

Children of the Bible

Week 4



The Childhood of Jesus

One of the frustrating things about the Lectionary is that it places the stories of Jesus as a child and teenager on the Sunday following Christmas, when most people are not in church. Unless special attention is made or the Sunday School lessons make point of including these stories of Jesus, most children don't hear them and don't realize that Jesus was once a child like them.

There are four references to Jesus' childhood, three in Luke and one in Matthew. The reference in Matthew and the first in Luke are often merged into the Nativity story that most churches tell.

To understand Jesus' early years we must first understand what was part of Hebrew culture in the first century CE. Jesus was only ever Hebrew, never Christian, so many modern Christian assumptions of his early years do not apply.

Finally, much of the story is stylized, meaning it wasn't recorded for historic accuracy but rather spiritual.

JESUS AS A
NEW BORN

JESUS AS AN
INFANT

JESUS AS A
TODDLER

JESUS AS A
TEENAGER

JESUS WITH
OTHER
CHILDREN

Jesus as a new born

Luke 2:1-19

The story of that Nativity that we find in Luke begins with the Annunciation, the story of Elizabeth and her son John the Baptist, then the census from Emperor Augustus, travelling to Bethlehem from Nazareth, the birth in the stable, the angels' announcement and the visit by the shepherds. Both Luke and Matthew make sure Jesus' lineage is set within the line of David, through Joseph, which suggests that marriage was what was significant in paternal identification, not who was involved in conception.

While the naming of two political leaders should place this story within historical context, it only confuses the matter. Emperor Augustus is mentioned, and he only called three census: 28 BCE, 8 BCE and 14 CE. Meanwhile Governor Quirinius only called a census in 6 BCE, triggering a revolt in Galilee. In the desire to harmonize Matthew and Luke's version, many scholars have simply decided that Luke was wrong.

One of the primary themes in Luke's version of the Nativity, from the Annunciation to the arrival of the shepherds, is the recognition and respect for those who are poor and oppressed. Beginning with the Magnificat, there is an acknowledgement that those who are in lofty positions will be brought down while those who struggle will be lifted up.



That sentiment is demonstrated in Luke's telling of the birth of Jesus through the inclusion of the shepherds. While needed in society, they were often viewed with suspicion. These were the only members of society who stayed out all night and were comfortable in the 'wilderness', or the lands around the settlements. There was great fear of the 'wilderness', which probably lent itself to fear of those who survived in that environment. Shepherds would not have gained much financial benefit from the profit of the sheep, as those who could afford large flocks would have hired shepherds rather than care for the sheep themselves.

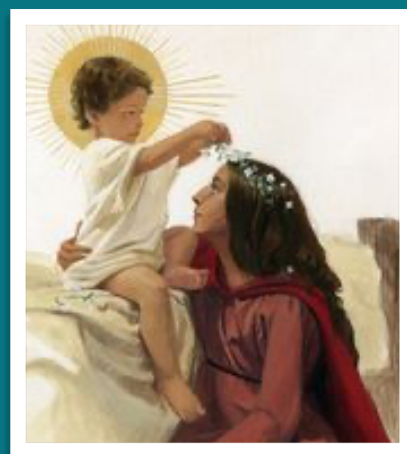
Luke's telling also places Joseph in the secondary or vulnerable position in the family, including being the 'midwife' who helped Mary birth Jesus. This again turns societal expectations upside down, signifying that everything about Jesus is meant for change.

MATTHEW VS LUKE

Although commonly merged traditional Nativity plays, the two stories of the birth of Jesus are quite different.

Matthew tells the story of the dream of Joseph, the star, the arrival of the Magi when Jesus is around two years old, and the warning for the family to rush to Egypt for safety from Herod's decree to murder every boy under two.

Luke tells a gentler story, with Mary receiving the annunciation, Caesar taking a census, Mary and Joseph travelling to Bethlehem, the angels' announcement and the shepherds seeing Jesus.





Jesus as an infant

Luke 2:21-24

Two ceremonies are mentioned in Jesus' infancy. First his circumcision at eight days old, making him an official member of the family of Abraham. This was also the day boys were officially named, and scripture says Mary and Joseph kept with that tradition.

