

CHAPTER 1

THE MASSACRE IN BETHLEHEM

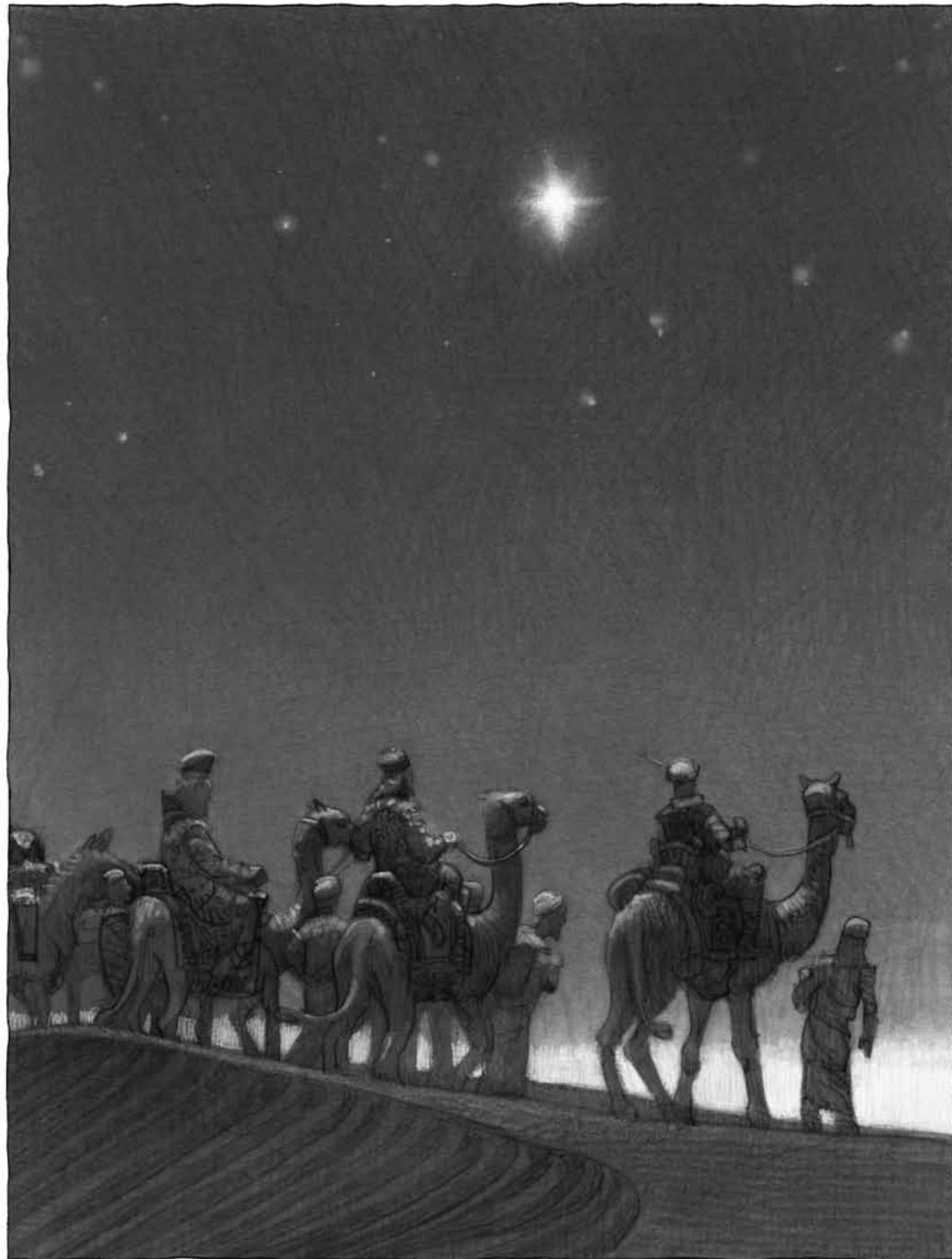
MARCH, 5 BC ♦ BETHLEHEM, JUDEA

JOSEPH AND MARY AND THEIR INFANT SON, JESUS, barely get out of Bethlehem alive. Joseph awakes from a terrifying dream and has a vision of what is to come. He rouses Mary and Jesus, and they escape into the night.

