

KATHIE LEE GIFFORD

WITH RABBI JASON SOBEL

the ROCK, *the* ROAD, *and the* RABBI



My Journey *into the* Heart of Scriptural Faith
and the Land Where It All Began

PRAISE FOR
The Rock, the Road, and the Rabbi

This is one of those unique “if” books that speaks deep into your soul with promise and possibility. Because *if* you’ve always wanted to visit the Holy Land, *if* you want a deeper understanding of the Bible, and *if* you enjoy great stories from a great storyteller—then this is a perfect book for you.

—Roma Downey, actor, producer, and president of LightWorkers Media

Kathie Lee Gifford has encouraged and inspired me for many years. This book will do the same for you. She escorts the reader to the land of the Savior, taking us on a heart-deepening journey of hope.

—Max Lucado, pastor and *New York Times* bestselling author

Living one’s faith unashamedly and joyfully in the public square as my friend Kathie Lee Gifford has done is rare and beautiful, and has inspired me personally in my own faith. So it’s no surprise that this rare and beautiful book should inspire me too. If it doesn’t make you want to know God better—and make you want to visit Israel!—you obviously haven’t read it yet. What are you waiting for?

—Eric Metaxas, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy* and host of the nationally syndicated *Eric Metaxas Show*

Kathie Lee Gifford’s vibrant personality is revealed in her book *The Rock, the Road, and the Rabbi*. You can sense the thrill of her many treks through the Holy Land as she writes about its captivating beauty and its spiritually deep roots that have found a place in her heart, all because of the power of God’s Word. Take time to read her innermost thoughts as she shares her experiences of walking where Jesus walked. “Seek [God] . . . and find him, though he is not far from any one of us” (Acts 17:27). Fix your heart on the Rock of salvation and walk the Road that leads to redemption with the Rabbi—the teacher who gives eternal life to those who seek Him.

—Franklin Graham, president and CEO, Billy Graham Evangelistic Association and Samaritan’s Purse

The Bible is probably the single most significant written work in history, and yet it's so often misunderstood, distorted, or overlooked. In *The Rock, the Road, and the Rabbi*, Kathie Lee Gifford does the important work of studying and sharing this most foundational of books, hitting both the mind and the heart with the powerful impact of what she uncovers. I am grateful for what this book has done for my life, and you will be too.

—Allison Pataki, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Accidental Empress*

The Rock, the Road, and the Rabbi will inspire and uplift readers everywhere. Whether you are a believer or not, a seeker or simply intrigued, this glorious walking tour of the Holy Land, with personal insights and stories by Kathie Lee Gifford, describes the sacred places of Israel and their meaning step by step. Rabbi Jason Sobel offers biblical and historical context with clarity and insight. From the stillness of the desert to the serenity of the Sea of Galilee, you will be swept into the beauty, wonder, and magnificence of these sacred places by two enthusiastic believers on a lifelong faith journey.

—Adriana Trigiani, *New York Times* bestselling author

A personal, inviting, and engaging encounter with both the Jesus of history, the man who walked the dusty landscape of first-century Judea and Galilee, and the Christ of faith, the one around whom the author's entire life revolves. Especially for Christians who know little about Jesus' Jewish background, this book is a fine place to begin your journey.

—James Martin, SJ, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Jesus: A Pilgrimage*

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and the RABBI

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“He Saw Jesus”

Music by Brett James and Lyrics by Kathie Lee Gifford

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“Lead Me, Gentle Shepherd”

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The most important fact I want to emphasize at the beginning of this book is this: *I am not a biblical scholar or an expert in biblical studies*. I am simply a lifetime student of the Word of God and a seeker of truth.

But in my search for a deeper understanding of the Bible, I have met extraordinary people such as my friends Emilie and Craig Wierda, to whom I am most grateful for first inviting me along this amazing journey.

And finally I thank God for Ray Vander Laan, Rod Van Solkema, and Rabbi Jason Sobel, three men who have taken me up steep slopes, led me deep into the desert, explained ancient mysteries, and revealed what Scripture means in its original form. Most importantly, they have relit a passion in my innermost being for the Bible and rekindled my desire for the Lover of my soul: Jesus, the Messiah.

For that I am eternally grateful, and to them I dedicate *The Rock, the Road, and the Rabbi*.

— KATHIE LEE GIFFORD

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INTRODUCTION

Lord, You Want Me to What?

The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.

—LAMENTATIONS 3:22–23 ESV

Before I began my new job as cohost of the fourth hour of *The Today Show* in 2008, I felt the Lord tugging at my spirit with the words of Matthew 6:33: *Kathie, seek first My kingdom and My righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*

I remember responding, “Lord, You know that’s what I am trying to do—put You and Your kingdom first in my life.”

Then I felt Him gently rebuke me: *You’re not listening. I said to seek Me first!*

“Lord, do You mean first thing in the morning before anything else?” I questioned.

In my heart, I sensed His clear answer: *Yes.*

Wow. I already got up earlier than most—usually right before dawn. But with my new duties at *Today*, I would be leaving my home

in Connecticut shortly after 6:00 a.m. for the hour-long commute into New York City.

“Really, Lord? Before I go into work?”

