

JESUS' EARLY LIFE

The Birth of Jesus

The gospel accounts of Jesus' childhood are brief, detailing the events of his birth, his temporary relocation to Egypt, his return to Nazareth in Galilee, and a trip to Jerusalem when he was twelve years old. Still, some relevant archaeological details can be gleaned from this period.

When Jesus was born, Mary and Joseph had traveled to Bethlehem in response to a census by Quirinius, the Syrian Governor (Lk. 2:2). A recovered papyrus census form from AD 104 indicates that people living in the provinces had to return to their own homes for registration, a striking parallel to the trip made by Mary and Joseph.

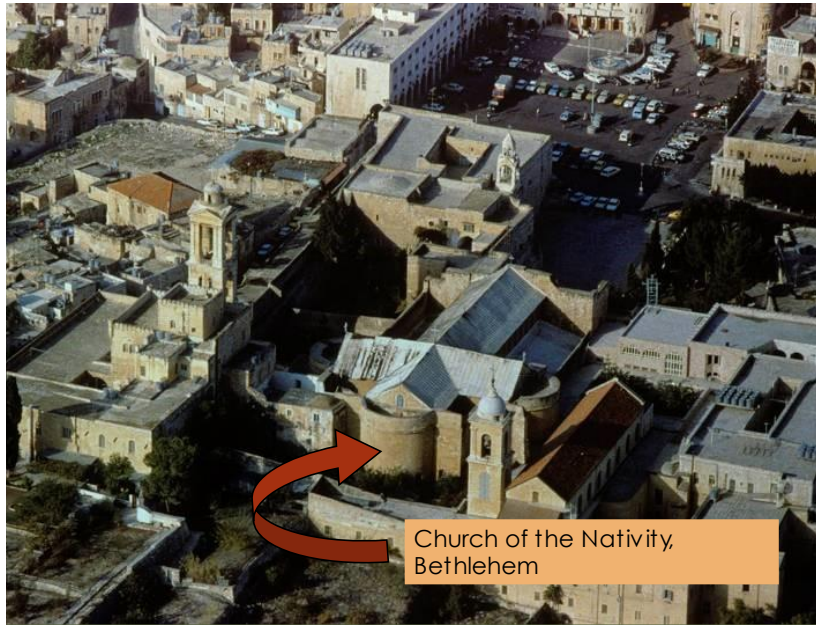


Though a century later than the time of Jesus, this census document (Papyrus 904, British Museum) from the time of Emperor Trajan (AD 104) contains a mandate for all to return to their homes for a census, the very situation described in Lk. 2:1-4 concerning the birth of Jesus.

THE PROBLEM OF QUIRINIUS

*From Josephus, we know of a Quirinius who conducted a census in AD 6 (Antiquities 18.2.1), but this date is too late for the one described by Luke, unless we disregard Matthew's narrative altogether and redate the birth of Jesus to a full decade later. This anomaly, in turn, has led to various attempts to solve the historical discrepancy. Some scholars suggest an alternative translation for the critical passage in Lk. 2:2b, which would resolve the difficulty by translating the word *πρώτη* as "formerly" rather than "first," thus showing that this census was prior to the one given in AD 6. Others conjecture that either there were two governors with the name Quirinius or else the one from AD 6 might have had an earlier tenure that was unrecorded. In any case, the issue remains unresolved.*

A cave under the present Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem has been identified since the early 2nd Century as the place of Jesus' birth. Justin Martyr (early 2nd century) testifies to the cave as the place where Jesus was born. St. Jerome (5th century) speaks of a grove in honor of Tammuz (Adonis) planted at the cave, while Paulinus of Nola indicates the grove was planted by Hadrian in a deliberate effort to dishonor the Christian tradition of Jesus' birth. The current double church built over the cave, a replacement of an earlier church destroyed in AD 529, dates to the Emperor Justinian (AD 527-565). One half is Roman Catholic and the other half Eastern Orthodox. The tradition of this cave as Jesus' birthplace is so



The apse of the church lies directly over the cave beneath, and one can pass from the Catholic to the Orthodox side or vice versa through the cave.

early, the likelihood of it being authentic is strong.

