

Class 1. The Historical, Geographical, and Cultural Context of the New Testament.

Understanding the World Jesus and the Early Christians Lived In





“Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth.”

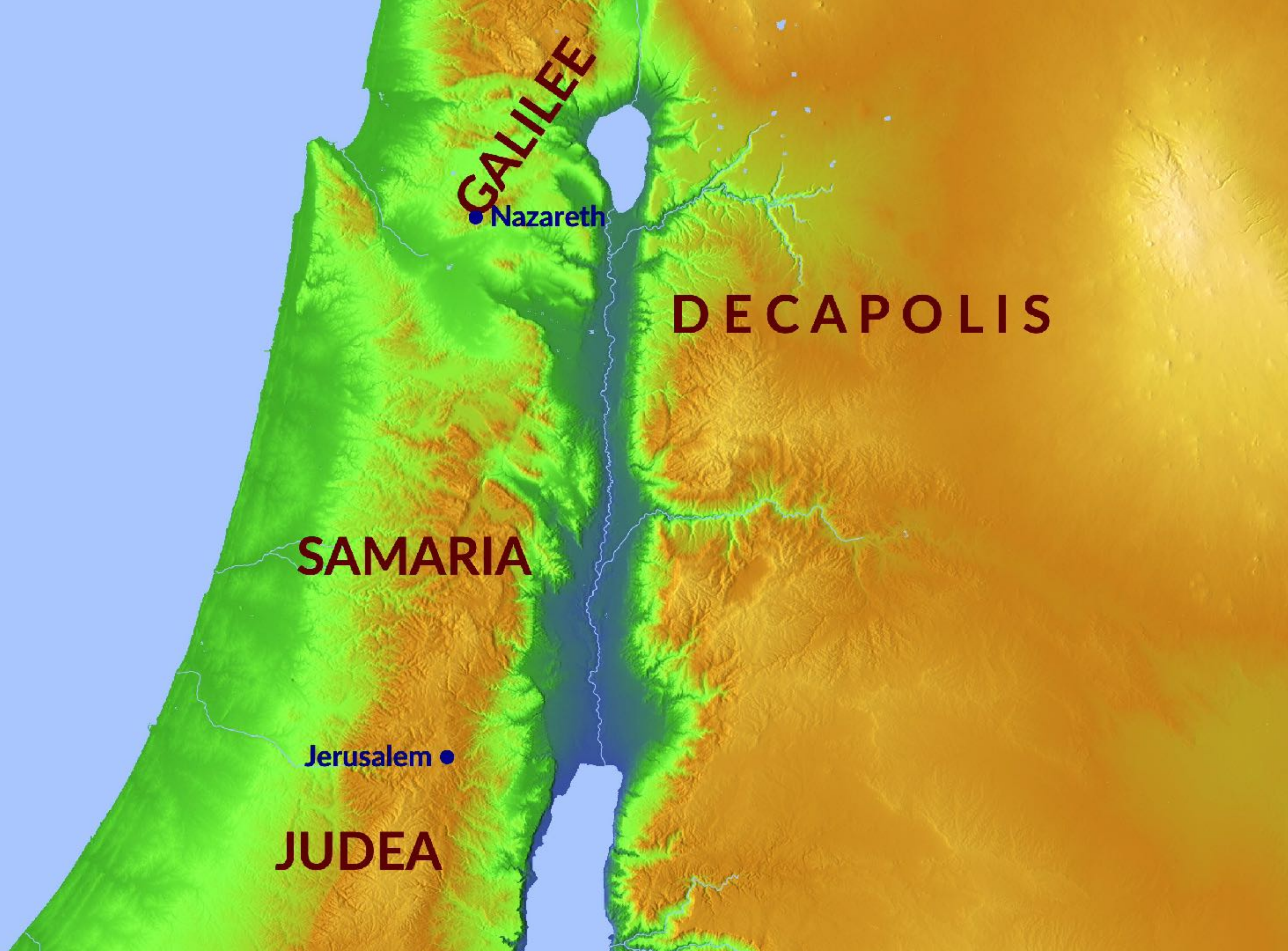
2 Timothy 2.15

1. Geography



Take 30 seconds to draw a rough sketch of Israel - i.e. the main places Jesus visited.





