

## The Life and Times of Jesus Christ

# 4

## The Childhood of the Messiah

The Bible is surprisingly silent about the childhood years of Jesus. Apart from a few scattered references and one account of an incident that happened when Jesus was 12 years old, the Bible skips the years between his birth and his baptism. This silence has tempted many in the early years of Christianity to concoct apocryphal accounts of Jesus' childhood – the many Infancy Narratives.

These fables portray a precocious child who is magical, aloof, arrogant and vindictive. He performs miracles that are completely out of character with the Jesus portrayed in the Gospel record (**Luke 4:3-12; 11:16,29-30**). As a newborn baby, he speaks to his mother. As a child, he changes the colors of dyed cloth and miraculously shortens or lengthens the wood with which Joseph worked. He creates live sparrows out of clay, transforms his playmates into goats and when he is about to be whipped by his teacher for being impudent, the teacher's hand withers and he dies. As the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* explains:

“[The Infancy Narratives] are very largely concerned with a record of miracles wrought by Jesus before He was 12 years of age. They depict Jesus as an extraordinary but by no means a lovable child. Unlike the miracles of the canonical Gospels those recorded in this gospel are mainly of a destructive nature and are whimsical and puerile in character. The wonder-worker is described...[as] wielding the power of the Godhead with a child's waywardness and petulance.”<sup>1</sup>

A Portrait of the Messiah

The Divinity of the Messiah

The Birth of the Messiah

▶ **The Childhood of the Messiah** ◀

The People of the Messiah

The Inauguration of the Messiah

The Opposition to the Messiah

The Last Week of the Messiah

The Trial of the Messiah

The Death of the Messiah

The Resurrection of the Messiah

The Ascendancy of the Messiah

We need to understand the reason why the Gospel accounts record so little about the early years of Christ. The Gospel writers simply did not think it necessary. Mark and John didn't even consider it important to give the precise details of Jesus' birth, and all four writers considered the childhood years of Christ, by and large, as an unnecessary intrusion into their narratives. It appears sufficient to say, as Luke does in **Luke 2:52**:

“And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.”

You will remember from **ES112-01** that there are only two valid lenses through which we may view the life of Jesus – the historical record and the Gospel record. Let's now look through this binocular view at the childhood of Christ, not so that we may concoct a fanciful story of his early years, but in order to understand the setting within which he grew up. And what better starting point than with the Gospel record itself.

## The Circumcision of Jesus

### Read Luke 2:21-24

From this passage we gain an important insight into the childhood of Jesus. Although the Son of God, he was also a normal Jewish boy. As required by the Abrahamic and Sinai Covenants, he was circumcised on the eighth day (**Genesis 17:10-14; 21:4; Leviticus 12:3**). It was at his circumcision that the child was formally named Jesus (or Yeshua, in Hebrew),\* according to the command given through the angel Gabriel (**Luke 1:31**).

### Read Galatians 4:4-5

Jesus was “born under law.” He was born into a community primarily defined by the Covenant of Sinai, instituted through Moses. This is important to understand, because contrary to popular belief, Jesus *never* contravened the Law of Moses.† In fact, he was the only person on the face of the earth who ever was able to keep it fully and thus be declared righteous in his own right before God. Jesus fulfilled the *requirements* of the Law of Moses in his own life before He *superceded* the Law of Moses on the Cross.

And so we see, right from his eighth day, he fulfilled the stipulations of the Law by being circumcised, the first step in a long road of meticulous adherence to the legal regulations of the Sinai Covenant. Why was Jesus circumcised? The answer is quite simple. To fulfill the Law (note **verse 23**).

\* Some have pointed out that it was at his circumcision that Christ first shed blood, whereupon the name Yeshua – “Savior” – was officially given to him. An interesting foreshadowing of the shedding of blood to come later.

† Jesus was never at odds with the Torah (the Law of Moses). He was at odds with the oral additions that the Pharisees, scribes and rabbis had made to the written Law. When Jesus declared himself Lord of the Sabbath (**Luke 6:5**), this was not, at that time, an abolition of the Sabbath, since the Law of Moses was still in force. He still kept the Sabbath and was always to be found in the synagogue on the Sabbath (**Mark 1:21; 6:2; Luke 4:16; 6:6**). Instead, Jesus was overturning the self-righteous prescriptions of the religious elite, who dictated that the Sabbath be far more stringent than required under the Torah. Thus he allowed his disciples to pick grain on the Sabbath (**Luke 6:1-5**) and continued to heal on the Sabbath (**Luke 6:6-10; John 5:8-18**).

But in **verse 22**, Luke records another legal requirement, met this time by Mary, his mother.

“When the time of their purification *according to the Law of Moses* had been completed, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord.”

What purification was this?

### Read Leviticus 12:2-4

The rite of purification after the birth of a son involved three periods:

- Seven days of ritual uncleanness
- Circumcision on the eighth day
- A further thirty-three days of ritual uncleanness

And so we see Mary going to the Temple (the “sanctuary”) “[w]hen *the time of their purification* according to the Law of Moses had been completed.” And so, from a simple count of days, as prescribed by **Leviticus 12:2-4**, we see that Jesus was exactly 42 days old when he was presented at the Temple.\*

As required by the Torah, Mary presented a sacrifice – a burnt offering and a sin offering – for her newborn son and as a mark that her ritual impurity was over. But look at what Luke records their offering to be in **2:24**:

“[They went] to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: ‘a pair of doves or two young pigeons.’”

Now look at **Leviticus 12:6**:

“When the days of her purification for a son or daughter are over, she is to bring to the priest at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting a year-old lamb for a burnt offering and a young pigeon or a dove for a sin offering.”

