

THE

A Historical & Cultural Journey

GOSPELS



JERRY PATTENGALE

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FOREWORD

Some of the world's most celebrated written works come in bunches. We refer to these in many ways such as trilogies, sequels, chronicles, or series. J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* and C. S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia* series drew millions of readers and various film adaptations. The same is true of J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* and so many others.

However, easily surpassing all of these series combined, in any decade, and throughout printing history since the late 1400's, is a different series—the Gospels. For most of their history they've been part of the Christian Bible, comprising the New Testament's first four books. Unlike the works mentioned above, though, the Gospels are four different books with four different authors retelling the life of Jesus from unique perspectives. They were all written in the first century AD in ancient Israel and still are best sellers. But the works already mentioned, the story of Jesus's life has been adapted for television and film since the inception of the modern media, with a current series, *The Chosen*, breaking records with viewership.

In the Museum of the Bible's bestselling book, its co-authors said the following. I share it here because it's a rare occasion of having an Orthodox Jew and Evangelical Christian collaborating on such a topic:

Christians see the Gospels (the first four books of the New Testament) as reliable accounts of the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. Because of his recorded words and works, Christians believe Jesus to be the *Messiah* (the mighty deliverer/king) promised by the Old Testament prophets. They see the book of Acts as the story of the birth and growth of the church, the Epistles (letters) as instructions for the people of God,

and the book of Revelation as a prophecy about the end of this present age.¹

The Early Church began to put these books in the front of its New Testament collection. After all, they contained the essence of the life of Jesus and his teachings. The Church leaders then and now realize the importance of these four books—which helps us to understand the modern phrase “It’s the gospel truth!” The following book helps you to understand the historical and cultural nature of the story told in the four Gospels and the manifestation of this idiom in efforts to understand the magnitude of influence these books have had on society.

Robert (Bobby) Duke, Ph.D.

Chief Curatorial Officer

Museum of the Bible, Washington, DC

¹Lawrence Schiffman and Jerry Pattengale, *The World’s Greatest Book: The Story of How the Bible Came to Be*, 2nd ed. (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishing, 2024), 7.

INTRODUCTION

The life of Jesus of Nazareth has shaped the course of human history more than any other figure. His teachings, actions, and ultimate sacrifice have inspired faith, provoked thought, and transformed lives across centuries and continents. But beyond the theological doctrines and religious traditions, there lies a deeply human story—one grounded in specific places, shaped by culture and conflict, and lived out through ordinary moments and extraordinary encounters.

This book offers a journey through the major moments of the Gospels, drawn from the four canonical accounts—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—and framed by the events that defined Jesus’s public life. Each chapter focuses on a pivotal scene from his birth and baptism, through his ministry and miracles, to his death, resurrection, and final charge to his followers. The selected Scripture verses are drawn from three translations: the King James Version (KJV), the New International Version (NIV), and the English Standard Version (ESV), and the reflections provide historical and cultural background to deepen understanding of each passage.

Rather than a devotional or commentary, this collection serves as a narrative companion and is designed to be accessible, thoughtful, and reverent. It is not meant to persuade or preach, but to present—to offer a view into the world in which Jesus lived and to illuminate the meaning behind the moments that shaped the gospel story.

Whether you are encountering these stories for the first time or returning to them with fresh eyes, may this book bring clarity to the context, richness to the reading, and wonder to the witness of a life that continues to speak across time.



MIRACLES & WONDERS





CALMING THE STORM

Mark 4:35–41

*Christ in the Storm on the Sea of
Galilee, Ludolf Bakhuizen, 1695.
Indianapolis Museum of Art,
Indianapolis, Indiana, USA.*



AND HE AROSE,
AND REBUKED THE WIND,
AND SAID UNTO THE SEA,
PEACE, BE STILL.
AND THE WIND CEASED,
AND THERE WAS A GREAT CALM.