GALILEE
• Nazareth

DECAPOLIS

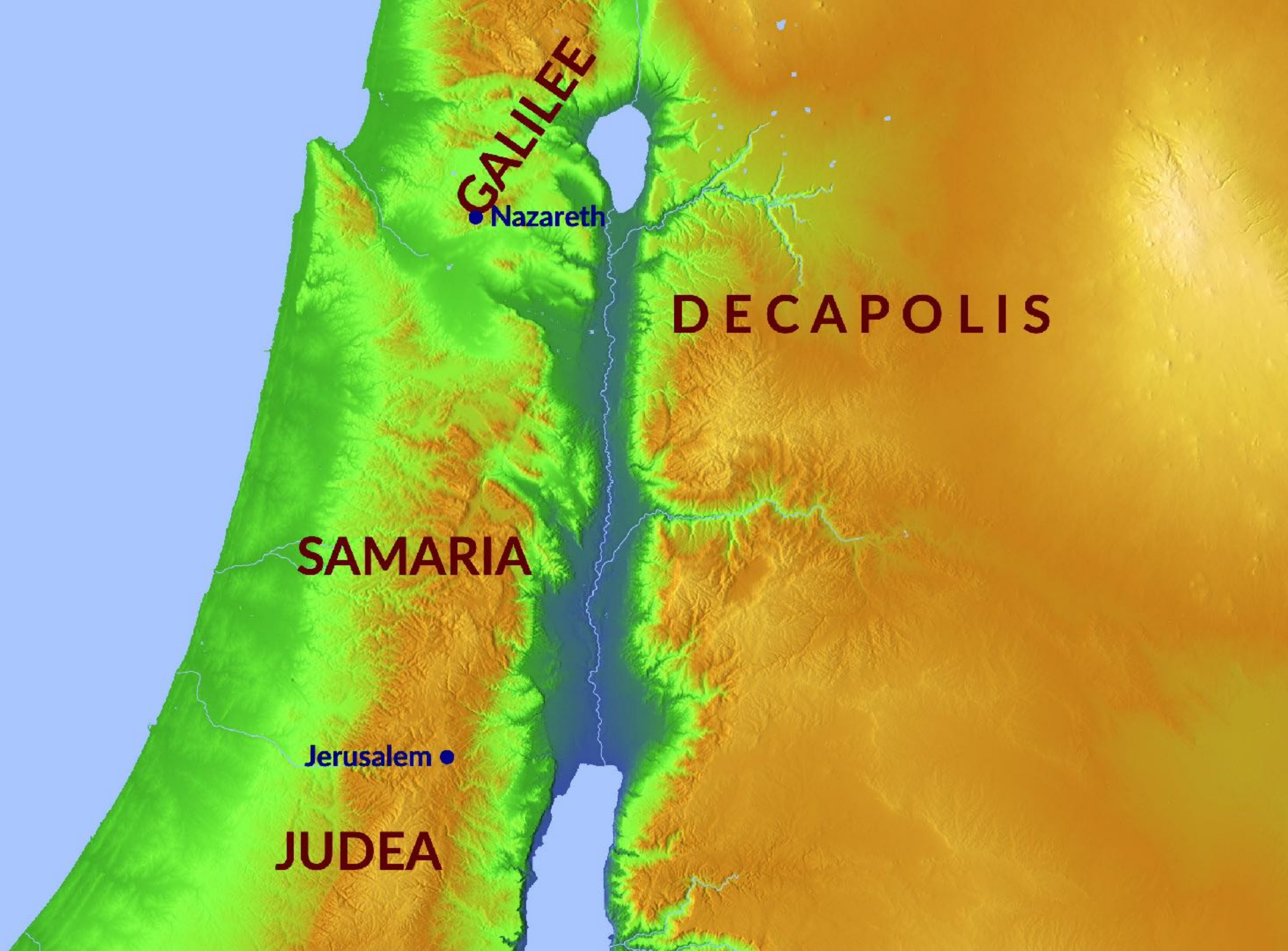
SAMARIA

Jerusalem •

JUDEA







GALILEE
• Nazareth

DECAPOLIS

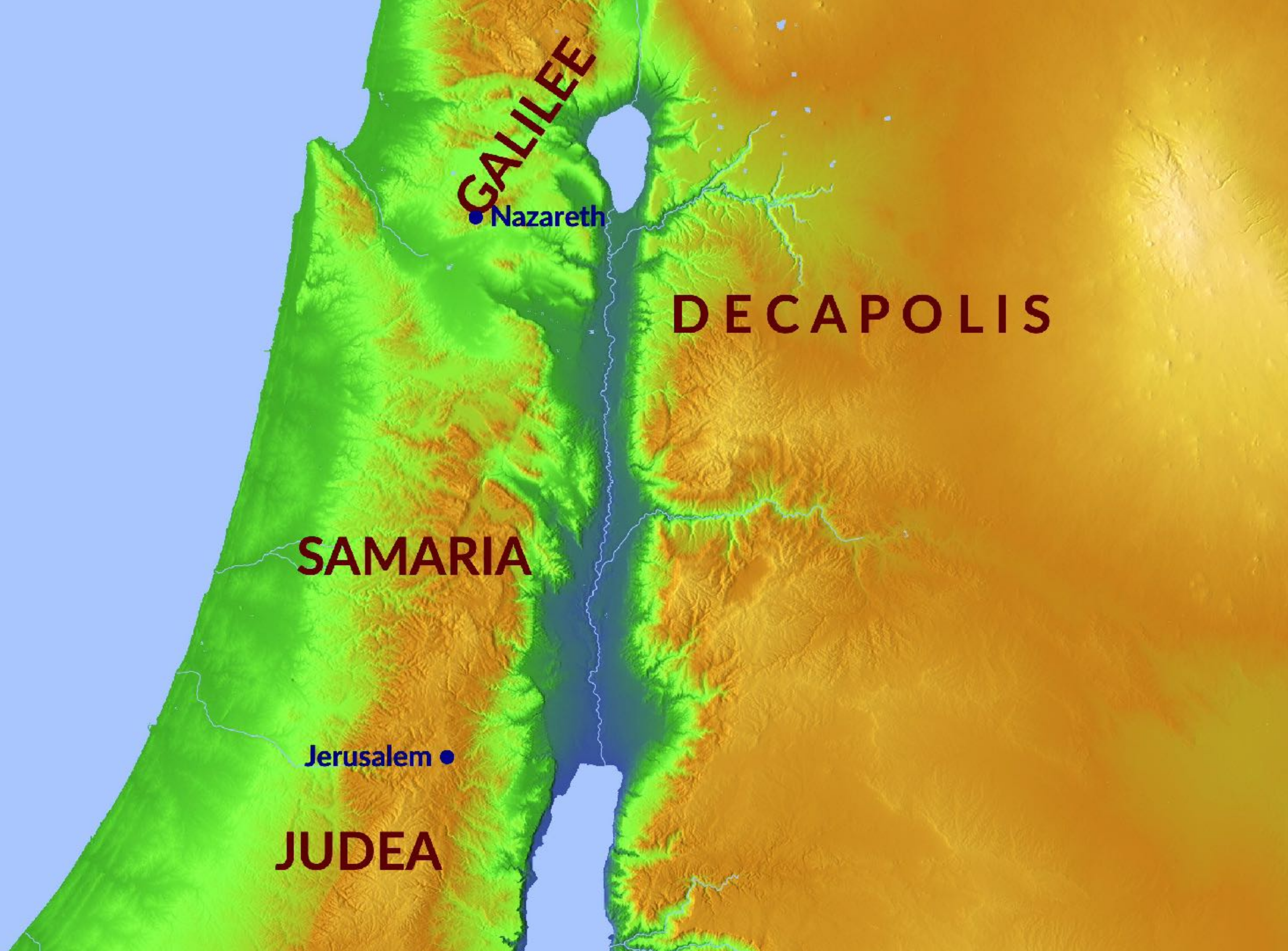
SAMARIA