Do you notice the Law’s requirements are very specific. What offering is specified by the Torah? “A year-old lamb for a burnt offering and a young pigeon or a dove for a sin offering.” But take a look at what Mary offered as a sacrifice – “a pair of doves or two young pigeons.” Yet Luke says this was “in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord.”

We understand why Mary offered doves or pigeons as a sacrifice when we read in **Leviticus 12:8**:

“*If she cannot afford a lamb*, she is to bring two doves or two young pigeons, one for a burnt offering and the other for a sin offering. In this way the priest will make atonement for her, and she will be clean.”

God had made provision in his Law for the poor, and Joseph and Mary obviously fell into this category. They were too poor to buy a lamb for an offering, and so had recourse to the poor man’s substitute – “a pair of doves or two young pigeons.”

\* Assuming that Jesus was presented at the Temple on the day immediately following the completion of Mary’s ritual uncleanness.

From this we see clearly that Jesus was not born into a wealthy family. Indeed, he was born into a poor family from an obscure rural village on the outskirts of the Roman empire. But this was all part of Christ's total identification with humanity.

### Read 2 Corinthians 8:9

When you think of all that Jesus left behind – the splendor of co-existence with the Father (**John 17:5**) – it makes the wonder of his Incarnation all the more amazing.

## Two Witnesses

At the presentation of Jesus at the Temple, Luke records the testimony of two prophetic witnesses:

- **Simeon – Luke 2:25-35**
- **Anna – Luke 2:36-38**

Simeon is a “righteous and devout” man who frequented the Temple because the Holy Spirit had revealed to him that he would not die until he saw the promised Christ. Anna (in Hebrew, Hannah) was a prophetess, an 84-year-old widow who “never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying.” It is possible that she “lived as a widow in one of the rooms surrounding the temple precinct.” Like Simeon, she recognizes the messianic anointing upon the child and “spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.”<sup>2</sup>

**Deuteronomy 19:15** tells us: “A matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.” This is a principle that is applied throughout the Bible (see **Deuteronomy 17:6; Matthew 18:16; 2 Corinthians 13:1; 1 Timothy 5:19; Hebrews 10:28**). And here we find, at the presentation of Jesus at the Temple, two witnesses bearing testimony to his identity as “the salvation of God” and “the redemption of Israel.”

It must be noted, however, that in first century Jewish culture a woman was never regarded as a legal witness. But Luke's inclusion of Anna was deliberate. Firstly, she is called a prophetess, which would have meant she was considered by all as a credible witness before God. And secondly, Luke is foreshadowing another witness by women later in the narrative, for the very first people to bear testimony to the resurrection of Christ were not men, but women.

## The Wrath of Herod

### Read Matthew 2:1-18

In the last lesson, we briefly told the story of the wise men, but the story doesn't end with the magi's return to their own land. When they had originally arrived in Jerusalem, they naturally assumed that the newborn king would be born in Herod's palace. But when they discovered that the location of his birth was Beth-lehem, some 6 miles to the south, Herod told the magi:

“Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.”

History tells us that Herod was a cruel tyrant who, in his latter years, became increasingly paranoid. He even killed his wife and three of his own sons, causing Caesar Augustus to remark, “It is better to be Herod’s pig than his son.”\*

For this reason, the account of his ordering the massacre of the infants of Bethlehem, although unrecorded outside the Bible, is entirely within character. Herod had put Hyrcanus (the last of the Hasmonean kings) to death to insure that the Roman Emperor would not be tempted to restore the Hasmonean dynasty. He then slew 45 members of the Sanhedrin who had supported the Hasmoneans. Josephus described him as “a man cruel to all alike: angry with his inferiors and haughty to the righteous.”<sup>3</sup> This cruelty and paranoia was further aggravated by a serious illness (horribly described by Josephus<sup>4</sup>), which caused great agony and amplified his distemper.

It is no wonder, then, that his natural paranoia was heightened by the arrival of these apparent “kingmakers” from the east. Although some have called the account of the infants’ massacre a fabrication, we must remember that the number of infants massacred would not have been that many – maybe around 20 or 30.

And this event happened close to Herod’s death and would have been overshadowed by another great massacre, recorded by Josephus. Knowing that he was about to die, Herod ordered that upon his death 3000 of the religious and family leaders of Judea be rounded up and executed. He never entertained any doubts that there would be great celebrations in Judea upon news of his demise, and so he ensured there would be mourning at the time of his death, even if it wasn’t for him.

\* There is a play on words in the Greek. The Greek word for “pig” is *hus* and the Greek word for “son” is *huios*. Ironically, Herod would never kill a pig and eat it, because he followed the Jewish dietary laws, but he had killed his own sons.

## The Childhood of John the Baptist

John the Baptist was a close relative of Jesus. Since he was born to an elderly couple, it is likely that his parents died when he was still young, for Luke tells us in **1:80**:

“And the child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the desert until he appeared publicly to Israel.”

John received his training in one or both of two possible places:

- **In the Temple as a trainee priest** – You will remember that his father, Zechariah, was of the priestly order of Abijah, and John would have normally inherited his priestly duties from his father. However, he would not have become a priest until his thirtieth birthday (**Numbers 4:47**). Coincidentally (or not), John began his public ministry when he was about thirty.
- **In the desert community of the Essenes** – This is a strong possibility, since Luke specifies that John “lived in the desert until he appeared publicly to Israel.”

We will investigate John’s possible Essene training in the next two lessons.

In the light of his character and actions, it is not difficult to see how he would react to the threat of a rival “king of the Jews” born in Bethlehem and backed by the messianic prophecies of Scripture. When the magi failed to return, he flew into a rage and, knowing the time the star had first been observed by the magi, ordered all male children 2 years old and under to be killed. Little did he know that the child and his parents had been forewarned by an angel and were already on their way to seek refuge in Egypt.