Now soldiers are walking toward Bethlehem. They have come from the capital city of Jerusalem and are approaching this small town, intent on finding and killing a baby boy. The child's name, unknown to them, is Jesus, and his only crime is that some believe he will be the next king of the Jewish people. The current ruler of the land, a tyrant named Herod the Great, is determined to ensure the baby's death. None of the soldiers know what the child's mother and father look like or the precise location of his home, so they plan to kill every baby boy in

Capture of Jerusalem by Herod in 36 BC. *An illustration from a 1470 French translation of the Flavius Josephus history of the Jews.* [The Bridgeman Art Library]

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Bethlehem and the surrounding area. This alone will guarantee that the threat is eliminated.

Herod first learns about Jesus from travelers who have come to worship the baby. These men, called Magi, are astronomers and wise men who study the world's great religious texts. Among these books is the Tanakh, a collection of history, prophecy, poetry, and songs telling the story of the Jewish people. The wealthy foreigners travel almost a thousand miles over rugged desert, following an extraordinarily bright star that shines in the sky each morning before dawn. "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?" they ask on their arrival in Herod's court. "We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

Amazingly, the Magi carry treasure chests filled with gold, as well as the sweet-smelling tree resins myrrh and frankincense. These are learned, studious men. Herod can only conclude that the Magi are either foolhardy for risking the theft of such a great fortune by carrying it across the vast desert to get to Jerusalem, or that they truly believe this child will be the new king.

After the Magi ask their question, a furious Herod summons his religious advisers. He insists that these teachers of religious law and temple high priests tell him exactly where to find this new king.

The teachers whom Herod first interrogates are humble men. They wear simple white linen caps and robes. Then he moves on to the bearded temple high priests. They dress elaborately, in white

The Magi follow a bright star. [William Low]



An illustration of frankincense from a book on medicinal plants published in 1887. The resin from this tree was used to make incense and perfume.

[The Bridgeman Art Library]

and blue linen caps and turbans with gold bands on the brows, and blue robes adorned in bright tassels and bells. Over this they wear capes and purses decorated with gold and precious stones. Their clothing signifies their stature as high-level temple leaders. Herod demands of the teachers and priests, “Where is this so-called king of the Jews?”

“Bethlehem, in the land of Judah.” They quote verbatim from the prophet Micah, whose words are recorded in the Tanakh. Some seven centuries earlier, Micah said that the person who would save the Jewish people would be born in Bethlehem. “Out of you [Bethlehem] will come . . . one who will be ruler over Israel. . . .”

Herod sends the Magi on their way. His parting royal instruction is that they locate the infant, then return to Jerusalem and tell Herod the child’s precise location so that he can visit this new king himself.

The Magi see through this deceit. They never go back to Jerusalem.



For centuries, Jewish prophets have predicted the coming of a new king to rule their people. They have prophesied five specific occurrences that would take place to confirm the Messiah’s birth.

The first is that a great star will rise in the east.

The second is that the baby will be born in Bethlehem, the small town where the great King David was born a thousand years ago.

The third prophecy is that the child will also be a direct

descendant of David, a fact that can easily be confirmed by the temple’s meticulous genealogical records.