After Jesus' birth, Mary and Joseph visited the temple to offer the appropriate sacrifice, which for the poor was to be turtledoves or pigeons (Lk. 2:24; cf. Lv. 12:6-8). Uncovered by archaeologist Benjamin Mazar near the temple mount and dating to the 1st century is a stone vessel inscribed with the Hebrew letters קרבן (*qorban* = offering), and incised on the vessel are two birds—doves or pigeons.

The Childhood of Jesus

According to the gospels, Jesus grew up in Nazareth, a small, insignificant village in southern Galilee. An ancient water source, a well popularly known as Mary's well, still exists and possibly was a primary water source for Jesus' family. Joseph's trade (Mt. 13:55),

and later Jesus' trade as well (Mk. 6:3), was that of a τέκτων (*tekton* = carpenter, mason, builder). Nazareth by itself may not have been sufficiently large to provide business for the support of a family at this trade, but only three miles from Nazareth was the much larger city of Sepphoris, and it is possible that Joseph and Jesus may have worked there. Whether Joseph and Jesus worked in wood, stone or both is unclear. Galilee in ancient times had an abundance of trees, and wood was used widely for buildings, furnishings, and various other household objects, including tools, implements, carts, and boats. At the same time, the black basalt stone of the region also was widely used, along with bricks and cut stone. Hence, Joseph's and Jesus' occupation might more safely be described as that of construction workers.



This stone vessel, recovered in debris near the Temple Mount, is inscribed with Hebrew letters (the lower wax casting shows the full inscription, which wraps around the vessel). Benjamin Mazar suggests it was used in connection with a sacrifice to celebrate the birth of a child, which is what Mary and Joseph did (Lk. 2:24; cf. Lv. 12:1-8).

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NT ARCHAEOLOGY

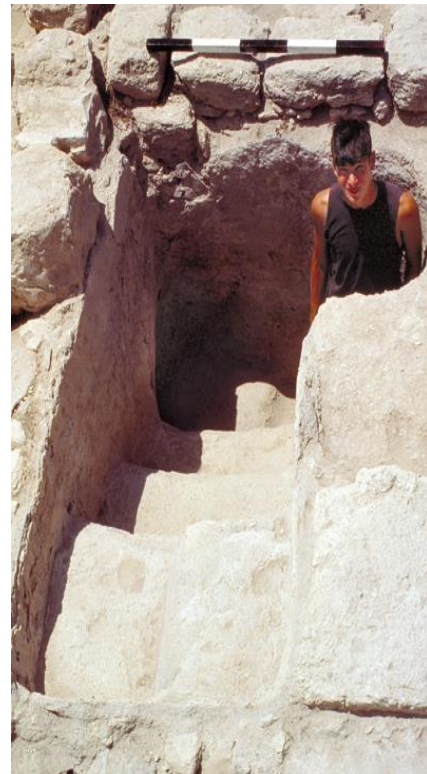


This cistern, serving a 1st century Jewish home in Nazareth, would have been typical for a family of modest means. While it would be too speculative to suggest this was Jesus' own home, perhaps Jesus' boyhood home had a similar installation.

As a builder, Jesus would have worked outdoors at the sort of labor requiring muscular development. While there have been many depictions of Jesus' face by artists over the centuries, these have largely been "theological" portraits, that is, portraits portraying some theological ideal. More recently, however, an attempt has been made by forensic

scientists to reconstruct the face and head of an "average" 1st century Semitic, and hence, a face more closely approximating the face of Jesus. The assumption is that Jesus did not look substantially different than others of his race and era. Using skeletal remains from the time of Jesus and the advances of computer technology, a 1st century Jewish face billed as "the real face of Jesus" has been reconstructed. Of course, such a label is highly optimistic and hopelessly overstated, since in any given era faces of the same race and era differ substantially. Nevertheless, the resulting visage with black hair, dark eyes, and a middle-eastern skin tone is probably closer than the work of the many artists who have gone before.¹

