

*Seven Events*  
THAT SHAPED THE  
*New Testament*  
*World*

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**B**  
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For Lee—  
with whom I have experienced  
many wonderful events



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## PREFACE

*F*irst, a word of explanation. In this book I refer to dates using the abbreviation of BCE and CE. These abbreviations may not be familiar to some readers. BCE stands for “before the Common Era.” CE is an abbreviation for “Common Era” and replaces the perhaps more familiar AD.

Second, another word of explanation. You will note that the second of the seven events has a date inscribed as ca. 250 BCE\*. The asterisk attached to a number looks a little unusual. At the beginning of chapter 2, I explain the asterisk’s function as signifying a date that is approximate, legendary, and a process.

Third, a word of appreciation. I want to thank Kendi Mohn and Amanda Henderson, two students at Brite Divinity School in Fort Worth, for their careful reading of the manuscript of this book. Their insightful feedback has been very helpful and has improved it considerably.



# ABBREVIATIONS

## General and Bible Versions

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*	Used to designate a date as approximate, legendary, and a process	M	Matthew's special source
		NIV	New International Version (2011)
BCE	before the Common Era	Ⓟ <sup>46</sup>	Chester Beatty papyrus, with Gospels and Acts, 2nd to 3rd century
ca.	circa, approximately		
CE	Common Era		
cf.	compare	Q	<i>Quelle</i> , hypothetical sayings "source" used by Matthew and Luke
chap(s).	chapter(s)		
e.g.	for example		
esp.	especially	RSV	Revised Standard Version
et al.	and others	trans.	translator, translated by, translation
idem	the same; that is, by the same author	v(v).	verse(s)
L	Luke's special source		
LXX	Septuagint, Greek translation of Hebrew Bible		

## Old Testament

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Gen.	Genesis	Ezra	Ezra
Exod.	Exodus	Neh.	Nehemiah
Lev.	Leviticus	Esther	Esther
Num.	Numbers	Job	Job
Deut.	Deuteronomy	Ps(s).	Psalms(s)
Josh.	Joshua	Prov.	Proverbs
Judg.	Judges	Eccles.	Ecclesiastes
Ruth	Ruth	Song	Song of Songs
1–2 Sam.	1–2 Samuel	Isa.	Isaiah
1–2 Kings	1–2 Kings	Jer.	Jeremiah
1–2 Chron.	1–2 Chronicles	Lam.	Lamentations

Ezek.	Ezekiel	Mic.	Micah
Dan.	Daniel	Nah.	Nahum
Hosea	Hosea	Hab.	Habakkuk
Joel	Joel	Zeph.	Zephaniah
Amos	Amos	Hag.	Haggai
Obad.	Obadiah	Zech.	Zechariah
Jon.	Jonah	Mal.	Malachi

### Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books

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1–4 Macc.	1–4 Maccabees	Sir.	Sirach/Ecclesiasticus
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### New Testament

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Matt.	Matthew	1–2 Thess.	1–2 Thessalonians
Mark	Mark	1–2 Tim.	1–2 Timothy
Luke	Luke	Titus	Titus
John	John	Philem.	Philemon
Acts	Acts	Heb.	Hebrews
Rom.	Romans	James	James
1–2 Cor.	1–2 Corinthians	1–2 Pet.	1–2 Peter
Gal.	Galatians	1–3 John	1–3 John
Eph.	Ephesians	Jude	Jude
Phil.	Philippians	Rev.	Revelation
Col.	Colossians		

### Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament

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2 Bar.	2 Baruch	Pss. Sol.	Psalms of Solomon
1 En.	1 Enoch	T. Reu.	Testament of Reuben
Let. Aris.	Letter of Aristeas		

### Dead Sea Scrolls

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1QS	<i>Serek Hayaḥad (Rule of the Community)</i>
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### Ancient Sources

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<i>Appian</i>		<i>Quint. frat.</i>	<i>Epistulae ad Quintum fratrem (Letters to Brother Quintus)</i>
<i>Mith.</i>	<i>Mithridates</i>		
<i>Augustine</i>			
<i>Civ.</i>	<i>De civitate Dei (City of God)</i>	<i>Rab. Perd.</i>	<i>Pro Rabirio Perduellionis Reo (For Rabirius on a Charge of Treason)</i>
<i>Cicero</i>			
<i>Prov. cons.</i>	<i>De provinciis consularibus (Consular Provinces)</i>	<i>Verr.</i>	<i>In Verrem (Against Verres)</i>

**Diodorus Siculus**

Hist. *Bibliotheca historica* (Historical Library)

**Eusebius**

Hist. eccl. *Historia ecclesiastica* (Ecclesiastical History)