The second was Mary's return to society after her days of recovery from child birth, 40 days after delivering a son. Leviticus 12 outlined the expectations: the first 7 days for a male child were in line with a woman's period, which is why boys were circumcised on the 8th day to include her. The ritual of purity was later.

Birth of a girl meant longer periods of recovery and a complete time of 80 days. One theory is that ancient peoples believed boys formed faster in utero, so the blood from their births did not last as long.

Much ink has been spilled on the gender inequality of these periods and women being 'impure' due to their reproductive system. That is a man's interpretation. For women who have given birth, these recovery times were probably a welcome, as they were tended by other women and had a chance to bond with their new baby. Health concerns probably contributed to these ritualized periods of waiting as well, keeping a child isolated from the wider community.

The assumptions of Joseph and Mary's poverty are also mentioned in the story about Jesus being presented to the temple, given that they provided the offerings assigned for the poor rather than those with money.

Different thinkers in history have tried to reconcile this with the gift of the Magi, again overlooking that these are two separate stories, and that Luke tells of a travelling family with few resources away from their home in Nazareth. One conclusion was that Mary did not accept the gold from the Magi because her faith required them to live in poverty. This is reverse justification, starting with the assumption than trying to make the story fit. It doesn't work.



ANNA THE PROPHET

Each Gospel has their style and intent. One of the styles in the Gospel of Luke is to have stories where woman's experience and men's experience are shown together or in consecutive stories.

In Luke we meet the prophet Anna, who had lived at the Temple most of her life, and recognized how important Jesus was when the family passed by.

The Gospels often have a pecking order of who recognizes Jesus as the Messiah. Women often seem to understand who Jesus is better and sooner than men.

Jesus as a toddler

Matthew 2:9-11

The only reference we have in Matthew to Jesus as a child comes from Matthew's version of the Nativity. Once we separate this story from that in Luke, we see a family who is settled in Bethlehem in Judah, and a father (Joseph) who was prepared to dismiss his fiancée because of her pregnancy. Two dreams change the course of the story and the eventual fleeing to Egypt after the visit from the Magi.

It is through this story that we have the only opportunity to place the nativity within historic context. Astrophysicists have suggested what the star in the east could have been. One theory, a comet: Chinese astronomers confirm a comet in that region of space visible to early in 5 BCE. However, most at that time saw comets as bad omens so it probably wasn't what inspired the Magi.

A second theory is a planetary conjunction. There are two options, first Jupiter and Saturn which would have been interpreted by astronomers as a 'great king', and was found to be in the constellation of Pisces in 7 BCE. Pisces was the constellation associated with Israel: the people of the fish. The second, Jupiter and Venus in 3 BCE, which would say a king was born to a maiden. It is this second option that give the theory that Jesus would have been born



in the spring or summer when Jupiter and Venus appeared as one star.

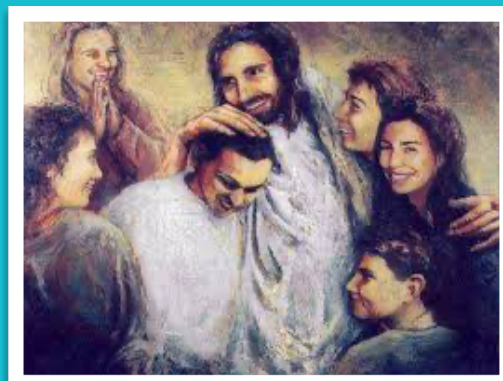
The Magi are another puzzle. Some suggest they were from the tradition of Zoroastrianism, others that they were simply Persian scholars. The name itself is from the Greek word meaning 'magicians'.

Traditionally the story says there were three, but the numbers would have been much larger due to the nature of caravans in those days, which most likely included entire families. The Bible only specifies three gifts: Frankincense, Myrrh and Gold. These were symbolic gifts since frankincense was used for worship in the Temple, myrrh was used to prepare bodies for burial, and gold was wealth. The names given to the Magi are legend from the 13th century CE, and not linked to any ancient documentation.

JESUS HAD SIBLINGS

One of the stretches in Biblical understanding is the notion that Mary was a perpetual virgin, so if Jesus had siblings, they were obviously from Joseph's previous marriage. This has led to the traditional believe that Joseph was quite a bit older than Mary when they were married.