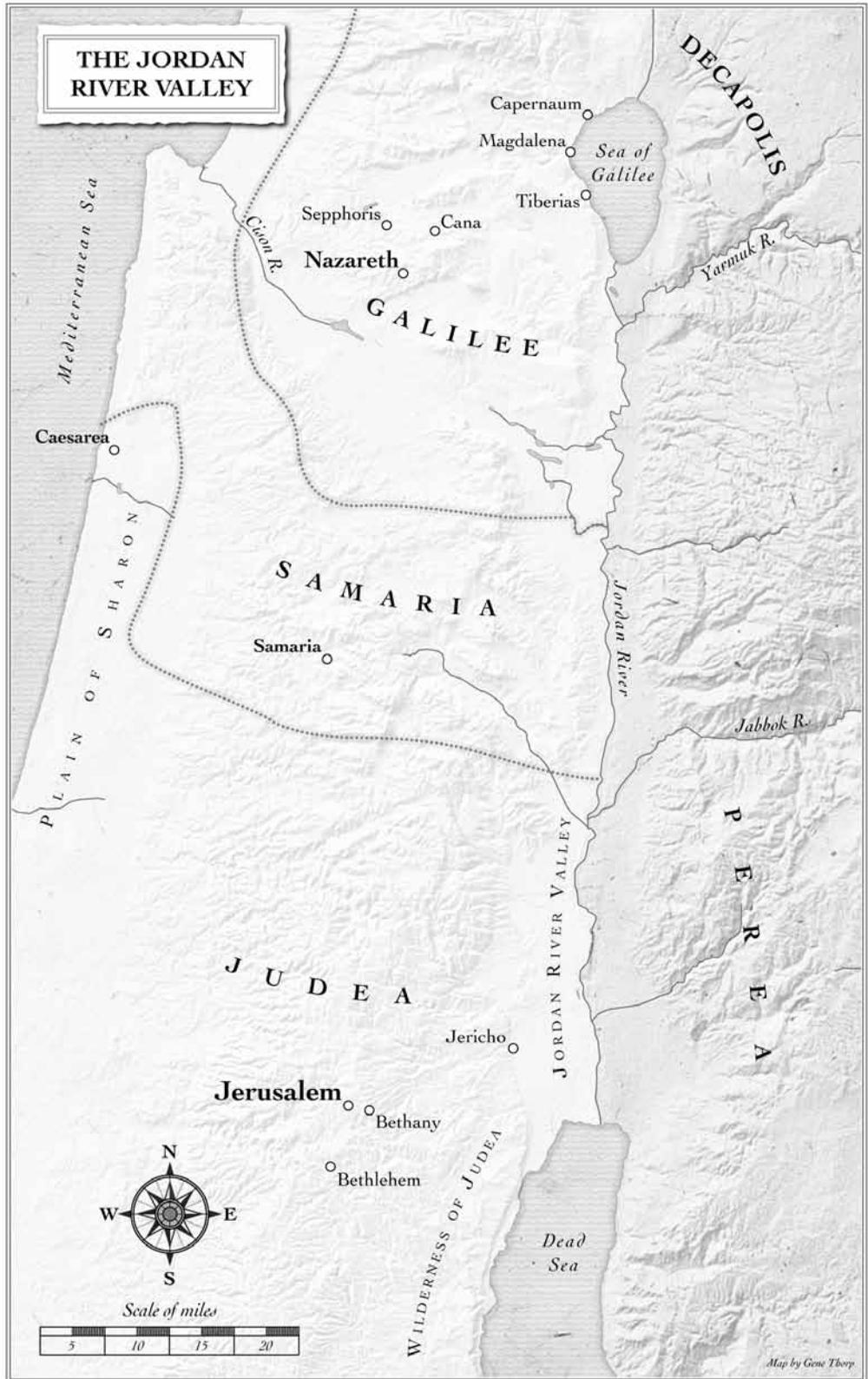
Fourth, powerful men will travel from afar to worship him.

And finally, the child’s mother will be a virgin.

What troubles Herod most deeply is knowing that three of these events have occurred. He would be even more distressed to learn that the remaining two are also true. The child is from the line of David, and his teenage mother, Mary, attests that she is a virgin, despite her pregnancy.

Herod gazes out of his palace window, waiting to hear that all the baby boys in Bethlehem have been killed. He is afraid of what will happen if a king rises up to save the Jewish people. One result is likely: it will mean the end of his good life. Even though he is half Jewish, Herod’s allegiance is to Rome.

Judea is part, though only a small part, of the vast Roman Empire—a sprawling kingdom stretching the length of Europe, across Asia Minor, and including almost the entire Mediterranean rim. But Herod’s kingdom is different from any other under Rome’s iron fist: it is the only Jewish territory. The Jewish people are an ancient civilization founded on a belief system that is at odds with Rome’s. The Jewish people believe in one true God; the rest of the empire worships many pagan deities and even considers its emperor divine. Herod stands between the Jews and the Roman emperor Augustus Caesar in their uneasy relationship. Rome will leave the Jews alone as long as Herod keeps his people productive so they can pay the high taxes that Rome demands.