## Escape to Egypt

Egypt had been a place of refuge for the Israelites throughout their long history. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob descended to Egypt during times of drought. But in Jesus’ time, Egypt had a large Jewish population, concentrated mainly in Alexandria in the Nile Delta, and it was possibly to Alexandria that Jesus’ family went. It is likely that Joseph found carpentry work while he was there. The gold, frankincense and myrrh given by the magi would have amply covered their stay.

### Read Matthew 2:19-22

We do not know how long Joseph, Mary and Jesus stayed on the shores of the Nile, but it may have been no more than a year. Even before news of Herod’s death reached Egypt, an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream to inform him of the demise of his archenemy, and soon afterwards Joseph took his family back to the land of Israel. But upon arriving in the environs of Jerusalem (possibly lodging once again in Bethlehem), Joseph discovered that Herod’s power-hungry son, Archelaus, was reigning in his father’s place. Joseph did not feel it was safe to stay in Bethlehem, so instead decided to return to Nazareth.\*

Egypt was the farthest that Jesus ever traveled from Palestine. And God predetermined that Christ, in his identification with Israel, would retrace their history, from their subjection in Egypt to their entry into the Promised Land. Hence **Hosea 11:1**, which describes Israel’s historic sojourn in Egypt, is applied by Matthew as a messianic prophecy fulfilled in Jesus.

## The Return to Nazareth

### Read Matthew 2:23

Matthew regards Jesus’ return to Nazareth to be a fulfilment of prophecy. Yet there is no place in the Old Testament that predicts that the Messiah “will be called a Nazarene.” In fact, Nazareth is not once mentioned in the Old Testament. Is Matthew lying? How can this “missing prophecy” be explained?

First of all, note that Matthew isn’t referring to just one prophecy. He says “according to the prophets,” not “according to the prophet.” This indicates that Mat-

\* It is probable that Joseph originally assumed that Bethlehem would be the place where Jesus, the promised Messiah, would be raised. God, however, had other plans.

thew is speaking of a number of different prophecies relating to this Nazarene theme. As we look at the broad range of messianic prophecies, we discover that there is, in fact, what we might call a “Nazarene” theme.

**Read Isaiah 4:2**

**Read Isaiah 11:1-4**

**Read Jeremiah 23:5**

**Read Jeremiah 33:15**

Do you see the prophetic theme common to all of these passages? The Messiah is described as “the Branch of the Lord” and “a righteous Branch.” In **Zechariah 6:11-13**, the messianic title “The Branch” is conferred upon Joshua the High Priest, but Zechariah makes it clear that Joshua is merely symbolic of The Branch who is to come (**3:8**). The Hebrew word for “branch” is *netzer*, which just happens to be the root word from which the name “Nazareth” is derived.

Thus the name “Jesus the Nazarene” had a double meaning – it referred to the place where he grew up, but more importantly it referred to the “branch” prophecies of **Isaiah**, **Jeremiah** and **Zechariah**. Thus “Jesus the Nazarene” is synonymous, in the original Aramaic of Matthew’s account, with “Jesus the Branch.”

But the meaning of the Hebrew word *netzer* is not exhausted here. Isaiah uses the word in **1:18** to mean “beseiged” (KJV) or “under seige” (NIV). Isaiah and many of the other Old Testament prophets enjoyed plays on words and double meanings, and it appears that God used such a play on words when he chose Nazareth to be the home village of his Son. For the title “Jesus the Nazarene” can mean “Jesus the Branch,” “Jesus the Beseiged,” or even “Jesus the Despised.” And in the ultimate play on words, **Isaiah 48:6** tells us:

“You have heard these things; look at them all. Will you not admit them?  
‘From now on I will tell you of new things, of *hidden things* unknown to you.’”

The Hebrew word for “hidden things” is *natzuroth* (a *netzer* derivative). So in the very “hidden things” that God declares he would tell them, he hides the name of the village in which his Son would grow up – Nazareth!\*

## Life in Nazareth

First century Nazareth was a small village nestled in the Galilean hills, some 1300 feet above sea level. The hills surrounding Nazareth are part of a limestone ridge that overlook the fertile Jezreel Valley. In fact, the countryside in Galilee is so lush that Josephus got a bit carried away when he described it:

“The land is everywhere so rich in soil and pasturage and produces such a variety of trees, that even the most indolent are tempted...to devote themselves to agriculture. In fact, every inch of the soil has been cultivated by the inhabitants.”<sup>5</sup>

\* The word *netzer*, *notzri* and its Nazarene derivatives can be found throughout the prophecies of Isaiah, but are too involved to discuss in this lesson. If you are interested in discovering more about this, go to Fred Miller’s article, “Isaiah’s Use of the word ‘Branch’ or Nazarene,” at <http://www.ao.net/~fmoeller/nazer2.htm>.

Nazareth is not mentioned, however, by Josephus, which is not surprising, since the village was “tiny, with two or three clans living in 35 homes spread over about two hectares,”<sup>6</sup> or about five acres in size. The population was probably about 300, including children.

From archaeological evidence, the Nazareth of Jesus’ day was surrounded by fields and vineyards.

“In the time of Jesus, his fellow villagers in Nazareth made their living by growing grapes, olives and grain on terraces cut into the limestone. At harvest time, all 300 villagers – Jesus likely included – would stomp grapes to extract juice and huddle in watchtowers at night to guard their produce against thieves.”<sup>7</sup>

Given the small size of Nazareth, we can understand Nathaniel’s derogatory remark in **John 1:47**: “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

Nazareth, like most small villages, would have centered on a small marketplace and a single street of shops where craftsmen and merchants sold their wares. Among these shops was a carpenter’s shop – the shop of Joseph.