**Ignatius**

Eph. *To the Ephesians*

**Irenaeus**

Haer. *Adversus haereses* (Against Heresies)

**Josephus**

Ant. *Jewish Antiquities*

J.W. *Jewish War*

**Justin**

Dial. *Dialogus cum Tryphone* (Dialogue with Trypho)

**Juvenal**

Spect. *Spectacula* (Spectacles)

**Macrobius**

Sat. *Saturnalia*

**Martial**

Spect. *Spectacula* (Spectacles)

**Philo**

Mos. *De vita Mosis* (Life of Moses)

**Pliny the Elder**

Nat. *Naturalis historia* (Natural History)

**Plutarch**

Alex. *Alexander*

Caes. *Caesar*

**Seneca**

Ben. *De beneficiis* (Benefits)

**Suetonius**

Aug. *Divus Augustus*

Cal. *Gaius Caligula*

**Tacitus**

Ann. *Annales* (Annals)

Hist. *Historiae* (Histories)



# INTRODUCTION

## Seven Events

So what is this book about? Why should you bother reading it? Reading it because an instructor assigned it to you to read is not a bad reason. But is there any payoff? Good questions.

Here's the short answer: the seven chapters of this book provide an orientation to some important aspects of the early Jesus movement and the New Testament. Reading it will enlighten you about the beginnings of the Christian movement and help your understanding of the New Testament.

Here's the long answer: Seven hundred years. Seven chapters. Seven events or key dates. Three times seventy (or so) pages. This book does not pretend to be comprehensive. Rather it is transparently selective. Each chapter highlights a particular event. There are many, many other events that we could have highlighted. The selected events are of varying lengths; like a blind date gone bad, one even lasts a couple of hundred years!

What makes each event special? How were they selected? I take each event as a focal point for larger cultural dynamics and sociohistorical realities that were in some way significant for followers of Jesus and the New Testament. I use them as entry points, as launching pads, to talk about these significant and larger realities.

Chapters 1–4 highlight four key events in the time period prior to the emergence of the Jesus movement. Each event, though, leads us into cultural configurations that are crucial for the Jesus movement; so in each of these chapters we will also jump forward to the Jesus movement. Then in chapters 5–7 we center on three events of great consequence for the Jesus movement.

These key events recognize that the ancient world was multicultural. Though so much a feature of our worlds, multiculturalism did not come into existence in the last decade or so. The early Jesus movement emerges in a multicultural world. It is enmeshed in this world and negotiates it daily.

So in chapter 1 we consider the first key moment: 323 BCE, the year Alexander the Great died. That's over three hundred years before the time of Jesus. How much do we care about Alexander? Enough to review some of his major accomplishments so as to focus on his important legacy. He sets in motion forces that spread Greek language and Hellenistic culture across the ancient world. Hellenistic culture did not suddenly replace all other cultures but entangled itself with local cultures to create multicultural worlds. Jumping ahead three centuries, we look at some of the ways the early Jesus movement participates in some of these dynamics.

Why does that matter? Chapter 2 takes up one expression of the spread of Hellenistic culture: the translation of Jewish Scriptures from Hebrew into Greek. This *process*—and I will emphasize this dynamic—seems to be under way by around the 250s BCE. This translation, known as the Septuagint, was a way to negotiate a multicultural world. The Septuagint became the Scriptures of the early movement of Jesus-followers. So jumping ahead a couple of centuries, we look at how the Septuagint (the LXX) provides them with resources, language, and paradigms for understanding Jesus.

In chapter 3 we pick up another layer of cultural traditions. Part of this Greek-dominated, multicultural world comprised Jewish traditions and culture. We look at a major incident in which Hellenistic and Jewish traditions collide, and in which Jewish practices are defended and asserted—namely, when the Jerusalem temple is rededicated in 164 BCE. The villain is King Antiochus Epiphanes. The hero is the local boy Judas Maccabeus. We sketch out some of the key dynamics of this Jewish world and, jumping ahead, locate Jesus in this diverse and vibrant tradition.

In chapter 4 another major power player comes to the fore: Rome. In 63 BCE the Roman general Pompey establishes Roman control of Judea. Jewish folks negotiate Roman rule in various ways. Jumping ahead a century or so, we look at some of the diverse ways followers of Jesus, who was crucified by Rome and its Jerusalem allies, negotiate imperial power.

Chapters 5–7 focus specifically on three events of central significance for the Jesus movement emerging in this multicultural world. Chapter 5 focuses on Jesus's execution in 30 CE. Only bad boys were crucified in Rome's world. The chapter thinks about how King Jesus threatened the Roman order and how, thereafter, Jesus's followers make sense of this event.