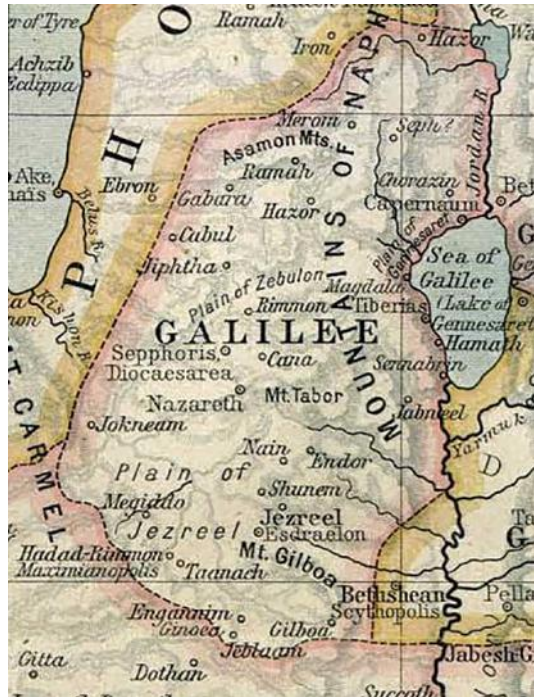
MARK 4:39, KJV



Located between one- and two-day's walk from Nazareth, the Sea of Galilee is known for sudden and violent storms due to unique geographical features. This body of water, sometimes called the Lake of Gennesaret, lies about 700 feet *below* sea level making it the lowest freshwater lake on Earth and the second-lowest lake in the world. The hills that surround it act as wind tunnels for strong gusts of cold, dry air from the northeast, generating rapid weather changes during the winter and early spring. Occasionally these wild winds stir up the water in the Galilee basin to significant heights, creating waves more than ten feet high. These storms could be particularly dangerous for small fishing boats, like those used by Jesus and his disciples.

One such storm arose when Jesus and his disciples crossed the lake after a long day of teaching from a boat along its shore. Waves spilled into the boat while Jesus slept on a cushion. The disciples, increasingly anxious about the situation, woke Jesus up to ask if he cared that they are all about to die on a sinking ship.

In the first century, fishing was a primary industry in Galilee, and many of Jesus's disciples were experienced fishermen. They would have been accustomed to the unpredictability of the Sea of Galilee, which makes their fear during the storm recorded in this account even more significant.



"Reference Map of Ancient Palestine" (detail of Galilee), from *The Historical Atlas*, Folio 6-7, William R. Shepherd, published by Henry Holt and Company, 1911.

The storm was clearly severe enough that even these seasoned sailors believed they were in mortal danger.

Yet Jesus remained asleep in the boat, a detail that illustrated both his humanity and a deep trust in God's sovereignty. Once awakened, Jesus rebuked the wind and commanded the sea to be still.

And the wind stopped. And the sea calmed.

The disciples were astonished at what they saw. Jesus asked his disciples why they were afraid; did they still lack faith? But the men asked each other "What manner of man is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" (Mark 4:41, KJV), revealing a growing realization of Jesus's divine nature.

This miracle had strong Old Testament parallels, particularly to Psalm 107:28–29, which described sailors crying out to God in distress and God calming the storm. Jesus's actions mirrored God's authority over nature, foreshadowing the claim that he was the Son of God. This moment would have had profound implications for his disciples, many of whom were still grasping the full scope of his divine mission.



Jesus on the Lake of Gennesaret, Alexandre-Gabriel Decamps, ca. 1850–1875. Louvre Museum, Paris, France.

Additionally, ancient Jewish thought often associated chaotic waters with evil forces. The deep sea was sometimes seen as a symbol of chaos and opposition to God's order (Genesis 1:2; Job 38:8–11). By calming the storm, Jesus not only rescued his disciples but demonstrated his power over the forces of nature and chaos.

