

Jesus: Liberator and King

Advance in Faith 1, Unit 2

Week 1 — Jesus' vocation: the kingdom of God



Series introduction

Welcome to the most exciting topic you could study: Jesus! Our prayer is that when you have completed this unit, you will know him better. If you have only recently come to know Jesus, developing that relationship will be fresh and exciting for you. If you have been in church for years, we are going to seek to understand Jesus in his time and in his culture—as a first century Jew. You may not have heard the words of Jesus in that context, so you will find this refreshing; in fact, you may find it challenging.

Let's begin with what we already know of Jesus:

a) Who was Jesus (his *identity*)?

.....

b) What did Jesus come to do (his *mission*)?

.....

c) In one sentence, summarise the *gospel* of Jesus (his good news).

.....

.....

Those questions will be the essence of our study together over the next six weeks. We will ask them again at the end, to see how our knowledge of Jesus has grown.

Sources (how we know about Jesus)

The Bible contains four accounts of the gospel, by **Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John**. They are biographies in the ancient sense.¹ Each has its own emphasis — like portraits painted from different perspectives.

The first three are the **synoptic** gospels (syn-optic = seeing together) i.e. they recount similar events in similar words. 90% of John's content is not in the synoptics.

There were others written as well. The best-known is the **Gospel of Thomas**, though it was written long after Thomas was dead and it just a collection of sayings (not an account of Jesus' life). It includes some sayings like those in the four gospels, but others are quite strange. The early church rejected it based on content, style, authorship and being too late to be authentic.²

¹ See Richard Burridge, *What Are The Gospels* (Eerdmans, 2004).

² For an informed examination, see Nicholas Perrin, *Thomas, the Other Gospel*. (SPCK, 2007).

Jesus in his setting

Theological context

Early Christians concluded that in Jesus from Nazareth, they had actually met God. How does that work? Was he partly human, partly divine? Was he divine, but seemed human? Was he human, but seemed divine? Did he start out human, and then God adopted him at some point? Eventually the church leaders met at Chalcedon (near Istanbul) and issued a statement that defined Jesus as 100% human and 100% divine at the same time. They described him like this:

... Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures, *inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably*; the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved, and concurring in one person and one Subsistence, not parted or divided into two persons...³

In practice, people still struggle to think of Jesus as both human and divine at the same time. Many today are so conscious of his divinity that they lose touch with his humanity as they read the gospels. The disciples, on the other hand, experienced Jesus first in his humanity; they understood his divinity only later (after the resurrection).⁴

Cultural context

You cannot treat Jesus as some kind of floating spirit dispensing pithy proverbs in a social vacuum to a timeless audience. He was a Jew, addressing his words to a specific people (Israel) at a specific time (first century). Before we ask, "What does this mean for us?" we must ask, "What did he mean for his audience in first-century Israel?"

Scriptural narrative context

"So the mouse said, 'Ah, that's why I'm here.'" That might be the punchline of a really good story, but without the rest of the story, the punchline makes no sense. The life of Jesus is a great read, with lots of amazing things happening, but you won't understand *why* this is happening if you don't understand the wider narrative of God's sovereignty over his world. Jesus' life is not an isolated event: it must be understood as the climactic moment of the whole narrative of Scripture—the acts of God to restore his world.

³ This creed-like statement, called the *Symbol of Chalcedon*, was issued in AD 451.

⁴ This happened very quickly. All four gospels end with people worshipping Jesus after the resurrection.

Jesus' key phrase for his ministry

Jesus chose one phrase to describe all aspects of his work, e.g.:

- his preaching — Luke 4:43
- his disciples' ministry — Luke 9:2
- his healings — Luke 9:11
- his exorcisms — Luke 11:20.
- his parables — Luke 13:18

The word *kingdom* turns up everywhere in the synoptic gospels: 55 times in Matthew, 20 times in Mark, and 46 times in Luke. And, that's only where the word is used: the whole story is about God's kingdom!