Jerusalem •

JUDEA







GALILEE
• Nazareth

DECAPOLIS

SAMARIA

Jerusalem •

JUDEA



Rome

ITALY

MACEDONIA

Philippi

GREECE

Corinth

Assos

Ephesus

Miletus

ASIA MINOR

Lystra

Antioch

Salamis

CYPRUS

Tyre

Ptolemais

Esdras

Caesarea

Jerusalem

JUDEA



32 +

54 +

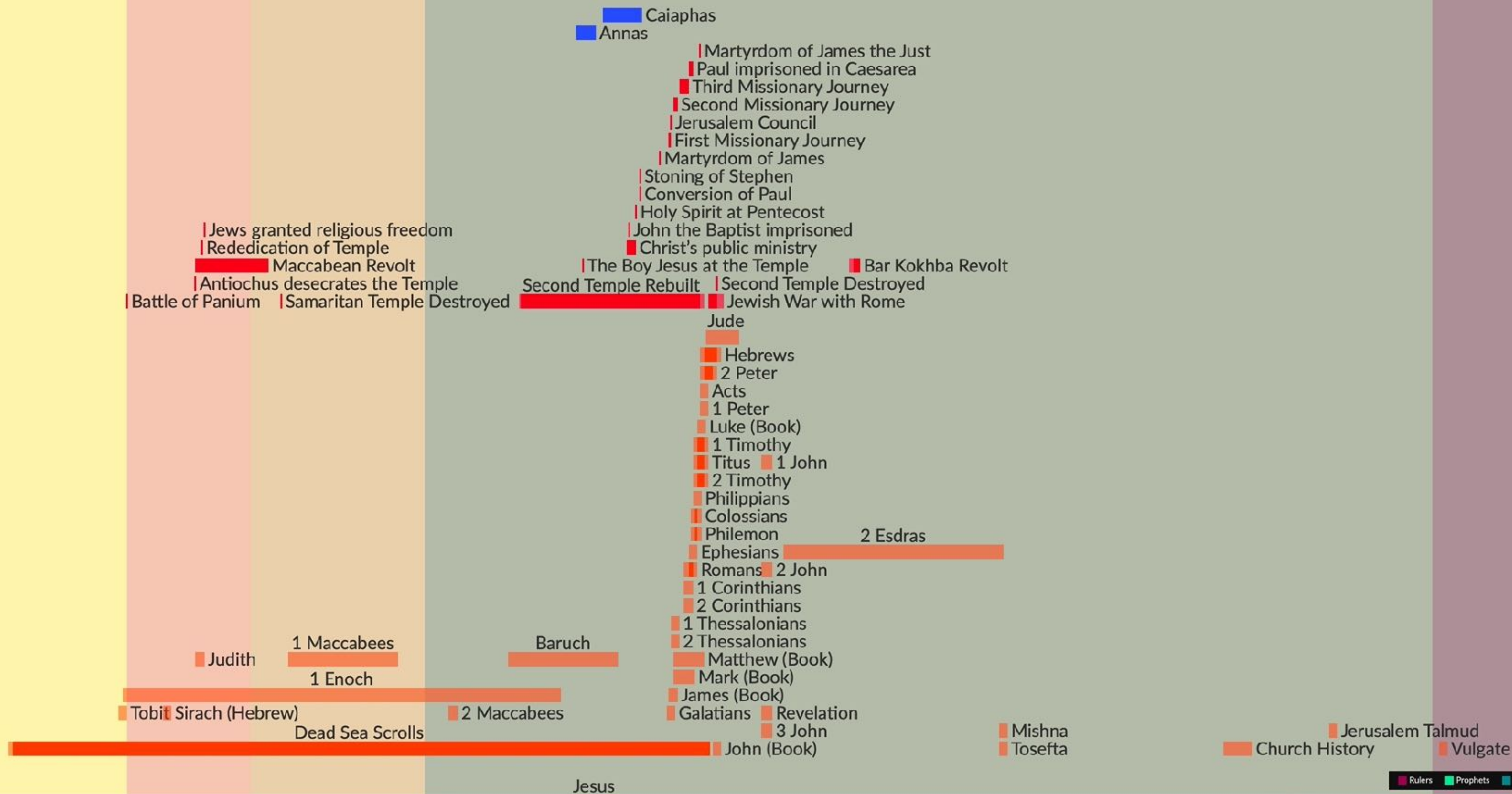
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2. History