“The smith and the carpenter, whose combined skills were needed to make and repair farm implements – iron-tipped plows, sickles, cart wheels – were usually located near each other, side by side or opposite [on the central street of the village]. The villagers also depended on mat makers, potters, and basket weavers, who displayed their goods on the street.”<sup>8</sup>

To this day, there is a perennial spring that would have been the focus of women’s life in the village. Women generally gathered there first thing in the morning to draw water, and this would have been the place of endless gossip about Mary’s pregnancy. This kind of talk can even be seen in the villagers’ grumblings in **Mark 6:3**, when Jesus return to Nazareth.

“Isn’t this the carpenter? Isn’t this Mary’s son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren’t his sisters here with us?’ And they took offense at him.”

The fact that they call Jesus “Mary’s son” betrays their view of his legitimacy. Even if Joseph had earlier died (which is hinted at in the Gospel record), he would still be called, according to Jewish tradition, “the son of Joseph.” No Jewish male was ever called the son of his mother. In doing so, they were, in effect, calling him “the bastard son of Mary.”

## The Family of Jesus

Family life in Nazareth was important, as it was in every Jewish town.

“Galilean social life centered on the family. Rural families tend to be large, cohesive, and extremely hardworking, and such was probably true of Jesus’ kinsmen and neighbors. The husband was the spiritual and legal head of the household, and he was the final arbiter of all issues dealing with the welfare of his wife and children.”<sup>9</sup>



But what do we know of Jesus' family? As we see in the verse quoted above (**Mark 6:3**), the Gospel record is clear that Jesus had four brothers (James, Joseph, Judas and Simon) and an unknown number of sisters (he had at least two).<sup>\*</sup> Thus Jesus grew up in a family of at least seven children. But how can this be? Wasn't Mary a perpetual virgin?

While Scripture is clear that Mary was a virgin when Jesus was born (**Matthew 1:23; Luke 1:27,34**), there is no indication from Scripture that Mary *continued* to be a virgin after Jesus' birth. In fact, there is every indication that this was not the case. In **Matthew 1:25**, we are told that Joseph "had no [sexual] union with [Mary] *until* she gave birth to a son." This presupposes that Joseph and Mary had sexual union *after* Jesus was born.

Some, who have sought to elevate Mary to divine status, have tried to explain away the fact that Jesus had brothers and sisters by saying that these were children of Joseph from a previous marriage. There is no indication of this previous marriage in Scripture, however, and the Gospel accounts always show that when Jesus was born, there were no other siblings around (note **Matthew 2:14**).

But what about Joseph? Why isn't he mentioned during the time of Jesus' ministry? It is likely that Joseph died before Jesus began his ministry, although we are not told the time or the circumstances of his death.

## Jesus at Home

What kind of a picture can we construct of Jesus' home life? Archaeology provides us with quite a comprehensive picture.

### ***The family home***

The home of Jesus would have been similar to many excavated in Nazareth.

"Parents, young children, unmarried adults, and married sons and their spouses might all live under one small roof, with little or no privacy and very few material comforts to ease their lives. While the better houses – especially in the larger cities – were likely to be made of stone, encompassing several rooms in perhaps two stories, the typical village house was little more than a rude dwelling constructed of mud brick and consisting of just one or two all-purpose rooms."<sup>10</sup>

Entering the house from the street, Jesus would have touched his fingers to his lips, then pressed his fingers against the *mezuzah* near the top of the righthand doorpost of the house. The *mezuzah* contained small parchments enscribed with the words of **Deuteronomy 6:4-9** and **11:13-21**. He would have then opened a narrow wooden door hung on leather hinges and, as he grew older, he would have probably had to bend slightly to get through. Since animals such as donkeys and chickens were often kept in the average village house in Nazareth, the home may have had two levels – the lower portion to shelter the animals and a second level, raised about 18 inches, where the family ate and slept.

\* Two of Jesus' brothers – James and Judas (Jude) – probably wrote the New Testament epistles that today bear their name.

Jesus' home would probably have been very sparsely furnished by today's standards. "Personal possessions...were scant. An entire family's total material wealth might fit into a single chest, so there was no need for many storage cabinets. The 'kitchen' consisted only of an oven, some pottery, a few utensils, and a stock of stored food. The only light in the house came from the dim glow of oil lamps, which were perched in wall niches or on shelves or stands"<sup>11</sup> (see **Matthew 5:15**).

"There was no bathroom; matters of personal toilet – washing for example – were best done in the courtyard or in the street, where the discarded water could seep away without turning the dirt floor of the house into a bed of mud."<sup>12</sup>

Bedding generally consisted of a straw mat, spread on the ground (**Mark 2:11-12**), and in the winter months, people usually covered themselves with a tunic or cloak.

The roof of the house was flat, made by weaving brushwood together and covering it with a thick layer of clay that filled the spaces between the branches and formed a hardened plaster. It was in this kind of roof that four men made an opening in order to lower their paralytic friend down to Jesus (**Mark 2:3-4**).

"To keep the roof from washing away, the owner performed a number of maintenance chores that included rolling over the roof after a heavy rain-storm with a device very like the modern lawn roller, applying a fresh coat of clay plaster each fall before the start of the rainy season, and replacing the entire roof or sections of it, when needed."<sup>13</sup>

Jesus would undoubtedly have helped his father with such chores on many occasions as he grew to adulthood, and after Joseph's passing, it would have fallen to him to make sure that the roof was kept intact.