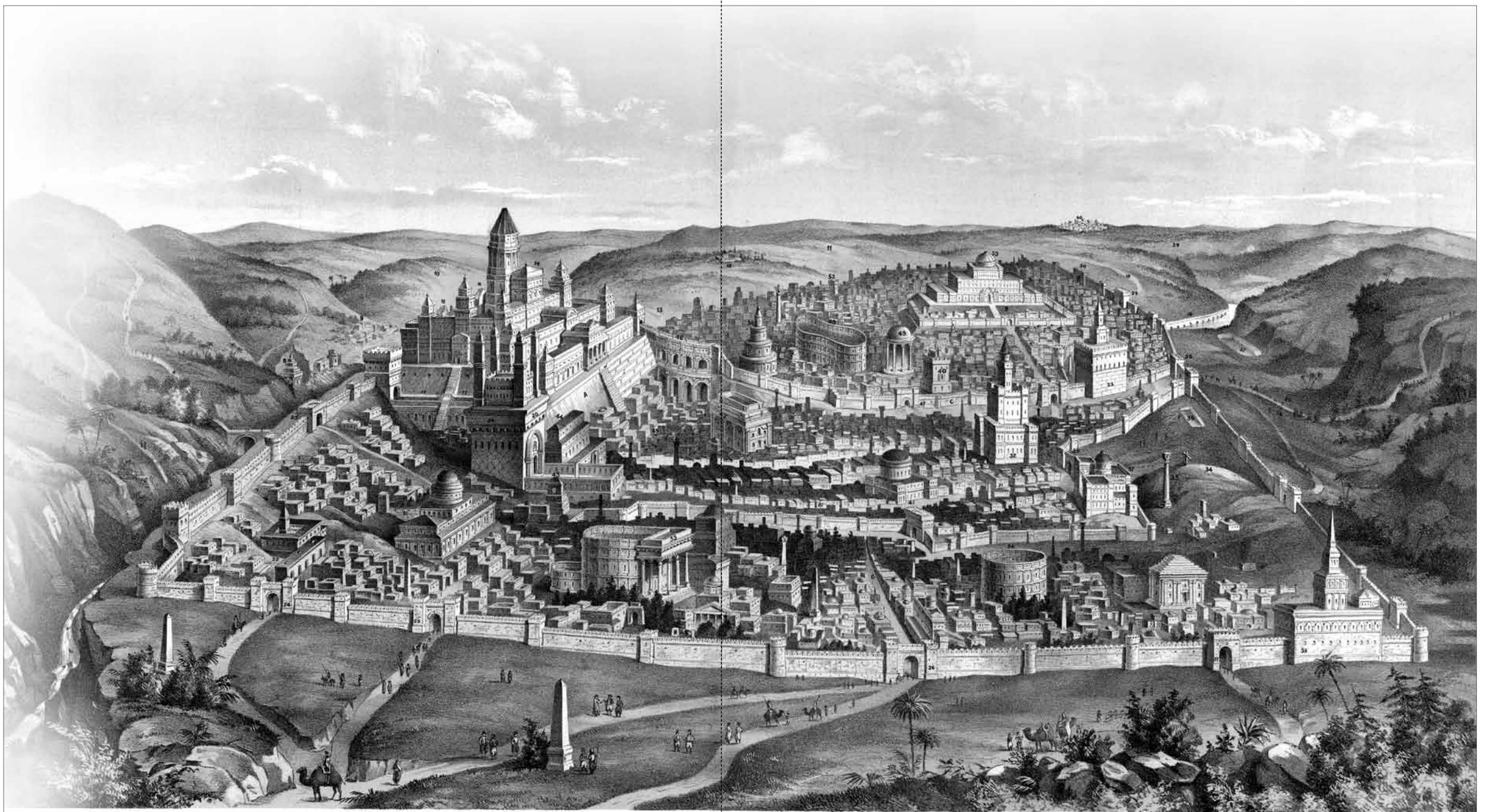


Herod doesn't know it, but Jesus and his parents have already traveled to Jerusalem twice before to pay visits to the great temple, the most important and sacred building in all Judea. Perched atop a massive stone platform that gives it the appearance of a fortress rather than a place of worship, the temple is a physical embodiment of the Jewish people and their ancient faith. The temple was first built by Solomon in the tenth century BC. It was leveled by the Babylonians in 586 BC and then rebuilt nearly fifty years later. Herod recently renovated the entire complex and increased the temple's size. Now it is not just a symbol of Judaism, but of the king himself.

Eight days after Jesus's birth, his parents made their first visit to the temple so that he might be circumcised. There the child was formally named Jesus. The second visit came when he was forty days old. The baby boy was brought to the temple and presented to God, in keeping with the laws of the Jewish faith. His father, Joseph, a carpenter, dutifully purchased a pair of young turtledoves to be sacrificed in honor of this solemn occasion.

Something very strange occurred as Jesus and his parents entered the temple on that day, something that hinted he might truly be a very special child. Mary, Joseph, and Jesus were traveling quietly, not doing anything that would draw attention. Even so, two complete strangers—an old man and an old woman, both of whom

[NEXT PAGES] *An illustrated map of Jerusalem as it may have looked in AD 65, drawn in 1887.* [Mary Evans Picture Library]



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A. MOUNT MORIAH.