Yes. I felt Him tenderly remind me, *As you begin your day, so goes your day.*

So I began to awaken before 4:00 a.m. and pray for an hour for my family members, friends and colleagues, world situations, and personal concerns. Then I would open the Scriptures and study God’s Word for an hour more, with my puppies and the birds outside my window as my only company.

This new discipline soon became the best part—and my favorite part—of the day. I began to understand and cherish the Scriptures that talk about the joy of seeking God in the morning:

- “Let the *morning* bring me word of your unfailing love, for I have put my trust in you. Show me the way I should go, for to you I entrust my life” (Psalm 143:8).
- “It is good to praise the LORD and make music to your name, O Most High, proclaiming your love in the *morning* and your faithfulness at night” (Psalm 92:1–2).
- “In the *morning*, LORD, you hear my voice; in the *morning* I lay my requests before you and wait expectantly” (Psalm 5:3).
- “O God, You are my God; *early* will I seek You; my soul thirsts for You; my flesh longs for You in a dry and thirsty land where there is no water” (Psalm 63:1 NKJV).
- “He will make your righteous reward shine like the *dawn*, your vindication like the noonday sun” (Psalm 37:6).
- “The path of the righteous is like the *morning* sun, shining ever brighter till the full light of day” (Proverbs 4:18).

Through this process of getting up early every morning to study God's Word, I have experienced the truth of my favorite Bible verse: "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13 NKJV).

Where do we get everything we need in life? From the Lord our God.

How does He strengthen us? With His Word.

Changing my morning routine has changed my life. I began not only to study the Word, but also to memorize as much as I could so that Scripture would become a living, breathing part of me. No textbook needed, no study guide necessary—just the pure, life-giving, sustaining Word of God settled deep in my soul.

Ever since then, I have been passionate about knowing and understanding the Bible. It breaks my heart to watch so many people desperate to find meaning, cures, and answers from a world that only wants to promote products, gain profit, and exploit human need.

Every answer to every question and every single desire and need anyone will ever have is already available for us in God's Word. The problem is that too few people are willing to do the work of searching for it! "Ask and it will be given to you," Jesus tells us. "Seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you" (Matthew 7:7). In other words, make an effort!

Many of us have become so complacent, spoiled, and comfortable that we don't realize we are miserable. Isaiah 55:2 says: "Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and you will delight in the richest of fare." I believe this is how our faith grows stale, our joy diminishes, and our passion for God runs dry.

We know that eventually we will die if we don't eat food. But

we will all die spiritually if we stop feeding on His Word! “*Taste and see that the LORD is good,*” Psalm 34:8 says. When we fill our lives with everything but the very thing we need most to thrive in our faith—His Word—we become lukewarm. We become bored and indifferent. We fall out of love with God.

One of my favorite verses is Psalm 18:30: “As for God, his way is perfect: The LORD’s word is flawless.” Friends, this is either a fact or a lie. There is no middle ground.

This is why I have grown so passionate about learning what the Bible really says. If I am going to base my life on something, it has to be the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me, God! But how can we live the truth if we don’t even know it?

Granted, there are mysteries in Scripture that will remain mysterious because God wills them to. But Jesus said in John 8:32, “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” Even Pontius Pilate asked Jesus, “What is truth?” (John 18:38).

Everyone wants to know what truth is, but too often in our world the truth is manipulated by individuals, organizations, or the media to accomplish certain agendas. It seems impossible to wade through all the informational garbage.

The word *truth* occurs in the Bible more than two hundred times. Obviously, God places immeasurable value in the truth, and He longs for each of us to seek it, find it, and apply it to our lives. The Bible is our treasure map. We can use its parables, psalms, numbers, prophecies, and personal stories of faith to guide our understanding. But this process requires great effort on our part. All too often we are so overwhelmed by technology, our personal dramas, and our endless ambition that we neglect to study God’s Word. Imagine how it breaks the heart of our heavenly Father—who loves His children

and longs to lead us into all joy, peace, and hope—when He sees us putting all our energy into everything but the one thing that can bring us life.



One of the saddest things I've encountered through the years when I try to share the gospel of salvation through Jesus, the Messiah, as taught in the Bible, is that many people dismiss the message immediately because of what they have already heard and therefore believe about what the Bible says.

They say they can't put their faith in a book that maintains the earth was created in seven days. They say they can't put their faith in a vengeful God who wants mankind to fear His judgment or they'll be sent to hell. They hate the apostle Paul's admonition for wives to be submissive to their husbands. They refuse to even pick up a Bible, read it, or study it in any way, even though most reasonable people agree it is the single most influential piece of literature ever written in all of history.

When people share their concerns with me, I always respond in the same way: "You have to understand what the Bible actually says, not what you've been told by others who are usually misinformed."

For instance, the word in Genesis 1:1–5 translated "day" is the Hebrew word *yom*, which refers to a period of time with a beginning and an end. It is unlikely it was a twenty-four-hour solar day, because the sun, moon, and stars do not appear until the fourth "day."

As to the issue of fearing God, I thought it would be fascinating to look up what the word *fear* actually means in ancient Hebrew.

I discovered that the word *yirah*, translated “fear,” has a range of meanings.