Nothing in the Bible supports this. When Jesus' siblings are mentioned, Mary is mentioned as well. Matthew 13:55-56 lists James, Joseph, Simon and Judas and additional brothers and sisters, while Mark 6:3 lists them as James, Joses, Judas and Simon, with an unnamed number of sisters.





Jesus as a teenager

Luke 2:41-52

When we read about Jesus being left behind at the Temple and neither of his parents were aware, the first question is always ‘now did they not know he was missing?’

Travel was not safe in first century Palestine, so people travelled in large families or groups, especially during a time of pilgrimage. These large groups were divided with men in the front and women with children in the back. A male child of 12 could have been with either the men, as someone about to become a man himself, or with the women, as someone who was still living in their child years. Simply put, Mary and Joseph would not have seen

each other as they travelled, and Mary would have been busy with their other children.

One of the debates among Christians is how poor Jesus was growing up. According to Luke, his family was comfortable enough to take part in the Passover celebrations in Jerusalem every year. He would have had more exposure to the wisdom of the Pharisees he met during those visits. Luke also tells us that Jesus had a deeper well of knowledge than most, and even his parents did not understand everything that he was speaking about.

From the beginning, Luke sets Jesus apart as one who was recognized as having something special about him, even though his parents were the only ones to know he was God incarnate. That attraction began with his presentation at the Temple and continued throughout his childhood.

An interesting point to be made in the story of Jesus being found at the Temple is that it's Mary, in a very public space, that scripture gives parental authority through her admonishing Jesus for scaring them. Patriarchal order would dictate that Joseph should be offering that censor, not Mary. Again we have the phrase “his mother treasured all these things in her heart”. The role of Mary is still significant in her son's ministry. She is not lessened as Jesus grows and begins his travelling and teaching.



JESUS AS CARPENTER AND SON

There are two references to Jesus and employment before he decides to start his mission. In Mark 6:3 he is called the carpenter, Mary's son. In Matthew 13:55, it is Joseph who is identified as a carpenter rather than Jesus.

To say Jesus was Mary's son was to offer an insult. In a heavily Patriarchal society like the first century BCE, a child was known through their father. To identify a child with their mother suggested a father was never part of the family.

Jesus with other children

Mark 9:36-37

The concept of childhood being a time dedicated to play and fantasy is relatively modern and comes with a good amount of leisure as a base of assumption. Inequality as we know it in modernity is underscored by economic comfort far more than gender, and that was true of the ancient world as well.

The world that children were raised in during Jesus' day was not one of leisure. There were some families that were better off financially, but that rarely excluded the younger children from participating in the daily household work. Everyone in the family was expected to contribute to the household as soon as they could. Only wealthier families could afford to send boys to study beyond the homeschooling every child experienced, and those boys often became Pharisees or scribes.

The notion of economy in the Hebrew culture differed from those of the Greeks and Romans. In the Hebrew culture, the economy of the household fell under women's domain, so women working outside the home was common. They ran shops that sold the produce they raise. They could be doctors, tentmakers like Prisca, or help in the shops of their husbands.



The children Jesus welcomed and told others to welcome were valued, but they were not upheld for their innocence, as we frequently represent today. These children were often at the mercy of illness and poor living conditions. Those who were part of slave or servant families might be treated horribly or sold at the whim of their owners.

Life was hard and often short. Children were essentially small adults and were often cast aside when the community gathered. That did not mean they were not loved, that simply meant their status in society was fairly low.

Jesus made a point of emphasizing the importance of children as a way to understand how we must be in God's world. Not naive, but open to putting our work towards the benefit of everyone.

EDUCATION IN 1ST CENTURY PALESTINE

One of the fallacies of ancient history is thinking all cultures were the same simply because we know so little about them each individually. Another base fallacy is that girls were not educated, only boys.

In the first century Hebraic culture, both boys and girls learned at home and were taught by their mothers. Along with everything they needed to know to participate in worship and daily chores. These children were taught how to read and memorize the scriptures.

Older boys could continue to study the Torah and Talmud in the synagogue schools, and only there might they learn to write.