- 1.1 Mount of Olives.
- 2 Road to Bethany.
- 3 Place where Jesus wept.
- 4 Garden of Gethsemane.
- 5.5.5 Valley of Jehoshaphat.
- 6.6 Brook Kedron.
- 7 Point of Ascension.
- 8 Absalom's Pillar.
- 9 The Village of Sion.
- 10 Hill of Offences.

B. MOUNT ZION.

- 11 Hill of Evil Counsel.
- 12 House of Caiaphas.
- 13 Anselhama, or Field of Blood.
- 14 The Temple.
- 15 Golden Gate.
- 16 Porch of Solomon.
- 17.17 Pool of Bethesda.
- 18 Aqueduct.
- 19 Road to Bethlehem.
- 20.20 Tower of Antonia.

C. UPPER CITY.

- 21.21 Via Dolorosa.
- 22 Fish Market.
- 23 St. Stephen's Gate.
- 24 Fish Gate.
- 25 Oil Gate.
- 26 Gate of Ephraim.
- 27 Gate of Herod.
- 28 Hebron Gate.
- 29 Gate of Essenes.
- 30 Zion Gate.

C. UPPER CITY.

- 31 Sheep Market.
- 32 Tower of Acra.
- 33 Tower of Hippicus.
- 34 Calvary.
- 35 Holy Sepulchre.
- 36 Pool of Heseekiah.
- 37 Palace of Helen.
- 38 Tower of Paphnia.
- 39 Judgment Gate.
- 40 Tower of Phasaelus.

D. BEZETHA.

- 41 The Lower Court.
- 42 Upper Court.
- 43 Hall of Judgment.
- 44 Pilate's House.
- 45 Tyropean Valley.
- 46 High Bridge.
- 47 Solomon's Gate.
- 48 Hippodrome.
- 49 Xystus.
- 50 Prison.
- 51 Great Market.
- 52 Dung Gate.
- 53 Palace of the Kings.
- 54 Circus.
- 55 Theatre.
- 56,56,56 Valley of Gihon.
- 57 Upper Pool of Gihon.
- 58 Road to Joppa.
- 59 Wilderness of St. John.
- 60 Bethshan.

ANCIENT
A.D.

JERUSALEM
65.



knew nothing about this baby called Jesus or his fulfillment of the prophecy—saw him from across the crowded temple and came to him.

The approaching old man's name was Simeon, and he was of the belief that he would not die until he laid eyes upon the new king of the Jews. Simeon asked if he might hold the baby. Mary and Joseph agreed. As Simeon took Jesus into his arms, he offered a prayer to God, thanking him for the chance to see this new king with his own eyes. Then Simeon handed Jesus back to Mary with these words: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too."

At that very moment, a woman named Anna approached. She was an eighty-four-year-old widowed prophetess, who spent her waking hours in the temple, fasting and praying. Simeon's words were still ringing in Mary's and Joseph's ears as Anna stepped forward and also praised Jesus. She loudly thanked God for bringing this special baby boy into the world. Then she made a most unusual claim, predicting to Mary and Joseph that their son would free Jerusalem from Roman rule.

Mary and Joseph marveled at Simeon's and Anna's words, flattered for the attention, as all new parents would be, but also unsure what this talk about swords and redemption truly meant. They finished their business and departed into the bustling city of

Jerusalem, both elated and fearful for the life their son might be destined to lead.



There are many more prophecies about the life of Jesus outlined in Scripture. Slowly but surely, as this child grows to manhood, those predictions will also come true. Jesus's behavior will brand him as a revolutionary, known throughout Judea for his startling speeches and teachings. He will be adored by the Jewish people but become a threat to those who profit from the populace: the high priests, the temple elders, the puppet rulers of Judea, and most of all, the Roman Empire.

And Rome does not tolerate a threat. The Romans have learned and mastered the arts of torture and persecution. Revolutionaries and troublemakers are dealt with in harsh and horrific fashion in order that others won't be tempted to copy their ways.

So it will be with Jesus. This, too, will fulfill prophecy.

All of that is to come. For now Jesus is still an infant, cared for and loved by Mary and Joseph. He was born in a stable, visited by the Magi, presented with their lavish gifts, and is now being pursued by Herod and the Roman Empire.

And it is Joseph who will train the boy to be obedient and strong, to follow Jewish ways and obey Jewish laws.