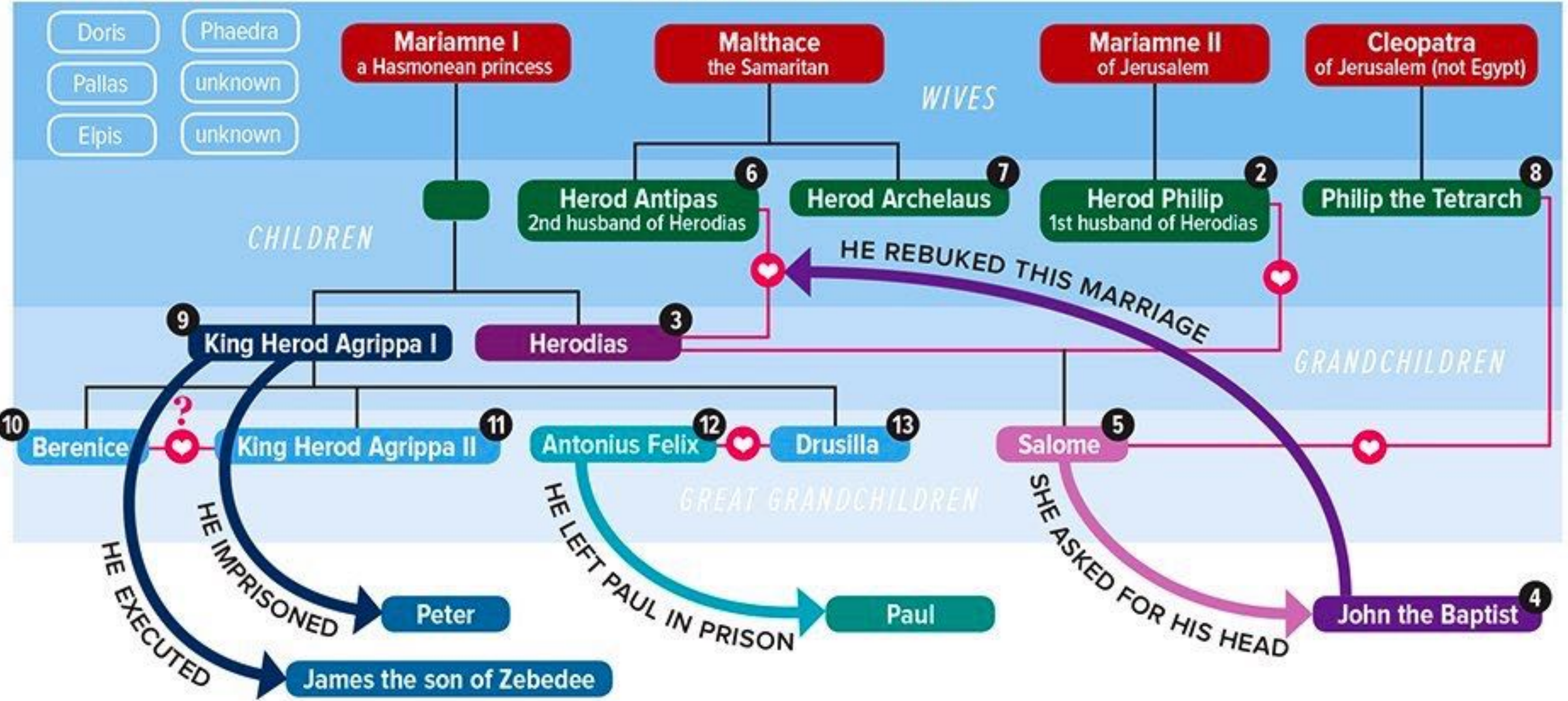
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Herod the Great
Governor of Galilee (r. 47–37 B.C.E.)
King of the Jews (r. 37–4 B.C.E.)

