



THE HISTORICAL JESUS IV:

Nativity and Early Life¹

SOON AFTER JOSEPH became engaged to Mary, who was already “great with child” (Luke 2:5), they left Nazareth in Galilee for Bethlehem in Judea. This trip was necessitated by a Roman census that had been ordered by Augustus Caesar and initiated in Herod the Great’s domain about 8 BCE by the Syrian governor, Saturninus. The census required the Jews to return to their birthplaces for registration, and so Joseph and Mary’s trip took them to Bethlehem. Upon arriving in the city, they found that there was no room for them in the inn, and so in desperation they sought refuge in a stable. Here Jesus was born and laid in a manger (ca. 7 BCE).

Immediately thereafter a group of shepherds, who were watching their flock at night, were approached by a retinue of angels and told where the Savior was born. With haste they went to Bethlehem, where they found baby Jesus lying in a manger and worshiped him.

On the eighth day after his birth, Joseph and Mary had Jesus circumcised in accordance with Jewish Law. Soon thereafter they went to the Temple to make the required sacrificial gifts and to “present him to the Lord” (Luke 2:22). They were met at the Temple by the “just and devout” (Luke 2:25) Simeon and also by the prophetess, Anna. Both of them recognized who Jesus was and greatly blessed him.

Not long afterward the Persian magi who had seen the “star in the east” determined to come and worship the “King of the Jews” (Matthew 2:2). Upon going to Herod’s court, they learned from the chief priests and scribes that the king would be born in Bethlehem. They immediately left Herod’s court and

Joseph and Mary found that there was no room for them in the inn, and so in desperation they sought refuge in a stable. Here Jesus was born and laid in a manger.

journeyed to nearby Bethlehem, where they found Jesus, Mary and Joseph. Bowing before the young child, they gave him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Then, warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they “departed into their own country another way” (Matthew 2:12). Herod was enraged by these developments and ordered the massacre of the innocent children in Bethlehem “and in all the coasts thereof, from two years old and under” (Matthew 2:16).

Meanwhile, Joseph also had been warned by an angel in a dream to take “the young child and his mother” to Egypt in order to escape the rage of Herod (Matthew 2:13). After remaining in Egypt for some time, an angel again appeared to Joseph and told him to return to the land of Israel, “for they are dead which sought the young child’s life” (Matthew 2:20). However, during the return Joseph became fearful when he learned that Herod’s brutal son, Archelaus, had been installed as ethnarch of Judea after his father had died (4 BCE). Once again an angel warned Joseph in a dream, advising him to turn aside into Galilee.

Upon arriving in Nazareth, Jesus’ parents learned that there had been a terrible rebellion in the neighboring city of Sepphoris after Herod had died. The rebellion had been led by Judah, the Galilean Zealot. The Syrian governor, Quintilius Varus, had been sent to subdue the rebellion not only in Galilee but in Jerusalem and all Judea. Thousands of Galileans and Judeans had been massacred, Sepphoris has been burned to the ground, and the entire nation was devastated.

Despite the awful rebellion, Archelaus remained on the throne until 6 CE. His expulsion coincided with the next Roman census, since a census took place every 14 years (8 BCE, 6 CE). It was probably soon after the removal of Archelaus that Jesus accompanied his parents to Jerusalem at the age of 12 for the annual Passover.

While in Jerusalem, Jesus sat “in the midst of the doctors, both hearing them, and asking them questions. And all that heard him were astonished at his understanding and answers” (Luke 2:46, 47). Assuming that Jesus was accompanying family and friends, Joseph and Mary left Jerusalem to return to Nazareth. However, upon stopping to rest after the first day’s journey, they could not find Jesus and so returned in haste to Jerusalem. After three days they found him in the Temple, still absorbed in discussion with the “doctors.”

After expressing their fright to Jesus, his parents returned with him to Nazareth, where Jesus remained with his family for the next 25 years. During this time he “increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man” (Luke 2:52). Beyond this no one knows what Jesus did throughout the long and hidden years of his early life. He probably worked as an artisan with his father and brothers in rebuilding nearby Sepphoris. He also had numerous opportunities to witness the chaos created by the existing power structures.

While in Jerusalem, Jesus sat “in the midst of the doctors, both hearing them, and asking them questions.”

Moreover, he must have reflected upon and prepared for his future mission to the Jews and to all mankind.

Endnote

1. "The Nativity and Early Life of Jesus," at mb-soft.com/believe/txh/gospgosp.htm

Copyright © 2007 Worldview Publications