What did Jesus mean by “the kingdom of God” (or “the kingdom of heaven” as Matthew calls it)?

- Is it going to heaven when we die?
- Is it about social justice (caring for the poor/vulnerable)?
- Is it something that exists now?
- Is it the millennium?

What is it? When is it? How does it come? Why is it important?

There are reasons why we don't understand what Jesus meant:

- a) Jesus **never defined** the kingdom. He didn't need to. Everyone in his audience already knew. They could disagree over details of how the kingdom came and in what form, but they knew what it was. But we lack the assumed knowledge behind that conversation, the shared understanding of the kingdom that was part of first century Jewish culture. So we hear them talking about the kingdom as we read the gospels, but we don't understand the conversation because we don't grasp the knowledge they shared.
- b) We live in a **democracy**, not a kingdom. We believe in government of the people, by the people, for the people. For us, *kingdom* is an archaic relic of a bygone era when too much power resided in one individual. The king owned the people. He made the laws. He enforced them however he liked. Inevitably, this much power in the hands of one person led to the abuse of power, so we want nothing to do with it. We believe kingdoms are not only archaic and irrelevant: they are downright dangerous! We know the Bible came from an ancient world when kingdoms existed, so we filter out the kingdom-talk and search for the bits that are relevant to us.

When British people first settled on the east coast of Australia, their culture was so different to the aboriginal people who already lived here that there was no connection between the two. It wasn't just about language: the concepts were different. For example, the British thought in terms of private ownership of land, whereas the aboriginal people had a completely different kind of connection to the land. The cultural disconnect has never been adequately addressed: more than 200 years later, it is still a problem!

In the same way, if you hear what Jesus said to first-century Israelites through the ears of our Western democratic individualised culture, we will seriously misunderstand what he said. We have a serious disconnect when he thought the kingdom of God was the core of everything, while we filter it out as irrelevant.

So, how can we grasp what Jesus meant?

- a) We need to understand as much as we can of his first-century Jewish worldview. The only way back there now is through the literature of the period. A good book can take you to another place and another time. So I've been on a journey to read everything that can transport me into their world, to learn to think as they thought. There is actually quite a range of literature available from the later second-temple period: books of the Apocrypha, the Pseudepigrapha, the Dead Sea Scrolls, Josephus, and so on. They reveal different perspectives within Judaism, but they are the best way out of our twenty-first century Western mindset and into their way of thinking.
- b) That literature made me aware of how we filter out the message of the kingdom, though it is the central message of the entire Bible. (It probably shouldn't be surprising that Jesus was right: the kingdom is central!) That means I've had to go back and to re-read the entire Scripture for the kingdom instead of filtering it out. It's such a different perspective that I cannot rush it, so it has taken me 6 months just to do a kingdom reading of Genesis! It might take me 20 years to complete this project, but it's worth it!

So, would you like to know what the kingdom is? As far as I understand at this point, it is very simply God's government, God's rule, God reigning, God as king.

The story of the kingdom

The kingdom of God (God's kingdom) is nothing more or less than God's reign. If you were asked to write a paper on the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, you would need to do some research about her time. You would discover the events of her reign, the challenges she inherited, the problems and opportunities she faced, the people who opposed her and the ones who helped her, the decisions she made and the difference she made for her subjects. You couldn't write about utopia (what should have occurred): you would write about what did occur under her reign.