Jesus
HE TRIED TO KILL

OTHER WIVES

- Doris
- Phaedra
- Pallas
- unknown
- Elpis
- unknown

Herod the Great's Family Tree



CHILDREN

WIVES

GRANDCHILDREN

GREAT GRANDCHILDREN

HE EXECUTED

HE IMPRISONED

HE LEFT PAUL IN PRISON

HE REBUKED THIS MARRIAGE

SHE ASKED FOR HIS HEAD

HE TRIED TO KILL

10

9

3

6

7

2

8

12

13

5

4

Peter

James the son of Zebedee

Paul

John the Baptist

Berenice

King Herod Agrippa II

Antonius Felix

Drusilla

Salome

King Herod Agrippa I

Herodias

Herod Antipas
2nd husband of Herodias

Herod Archelaus

Herod Philip
1st husband of Herodias

Philip the Tetrarch

Mariamne I
a Hasmonean princess

Malthace
the Samaritan

Mariamne II
of Jerusalem

Cleopatra
of Jerusalem (not Egypt)

“Alas! Why was I born to see this, the ruin of my people, the ruin of the holy city, and to live there when it was given over to the enemy, the sanctuary given over to aliens?

Her temple has become like a person without honour; her glorious vessels have been carried into exile. Her infants have been killed in her streets, her youths by the sword of the foe.

What nation has not inherited her palaces and has not seized her spoils?

All her adornment has been taken away; no longer free, she has become a slave.

And see, our holy place, our beauty, and our glory have been laid waste; the Gentiles have profaned them.

Why should we live any longer?”

1 Maccabees 2.7-13

“Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” They answered, “The emperor’s.” Then he said to them, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.””

Matthew 22.17-21

Group	Beliefs & Practices	Relationship to Jesus
Pharisees	Law + Oral Tradition (Hedge around the Law)	Disagreed, but debated with Jesus
Sadducees	Temple-focused, wealthy, collaborated with Romans	Opposed Jesus, plotted against him
Essenes	Separatists, strict purity, apocalyptic	No direct NT interaction, but similar language in John
Zealots	Political rebels, violent overthrow of Rome	One of Jesus' disciples was a Zealot (Simon)



“Matthew, Thomas, James
son of Alphaeus, Simon
who was called the Zealot,”

Luke 6.15



3. Culture





And He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up; and as was His custom, He entered the synagogue on the Sabbath, and stood up to read. And the book of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him. And He opened the book and found the place where it was written....

Luke 4.16ff



“When Jesus realised that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.”

John 6.15

“Then the king wrote to his whole kingdom that all should be one people, and that all should give up their particular customs. All the Gentiles accepted the command of the king. Many even from Israel gladly adopted his religion; they sacrificed to idols and profaned the sabbath. And the king sent letters by messengers to Jerusalem and the towns of Judah;

1 Maccabees 1.41-50

“...he directed them to

- follow customs strange to the land,
- to forbid burnt offerings and sacrifices and drink offerings in the sanctuary,
- to profane sabbaths and festivals,
- to defile the sanctuary and the priests,
- to build altars and sacred precincts and shrines for idols,
- to sacrifice swine and other unclean animals, and
- to leave their sons uncircumcised.”

1 Maccabees 1.41-50

“They were to make themselves abominable by everything unclean and profane, so that they would forget the law and change all the ordinances. He added, “And whoever does not obey the command of the king shall die.””

1 Maccabees 1.41-50

"They shall govern themselves using the original precepts by which the men of the community began to be instructed, doing so until the coming of a prophet and the Messiahs of Aaron and Israel."