In Jewish thought, there are three levels of fear. First, there is the fear of punishment or pain (*yirat ha'onesh*).¹ This is the sense in which we usually think of the word *fear*. Second, there is the fear of breaking God’s law (*yirat ha'malkhut*).² This is the fear of being punished by God for sin. The third type of fear is a deep reverence for and awareness of the presence of God (*yirat ha'rommemnut*): “The fear of the LORD leads to life; then one rests content, untouched by trouble” (Proverbs 19:23).³ This is the healthy type of fear that draws us near to God. “There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love” (1 John 4:18). If we “fear” God in this way, then we will be aware of God’s presence all around us. I love this thought!

On the subject of submission, I thought it would be interesting to test what I had been learning from my rabbinic study and go to the original text. I searched for what “submit” means in the original text of Ephesians 5:22, where Paul exhorts, “Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord.” I found the Greek word *hupotasso*. Basically, it means “to identify with” or “to be in support of.” This is different from the English translation, which is taken from the Greek word *hupеiko*, meaning “submit to.”

The biblical meaning of submission has nothing to do with being a doormat or a second-class citizen, or even a slave of any kind. Instead, it seems to point to what most of Jesus’ teaching points to: be kind to one another, love one another, be of service to one another, and treat others the way you want to be treated.

The truth is that some people aren’t aware of the facts about

God's Word, and others choose to ignore them. The Bible is not an ancient, dead book. Hebrews 4:12 tells us, "The word of God is alive and active."

God is a covenant-keeping, faithful, unchanging Father to us all in a world where everything else changes from one moment to the next.



In this book you will have the exciting opportunity to discover the *truth* of the Bible and learn what many passages in the Scriptures really mean. You will experience the Rock (Jesus), the Road (the Holy Land), and the Rabbi (the Word of God) as you have never experienced them before!

Come deeper as we explore the land of Israel and mine the treasures of God's Word together. There is so much more!

PREFACE

My Love Affair with Israel

*Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:
“May they prosper who love you.”*

—PSALM 122:6 NASB

My love affair with the land of Israel began the moment I took my very first step onto the Promised Land in June of 1971. I was seventeen years old, and my father’s high school graduation gift was a trip for me and my mother to attend the first Jerusalem Conference on Biblical Prophecy. I missed my graduation ceremony, but I couldn’t have cared less. I was where it all happened! All the stories I had heard, all the Scriptures I had studied since I was a young girl—*everything* I believed from the Word of God had taken place thousands of years before in this land I was experiencing for the very first time! That thought took my breath away all those years ago. It still does today.

I have returned to Israel many times during the last forty-five years, and each time I have come back a totally transformed person.

Why? you might ask. *What is so magical about a small piece of rocky terrain roughly the size of New Hampshire that gives it the power to completely redirect, redefine, and ultimately redeem a human heart?*

That question is the essence of this book. I want to take you to the Holy Land. I want you to experience the thrill of discovering the Word of God in its original languages of Hebrew and Greek, because I believe with all my soul that the answer to every question any person will ever ask is hidden in that land and in the Word of God in its purest form.

Come! Let's go to the land, let's hear the Word, and let's be transformed by the wonder of it all.

MEET THE GOOD RABBI: JASON SOBEL

I first met Rabbi Jason Sobel in December 2016 during the Christmas rush at Rockefeller Center. I had heard about him for several years from friends I respect very much, and to a person, their regard for him and the depth of his teaching was extraordinary. “You *have* to meet him!” my friends told me. “His teaching will change your life.”

So Jason and I sat across from each other at my favorite New York City restaurant, Neary’s Pub, and ordered the famous lamb chops. I instantly warmed to him. Rabbi Jason is the kind of person who gives you a big smile and a bear hug that leaves you breathless.

I expressed to Rabbi Jason my exasperation with what Christmas has deteriorated into: a massive, crass, commercial circus that has nothing to do with the birth of Jesus Christ. I challenge anyone to find a baby in a manger anywhere! (Okay, they still have one at the end of the Christmas Spectacular at Radio City Music Hall. But that’s it.)

I remember throwing up my hands and declaring to Rabbi Jason that I basically hated the whole furious frenzy.

He gave me a wry smile and said quietly, “I can give you a good reason to love December 25.”

I couldn’t imagine such a reason. “Please!” I pleaded.

For the next three hours, I listened as the good rabbi unpacked the secret of this biblical story in a way that left me in awe. (He will share it later in this book.)

Throughout these chapters, I have asked Rabbi Jason to take us deeper into the Scriptures—the same ones we have read over and over through our lives without ever mining the treasures that lie beneath. This is Jason’s extraordinary gift. Every time you think he’s finished with his point, he flashes a smile and says, “But wait! There’s more!” And there always is. So much more!

Rabbi Jason Sobel is a colorful, funny, delightful, brilliant, given-to-rapping Messianic Jew. That term *Messianic Jew* simply means he is a Jewish individual who believes that the Messiah, who was prophesied 353 times in the Old Testament, has already come into the world in the person of Jesus Christ. Simply put, Messianic Jews believe that Jesus was and is the Messiah (or “Anointed One”).

By that definition, I, too, am a Messianic Jew. My father was a Jew, so I am Jewish by birth. And I believe the Messiah has not only already come, but He is going to come again, this time to reign in His kingdom in a new heaven and a new earth.

Jewish friends of mine have often teased me about my *chutzpah*, a Yiddish term I always took negatively to mean “a little pushy.” So imagine my surprise when Rabbi Jason explained to me that it actually means “holy boldness.” Much better!