### ***The family meals***

While Joseph was doing carpentry, Mary would have stayed at home and participated in a strict routine of household chores. Her day would probably have begun with a visit to the local well to collect water, followed by a visit to the marketplace to buy fresh vegetables, eggs, bread, cheese, fruit and nuts.

Chicken or wild fowl may have also have been purchased on occasion, although red meat would have probably been a rare delicacy for Jesus throughout his life, eaten mainly at celebrations (**Luke 15:23-30**), wedding feasts (**Matthew 22:4**), and festivals such as Passover (**Luke 22:7**). But as a Jew, all the meals Mary prepared would have followed a strict observance of the dietary regulations of the Torah.\*

"In warm weather cooking was done in the courtyard. On cold and rainy days, the cook brought her fire indoors to a portable clay stove fueled with charcoal and twigs. As there were no chimneys, the smoke and cooking smells permeated the house."<sup>14</sup>

\* There is every indication that Jesus strictly observed the Old Covenant's dietary regulations throughout his life. In **Mark 7:1-23**, Jesus is simply foreshadowing the later abolition of the Sinai dietary regulations, but his actual purpose then and there was to overturn the oral law of the Pharisees, requiring the meticulous ritual washing of hands.

Meals were usually boiled or stewed in a large pot, and seasoned with salt, onions, garlic, mint, dill, cummin, coriander, rue or mustard. Food was also sometimes sweetened with wild honey or syrups made from boiled dates and grapes. The staple food for most villagers in Nazareth, however, would have been barley bread. Barley was the poor man's grain, with wheat usually eaten only by the wealthy.

The evening meal was seen as a time of relaxation after a long day's work. The family sat or reclined on mats around a low table, under the flickering light of oil lamps, and the food was usually eaten by dipping in with the fingers in common bowls.

## Jesus at Synagogue

Central to village life in Nazareth was the local synagogue.

“All village Jews were governed by the same stringent system of moral, religious, and social codes...And every important event in a Nazarene's life, from birth to marriage to parenthood to death, had its proper time and its immutable rules and rituals, many of them involving prayer. For example, many Jews recited a blessing for nearly every occasion, including waking up, dressing, lacing their sandals, and washing their hands.”<sup>15</sup>

Because absolutely no manual work was allowed on the Sabbath (not even cooking), Friday afternoons were usually a very busy and occasionally a hurried time. Everything needed to be prepared for the Sabbath, for it was to be a time of total rest. The men finished up their work and the women cleaned the house with special care, making sure that lamps were refilled with oil, that clothes were laundered and that meals were prepared in advance.

The Sabbath day of rest began at sundown on Friday and ended at sundown on Saturday. As the first stars appeared on Friday evening, the *hazzan* (a synagogue official) blew three sharp blasts on his *shofar* (a ram's horn), calling the faithful to prayer at the synagogue.

Jesus' family would have gone to synagogue on the Friday evening. “Men, women and children arranged themselves on [segregated] benches lined up along three of the stone walls or sat or stood on the stone floor. In front of the fourth wall – the one that faced toward Jerusalem – pinpoints of flame danced in a seven-branched lamp stand set near a reading desk on a small platform. Upon this dais stood the prayer leader for that morning. He was not a priest, like those in the Temple, nor was he necessarily an elder of the congregation or the *hazzan*...The prayer leader could be any adult male member of the congregation, someone who was known to the villagers during the week as a carpenter, potter, or farmer, but who was transformed and honored on this special day appointed by God for rest.”<sup>16</sup>

The Sabbath service began with the opening blessings and praises to “God, the eternal and mighty,” who had established his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and who would bring a redeemer and grant peace to his people, Israel. To this, the congregation responded with a loud, “Amen!” Then the congregation chanted in unison the Shema, from **Deuteronomy 6:4-8**.

After this, the *hazzan* brought forward the Ark of the Torah – a wooden chest containing the Torah scrolls, which were made of lengths of parchment stitched together and wound up around wooden staves called “trees of life.” “Opening the chest, [the *hazzan*] withdrew a Torah scroll, swathed in fine linen. Removing the linen and unrolling the staves, he held the scroll up so that all could see the columns of bold, black letters marching across the tan parchment.”<sup>17</sup> The scroll was laid upon the reading desk and the prayer leader then uttered a blessing upon the Torah scroll.

At this point, another man was called from the congregation, who came up to the dias and read from the required portions for that week. The Scripture was written in classical Hebrew, but this was no longer the common language of the people, who now spoke Aramaic, a sister-language to Hebrew. For this reason, the person reading the Hebrew of the scroll would often pause while another man translated the passage into everyday Aramaic.

“When the reading of Scripture was completed, the scroll was reverently replaced in the Ark, while another exultant blessing rose from the gathering. Then a speaker walked to the reader’s desk and delivered a sermon, a commentary on the text. He might be an official of the congregation, but he could also be any one of its members who was invited or who volunteered to give an interpretation of the lesson. If he was an able preacher, interweaving quotations from Scripture and illustrating his points by poetic and lively images, the audience leaned forward attentively, their faces knit in concentration or relaxed in appreciative smiles in the warm glow of the oil lamps. The Scripture lesson was, for hardworking fishermen, craftsmen, farmers, and mothers, a chance to take their minds off their daily round of toil.”<sup>18</sup>

The conclusion of the Sabbath service was the *haftarah* – a reading by yet another man of one of the prophetic books of the Bible, after which a benediction was pronounced and Sabbath good wishes exchanged among members of the congregation.

After synagogue, the family then returned home to a pre-prepared meal which was an especially joyous time. On the Saturday morning, the family would have gone again to synagogue and the rest of the day would have been marked by relaxation, games and the reading of the Scripture. The Sabbath ended on the Saturday evening, as the first stars came out, signaled once again by blasts from the *shofar*.

