

## **Sermon: The Lost Years**

**December 15, 2024**

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**In our UUSL class on The History and Archaeology of the Bible, our lecturer, Dr. Jean- Pierre Isbouts, spoke of the “Lost Years” of Jesus – the period of time between the nativity and Jesus’ leaving Galilee to join John the Baptist when Jesus was about 25-30 years old.<sup>1</sup> Dr. Isbouts has written an entire book about these Lost Years, entitled “Young Jesus,” which I have read and indeed, studied. I want to share with you some of his insights and beliefs into whatever happened to Jesus during his childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood.**

**There are other theories about what happened to Jesus during these years, including his traveling to India. But for this morning, let’s focus on Dr. Isbouts’ findings.**

**During my seminary years at Lancaster Theological Seminary a United Church of Christ seminary, I was taught in my Christianity history courses**

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<sup>1</sup> See The Great Courses. Jean Pierre Isbouts, DLitt. *The History and Archeology of the Bible*. Lecture 20.

that the search for the historical Jesus was not a very fruitful path.  
-That is, the search for who Jesus actually was when he was alive.  
In contrast, Dr. Isbouts' work uncovered for me  
some credible possibilities  
about whom the historical Jesus was and what his life was like.

The religious and historical literature about young Jesus is quite scant.

There is only one story from Jesus' youth in the New Testament.

In the *Gospel of Luke*, Mary and Joseph are searching  
for 12-year-old Jesus during Passover week.

They find him debating scholars and scribes  
on the Jewish Law on the Temple grounds.

I and most scholars question the truth of Luke's account.

Luke, as an evangelist, surely wanted to impress his readers  
about the greatness of Jesus, even at a young age,  
so that they might be converted to Christianity.

The early writings of Paul of Tarsus (St. Paul for Christians)  
provide very little information about Jesus' early life,  
as Paul believed that the significance of Jesus' ministry  
was not his life, but his death on the cross,  
which Paul preached was to save humankind from its sins.

The discovery at Nag Hammadi in 1945 of 45 dissent Christian texts

written as early as mid-1<sup>st</sup> century CE, contain writings that totally disagree with Paul, -thus, not focusing on the meaning of Jesus' death, but instead they focus on His life, teachings and sayings. In our new course here at UUSL, entitled *Lost Christianities*, we are studying some of these early Christian writers, who focused on Jesus' life and his vision of the "Realm of God" on earth, which He preached was attainable by all who would follow a virtuous, spiritual path to gain wisdom.

Much of what has been known about Jesus' early life has been found in the writings of Josephus, Jewish historian, of the first century CE. It is such historical works that provide needed information about what life was like during Jesus' years of growing into adulthood.

In addition, we can learn a great deal from the Mishnah first written around 200 CE. If we separate out from this Jewish text theological arguments and focus on the descriptions of Palestine's social and economic environment, we can learn a lot about what life most likely was like for young Jesus.

**Most of all, I have found Dr. Isbouts' knowledge  
of the history and archaeology  
of the Bible and specially about the time of young Jesus' life  
an important source in giving me a newer understanding of what  
life might have been like for the historical Jesus.**

**To glean some of Dr. Isbouts' thinking,  
let's look at the picture on the cover of our Order of Worship  
of John Everett Millais's Pre-Raphaelite painting from the 1849-50.  
Using this painting, Dr. Isbouts suggests that many of us  
have a similar image of what life was like for young Jesus.  
We see a very white Jesus being comforted by his mother, Mary,  
for he has hurt his hand on a nail, in his father's carpentry shop,  
While this Pre-Raphaelite painting itself is full of Christian symbolism,  
what is most important for us right now is to see how our own  
imagination  
have most likely been shaped by our Western culture  
by such images and paintings like this one.  
View the idyllic scene of the countryside, just outside of this  
workshop.  
Devoid of any information,  
many generations since Jesus lived, have come and gone,  
and filled in the Lost Years of Jesus with their imaginations.  
The result is that probably many assumed or hoped that Jesus had**

**a fairly normal childhood in an idyllic setting.**

**Dr. Isbouts' research provides us with a very different picture,  
based on current archaeological research and historical study.**

**First of all, we suspect that Joseph was most likely not a carpenter.**

**If he did carpentry, such work would be limited by the poor quality of  
wood**

**available in Palestine, as wood was very scarce,  
with olive trees twisted in their trunks and not a good source.**

**Like most around him, Joseph probably was a peasant farmer,  
growing and raising the food for his family's table  
on land passed down to him from previous generations.**

**Lower Galilee's one good asset was its very rich soil,  
with an excellent good water supply.**

**Agriculture was the main and only really viable industry.**

**We understand better why Jesus used images from the countryside  
as metaphors in his parables,**

**such as that of the parable of the mustard seed**

**It's a story symbolizing the realm of God beginning**

**from the smallest of beginnings, inside oneself,**

**which can grow into a huge tree, teeming with life and goodness.**

**Interestingly, Jesus didn't use metaphors from carpentry in his  
parables.**

Part of the confusion about Joseph comes from how he was described in scripture.

He was referred to as a “tektoon”

– a skilled laborer who worked in various types of building tasks.

This word “Tektoon” was translated as “carpenter,” and occurred originally in The King James Bible.

The much more common understanding of this word “Tektoon” is that of a skilled laborer.

Most of us believe, as did my deceased husband Rudy, when he wrote the poem *Peaceable Kingdom*, that Jesus and Joseph were carpenters.

We were taught that, right?