I want to be bold in my witness for Jesus, but I also want to be sensitive to the Holy Spirit. It’s so easy to completely turn off people whose hearts are not ready to hear the Word.

Rabbi Jason taught me that Jesus came to undo all that we lost in the garden of Eden. He came to undo the ten plagues Moses brought down in the first exodus from Egypt, because Jesus is the final exodus—becoming the one and only Doorway into heaven, the restored Garden that awaits believers.

Another thing Rabbi Jason taught me is that from the first letter to the last, the Bible points to Jesus. On the third day after the crucifixion, two of Jesus' disciples were discussing everything that had happened in Jerusalem during the Passover. Jesus appeared to them on the road to Emmaus and said: “‘Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?’ And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself” (Luke 24:26–27). Jesus' statement on the road to Emmaus is very similar to one made by the rabbis who state in the Talmud, “The prophets prophesied only of the days of the Messiah.”¹

All of Scripture is meant to point to the Messiah in some way. For example, as Rabbi Jason explained to me, the first letter of Genesis is the Hebrew letter *bet*, and the last word of the book of Revelation is the Hebrew word *amen*, which ends in the letter *nun*. The first and last letters of the Bible spell the Hebrew word *Ben*, which means “Son.” From the very first to the very last letter, everything in the Bible points to the Son!

When the old and the new are connected in this way, we experience what the two disciples experienced on the road to Emmaus when they exclaimed, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?” (Luke 24:32). This type of Emmaus experience can happen repeatedly as you discover the Jewish roots and foundations of the Scriptures.

Throughout *The Rock, the Road, and the Rabbi*, Jason will provide his own unique thoughts and insights into many of the places we visit, the Bible passages we examine, and the truths we discover. You'll see his contributions in a different font throughout the book.

So join us, won't you? Come to the land, to the Word, and to the wonder of Israel—and to the Scriptures through which they all come together.

MEET THE TOUR GUIDE: RAY VANDER LAAN

In April 2012, my husband, Frank, and I went to Israel together for the first time. To say he didn't want to go would be an understatement. He was dreading it, and this from a man who had traveled all over the world as an athlete and sportscaster! But our dear friends Emilie and Craig Wierda had told me about a man named Ray Vander Laan, who was considered one of the greatest Bible teachers in the world, and about a tour he was leading in Israel.

My heart was hungry for more truth, but Frank felt he already had all the truth he needed. He had become a Christian decades earlier as a young boy growing up in poverty during the Depression. His parents were Christians, and his father worked as an itinerant oilman in California and Texas. According to Frank's mother's Bible, they moved twenty-nine times before Frank went to high school in Bakersfield, California. Frank remembered eating dog food—and being grateful for it—when life was particularly harsh. But his family always found a church each time they came to a new town, and many times that church was all they had other than one another.

What Frank didn't realize until our trip to Israel is that he had a

religion all his life, but he never had a *relationship* with the living God. Begrudgingly, he agreed to go to Israel with me because he knew how much it meant to me. This trip became the prototype for what we now call the Rock and Road Experience.

Frank and I arrived at Ben Gurion Airport in Tel Aviv at noon after a ten-hour flight from New York City. I think most of the people in our tour group thought we would head to our hotel in Jerusalem, relax for the rest of the day, and then begin our study of the Holy Land rested and refreshed the next morning. But that's because we did not yet know our leader, Ray Vander Laan. Oh, we'd read his bio. We knew he was a teacher of biblical studies from Holland, Michigan, and the founder of That the World May Know Ministries. We knew he had a master's degree from Westminster Theological Seminary and had completed graduate studies that were the equivalent of an Orthodox rabbinical degree from Yeshiva University in New York City. But what we didn't know was *why* he had gone to such extensive lengths to study the Bible.

We soon discovered that Ray was an extremely memorable individual. Do you remember Indiana Jones from *Raiders of the Lost Ark*? Well, I immediately dubbed our teacher "Michigan Ray"! He not only looked like Harrison Ford, he even dressed like him and wore an Indiana Jones-style hat straight out of the Paramount Studios wardrobe! But Ray's message was completely his own.

"The problem with the Bible," he explained on the first day of our study tour, "is that the Bible was written *by* Middle Easterners *for* Middle Easterners. But we try to understand it with a Western mind-set. We try to apply our own principles and our Western understanding to a culture that is completely foreign to us."

That made sense to me. Our foreign policy has tried to do the

same thing with nation building in the Middle East, with disastrous results. The difference between the Eastern and Western mind-sets is apples and oranges. Or more accurately, hummus and hot dogs. Culturally and historically, the East and the West are worlds apart. So how do we bridge that chasm when it comes to learning Scripture?

“By understanding what the Word of God—the Bible—*really* says,” Ray explained.

After our flight landed, we were instructed to gather our luggage, put on our hiking boots, and grab our Bibles. There would be no lounging by the pool that day!

Then came one of my favorite memories on the entire Israel tour. We climbed straight up a mountain for about an hour to reach Gezer, a once-thriving biblical city that is now in ruins. I remember eighty-two-year-old Frank looking at me without an ounce of humor and declaring, “I am on the first flight out of here tomorrow.”

“I’m right behind you,” I said, wondering why we had agreed to such a trip.