In the same way, describing God's reign means telling the story of his involvement with his world. It is the story of a sovereign who:

- a) orders his realm, and assigns responsibility (creation),
- b) deals with rebellion—grasping authority (Adam and Eve),
- c) overrules anarchy—violence of ungoverned revenge (flood),
- d) limits what human government is permitted to do (Babel),
- e) establishes a nation to represent him (Abraham) to draw the other nations back under his rule,
- f) releases them from oppression by human rulers (Red Sea),
- g) forms them into his kingdom, guided by his laws (Sinai),
- h) leads them, despite unbelief, to their land (Numbers, Joshua),
- i) frees them when other nations oppress them (Judges),
- j) gives them a human king to represent his divine rule (David),
- k) crushes the northern tribes under Assyria (722 BC),
- l) sends the rest into exile in Babylon (587 BC),
- m) brings them back from exile (Cyrus, Ezra, Nehemiah),
- n) promises to restore the kingdom (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, ...)
- o) comes to live among them as a different kind of ruler (Jesus).

That's the background to the kingdom, the story that culminates in the coming of God's anointed ruler (Jesus). That's the setting in which the story of Jesus makes sense.

Matthew ties Jesus into the story of King David and the Abrahamic family (Mt 1:1). He arranges Jesus' genealogy in three stages:

- from Abraham to David—the rise of the kingdom (1:2-6),
- from David to the exile—the demise of the kingdom (1:7-11),
- from the exile to Jesus—waiting for restoration (1:12-16).

After more than 500 years of waiting for the kingdom to be restored, a son of David is born to whom the kingdom belongs. God himself has come to earth to rule us—Immanuel (Mt 1:22-23).

But the leaders of God's nation do not recognise their king. He is recognised by Magi from the east—representatives from the very people who crushed the kingdom (Babylon/Persia). The Jewish leaders know they've been promised a son of David in Bethlehem, but they don't even know he's been born (Mt 2:5-6). The current "king of the Jews" (Herod) orders the slaughter of Bethlehem's infants. That's exactly what's wrong with how the world is being ruled: evil rulers do whatever it takes to keep their power. Jesus and his family know first-hand what evil rule looks like: they are political refugees. That's the background Matthew gives to Jesus announcing an alternative kingdom: the reign of God instead of the reign of evil (Mt 4:17).

Luke also announces Jesus as the long-awaited ruler who restores the kingdom. In his opening chapters, he mentions David *five times* (Luke 1:27, 32, 69; 2:4, 11) e.g.:

Luke 1 ³² The Lord God will give to him the *throne* of his father *David*, ³³ and he will *reign* over the house of Jacob forever, and of his *kingdom* there will be no end.

In fact, Luke has structured his gospel to echo the story of David. 1 Samuel begins with the answer-to-prayer birth of Samuel—the prophet who announces David as king. Luke begins with the answer-to-prayer of birth John the Baptist—the prophet who announces Jesus as king. Luke is saying that Jesus is the new David—the one who establishes God's kingship!

What sort of king?

If this is Jesus' mission, he cannot just lead a good life in his carpenter's shop in Nazareth. He has to engage with the evil in the world. He has to deliver his people from oppression by evil. How should he do that? Should Jesus do what David did?

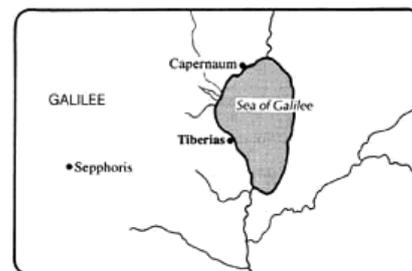
David was an amazing warrior. He killed tens of thousands of enemies (1 Sam 18:7; 21:11; 29:5) to set his people free. Should Jesus kill the Roman rulers, casting them out of the Promised Land so God's people should finally be free?

That's what Godly rulers had always done, isn't it? Joshua battled and killed the Canaanites. Judges like Gideon and Samson did the same. So did the kings who came after David, right up until they lost the Promised Land to Assyria and Babylon.

Four generations before Jesus (167 BC), a foreign ruler (Antiochus Epiphanies IV) tried to force the Jews to be less exclusive. To stop them worshipping only their own God, he erected an idol to Zeus in the temple, and sacrificed a pig on the altar. Judas Maccabeus fought against the evil ruler, freed the people, and cleansed the temple. The Jews celebrated his victory in the feast of Hanukkah, which they still celebrate today! “Judas” became a popular name, as generation after generation hoped for the leader who would finally set them free.