## Jesus at School

A rabbi contemporary to Jesus once said: “A child ought to be fattened with the Torah as an ox is fattened in the stall.”<sup>19</sup> In line with this, Jonathan Went observes:

“The Jews of Jesus’ era were world innovators in comprehensive universal education. The majority, if not all, were taught to read and write. The philosopher Seneca remarked that the Jews were the only people who knew the reasons for their religious faith...”<sup>20</sup>

Although girls received instruction in the home, boys were educated in three stages:

## ***Bet Hasefer***

As a young child, Jesus would have started classes at the village synagogue.

“Formal school began – for boys – usually at the age of five, with enrollment in an elementary *bet hasefer*, or ‘house of the book.’ There a boy would spend at least half a day, six days a week, for the next five years...Mothers and fathers brought the youngest children at daybreak and came to guide them back home about the ‘sixth hour,’ or midday...In a small town, the teacher was apt to be the *hazzan* of the synagogue, which also served as the schoolroom.”<sup>21</sup>

The children sat at the feet of the teacher, who was called “rabbi.” They learned the Hebrew alphabet by tracing out each of the 22 letters. Later, the children began writing individual words and finally whole phrases and passages from the Torah, which was their only textbook.

“Memorization became an important skill, and those boys who could commit many passages to memory could become outstanding scholars. This was all the more true because it was not considered proper, except for teaching and liturgical purposes, to copy the words of the Torah. The whole style of teaching was geared to a culture in which the spoken word was passed down through the generations. So the schoolroom and the narrow streets around it resounded each day with the rhythmic chanting of little boys committing their lessons to memory.”<sup>22</sup>

So important was this early instruction in the Torah, one story has it that an enemy of Israel asked a wise man how the Jews might best be destroyed. His answer was: “Go round to their synagogues and schools and if you find there children with voices uplifted you cannot subjugate them; if not, you can.”<sup>23</sup> Likewise, Josephus made this boast:

“Should anyone of our nation be questioned about the laws, he would repeat them all more readily than his own name. The result then of our thorough grounding in the laws from the first dawn of intelligence is that we have them, as it were, engraven on our souls.”<sup>24</sup>

## ***Bet Talmud***

At the age of ten, Jesus would have graduated to the next step of his education at the *bet talmud*, which means “house of learning.” Although his teacher might be the same, the subject of his education was not. Now he no longer learned just the Torah itself, but also more complex oral law, which were rabbinic interpretations of the Torah’s commands applied to first century life. At the *bet talmud* “both morning and evening sessions were probably held and inattentive students may have received corporal punishment.”<sup>25</sup>

“Seated on his bench, the teacher would raise a question of law. ‘Are there any kinds of work permitted on the Sabbath?’ he might ask. Then he would repeat the verses that applied and follow them with a description of how this sage and that had answered in case after case; each of his comments sought

for new definitions of the very words *permit*, and *work*, and *sabbath*, and each rested on the authority of other verses from the sacred text. The students gathered around the teacher would repeat the lesson, together or one by one as he called on them, until the general outline, and ultimately the exact wording, was imprinted firmly on their minds.”<sup>26</sup>

The rabbi would use many different methods to clarify the meaning of the oral law, including legends, fables and parables. Yet, as in modern times, school hours may have at times seemed endless to the children of Nazareth.

“Truly gifted teachers and scholars are rare in any age, and so many of the days passed in the three years of the *bet talmud* must have been filled with droning repetition, drowsiness in the Palestinian heat, the buzz of insects, the shuffling of feet, the shifting of bodies, an occasional reprimand. Most of the boys probably forgot the memorized verses once they had escaped the discipline of the schoolroom and graduated into manhood. But they never forgot the fundamental lesson that they were God’s people, who must never lose sight of the teachings of his lawgivers, leaders, and prophets.”<sup>27</sup>

What was Jesus like during these times? We see a glimpse in the only childhood story recorded in the Gospel accounts.

### Read Luke 2:41-51

Jesus is now twelve years old. He is in the middle of his *bet talmud* studies, just before his *bar mitzvah*, which would be celebrated next year. What is important to realize is that he is in the role of student, not teacher, in these sessions in the Temple precinct, for he was “sitting among the teachers (in the student’s position), *listening* to them and *asking* them questions.” But at the same time, the teachers were obviously also asking him questions, once again in the rabbi-student format, for “[e]veryone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers.”

At the age of thirteen, the following year, Jesus would have appeared before the local rabbi at the village synagogue to test his knowledge of the 613 commandments of the Sinai Covenant. This ceremony is known as the *bar mitzvah* (which means “son of the commandment”) and is a tradition carried on by Jews down to this day.

After his *bar mitzvah*, Jesus became a legal member of the synagogue at Nazareth. He would have worn phylacteries (called *tefillin* in Hebrew) on his arm and forehead during Sabbath services. The arm phylactery had two strips of parchment folded up in a case of black calfskin. On the parchments were written four passages of Scripture – **Exodus 13:1-10; 11-16; Deuteronomy 6:4-9; 11:13-21**. The arm phylactery was fastened with a long narrow strap to the arm and fingers so that when the arm touched the body the Law would be near the heart. The forehead phylactery had the same four passages of Scripture placed in four compartments in a case fastened to the forehead with leather straps.

Jesus also wore the *tallit* – a prayer shawl with 613 fringes along the bottom representing the 613 commandments of the Law of Moses. When the woman with

the issue of blood reached out to touch “the hem of his garment,” it was the fringes (or *tzitzit*) of the *tallit* that she was reaching out for (**Luke 8:43-44; Mark 6:56**).