When all of us jet-lagged pilgrims finally made it to the top of the mountain, I noticed Michigan Ray wasn’t even out of breath.

The view was stunning. “Look down there,” Ray pointed, “down to where we started out. See that tiny white ribbon following alongside the Mediterranean Sea? That’s the Via Maris, or ‘The Road of the Sea.’ It’s an ancient trade route dating back thousands of years.” It was a beautiful sight, and it set the stage perfectly for Ray’s first teaching session.

“People always ask, *Why the Jews?* Out of all the nations, why did God choose this stubborn, brilliant, but rebellious people to bring His message of salvation to the world?”

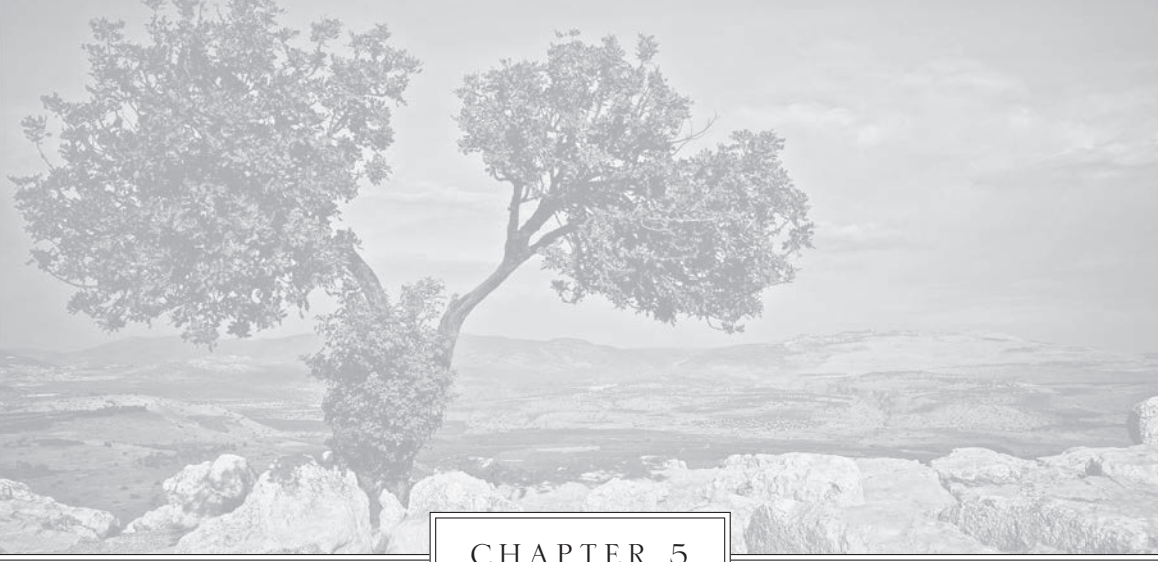
Ray clasped his worn leather Bible for emphasis and pointed below.

“Whoever controlled *that* road controlled the world at that time,” he explained to our group. “It would be like God choosing Wall Street or Hollywood today. But in Jesus’ time, that road was the center of commerce in the Middle East. To the north were Syria, Lebanon, and Turkey; to the east was Mesopotamia; to the south were Egypt, Libya, and Ethiopia. And to the west? To the west was Caesar.”

MORE FROM RABBI JASON

We often refer to Jews as the “chosen people” because God made the nation out of a chosen couple, Abraham and Sarah. Part of God’s covenant with Abraham and his children was giving them the land of Israel. This begs the question: why did God choose that land?

As Kathie mentioned, Israel’s geographic position is key, since it functions as a land bridge between Asia and Africa. But from a spiritual perspective, there is even more. I believe the land God promised Abraham has the same geographic boundaries as the garden of Eden. When they ate of the forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve compromised Paradise and brought sin into the world. But through Abraham, Sarah, and their seed (the Messiah), God will restore heaven to earth, unifying Abraham’s biological children with those in the nations who place their faith in Jesus.



CHAPTER 5

CAESAREA AND HERODIUM

Herod the Great

*When King Herod heard this he was disturbed,
and all Jerusalem with him.*

— MATTHEW 2:3

Other than Jesus, there is perhaps no biblical character more fascinating than Herod the Great. If Jesus is the greatest story ever told, then I believe Herod is the greatest story *never* told.

While there are a number of people named Herod in the Scriptures, we read about Herod the Great only in a couple of places—first as the king the wise men visited when they were seeking the place where the Messiah was to be born (Matthew 2:1–12), and then later when an enraged Herod sent his soldiers to Bethlehem to kill every male child under the age of two years old in the hopes

of destroying any future threat to his throne and kingdom (Matthew 2:16).

But according to the historian Josephus and other chroniclers of the era, Herod the Great, who was born around 73 BC, lived a life of extraordinarily ruthless ambition, unbounded intellect, viciousness, and architectural genius.

Herod murdered the father of his favorite wife, Mariamne. He also drowned her brother and then murdered her as well, claiming she had committed adultery. He executed his most trusted friend, his barber, and three hundred military leaders in one day. He also killed three of his sons, suspecting them of treason. Finally, at the end of his life, he locked up three thousand of the leading citizens of Israel with orders that they be executed at the hour he died, to assure there would be sorrow and mourning on that day. Josephus wrote that Herod “put such abuses upon [the Jews] as a wild beast would not have put on them, if he had power given him to rule.”¹

Looming just a short distance away from Bethlehem is one of Herod’s eleven palaces, Herodium, which Herod selected as the place where he would be entombed.

