

CHAPTER 2

I've Always Wondered...

... What Are The Basic Facts About Jesus?

THIS HAS TO BE EASY. You're no professional theologian, but you do know this stuff, at least. Jesus was born, preached, died, rose from the dead, right?

Good start.

But you probably won't be surprised to find out that even basic facts about Jesus — which you have absolutely correct, by the way — aren't beyond discussion and controversy. You might already have discovered this, anyway, in an aggravating conversation or two with friends of various religious persuasions.

Your nonbelieving friend, for example, might have very coolly told you over your slab of cardboard, a.k.a. school cafeteria pizza, that lots of pagan gods were conceived or born without human fathers — oh, and some other pagan gods died and rose from the dead, too, by the way. By telling you all about this in an impressively knowledgeable way, he might have caused you to wonder (just a little) if these themes of wondrous beginnings and miraculous endings were just plastered over the rather ordinary life of Jesus to make Him seem like the gods of classical mythology.

Your Protestant friend, on the other hand, might have laughed out loud when you told him that sure, Mary remained “ever-virgin” her whole life (as we say in the Nicene Creed). You might have wanted to

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laugh right back — that is until he opened his Bible and pointed out a couple of passages that, sure enough, refer to Jesus’ “brothers.”

It seems as if, like everything else with Jesus, even the basic facts aren’t immune to argument. Let’s get you ready to talk about this stuff.

The questions begin with the date of Jesus’ birth. Believe it or not, Jesus was probably born sometime in the years 6-4 B.C. Before Christ. No, your eyes are not deceiving you. Jesus Christ was born (B)efore (C)hrist.

You see, the Gospel of Luke tells us Jesus was born during Herod the Great’s reign as king (put there as a puppet by the Romans, of course) over Palestine. The very interesting problem is that this Herod died in 4 B.C. So how could Jesus have been born before He was born?

The confusion arises from the fact that around the year 525, a monk named Dionysius Exiguus decided to draw up a precise calendar of Christian events, using the foundation of Rome as his starting point. His calculations were a little off, though — he put Jesus’ birth about three years after Herod’s death, which, as we now see, was a big mistake.



So there you go — Jesus probably lived from 4 B.C. to around A.D. 28. Don't let the uncertainty about time bother you. We may be obsessed with time, surrounding ourselves with clock, calendars, and planners, but ancient people simply didn't share that concern. They were pretty casual about time, to tell the truth. Calendars might have been kept by governments and in religious temples, to keep track of festivals, for example, but most ordinary people were more interested in the rising and setting of the sun and the passing of the seasons than specific dates. Most people had only the vaguest idea how old they were, and there are countless ancient figures, including Roman emperors, for whom we don't have specific dates of birth. That doesn't mean they didn't exist or weren't important people. It just means ancient peoples didn't have the capability to keep exact time.

So it's not surprising that we don't exactly have precise records of when Jesus — a wandering Jewish preacher in a backwater of the Roman Empire — was born. Actually, when you think about it, it's amazing that we know as much about Him as we do!

So here we have Jesus — born in Bethlehem, a town about five miles south of Jerusalem. Bethlehem may have been just a village, but it was quite important in Jewish tradition because it was the family home of King David, the greatest king of Israel, who had reigned in the tenth century B.C. and whose descendants would produce the Messiah — the God-sent savior of Israel.

Because we've touched on the whole time thing, you're probably wondering about Christmas. Was Jesus born on December 25?

Probably not. Now, one supposedly fun fact you're going to hear, from a variety of nonbelievers, Jehovah's Witnesses, and even some anti-Christmas fundamentalists, is that Christmas is no more than a Christian adaptation of the pagan feast celebrating the birth of the Roman sun god. To trump the competition, the theory goes, Christians took over the feast and made it their own. That, the various protesters will try to convince you, somehow renders Christmas an illegitimate celebration. The nonbelievers keep jumping right to the



conclusion that Jesus, therefore, isn't divine. The fundamentalists make their own leaps, too, but to the rather different conclusion that since Christianity borrowed or was somehow influenced by paganism in this regard, it had, by this time, been corrupted from its original purity, and that means you, Mr. or Ms. Christmas-celebrating Catholic.