Chapter 6 thinks about the emergence of the writings that will eventually make it into the New Testament. They are written in the window of about 50–130 CE. Chapter 7 develops the larger question of the processes by which the New Testament canon is formed and then ratified in 397 CE.

Seven hundred years of human experience. Seven chapters. Seven key events. Obviously that is selective. Obviously we leave out many other key events. The seven events function as entry points into the worlds that constitute the complex multicultural environment in which the Jesus movement emerges.

## Dates and History?

People often think of studying history as the boring and tedious task of learning dates. Often studying history has focused on “Great Men” and their political and military exploits, ignoring women, common people, and everyday living and social structures. Often history has concentrated its efforts on discovering “what really happened.” That’s not the sort of history this book undertakes.

Yes, we do have seven key dates or events. Yes, we do have some “big names” and “Great Men.” They don’t come much bigger than Alexander the (not so?) Great, or Judas Maccabeus, or the Roman general Pompey and the emperors who follow him to power. But I’m not interested in them for their own sake. I’m not much interested in how many battles they won, or how they won them, or how much political power they had. I’m much more interested in the impact of their victories and their power on the little people, the common folks. Think of these key dates as being in the service of demographics or cultural dynamics.

Our focus is on the emergence of the early Jesus movement. This was not a movement that elites and “Great Men and Women” joined. Jesus came from a poor town in a country under Roman imperial power. He was an artisan. He died on a Roman cross. His followers, at least initially, constituted a movement of largely common folks who every day experienced varying degrees of poverty and powerlessness in a multicultural world. That is, this movement was not a superspiritual one that somehow escaped or ignored the socioeconomic realities of the time. They did not live ten feet above poverty, sickness, disease, food shortages, taxes, slavery, and hard work—the normal conditions of most poor folks living in the Roman Empire. They were enmeshed in this larger complex world whether they wanted to be or not. There was no escaping the consequences of what the small ruling elites of “Great Men and Women” did or how they structured the world for their own advantage.

Thus, instead of focusing on the powerful as though they are the whole story, one can do history from below, focusing on people and the social and

cultural environments in which they lived. This people's-history perspective thinks about the impact of larger cultural movements and political structures on common folks.<sup>1</sup> In the ancient world, that is somewhat hard to do because most of the sources—though not all—come from elite males. They aren't much interested in nonelites. But our focus on the early Jesus movement takes us immediately into a group of common folks. By learning about their worlds and by reading their writings, we can gather some idea of how they negotiated this world of intertwining traditions: Greek culture, Jewish culture, and Roman imperial power.

The term “negotiated” is important. By “negotiated,” I don't mean that someone brought donuts, or bagels and cream cheese with coffee, for a meeting where several parties try to hammer out deals that serve their own best interests. No such meeting is among our seven key events. I am using the term “negotiate” to refer to how they lived, how they made their way, in their complex world as followers of Jesus.

And I don't use “negotiate” to mean opposition. I am not suggesting that Jesus-followers automatically opposed Greek culture, Jewish practices, or Roman power. That is not so. There is no evidence for a singular approach of conflict or opposition or persecution. For much of our time period, most followers of Jesus did not need to worry about being thrown to lions because everyone hated them. That's a very inaccurate stereotype.

There is no doubt, though, that interactions were complex. In places there was some opposition. After all, followers of Jesus followed one who had been crucified by Rome and its allies. But there was also plenty of cultural imitation and accommodation. Christians drew resources such as language and ideas and social structures from each of these cultural streams. They wrote in Greek. They read Jewish Scriptures. They followed Jesus as members of his kingdom or *empire*, which they saw as eventually ruling over everything. They accommodated, they contested, they competed, they survived.

As strange as it might sound to us, the early Jesus group was a minority movement. It was initially very small, hardly a blip on the screen for most people. Living as a minority movement in a complex society is not easy. Powerlessness shapes your identity, your ways of being, your interactions with others, how you organize yourselves as a group, what you think and talk about, how others perceive you and interact with you. This minority status, of course, changes over the centuries. By the fourth century the Christian movement had

1. For a much more developed discussion of a people's-history approach to the early Jesus movement, see Richard A. Horsley, ed., *Christian Origins*, vol. 1 of *A People's History of Christianity*, ed. Denis R. Janz (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005).

much more presence and influence, especially when the emperor Constantine took it under his wing around 313 CE (for better or for worse).

We can't engage all of this in the seven-chapter sketch that follows. But these are some of the issues and social dynamics that come to the fore in our people's-history approach. The seven key events help us see something of the dynamics of the emerging Jesus movement and help us understand the New Testament that those dynamics produced.