Herod was the governor of Galilee (appointed by Marc Anthony) when in 40 BC the Parthian Empire conquered Judea and named a new king. Herod was more shrewd than loyal. He declared allegiance to Rome and fled Jerusalem with as many as five thousand people, including his family, under cover of night. Josephus wrote that, while fleeing, his mother’s chariot overturned and trapped her underneath. When she miraculously emerged unscathed, Herod declared his gratitude to the gods and decided to one day be buried at that very site.²

For two thousand years, experts insisted that Herod’s tomb was not

in Herodium. But then in 2007, Herod's burial place was finally discovered by Ehud Netzer of Hebrew University, just where Josephus had written it was.

It is fascinating to climb down the cistern at Herodium and see where the earth has been packed and pushed forward to raise the height of the mountain. (One can only imagine how many slaves died to accomplish this.) Why would Herod go to so much trouble to raise the mountain? Because there was another mountain the same size next to it, and Herod, being the narcissist he was, demanded that his palace or burial site be higher than the one next door.

All of Herod's magnificent palaces were one day's journey from each other—from the north to the farthest south, to Masada, in the Dead Sea region. These palaces were, in essence, his escape route should things go wrong with the Jews or, even more dangerously, with Caesar.

Herod the Great needed Caesar because he needed Caesar's army, but Caesar needed Herod for a reason that has been lost to history. This is perhaps the most fascinating aspect of Herod's story.

Caesarea Maritima (also called Caesarea by the Sea) is an extraordinarily beautiful city on the coast of the Mediterranean, best known in the Bible as the place where Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great, imprisoned the apostle Paul. When you visit this city, you will see a plaque that mentions Pontius Pilate. We can assume Pilate was one of the thousands of soldiers who sailed to Israel on Caesar's ships to this man-made harbor at Caesarea. Only recently have experts finally discovered how King Herod was capable of going 120 feet into the Mediterranean Sea to pour concrete more than two thousand years ago. Why did he go to such trouble? If Caesar's ships arrived carrying soldiers, then what did they return with? The

answer is surprising: King Herod and his family had a product that Caesar desperately wanted and desperately needed—the ancient version of Viagra.

It's important to understand the historical context. The Jews were the first monotheistic culture in history. They believed in one God and one God only. The Greco-Roman world of Herod's day was polytheistic. They believed in many gods, and much of their worship was sexual in nature. To facilitate this "worship," Herod had a product made from a substance extracted from the balsam tree, among other ingredients, that functioned as an aphrodisiac! Whether it actually worked, no one knows; but we do know from Josephus's historical writings that Caesar had a voracious appetite for this product, and he kept his ships coming and going between Capri, where he spent most of his time, and Caesarea Maritima on Israel's west coast, where Herod and his family made sure Caesar's ships were filled to capacity with their valued product.³

One of my favorite memories of Caesarea was when our group toured the ancient hippodrome, or athletic arena. Frank jumped up on a huge rock and immediately went into "sportscaster mode," holding an imaginary microphone to his mouth and saying, "Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome! This arena is rocking!" I don't recall his exact words, but I remember so well the joy in Frank's voice as he stood there in the arena. On our first trip to Israel with Ray Vander Laan in 2012, we visited the palace of Herodium, and I have a vivid memory of Ray teaching us the story of the Jewish Zealots' revolt against Rome in AD 70. The Zealots fled to the high spots in Israel in order to hold off the Roman assault. The most famous of these mountaintop fortresses is Masada next to the Dead Sea (see "Masada" on page 166). But they also went to Herodium.

Ray told us that when the Zealots broke into Herod's tomb, they discovered the sarcophagus, or box, that held Herod's remains. Archaeologists believe the Zealots smashed the box into six thousand pieces and blew Herod's ashes into the wind. This is symbolic of how despised Herod still was to the Jews seven decades after his death.

We were sitting in the area of the ancient synagogue on top of the palace when Ray recounted the story. Suddenly he threw his hat onto the ground and yelled, "Herod!" His voice echoed. *Herod! Herod!*

