

## The Birth of Jesus



Examining the records about Jesus' birth, the Gospel of Matthew allows us to infer that he was born no later than 4 BCE. Matthew 2:1 states that Jesus was born "in Bethlehem" during the reign of King Herod (who ruled Palestine 37–4 BCE), and that the Magi visited the place of his birth and offered gifts. Afterwards, to escape persecution, the family fled to Egypt; when they returned to Israel, they settled in Nazareth. Matthew develops its story by treating Jesus as the savior promised in the Old Testament.



In Matthew, an unnamed angel appears in Joseph's dream (while he is sleeping in his own house in Bethlehem) and strongly dissuades him from breaking off the betrothal. The angel tells him to call the child *Immanuel*, yet Joseph names the baby born of Mary *Jesus*. "The phrase 'what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit' (Matt 1:20) means that the conception took place through an agent of God's

Spirit, but it does not state directly that God is Jesus' father." 1)

By contrast, Luke 2:1–2 says that Joseph and his betrothed Mary were living in Nazareth when Caesar Augustus (63 BCE–14 CE; reigned 27 BCE–14 CE), the first emperor of Rome, ordered a census. They went to Bethlehem for this purpose but, unable to find a guest room, Mary gave birth there in a manger. In 6 CE, as Rome moved to direct governance, Quirinius (51 BCE–21 CE) was appointed governor of Syria, and a census was conducted in Judea—after Herod Archelaus (23 BCE–18 CE; reigned 4 BCE–6 CE), Herod's successor, was deposed in 6 CE.



In Luke, the angel Gabriel personally visits Mary—a virgin living in Nazareth of Galilee and betrothed to Joseph—announces that by God's favor she will conceive, and asks that the child be named *Jesus*. At the birth, however, other angels appear to the shepherds.

Matthew thus places Jesus' birth before 4 BCE, whereas, taken at face value, Luke's record would not allow Jesus to have been born earlier than 6 CE. As for the year of Jesus' baptism, Luke 3:1 dates it to "the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar," which calculates to 29 CE and aligns with the tenure of Pontius Pilate as prefect of Judea (27–37 CE). On that reckoning, Jesus began preaching at age twenty-three; if his ministry lasted three years, he died in 32 CE at the young age of twenty-six. Yet

Luke 3:23 says Jesus was "about thirty years old" when he began to teach—an inconsistency.

"Nothing was more degrading in Jesus' time than for a woman to conceive out of wedlock. John's record—'We were not born of sexual immorality; we have one Father—even God' (John 8:41)—is another hint, perhaps? The statement plainly implies that Jesus was born of fornication." 2) And "although John's Gospel omits any story of a miraculous birth, it twice (1:45; 6:42) calls Jesus 'the son of Joseph.'" 3)

Mark calls Jesus a "carpenter," whereas Matthew pointedly changes this to "the carpenter's son." "In Mark, calling Jesus 'the son of Mary' effectively means there is no father; it implies 'illegitimacy' (a child born outside wedlock). In Jewish society, children are identified not by the mother but by the father. Mark never mentions Joseph—by name or otherwise. He completely avoids the issue of paternity. Such silence surely has a reason. In contrast, Matthew swiftly alters Mark's wording so that even a hint of illegitimacy disappears. We even find that later Greek copies of Mark change the original to 'son of Mary and Joseph' in an attempt to 'resolve' the scandal." 4) In Mark, the only "Joseph" mentioned is the man who lays Jesus' body in his own prepared tomb; Jesus' father Joseph is not mentioned at all.

"As for Jesus' occupation, the word *tekton* is used—at the time roughly equivalent to a (day) laborer on a construction site." 5) "A scholar of the Greco-Roman world published a *Dictionary of Colloquialisms* revealing their prejudice against the uneducated lower classes. 'Tekton' is among the contemptuous terms listed." 6)

Because Jesus' trade was close to day labor, the Gospel claims that he read (Luke 4:16–20) or wrote (John 8:1–11) become less credible. In particular, the episode of "the woman caught in adultery" in John—where writing appears—is a later insertion; and only Luke depicts Jesus as reading. That passage, too, is likely to have been

redacted. Had he been literate enough to read, he might have chosen the scribe's profession; since he did not, it is reasonable to conclude that, though wise, he could neither read nor write.

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## Sources

1. **The Jesus Dynasty**, James D. Tabor; Korean trans. by Kim Byunghwa, Daehan Textbook, 2006, p. 65.
2. **Jesus for the Non-Religious** (Korean trans. *Made Jesus, Real Jesus*), John Shelby Spong, Korea Institute for Christian Studies, 2009, p. 72.
3. **Jesus for the Non-Religious** (Korean trans.), John Shelby Spong, 2009, p. 75.
4. **The Jesus Dynasty**, James D. Tabor; Korean trans., 2006, pp. 92–93.
5. **Misquoting Jesus** (Korean trans. *The History of Biblical Distortion*), Bart D. Ehrman; trans. Min Kyung-sik, Sunglim Publishing, 2006, p. 371.
6. **Who Is Jesus?**, John Dominic Crossan; Korean trans. Han In-cheol, Korea Institute for Christian Studies, 1998, p. 67.