Despite this long history of fighting their oppressors, Jesus didn't fight the Romans. John the Baptist spoke out against Herod, and it cost John his life. Jesus did not speak against Herod, or Pilate, or any of their oppressors. Jesus not only avoided confrontation with Herod: he avoided contact! Herod had built two major centres in Galilee:

- Sepphoris: the most important town near Nazareth (5km).
- Tiberias: Herod's capital. The most important city on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, closer than Capernaum.⁵



Can you recall any miracles Jesus did at Sepphoris? How about at Tiberias? The Gospels never record Jesus even passing through either of Herod's main cities. For three years, Jesus avoided the biggest city in Galilee! He avoided Herod. In fact, the day Jesus met Herod was the day he died (Luke 23:8).

If Jesus didn't engage with the rulers who were oppressing Israel, how could he be their king? How could he talk about God's rule when they were being ruled by someone else?

What's the use of a king who fails to deliver his people? What's the use of a king who is killed by the enemies? That's not unusual, of course: there's a long list of kings who were killed by their enemies. But what help is that? That's exactly what the Jerusalem leaders hoped to prove by getting Jesus out of the way.

The King and God's kingdom

Jesus had a radically different way of understanding God's reign. He planned to liberate his people from the reign of evil, but not the way anyone imagined. He had a radical vision of what the world would look like when restored under God's governance. It was difficult to convey, so he used parables—stories that sowed seeds to germinate later. He cast out demons—enacting the overthrow of oppressive powers. He healed people—demonstrating how God would restore what was wrong.

⁵ Map: *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Revised*, ed. by G W Bromiley, Eerdmans, 1979–1988. Vol 4, 847.

He challenged their expectations about the kingdom. The kingdom was present because the king was present:

Lk 17 ²⁰ Being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, he answered them, “The kingdom of God is not coming in ways that can be observed, ²¹ nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There!’ for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you [plural].”

Unavoidably, this led to the final show-down between the powers that claim to run the world and the one they mocked as “king of the Jews.” In that confrontation, Jesus planned to drive out the rebel ruler that oppressed not only God’s nation but God’s world (John 12:31).

Conclusion

This is the kingdom of God: the restoration of God’s reign over creation, through humans. It’s far bigger than anyone imagined: Jesus didn’t release Israel and destroy their enemies; he released humanity, dealing with our real enemies! This is a *total* restoration (not a partial one where one nation or ethnic group gains power over others).

It’s not a temporary restoration. If he had defeated the Romans, they would have to keep fighting as soon as the next oppressors attacked. Jesus broke the reign of evil and death!

Yet, it’s not yet a completed task. He has entrusted to us the task of implementing his royal command to bring all nations into submission to his authority (Matt 28:19). We live in a world where evil rulers still oppress and kill their enemies to keep their own power. Our mission is therefore a dangerous one: we face those powers unarmed, just as Jesus did. We can get hurt, just as he did.

We have the best news for oppressed humans! The war is over. Jesus has liberated humanity. Evil has lost its grip. Death no longer reigns. The resurrected Jesus is earth’s Lord!

Memory Work

Mark 1:14–15 (NIV)

After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. “The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!”

Group Questions

1. What is the significance of Jesus being the “son of David”?
What did this mean for Jews in Jesus' time?
2. What did Jesus mean by “the kingdom of God”?
What does it look like? What does it mean to pray,
“Your kingdom come on earth as in heaven?” (Lk 11:3)
3. Discuss examples of people who are doing kingdom-of-God things beyond the church program. They could be people you know personally, or people you have read about. What do these stories inspire you to do?

[Stay with question 3 as long as you have inspiring examples to discuss.]

4. What's our position in the kingdom of God? Does it mean that we are ruling and reigning with Christ so nothing bad can happen to us? Or does it mean that we are called to follow Jesus by laying our lives on the line, being faithful even unto death if necessary?

