The Birth of Jesus

The second topic we will look at is the birth of Jesus: when was Jesus born? Where was Jesus born? Under what circumstances was Jesus born?

Most of us are familiar with the stories about Jesus’ birth, and become reacquainted with them ever year in the run-up to Christmas. However, many of the commonly held beliefs about the birth of Jesus are not evidenced by the sources we have available to us. So, what can we actually say about the birth of Jesus, and how does this differ from the commonly held beliefs?

Our main sources for the birth of Jesus are Matthew’s gospel and Luke’s gospel – neither Mark nor John nor any other sources inside or outside of the New Testament give us any details about his birth.


When was Jesus born?

Most people, unsurprisingly, believe that Jesus was born in 1 A.D. (Actually, a lot of people think Jesus was born in 0 B.C., but there is no such year: after 1 B.C. comes 1 A.D.!) This comes from a Roman monk called Dionysius the Small who tried to date the birth of Jesus and claimed that Jesus was born in the year we now call 1 A.D., but how accurate is this? Matt. 2:1 tells us that Jesus was born in the reign of Herod the Great and Luke 1:5 mentions Herod’s reign just before the birth narrative. Scholars generally agree that Herod died in 4 B.C., just as Josephus writes in Antiquities of the Jews 17.6.4 and so many date the birth of Jesus accordingly, to around 4 B.C. However, Luke writes that Jesus was born around the time of the census of Quirinius which took place around 6/7 A.D. (Josephus, Antiquities, 17.355). Furthermore, there is no evidence available to us that substantiates Luke’s claim that one had to return to one’s place of birth in order to take part in the census, and there is also no evidence of a world-wide census taking place in this period.

How, then, are we to reconcile these two facts? Many scholars simply believe that Luke made an error in referring to the census and assert that Jesus was born under Herod, likely around 4 B.C. It seems likely that Luke has included the census in order to provide a narrative reason for Mary and Joseph to travel to Bethlehem. As such, we seem to have warrant to disregard Luke’s inclusion of the census in his account of Jesus’ birth and instead date the birth of Jesus to 4 B.C., or just earlier, under the reign of Herod the great.

Where was Jesus born?

Many people believe that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, so why then do we call Jesus, Jesus of Nazareth? This is because this is where Jesus grew up and from where he began his ministry as an adult. Both Matthew and Luke agree that shortly after being born in Bethlehem, Jesus, Mary and Joseph left to go and live in Nazareth (Matt. 2:23; Luke 2:39-40), but whereas Luke writes that Mary and Joseph originally lived in Nazareth and travelled
to Bethlehem in order to be counted in the census, Matthew gives us no indication that the family were originally from Nazareth.

Whilst our two most important sources on the issue claim that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, most scholars do not believe this to be historically accurate. The majority of scholars think (to put it simply) that since both Matthew and Luke’s account contradict each other, and so cannot both be true, that neither of them accurately presents historical fact. Unfortunately, we simply do not have enough information to either rule out or confirm Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem.

**Under what circumstances was Jesus born?**

Finally, we will look at the circumstances surrounding Jesus’ birth. Some of this we have already looked at: we have discussed our reasons for disregarding Luke’s claim that Mary and Joseph left for Bethlehem in order to be counted in a census, but what else can we say about the events surrounding Jesus’ birth? Unfortunately, for the most part, we have more to say about what did not happen, than about what did. Let’s look at the most important events.

First, we are all aware of idea that three wise men (or Magi) visiting the baby Jesus. This event is only reported by Matthew who does not tell us how many Magi visited the family: it has been assumed that there were three Magi to correspond with the number of gifts, but since the Greek is in the plural, we can only be sure that there was more than one Magi.

Matthew’s assertion that Herod the Great attempted to kill all the first-born sons in Bethlehem is also highly dubious. Scholars have long noted Matthew’s use of Jewish culture and referencing the Old Testament in his gospel. As such, Herod’s plot to kill the first-born sons of Bethlehem is often seen as a direct reference to the Moses story, wherein Pharaoh sent soldiers to kill all the first born sons of the Jews in order to try and prevent a saviour emerging to free them from captivity (Exod. 2:1-10). Additionally, no other source we have makes any reference to such a plot being undertaken. This part of the birth narrative, therefore, does not seem to be historical.

Unfortunately, there is little else that we can conclusively say, one way or the other. Matthew and Luke are our only sources of information about Jesus’ birth, and due to the fact that they contradict in places, and they both seem to have overtly theological agendas at times, scholars are often very reluctant to assert that the narratives are historical.