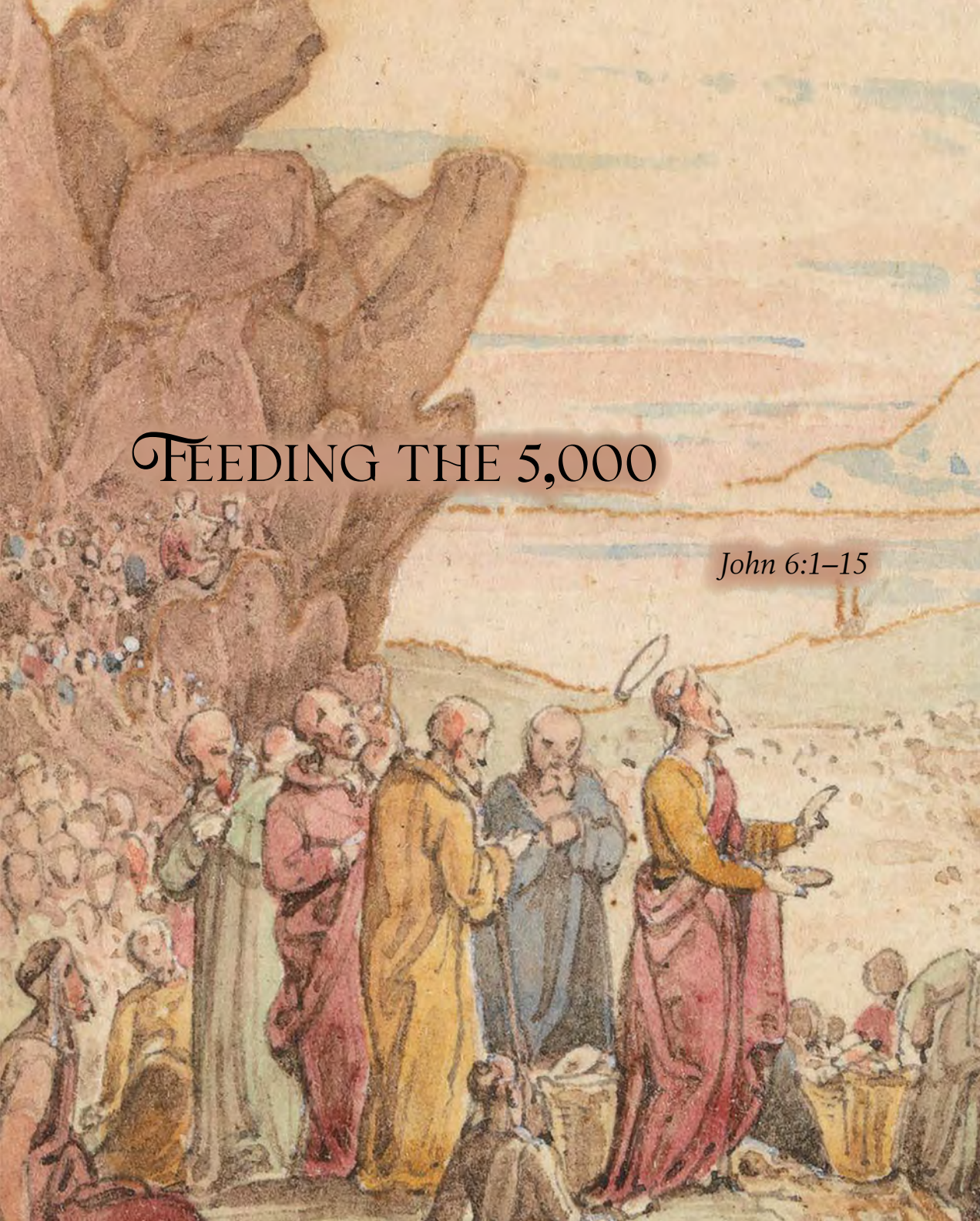
This event deeply impacted the disciples, preparing them for future trials where they would need to trust in Jesus amid life's storms. The miracle was not just about physical deliverance, but also about teaching them a lesson in faith—to rely on God even in the most turbulent times.



WHAT MANNER OF MAN IS THIS,
THAT EVEN THE WIND
AND THE SEA OBEY HIM?

MARK 4:41, KJV





FEEDING THE 5,000

John 6:1-15

The painting depicts a vast, colorful crowd of people gathered in a valley, with mountains in the background. The style is characterized by bold outlines and a rich, somewhat muted color palette. The figures are rendered in various colors, including reds, blues, yellows, and browns, creating a sense of a diverse and large assembly. The mountains in the background are outlined in brown and filled with soft, pastel colors like pinks and blues. The overall composition is dynamic and emphasizes the scale of the event.

Feeding the Five Thousand, John Martin,
ca. 1789–1854. Yale Center for British Art,
New Haven, Connecticut, USA.



“THERE IS A BOY HERE
WHO HAS FIVE BARLEY LOAVES
AND TWO FISH, BUT WHAT ARE
THEY FOR SO MANY?” . . .

JESUS THEN TOOK THE
LOAVES, AND WHEN HE
HAD GIVEN THANKS,
HE DISTRIBUTED THEM TO
THOSE WHO WERE SEATED.

SO ALSO THE FISH,
AS MUCH AS THEY WANTED.

JOHN 6:9, 11, ESV



Hospitality has been an important custom in the Middle East from ancient times. Providing food for guests would have been viewed as a sacred obligation in the first-century Jewish world. One day while Jesus was teaching his disciples in a place near Bethsaida on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee, crowds arrived that had been following Jesus because he had been healing the sick.

