

A King Is Born: Jesus' Early Years

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At the time of Jesus' birth the Magi or "the three Kings" came from the East to render tribute to him. The value of the gold, frankincense and myrrh that they offered to Jesus is unknown but the Magi surely did not travel from afar to deliver "dollar store" presents. After learning of Jesus' birth from the Magi, Herod Agrippa ordered the killing of all male Jewish infants in the Bethlehem area under age 2 to protect his "royal" line, and assure that his successor would not be born of the lineage of David and Solomon (Matthew 2:16-18). Perhaps the gold and other precious gifts offered to Jesus were bartered by Joseph to facilitate the escape of Jesus' family to Egypt and avoid Herod's genocide.

The gold and gifts were not utilized to provide an appropriate celebration for the consecration of Jesus in the Temple as the first son of Joseph and Mary, as was prescribed by Exodus 13:2 and Numbers 8:17. Nor is there any indication that the proceeds from such gifts were used for the required purification ceremony of Mother Mary as outlined in Leviticus 12:8. Rather than a lamb offering, the ceremonies surrounding Jesus' birth appear to have been conducted "on the cheap" using pigeons (Luke 2:23-24) instead of a lamb. Shouldn't Jesus' parents have at least put aside part of the gold that Jesus received to celebrate the purification and consecration at the Temple in a way deserving of God's only begotten son?

Joseph and Mary were not that impoverished. They had sufficient finances to travel to Jerusalem every year to celebrate Passover. There they partook of the ceremonial Passover lamb prescribed for that season; they did not eat pigeons. Yet they did not present a lamb to mark the birth of their first son for the Temple offering. (Matt 1:21).

Jesus was literate and, from a very young age, knowledgeable of the Torah and of the traditions and

practices of Judaism. At age 12, Jesus slipped away from his parents during their travels back to Galilee from Jerusalem following that year's celebration of Passover. When Mary and Joseph discovered that he was missing, they returned to Jerusalem in search of him. They discovered him engaged in a lofty exchange of ideas with the authorities on Jewish tradition and scripture (Luke 2:41-52). When his parents admonished him for not accompanying them back to Nazareth, he retorted that he must be about the business of God, his Father.

Jesus began to understand that he was different from others, but at what time he became conscious of his special relationship with God remains unclear. The Bible does not provide us with details about the period between his meeting the Temple's doctors of the law at age 12 and the start of his public ministry.

Two decades later, the child of Mary and Joseph, whom the world would know as "Jesus Christ", began to engage a world that was preparing to receive him.

The World in Which Jesus was Born

Jesus grew up in Galilee, which projected a multicultural identity and brought together a greater variety of ethnicities than Judea, the center of Judaism at the time. Only certain pockets of Galilee were dominated by Jews. Neighboring Judea, predominantly Jewish, was directly under the rule of a Roman prefect, the most famous of whom was Pontius Pilate. Galilee was ruled by Herod Agrippa at the time of Jesus' birth. In some sense, Jesus' family might be compared to "Canadians" with US citizenship visiting the United States. To reach Judea, they had to travel south, first crossing the border of Galilee and then the border of Samaria before arriving in Judea, which, along with Samaria, was directly under the rule of the Romans.

Caesar Augustus, who presided over the Roman Empire at the time of Jesus' birth, strove for a disciplined Roman citizenry; the foundation of which was the nuclear family, characterized by monogamous couples of husband and wife. Rome's religion relied on two volatile parental figures, Jupiter and Juno, who had been adopted and adapted from the Greeks' Zeus and Hera whom the philosopher Socrates was said to have "doubted" like many other Greeks in his time.

"All roads lead to Rome" was more than a metaphor; it referred to the Roman highway system, beginning with the Appian Way that brought the known world of the time together through 80,000 kilometers of paved roads extending from Britain to Mesopotamia. These highways made it possible for Rome to trade with lands as far away as China's Han Empire. It also guaranteed that at the moment when the Messiah appeared, his message could potentially reach the known world in a short period of time.

Rome's rulers guaranteed the safe flow of commerce based on the hard-won Pax Romana. Rome provided a cultural matrix for the region that it dominated and claimed to protect through its military might. Indeed, because of Rome, there was a measurable "peace on earth" at Jesus' birth, even if imposed by Rome's armies. Along with its impressive construct of governance, language, culture, and commerce, Rome, at its apex, inspired its citizens with an optimistic vision of a secure future that even Romans of Jewish heritage, like Saul of Tarsus, found appealing.

In Judea, a critical crossroads of the Empire, the prophetically inspired aspiration for freedom and independence from Rome whetted the apocalyptic appetites of militant Zealots, as well as those of the more reserved Essene ascetics, the purist yet more socially integrated Pharisees and, to some extent, even the Sadducees, who, among these, probably found the most solace in Rome's leaders. Jesus was born in the midst of a cacophony of political and religious viewpoints. Yet in the centuries that led up to Jesus' birth, the world was moving towards a philosophically and spiritually based awakening.