Dead Sea Scrolls (Community Rule, 1QS)



- New Moses
- New Aaron
- New David



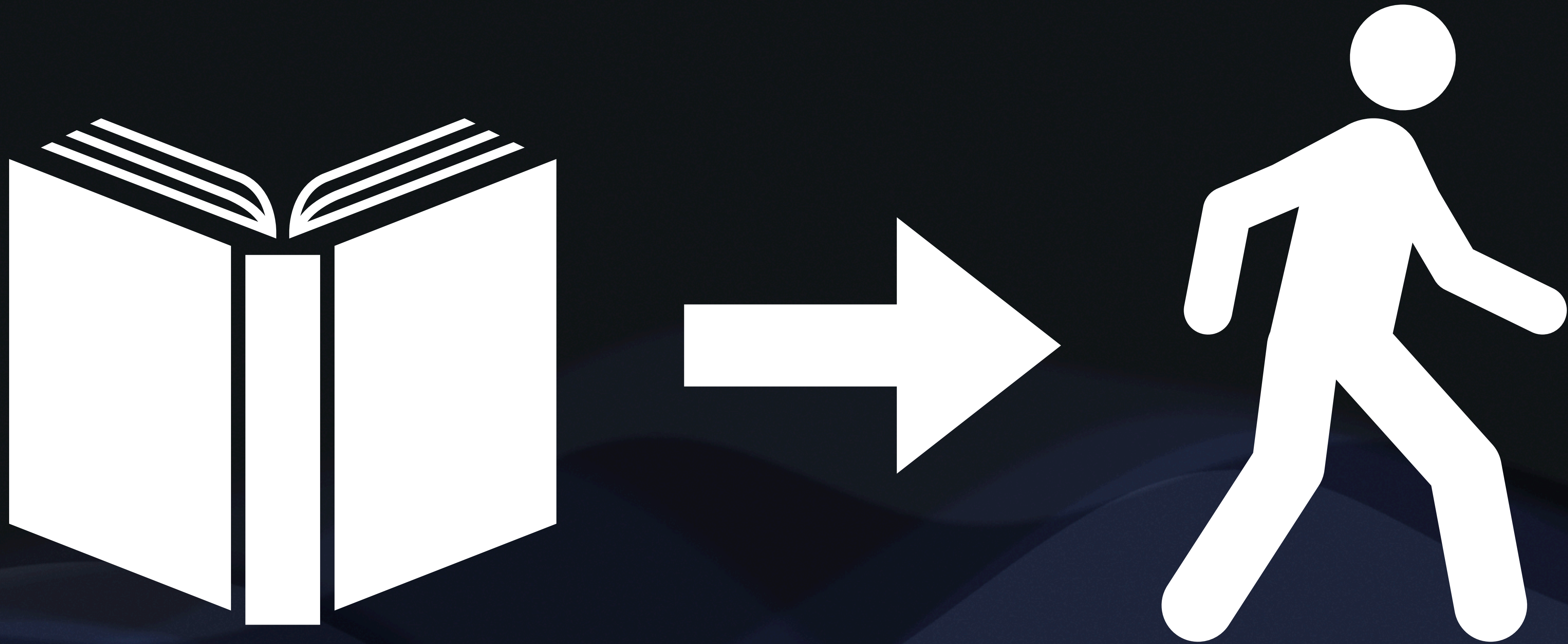
“So he got up and went to his father.

“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.”

(Luke 15:20)

Date	Event
333 BC	Alexander the Great's conquests
167 BC	Maccabean Revolt
63 BC	Roman conquest of Judea
4 BC	Birth of Jesus (approximate)
AD 30	Death & resurrection of Jesus
AD 70	Destruction of Jerusalem & Temple

4. Application



1. Understanding Context Prevents Misinterpretation
2. Bringing the Bible to Life for Others
3. Connecting Biblical Principles to Modern Audiences

1. How does the historical background of the New Testament change the way you understand Jesus' message?
2. What insights did you gain about the geography of the New Testament that help explain biblical events?
3. How can understanding first-century Jewish culture help in preaching today?
4. If Jesus came today, what cultural, political, or religious tensions might he address?
5. What event would you say most shaped the NT? Why?

Suggested Reading & Resources

- A.J. Heschel: God in Search of Man, The Sabbath, Man is Not Alone.
- Intertestamental History: Maccabees
- NT Wright: The New Testament and the People of God.