The day grew late, but the crowds stayed. The mountainous terrain and remoteness of the location contributed to concern about how such a vast group could be fed. Faced with the challenge of feeding 5,000 men, plus women and children, Jesus asked Philip where they could buy food. His question was rhetorical, emphasizing the impossibility of the task—no nearby markets could provide such an amount, nor did the group have sufficient money to purchase enough food even if it had been available.



Hills of Galilee, John Singer Sargent, 1905–1906. Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, New York, USA.

Andrew, another disciple, pointed out a boy carrying five barley loaves and two fish, likely part of a simple meal for the boy and his family. Jesus blessed the boy's food, broke the bread, and distributed it to a crowd some scholars estimate was closer to 15,000 people. Stunningly, the boy's miniscule amount fed the entire group with food to spare.

This miraculous multiplication of food evoked Old Testament parallels, including God providing manna in the wilderness (Exodus 16:4–35) and Elisha feeding 100 men with 20 loaves of bread (2 Kings 4:42–44). The emphasis on 12 baskets of leftovers symbolized God's abundant provision and the twelve tribes of Israel, linking this event to Israel's spiritual nourishment.

The region around the Sea of Galilee was heavily populated with both Jewish and Gentile communities, making this miracle an inclusive sign of Jesus's mission to all people. The fact that the crowd sought to make Jesus their king afterward (John 6:15) shows they were actively awaiting a messianic leader who would restore Israel's independence from Rome. However, Jesus rejected this political interpretation of his mission and instead withdrew from the crowd to pray alone.

Feeding the 5,000 is one of the few miracles recorded in all four Gospels, which underscores its significance in Jesus's ministry. It also introduced the



Mosaic tile floor depicting loaves and fishes at the reported site of Jesus feeding 5,000, unknown artist, ca. AD 480. Church of the Multiplication, Tabgha, Israel.

theme of Jesus as the “Bread of Life,” on which he later expounded: “Whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst” (John 6:35).

This feeding miracle was not merely about physical sustenance, but also about spiritual nourishment, pointing toward the coming Eucharistic tradition in Christian theology. The location of the miracle, believed to be at Tabgha, remains a significant pilgrimage site today. The Church of the Multiplication, built there in the fifth century, features ancient mosaics depicting loaves and fish, reinforcing the enduring power of this event in Christian memory.



SO THEY GATHERED
THEM UP AND FILLED TWELVE
BASKETS WITH FRAGMENTS
FROM THE
FIVE BARLEY LOAVES
LEFT BY THOSE WHO
HAD EATEN.

JOHN 6:13, ESV



WHO, BEING IN VERY NATURE GOD,
DID NOT CONSIDER EQUALITY WITH GOD
SOMETHING TO BE USED TO HIS OWN ADVANTAGE;
RATHER, HE MADE HIMSELF NOTHING
BY TAKING THE VERY NATURE OF A SERVANT,
BEING MADE IN HUMAN LIKENESS.
AND BEING FOUND IN APPEARANCE AS A MAN,
HE HUMBLLED HIMSELF
BY BECOMING OBEDIENT TO DEATH—
EVEN DEATH ON A CROSS!

THEREFORE GOD EXALTED HIM TO
THE HIGHEST PLACE

AND GAVE HIM THE NAME THAT IS ABOVE EVERY NAME,
THAT AT THE NAME OF JESUS EVERY KNEE SHOULD BOW,
IN HEAVEN AND ON EARTH AND UNDER THE EARTH,
AND EVERY TONGUE ACKNOWLEDGE THAT
JESUS CHRIST IS LORD, TO THE GLORY OF
GOD THE FATHER.

PHILIPPIANS 2:6–11, NIV



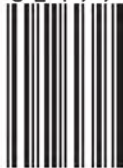
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Bible

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INFORMATION

At the heart of the Bible—the world’s most-read book—lie The Gospels, arguably the most well-loved portion. More passages are quoted each year from the Gospels than any other part of Scripture. The words of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John have shaped art, music, and literature across centuries and civilizations. But do we fully grasp the historical and cultural context behind them?

This beautifully designed gift book explores the historical and cultural background of thirty timeless moments from the Gospels, which have inspired some of the greatest masterpieces the world has ever known. Adorned with vivid imagery and specially selected verses, each page is elegantly presented, reflecting the majesty of Scripture.

Perfect for personal reflection, inspiration, or as a thoughtful gift, this book invites readers to immerse themselves in the stories of Jesus’s life—from the announcement of His birth to His triumphant entry in Jerusalem to the commissioning of His disciples—stories that continue to inspire and transform the world.

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