### ***Bet Haknesset***

By the age of 18, most of the young men of Nazareth had completed their formal training, but that doesn’t mean their education ceased. For their education now continued within the synagogue gatherings (both on the Sabbath and on weekdays). The Greek word *synagogue* and its Hebrew equivalent *bet haknesset* both mean “house of assembly.” And that was the synagogue’s main role – a point of assembly for the people of the village to learn from God’s Law and to teach one another.

## **Jesus at Play**

Just like today’s children, the full gamut of everyday life in Nazareth would have been played out in endless childhood games. Instead of playing “doctor and nurse” or “cops and robbers,” the children of Jesus’ day would have probably played at “mothers and fathers” or “being a rabbi” or “fighting a Roman soldier.” Jesus would have been no different from other children in this regard.

“Children played ball games and what appear to have been hopscotch and jacks. Evidence of whistles, rattles, wheeled animals, hoops, and spinning tops have been found by archaeologists. Older children and adults played various kinds of board games, including a form of checkers.”<sup>28</sup>

### **Read Luke 7:31-32**

Here we see a unique window on the kinds of games that Jesus would have played as a child. Marriages and funerals would have been two of the most conspicuous events in village life, and like the children of any age, these would have been acted out in role-playing games.

Jesus and his boyhood friends would probably have roamed the nearby hills, exploring the caverns and climbing the trees. He probably would have even played with his friends along one of the sharp bluffs near the village – a bluff that his fellow villagers would later try to throw him off (see **Luke 4:29**).

## **Learning a Trade**

A rabbi once said: “Whoever does not teach his son a trade it is as if he brought him up to be a robber.”<sup>29</sup> Even the rabbis were expected to know a trade. For example, the heads of the two largest schools of the Pharisees were Hillel and Shammai. Hillel is reported to have been a woodcutter, and Shammai a carpenter. And Paul, Aquila and Priscilla were all tentmakers by trade (**Acts 18:2-3; 20:34; 1 Corinthians 4:12; 1 Thessalonians 2:9**).

The Gospel accounts do not leave us in any doubt as to the trade that Jesus learnt. Not only do we know that Joseph, Jesus’ step-father, was a carpenter, but **Mark 6:3** informs us that the villagers of Nazareth knew Jesus as a carpenter too.

Timothy Blackburn explains:

“...the era in which Jesus lived was a ‘Golden Age’ of woodworking. All major joinery was developed by His time, including mortise and tenon, dovetail, etc...[T]he capability to turn objects on the lathe was well developed. A carpenter was needed to make items for all aspects of life, including framing for the roofs of house, doors and frames, tables, beds, objects for the culinary arts such as turned bowls and cups and other utensils. Objects for the farm were also needed, such as yokes and plows.”<sup>30</sup>

Formal apprenticeship for Jesus probably began at the age of 15, and would have involved working with his father at the carpenter’s shop, which may have been a storefront at the front of their home.

“It seems likely that Joseph worked in his doorway or just outside of his house, which may have been one in a row of craftsmen’s shops at the center of town, but he probably stored his tools and materials inside. Joseph must have owned a substantial kit of tools, some of which he accumulated in his own lifetime, some of which he inherited from his father. Basic carpenter’s tools included an ax for chopping down trees, an adz for shaping wood, and a hatchet. Also essential were iron saws for cutting wood to precise shapes, a bow drill and bits for drilling holes through wood, a stone-headed hammer for driving nails, a wooden mallet for pounding chisels for hammering wooden surfaces together, iron chisels and files for shaping and carving, awls for putting small holes into wood or leather, and a supply of nails. Joseph may even have owned one or more wood planes and a spoke shave, a recent innovation. Among his measuring tools were a rule, a compass or dividers, a chalk line, and of course, some pencil-like markers to score his patterns and to guide him in his cuts.”<sup>31</sup>

Jesus probably helped his father make farm tools (such as plows, winnowing forks, yokes, carts and wheels), house construction parts (like posts, beams, doors and window frames), furniture (including tables, chairs and storage boxes) and kitchen utensils (such as ladels, bowls, cups and the like). He may also have traveled with him to carpentry jobs in nearby towns, such as Sepphoris, which was barely four miles north of Nazareth and supported a booming construction industry due to the lavish building projects of Herod Antipas. As James Strange observes:

“As a carpenter, Jesus would have been in a lot of demand in Sepphoris, which was a growing city at the time.”<sup>32</sup>

## **The Parables as a Window on Christ’s Childhood**

One of the best ways to understand life in first century Galilee, and thus childhood life for Jesus, is to look at his parables, which were stories drawn from everyday life in rural Galilee. Many of the sayings of Jesus may have been based on events witnessed by him during his childhood and early adulthood.

- **Matthew 5:13** – As he grew up, Jesus would have seen workmen salting roads in order to keep them clear of weeds.



- **Matthew 5:14** – Some have suggested that the “city on a hill that cannot be hidden” was, in Jesus’ mind, Sepphoris, which overlooked the Galilee basin.
- **Matthew 5:15** – Jesus would have witnessed his mother lighting lamps each evening and placing them so that they spread light to the whole room.
- **Matthew 5:41** – Roman soldiers were entitled to conscript a Jew to carry a load for one mile. Jesus may have seen Roman soldiers come into Nazareth and pick out some able-bodied males for porter duties. Maybe Jesus himself had experienced such humiliation.
- **Matthew 9:15** – Jesus would have been a guest at many weddings during his life. **John 2:1-11** is just one example of this.
- **Matthew 13:33** – As a child, Jesus would have watched his mother kneading yeast into barley dough in order to make bread.
- **Matthew 13:47-48** – On visits to the Sea of Galilee, Jesus would have watched the fishermen at work, counting their fish and mending their nets.
- **Matthew 20:1-16** – It is likely that Jesus joined the other villagers in Nazareth to harvest the grapes and tread out the wine. It is interesting to note how many times Jesus uses a vineyard in his teaching (see **Matthew 21:28-31,33-40; Luke 13:6-9; John 15:1-4**).
- **Luke 15:8-10** – It is quite likely that Jesus’ mother may have lost a coin in their home. Such an event would spark a house-wide hunt, with all the children searching for the coin. In such a situation, Mary would have swept the hard-packed dirt floor carefully, and when the coin was found, the entire family would have rejoiced.