The close proximity of Sepphoris meant that Jesus might have been exposed to a sophisticated society, largely Jewish, but with various Hellenistic characteristics as well. A century or more before Jesus' time, Sepphoris was the site of a Hellenistic fort taken over by Jewish freedom fighters in the Maccabean revolt. Excavated stepped pools and baptismal baths (*mikva'ot*) date from this period. After the Roman occupation, Sepphoris gained prominence in that it was the only city allowed to have a Jewish council. Later, Herod the Great used Sepphoris as his base of operations in the north, and when he died, a Jewish rebel named Judas ben Ezekias raided the fort, raising the ire of the Romans, who then burned the city to the ground, sold its citizens into slavery, and crucified many of the rebels on the public roads.² The city quickly recovered, however, and it remained the capital of Galilee until about AD 20, when Herod Antipas constructed



One of several mikva'ot discovered in Sepphoris. (A mikveh is a Jewish baptismal pool for purification, Lv. 14:8-9; 15:4-11, 13, 16-18, 21-22, 27; 16:24-28; 17:15; 22:6.)

¹ M. Fillon, "The Real Face of Jesus," *Popular Mechanics* (December 2002), pp. 68-71.

² *Antiquities*, 17.10.9; *Wars*, 5.1.

THE LANGUAGE OF JESUS

Most scholars conclude that the first language of Jesus was Aramaic, though this is sometimes debated. In Mark's Gospel, the handful of times Jesus' actual words are given in transliteration are in Aramaic (i.e., Greek letters but in the Aramaic language). The fact that a few additional Aramaic words and phrases are preserved in Christian liturgical expressions also seems best explained if the lingua franca of the Jews in Palestine was Aramaic (Ro. 8:15; Ga. 4:6; 1 Co. 16:22).

Jesus' reading of the Isaiah text in the Nazareth synagogue service (Lk. 4:16-20) might suggest he also knew Hebrew (though Targums in Aramaic were also read in Palestinian synagogues).

Did Jesus know Greek? Very possibly, since this international language was very often used by Jews. Jesus was able to converse with a Roman centurion (Mt. 8:5-13) and Pontius Pilate (Jn. 18:28-38), and it is more likely that Jesus knew Greek than that either of them knew Aramaic or Hebrew. However, there is no direct indication in the New Testament one way or another.

Tiberias and moved his administration there.

The close proximity of Sepphoris also raises the intriguing question as to whether or not Jesus visited it during his ministry. The gospels are silent on this question, but even if he did not visit Sepphoris, he could hardly have been unaware of such an important site.

A related question is whether or not Jesus spoke Greek in addition to his native Aramaic. Certainly, in periods later than Jesus, Greek was used in Galilee, but the evidence as early as the 1st century is sparse. Still, the possibility that someone could have written down and collected some of Jesus' sayings in Greek during his lifetime cannot be dismissed out of hand (e.g., Lk. 1:1). Many ordinary people knew how to read and probably also to write.

The only story preserved in the canonical gospels about Jesus' childhood is his visit to Jerusalem with his parents while still a boy (Lk. 2:41ff.). While no precise location is given in the gospels, it is possible that his dialogue with the rabbis occurred on the south steps leading to the temple mount. Here, the Talmud says that a group of rabbis, including Gamaliel, stood "at the top of stairs at the Temple Mount" discussing the Torah.³ Of the 18 additional years before beginning his public ministry we know nothing, except that Jesus was known locally as "the carpenter" (Mk. 63a), which in turn presumes that

he continued his trade in Nazareth, attending the weekly synagogue "as was his custom" (Lk. 4:16).

These steps on the south face of the Temple Mount may be where Jesus, as a 12-year-old boy, engaged the rabbis before his parents missed him (Lk. 2:45-48).



³ Tosfeta, Sanhedrin 2:2.