"Was it worth it?" *Worth it? Worth it?*

"Would you do it all again?" *Again? Again?*

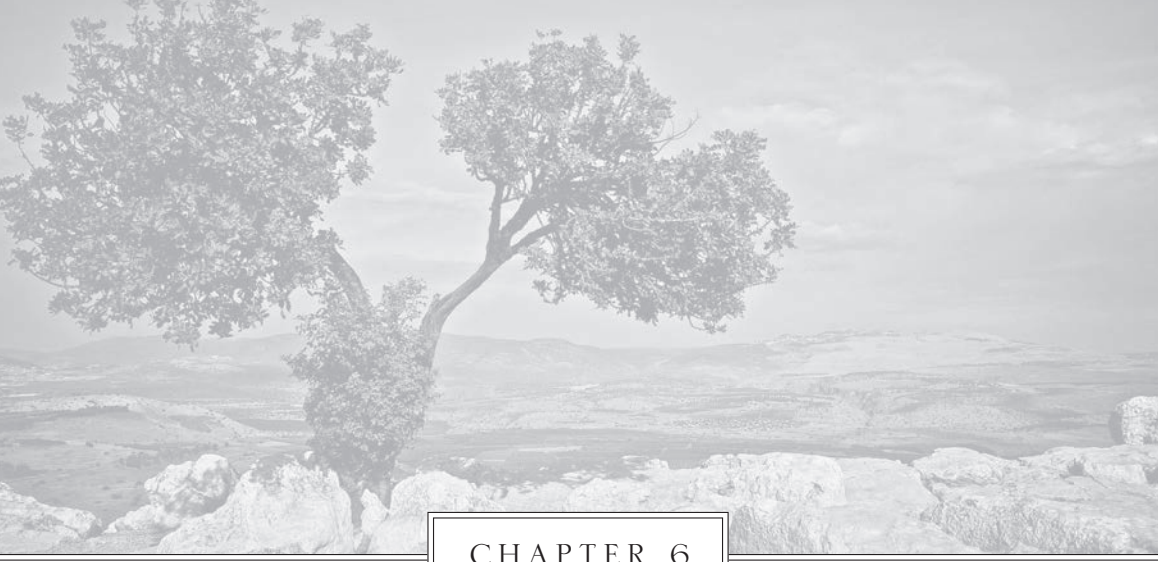
The words of Mark 8:36 came to my mind: "For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?" (NKJV).

Herod had everything—a kingdom, a family, a thriving business, and a brilliant, creative mind. Yet he used all these things selfishly, narcissistically, and cruelly to build a monument to himself at the expense of everything and everyone else. He eventually died at his palace in Jericho, roaming the palace and murmuring, "Mariamne, Mariamne." He had lost his brilliant mind and his body wasted away. Josephus tells us that he stank so badly, even his servants hated to come near him.⁴

Every day as I read the newspapers, I see evidence that nothing has changed throughout the centuries.

Only what we build for God's kingdom will last. Nothing else is worth it.

Come . . . to Caesarea and Herodium!



CHAPTER 6

BETHLEHEM

Church of the Nativity

*But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
though you are small among the clans of Judah,
out of you will come for me
one who will be ruler over Israel,
whose origins are from of old,
from ancient times.*

—MICAH 5:2

I was deeply disturbed when our tour group visited modern-day Bethlehem. Scripture tells us Bethlehem was the birthplace of Jesus, the Messiah, prophesied in Micah 5:2 sometime between 750 BC and 686 BC (seven hundred years before Jesus’ birth): “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.”

Today, the city of Bethlehem is controlled by the Palestinian Authority, and it feels—as my daughter, Cassidy, described it—“darkly oppressive.” There are military checkpoints as you enter and exit. It hardly feels joyful or anything like the way the shepherds would have experienced it two millennia ago, as a place of great rejoicing at the Savior’s birth.

Come . . . to Bethlehem!

MORE FROM RABBI JASON

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF BETHLEHEM

Shortly after the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, an angel of the Lord appeared to shepherds guarding their sheep at night and announced to them, “Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord” (Luke 2:11). And the sign given to them was that they would find “a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger” (v. 12). Of all the possible signs that could have been given to these shepherds, why did the Lord choose a baby lying in a manger and wrapped in swaddling clothes? Why was this so significant?

To answer this question, we need to dig deeper and explore the Jewish context in which the New Testament was written. Good students of the Bible are like detectives who ask lots of questions of the text. The first question we need to ask is: *Who are these shepherds? Is there anything unique about them?*

I believe these were no ordinary shepherds. They were Levitical shepherds, trained and tasked with the responsibility of tending and guarding the flocks used for sacrifices in the temple in Jerusalem.

Next, we must ask, *What is so significant about the location in which they found Jesus?* When it was time for one of their flock to give birth,

the shepherds would bring the sheep into one of the caves surrounding Bethlehem that were used for this purpose. These birthing caves were kept in a state of ritual purity since these lambs were destined to be used as sacrifices in the temple. In fact, many of the male lambs born around Bethlehem would be used for the Passover.¹

Since there was no room in the local inn, Mary and Joseph used one of these caves around Bethlehem. Messiah was not born in a stable behind some Econo Lodge or Motel Six. He was born in one of the many caves used for birthing these sacrificial lambs, because He Himself would be the ultimate sacrificial Lamb.

Not only would the location of Jesus' birth be significant to these shepherds, but so would the fact that Jesus was swaddled in cloths.

These shepherds were responsible for making sure that the newborn lambs did not contract defects, for only animals without spot or blemish could be used as a sacrifice in the temple. Baby lambs are very clumsy when they are born, so many scholars believe that these shepherds would swaddle their newborn lambs in order to prevent these future sacrificial lambs from becoming blemished by injuring themselves on jagged parts of the cave.

Another key aspect of swaddling in ancient Israel was "salting" a newborn. After Jesus was born, Joseph would have washed and scrubbed Him with salt water. Practically, the salt killed any bacteria found on an infant's body. But there is a lot of spiritual symbolism in this act as well.