## The Childhood of Jesus in Summary

The childhood of Jesus, though unrecorded in the Gospels, shows the extent to which God lowered himself when he became incarnate in a baby born in Bethlehem. That baby grew up, first in Bethlehem, later in Egypt, and finally in Nazareth. He went through all the hardships of growing up and experienced the many heartaches that life presents us. He knew what it meant to be under his parents’ authority, to go to school, to learn a trade and to relate to those around him. He most likely experienced family squabbles, bullies on the street, and the constant gossip of a village that knew his mother had become pregnant before marriage. He was, as **Hebrews 4:15** tells us, “tempted in every way, just as we are – yet was without sin.”

When did Jesus discover God’s plan for his life? We don’t know when God first revealed the redemptive plan of the Cross, but from the age of 12 we know that he was fully aware of his special relationship with his Father. This relationship would have shaped his growth during his years in Nazareth.

As we saw earlier, **Luke 2:51-52** summarizes the so-called “missing years”:

“Then he went down to Nazareth with [his parents] and was obedient to them ...And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.”

Pause to contemplate the wonder of what God did – that the eternal Son of God should deign to come to earth – not as a full-grown man, but born as a baby and raised as an ordinary human child. And he did this not just to save you from the penalty of sin, but to bring you back to where he was – as a son of the Most High God – “that he might be the firstborn among many brothers” (**Romans 8:29**).

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- <sup>1</sup> *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, excerpted from QuickVerse 6.0, Deluxe Edition.
- <sup>2</sup> *NIV Bible Commentary: New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), p.220.
- <sup>3</sup> Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities*, XVII 191.
- <sup>4</sup> Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities*, XVII 6:5.
- <sup>5</sup> Flavius Josephus, *The Jewish War*, III 3:2.
- <sup>6</sup> *Associated Press*, December 24, 1997.
- <sup>7</sup> *Associated Press*, December 24, 1997.
- <sup>8</sup> *Jesus and His Times* (Pleasantville, NY: Reader’s Digest, 1987), p.91.
- <sup>9</sup> *Jesus and His Times* (Pleasantville, NY: Reader’s Digest, 1987), p.92.
- <sup>10</sup> *Jesus and His Times* (Pleasantville, NY: Reader’s Digest, 1987), p.93.
- <sup>11</sup> *Jesus and His Times* (Pleasantville, NY: Reader’s Digest, 1987), p.93.
- <sup>12</sup> *Jesus and His Times* (Pleasantville, NY: Reader’s Digest, 1987), p.93.
- <sup>13</sup> *Jesus and His Times* (Pleasantville, NY: Reader’s Digest, 1987), p.94.
- <sup>14</sup> *Jesus and His Times* (Pleasantville, NY: Reader’s Digest, 1987), p.97.
- <sup>15</sup> *Jesus and His Times* (Pleasantville, NY: Reader’s Digest, 1987), p.93.
- <sup>16</sup> *Jesus and His Times* (Pleasantville, NY: Reader’s Digest, 1987), p.147.
- <sup>17</sup> *Jesus and His Times* (Pleasantville, NY: Reader’s Digest, 1987), p.148.
- <sup>18</sup> *Jesus and His Times* (Pleasantville, NY: Reader’s Digest, 1987), p.148.
- <sup>19</sup> *Mishnah*, Baba Bathra, 21a.
- <sup>20</sup> Jonathan Went, “Jesus the Jew” (1998), <http://www.leaderu.com/theology/jesusjew.html>.
- <sup>21</sup> *Jesus and His Times* (Pleasantville, NY: Reader’s Digest, 1987), p.151.
- <sup>22</sup> *Jesus and His Times* (Pleasantville, NY: Reader’s Digest, 1987), p.151.
- <sup>23</sup> *Jesus and His Times* (Pleasantville, NY: Reader’s Digest, 1987), p.151.
- <sup>24</sup> *Jesus and His Times* (Pleasantville, NY: Reader’s Digest, 1987), p.151.
- <sup>25</sup> *Jesus and His Times* (Pleasantville, NY: Reader’s Digest, 1987), p.152.
- <sup>26</sup> *Jesus and His Times* (Pleasantville, NY: Reader’s Digest, 1987), p.152.
- <sup>27</sup> *Jesus and His Times* (Pleasantville, NY: Reader’s Digest, 1987), p.153.
- <sup>28</sup> *Jesus and His Times* (Pleasantville, NY: Reader’s Digest, 1987), p.98.
- <sup>29</sup> Timothy Blackburn, *Richmond Antique Tool Society Newsletter*, <http://timana.tripod.com/Monographs/jesuscarpenter.html>.
- <sup>30</sup> Timothy Blackburn, *Richmond Antique Tool Society Newsletter*, <http://timana.tripod.com/Monographs/jesuscarpenter.html>.
- <sup>31</sup> *Jesus and His Times* (Pleasantville, NY: Reader’s Digest, 1987), pp.111-112.
- <sup>32</sup> James Strange, quoted by Lynn Rothman, “Strange Digs,” [http://www.tfba.org/projects/sepphoris/body\\_sepphoris.htm](http://www.tfba.org/projects/sepphoris/body_sepphoris.htm).

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