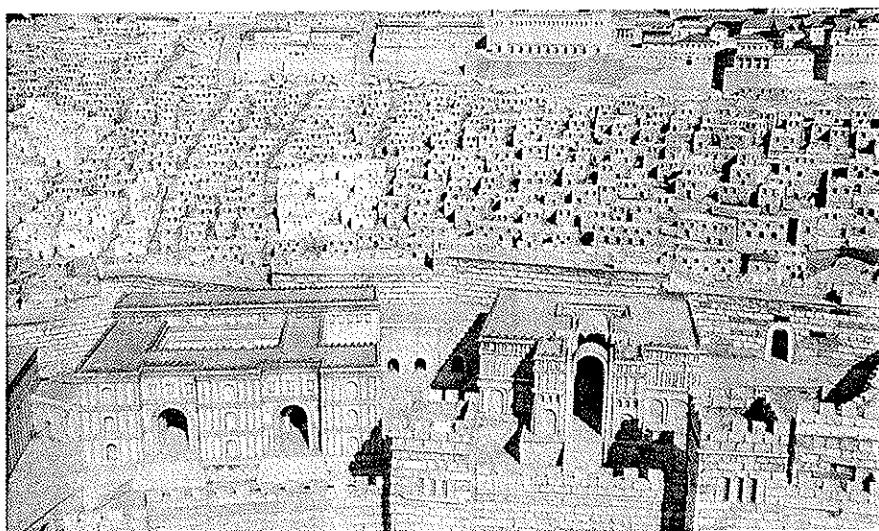
In Jesus' time there was some tension between Galileans and Judeans. Galileans were often looked down upon as backward country folk by Judeans.

Model of the Temple of Jerusalem



During Jesus' time Palestine was divided into provinces. The southern province was known as Judea. Its capital was Jerusalem. Judea was ruled directly by Rome through its governor Pontius Pilate. The northern province was Galilee. Here a Jewish king, Herod Antipas, exercised Roman authority. Jews were unhappy with Roman rule but were not powerful enough to overcome the might of the Roman Empire. Jewish society at the time of Jesus included a number of groups that are mentioned frequently in the gospels.

8



Model of Jerusalem



Activity

Galilee was an agricultural area. It was bordered by the Mediterranean Sea on the West of the River Jordan and Sea of Galilee in the East. It was because of these natural features that Jesus used farming and fishing images to help people understand the message of God's Kingdom.

The Kingdom of Heaven is like . . .
MARK 4:30-33

The Kingdom of Heaven is like . . .
MATTHEW 13:47-48

The Kingdom of Heaven is like . . .
LUKE 15:1-7

- 1 Read each of these stories and then write an explanation of what Jesus meant when he talked about the Kingdom of Heaven.
- 2 If Jesus were to visit the community where you live, he would probably use images that people today are familiar with to share his message. Using the statement below, give **THREE** contemporary images that Jesus might use:

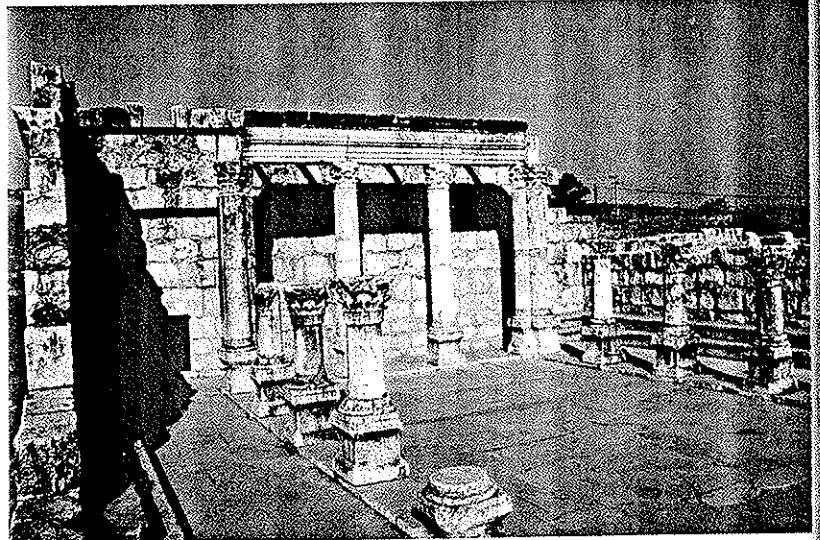
The Kingdom of Heaven is like

because

Groups in Jewish society at the time of Jesus

Group	Summary
Pharisees	An influential group in Jewish society, the Pharisees were very keen to keep the laws of the Torah. They memorised these rules and even multiplied them so more important rules would not be broken. Jesus' friend Nicodemus was a Pharisee. Jesus often argued with the Pharisees about the law, especially when they made rules that were difficult to keep and not in the spirit of God's law.
Sadducees	Most of the priests of the Temple were Sadducees. They were wealthy and powerful. The only books of the Bible they accepted were the first five. Because of this, they rejected many religious ideas that other Jews accepted. This put them in conflict with the Pharisees. The Sadducees were well regarded by the Romans because they did not involve themselves in political affairs.
Sanhedrin	Sanhedrin was the council of Jewish officials who had authority both inside and outside Palestine. It consisted of priests, elders and scribes. It was headed by the High Priest. The Sanhedrin issued rules that controlled day-to-day Jewish life, but was not allowed to impose the death penalty.
Zealots	A political group who were trying to end Roman rule of Palestine, the Zealots recognised only God or someone sent by God as their leader. Like many Jews, they were waiting for a Messiah to lead a powerful army that would defeat the Romans. Simon, one of the apostles, was a Zealot.
Scribes	Well-educated Jews who explained and wrote out the law were known as Scribes. They were sometimes referred to as lawyers.
Essenes	Living in communities in the desert regions like monks, the Essenes regarded themselves as the only ones who were faithful to God, believing that all other Jews had gone astray from what God wanted.

As a Jewish boy growing up in a religious community, Jesus would have been very familiar with the Jewish law contained in the Torah, the first five books of the Bible. Jesus' familiarity with the law is noted in the gospels when people refer to him as "rabbi". A rabbi is a teacher who is expert in Jewish laws and religious customs. Jesus often spent time discussing and arguing about the law with others, especially the Pharisees. He also attended meeting houses called synagogues. These are places where Jews gather for instruction, discussion and prayer.

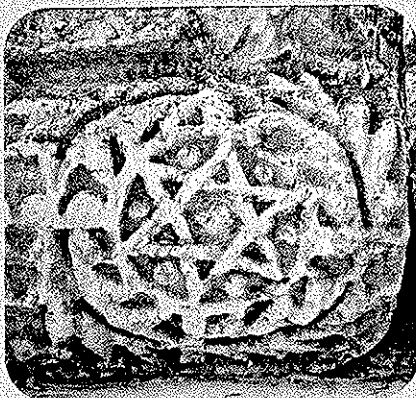


Ruins of the Synagogue in Capernaum.



Think about – Jesus in the synagogue

- 1 An example of Jesus teaching in a synagogue is given in Luke 4:16–18. Read this account.
- 2 What does this passage tell us about Jesus?
- 3 What is a synagogue?



Stone carving with The Star of David found at Capernaum Synagogue.



A Frieze from the Synagogue of Capernaum engraved with grapes.



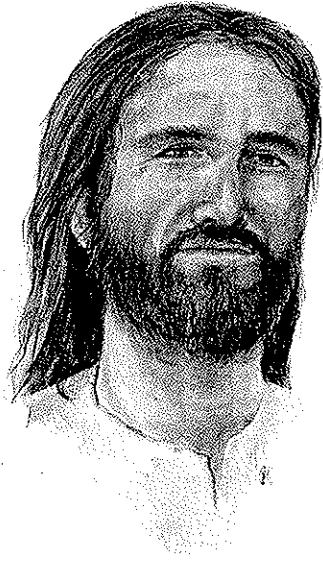
Frieze from 4th C Synagogue on display in the Garden - Ark of the Covenant.

Jesus was an observant Jew. He performed those tasks expected of a faithful Jew. As a child he was presented at the temple in accordance with Jewish law. Jesus also observed the Sabbath and participated in Passover celebrations. The Last Supper was a traditional Passover meal.



Activity

- 1 Read the story of Jesus' presentation in the Temple. Luke 2:22–24
- 2 Read John 5:1–13. What does this story tell us about Jesus and the Sabbath?



What did Jesus look like?

We are not sure. The images of Jesus that are common today are artists' impressions. In the gospels no mention is made of his appearance. Jesus probably looked like most inhabitants of Palestine at the time, having dark skin, hair and eyes.



Rembrandt Harmens van Rijn, *The Presentation of Christ in the Temple*



Test your knowledge

- 1 Where was Jesus born?
- 2 What was the capital of Judea?
- 3 Which group in Jewish society were actively working to overthrow Roman rule?
- 4 Which group often argued with Jesus about how to interpret the law?
- 5 Who was the High Priest and leader of the Sanhedrin when Jesus was put to death?
(Hint: Look at the end of the gospels.)



Dead Sea Scrolls

Between 1947 and 1960 over 750 documents were discovered dating from the 3rd century BC to the 2nd century AD. The first scrolls were discovered in caves on the west side of the Dead Sea, by a young shepherd looking for stray sheep.

The scrolls are linked with the Essene community at Qumran and are at least 1000 years older than any previously known documents containing scriptural texts.

- Why would scholars regard these texts as one of the most important archaeological finds of all time?
- Research more – for example www.faithcentral.net.nz/inclass/biblical.htm