However, most likely both Joseph and Jesus, not only cared for the family’s agricultural plot, but worked as well as tektoons, as skilled laborers.

Lower Galilee where Jesus grew up was mainly occupied by Gentiles, and not Jews.

Thus, Jesus was exposed to a cosmopolitan environment.

In contrast, those Jews living in Judea to the south, where the Temple was situated,

were in the vast majority, governed by the religious elites of the priesthood.

Unlike Judea, in Lower Galilee Jesus grew up in one of 204 small rural villages, all of which were devoted to Judaism. The Gentiles surrounding these towns were either Hellenized or Romanized. Fairly isolated from the rest of Galilee, each of the Jewish villages consisted *often 10-12 dunams (each dunam represented 10 families) living in huts and mud-brick homes over no more than 2 & 1/2 acres<sup>2</sup>.*

By the time Jesus experienced his bar mitzvah, his town of Nazareth and surrounding crops were most likely destroyed two different times, The cause of this were two Jewish peasants revolts. The peasants revolted against paying exorbitant taxes, tariffs, and tributes which they were forced to pay to Rome, to the temple authorities, and to the Roman officials, such as Herod and Antipas, who oversaw Galilee for Rome. Military reprisal was swift and repression terrible against these two peasant farmers' revolts

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<sup>2</sup> Young Jesus. p. 24.

**with crops and homes destroyed.**

**Mary and Joseph and Jesus did survive these traumas,**

**but clearly, the young Jesus must have been impacted by such violence.**

**In all likelihood, Jesus did not experience the idyllic countryside scene painted outside the window of John Everett Millias's painting on our cover.**

**The burden of taxation placed on these peasant farmers is difficult to imagine.**

**King Herod, and then King Antipas taxed the peasant farmers mercilessly.**

**Herod's taxes went for among other things, the building of the Temple.**

**Antipas's ruthless taxes went towards the building of a city he prized –**

**Sepphoris – which was about four miles away from Nazareth.**

**Dr. Isbouts speculates that both Joseph and Jesus worked as tektoons**

**for years in Sepphoris, because of the high need to provide for their family**

**and save their family land from being foreclosed by landlords eager to consolidate the plots of the village peasants into larger tracts of land for growing crops.**

**Jesus and Joseph's work in Sepphoris was grueling and hard.**

**Most likely Joseph and Jesus lived in Sepphoris,**



in tents with other workers and travelled home whenever they could do so.

It took fourteen years for the construction of the new city of Sepphoris.

Herod's and Antipas's taxation policies meant that 28 to 33 percent of a farmer's harvest went to pay such taxes.<sup>3</sup> The standard of living for the peasants fell to below a subsistence level.

A number of peasant farmers lost their ancestral lands, owned by many through their families for about one thousand years.

It was a desperate time for those living on peasant farms.

Jesus' parables are filled with "landlords" and "stewards" who manage large estates on their behalf.

In the Gospel of Luke we learn of debtors who owed their creditors the staggering amount of "fifty measures of oil" or "fourscore measures of wheat" – with interest rates being between 25 and 50%.<sup>4</sup>

Foreclosures of peasant lands were inevitable, as peasant farmers struggled to survive.

Indeed Jean Pierre Isbouts states that "*being witness to the escalating socioeconomic crises of Galilean peasantry*

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<sup>3</sup> Jean Pierre Isbouts, *Young Jesus*, p. 81.

<sup>4</sup> Isbouts. P. 171

***was probably the most defining experience of Jesus's young life."***

**These experiences most likely stirred Jesus  
*into to a life of social action and led to his becoming a religious  
dissident,  
wholly devoted to reform Judaism from within.***<sup>5</sup>

**We do not know if Joseph lost his farmland,  
but it is possible, whether or not that happened,  
that Joseph and Jesus did work in Sepphoris to help their families  
financially.**

**It was in Sepphoris where Jesus may have gone to a synagogue,  
and received formal teachings on the Jewish scriptures.**

**All of the Gospel accounts state that Jesus was well versed in  
scripture,  
and highly skilled at debating the finer points of the Covenant Law.  
Perhaps Jesus was taught in a prayer house in Sepphoris.**

**Dr. Isbouts speculates as well that Jesus was taught by the Pharisees,  
whose presence in Sepphoris is well documented.**

**The Pharisees argued for *applying the principles of the Law  
to the changing circumstances of Palestine Judaism.***<sup>6</sup>

**They rejected that the only way for salvation was through**

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<sup>5</sup> Jean Pierre Isbouts. Young Jesus. p.

<sup>6</sup> Isbouts. P. 128.

**frequent sacrifices at the Temple.**

**Later in his ministry, Jesus is opposed to such sacrifices.**

**The Pharisees advocated for life after death,  
an idea that Jesus, also taught.**

**In conclusion, no matter today who we believe Jesus to be,  
divine and human, human only, divine only,  
we can learn a great deal by studying the environment  
in which he grew up as a young Jesus.**

**I am grateful to Dr. Isbouts for providing us  
with very different ideas about who young Jesus was.**

**What is clear to me in thinking about the Lost Years of Jesus  
is that we humans will make up something  
to fill a void in a story, and then, pass whatever  
we created to fill the void, on to the next generations.**

**Whether or not Dr. Isbouts' writings about young Jesus  
are true, I believe they bring us closer to  
what Jesus' life was like and some of the conditions and causes  
in Jesus' life that led to his becoming one of the greatest  
figures in the Western world's religious history.**

**Peace and Love to You.**