[John Dixon, *Life of Jesus*, Disk 1, Episode 3, 0:50 – 6:03 “to love as God loves.”]

Take Home Exercise

Read 4 chapters of Mark's gospel each week. Reading a gospel is the best way to understand Jesus.

As you read Mark 1–4, what do you learn about *the kingdom of God*? Examples:

- 1:15 Jesus announces the restoration of God's reign.
- 1:22, 27 Jesus expects people to respond to his authority.
- 2:9-11 Jesus has authority to heal deformity and pardon sins.
- 3:15 Jesus has authority over evil, and delegated it to his disciples.
- 3:23-27 Jesus is overthrowing Satan's hold.
- 4:11 The parables explain how Jesus replanted God's damaged creation, which will be fruitful even though not every seed responds (sower parable).
- 4:26-29 Humans work cooperatively with God: we sow, God makes it grow. Jesus sowed, trusting God to bring the harvest—God's reign.
- 4:30-32 A single mustard seed seems insignificant, but the kingdom Jesus planted will encompass the whole world.

Recommended reading

Jesus in his historical context:

- Tom Wright. *Simply Jesus: A New Vision of Who He Was, What He Did, and Why He Matters*. (SPCK, 2011)

A biography of Jesus' life:

- Ben Witherington III. *The Gospel of Jesus* (Seedbed, 2014) [Available in Kindle only]

The impact of Jesus' life:

- Tom Wright. *How God Became King: The Forgotten Story of the Gospels* (HarperOne, 2012).
- John Ortberg. *Who Is This Man? The Unpredictable Impact of the Inescapable Jesus*. (Zondervan, 2012).

Jesus as the central message of the New Testament:

- James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus according to the New Testament* (Eerdmans, 2019)

Commentaries:

- Tom Wright. *New Testament for Everyone series*. (SPCK), e.g. *Mark for Everyone*.
- <http://www.biblegateway.com/resources/commentaries/>

Dictionaries:

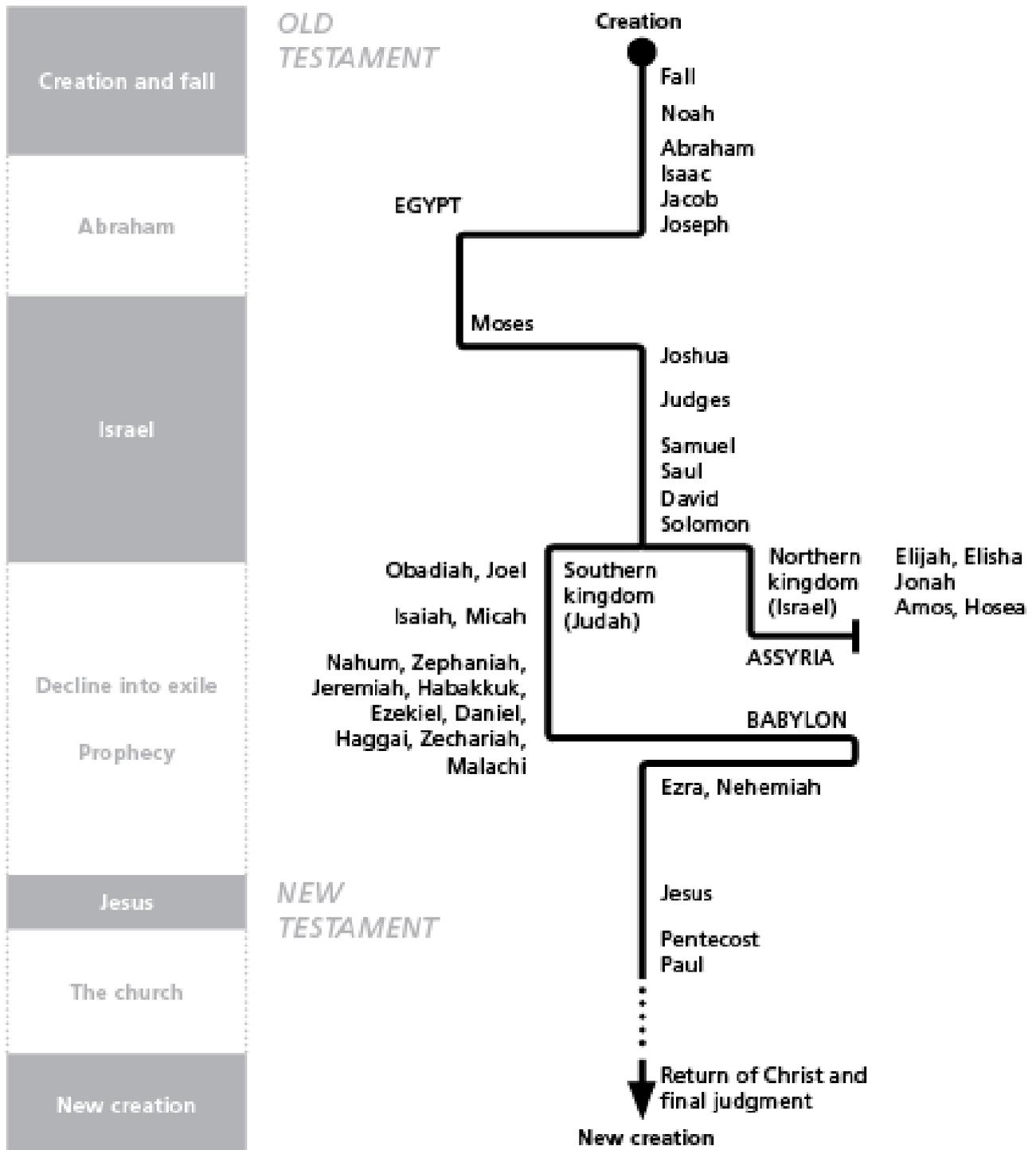
- D. R. W. Wood et al. *New Bible Dictionary* (IVP, 1996).
- <http://www.bibleodyssey.com/>

Key events

Keep the chart below in your Bible so that when you are reading the Old Testament you can see how the story flows. (There's a more detailed version on page 64 of *Simply Jesus*.)

	<i>B.C.</i>	<i>Event</i>	<i>Source</i>
1		God created Adam as his image, to rule creation.	Gen 1
2		Rebelling against God brought futility, pain, death.	Gen 3
3	2000	God chose Abraham as the family through whom he would restore the broken world.	Gen 12
4	1400	Under Moses , God delivered Israel from slavery—his nation with his laws.	Ex 19
5	1000	Under King David , they became a kingdom. David's son is to rule forever.	2 Sam 7
6	930	Solomon built the temple (Jerusalem). The kingdom split: Israel (north) & Judah (south).	1 Kg 12
7	722	Israel (north) was wiped out by Assyria .	2 Kg 17
8	587	Judah (south) was exiled to Babylon . The temple was destroyed.	2 Kg 25
9	538	Persia captured Babylon, so they return to rebuild the temple (516) & Jerusalem (444).	Ezra/ Neh
10	330	Alexander the Great captured Persia, so they are part of the Greek empire.	Dan 8
11	167	Syrian rulers desecrate the temple to destroy Jewish identity. The Maccabean family lead a revolt and rededicate the temple (Hanukkah — Jn 10:22).	Dan 11
12	63	Rome conquered Israel. Jesus was born under Herod the Great, and lived under Herod Antipas (in Galilee), and Pontius Pilate (in Jerusalem).	Mt – Jn

Figure 3: An outline of the Bible story



Source: Tim Chester, *From Creation to New Creation: Making Sense of the Whole Bible Story*. (Good Book Co, 2010).