Salt was symbolic of friendship and loyalty in the ancient world; it was a sign of covenant, as in the phrase "a covenant of salt" (2 Chronicles 13:5; Leviticus 2:13; Numbers 18:19). A common expression to denote friendship in Middle Eastern culture is, "There is salt between us." A salt covenant is used to denote the eternal covenant of friendship and kingship that God made with David and his heirs: "Don't you know that

the LORD, the God of Israel, has given the kingship of Israel to David and his descendants forever by a covenant of salt?" (2 Chronicles 13:5). Jesus was not only born in Bethlehem, which is the city of David, but He was also the promised Son of David, the Messiah and King who came to fulfill the Davidic covenant—God's promise that one of David's descendants would live on the throne forever—and to establish the new covenant spoken of in Jeremiah: "'The days are coming,' declares the LORD, 'when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah'" (31:31).

Salt was also an indispensable part of every sacrifice offered in the temple, as we read in Leviticus: "You are to season with salt every sacrifice of your grain offering. You are never to allow the salt of the covenant of your God to be lacking from your grain offering. With all your sacrifices you must offer salt" (2:13 TLV).

Not only was Messiah born in the same location as the temple offering, but He was also washed in salt as part of the swaddling process, which points to His future sacrifice as the Passover Lamb of God who would take away the sins of the world and inaugurate the new covenant (Jeremiah 31:31).

Messiah came to make a covenant with us, and He was so committed to us that He chose to die in order to establish it, demonstrating how seriously He takes His friendship with us! This is what John 15:13 alludes to: "Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends." Messiah was "the Lamb who was slain from the creation of the world" (Revelation 13:8), so He needed to be salted as our true sacrifice to erase our sin and bring us into a covenant friendship with the Lord. Now, that's a true friend. Isn't it amazing? We must make sure we are valuing His friendship and taking full advantage of it.

Not only was the process of swaddling significant to the shepherds,

but I believe the actual garments in which the baby Jesus was swaddled were meant to be a sign to them as well. Let's explore their deeper meaning.

One of the oldest symbols of the Jewish faith is the menorah, a seven-branched candelabrum used in the temple. The Kohanim, the Levitical priests, lit the menorah in the sanctuary every evening and then cleaned it out every morning, replacing the old wicks with new ones.

What were the wicks of the menorah made from? The priests' tunics. Any priestly garment that became so dirty to the point that its stains could not be washed out was no longer acceptable to be worn during priestly service. These unusable garments were not destroyed; instead, they were cut up, and the fabric was used for another holy purpose. The tunics of the ordinary priests were used to make wicks for the menorah that was to burn continually in the Holy Place in the temple.

This is speculation, but I believe Jesus' swaddling clothes could have been made from the torn priestly garments that would have been used to make the wicks of the menorah. But where would Joseph and Mary have gotten them? My guess is that Mary got these cloths from her cousin Elizabeth, who was married to the priest Zechariah. As soon as Mary entered the home of Elizabeth, who had miraculously conceived in her later years, the unborn baby in her womb leaped, filled with the Holy Spirit. Elizabeth cried out, "You are blessed among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. Who am I, that the mother of my Master should come to me? For even when I just heard the sound of your greeting in my ear, the unborn child leaped with joy in my womb. Blessed is she who trusted that there would be a fulfillment of those things spoken to her by *ADONAI*" (Luke 1:42–45 TLV).

So the shepherd priests, who encountered angels, went to a place where the lambs used for the sacrifices were born and swaddled. There,

they saw the baby Jesus swaddled like a sacrificial Passover lamb in priestly garments that were used for the lighting of the menorah in the temple, which symbolized the eternal presence and promise of God! Now it should make more sense as to why a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger would be such a significant sign to these shepherds, for it pointed to Jesus being both the Lamb of God and the Light of the World.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

KATHIE LEE GIFFORD is the three-time Emmy-winning cohost of the fourth hour of *TODAY*, alongside Hoda Kotb. The Gifford-Kotb hour has been hailed as “appointment television” by *Entertainment Weekly*, and “*TODAY*’s happy hour” by *USA Today*.

Prior to NBC News, Gifford served as cohost of *Live with Regis and Kathie Lee* for fifteen years, where she received eleven Emmy nominations. She was also a correspondent for *Good Morning America* for three years. In 2015, she was inducted into the Broadcast & Cable Hall of Fame. Her Broadway musical, *Scandalous*, for which she wrote the book and the lyrics, received a Tony nomination for its lead actress. Also a songwriter, Kathie recently wrote “He Saw Jesus” and “Jesus Is His Name,” as well as the score and script for the movie *A Reel Life*.

Gifford has authored three *New York Times* bestselling books, including *Just When I Thought I’d Dropped My Last Egg*, *I Can’t Believe I Said That*, and the popular children’s book *Party Animals*. Her book *Good Gifts: One Year In the Heart of a Home* raised over \$1 million for the Salvation Army.

Gifford lends support to numerous children’s organizations, including Childhelp, the Association to Benefit Children, the Salvation Army, and the International Justice Mission. A devoted humanitarian, she received an honorary degree from Marymount University for her humanitarian work in labor relations.

Gifford has two children, Cody and Cassidy, and resides in Connecticut.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

(CONTINUED)

RABBI JASON SOBEL is a thought leader, spiritual guide, and Jewish follower of Yeshua (Jesus). He is cofounder of Fusion with Rabbi Jason, an organization dedicated to sharing teachings and resources that reveal deeper insights into the Jewish roots of the Scriptures. Learn more at www.rabbisobel.com.

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