Now, that may be (and I said *may be*) an accurate account of part of the Church's motivation for selecting that particular date to celebrate Jesus' nativity. But if it was, so what? That doesn't cast any shadows on Jesus' divinity or the Church's faithfulness to Christ. They knew they didn't know the exact date (remember — they hardly knew the exact date for *anything*), but wanted to celebrate the Incarnation (Jesus as true God and true man) anyway. In choosing to do so at the same time as the Romans were celebrating the feast of their imaginary sun god, Christians weren't embracing paganism (as the fundamentalist might say) or creating a story just to compete with the pagans (as the nonbelievers would say). They were actually doing a pretty smart thing — tapping into a sense of celebration already in the culture during that time of year and turning it toward the truth.

Matthew and Luke give us plenty of details about Jesus' birth, although not the same details, which some people see as a negative, but is actually a positive, don't you think? Matthew wanted to emphasize Jesus' similarity to Moses and how He fulfilled various prophecies, so he took care to include the Holy Family's escape from Herod (sort of like Moses being saved from Pharaoh's wrath when he was a baby). Luke was really amazed by Jesus' compassion toward the poor, and you can tell as much, even from the way he relates the story of Jesus' birth: He selects the parts that bring out the fact that God came among us through Jesus for everyone, especially the poor. In Luke, it's the shepherds, the poor guys who were hardly ever ritually clean enough to enter into worship, who get the Good News first, direct from angels.

With all their different emphases, there's one element that both Matthew and Luke share: the fact that this Jesus, whose name means



“God saves,” was born of a woman named Mary, who conceived her child not by natural means, but by the power of the Holy Spirit. We call this truth the Virginal Conception of Christ — not to be confused with the Immaculate Conception of Mary, of course. That latter truth, which we celebrate on December 8, celebrates the fact that God saved Mary from original sin when she was conceived, making her worthy to carry Jesus, God Himself, in her womb. You cannot imagine how many people have those two truths confused. But you don’t. Not anymore, right?

Is the Virginal Conception of Christ unbelievable? Well, I guess it is, if you don’t believe in God, or if you believe that God is somehow limited in what He can do by human expectations.

God is the great iconoclast; the Incarnation leaves all previous ideas of the Messiah in ruins.

— C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*

It’s funny, but God actually spent a lot of time preparing us for this amazing event, in which all of salvation history focused on, as G.K. Chesterton said, “a young Jewish girl at her prayers.” The Old Testament is full of stories of God intervening in the natural order to help couples thought to be infertile have children. Remember how Abraham’s wife, Sarah, laughed when she heard she was to conceive because she was so old? (And that’s what her son was named: Isaac — “God laughed.”) The same thing happened with the conceptions of Samson and Samuel and loads of other kids, including, of course, John the Baptist.

God, it seems, has a habit of working miracles with women and babies.

It all comes down to this: the Virginal Conception of Christ was taken for granted by Christians from the very beginning. Mary outlived Jesus, physically speaking, and had plenty of time to tell the stories of His birth, stories which then evidently were passed on to the Gospel writers. There’s absolutely not a shred of evidence indicating that anyone in early Christianity thought anything different about Jesus’



origins. The idea wasn't, as some would say, simply swiped from pagan mythology in the quest to make people believe Jesus was God, nor was it created to cover up an embarrassing, scandalous beginning to Jesus' life. Some people will seriously argue that with you, but all you have to do is ask for evidence, and trust me, all you'll get in return are not-too-attractive, totally blank stares.

So — Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary, and raised by Mary and her husband, Joseph, in Nazareth, a village way up in the northern part of Palestine, in the region called Galilee. Like most boys of the time, Jesus trained in His father's trade, which happened to be carpentry (Mark 6:3). He would have spoken the common language of the area, Aramaic, which is somewhat similar to Hebrew. One of Jesus' most well-known ways of speaking to God the Father is in Aramaic — *Abba* — which is an affectionate, familiar way of saying “father,” more like “Daddy” or “Papa” (Mark 14:36).

Now, what about the whole issue of siblings. Did Jesus have any?

Many of your Protestant friends will say He did, pointing to parts of the Gospels that mention “Jesus' brothers.” It's not as easy as that, however.



Those who translated the Gospels into Greek long ago were working out of two other languages: Hebrew, the language of the Old Testament; and Aramaic, the common spoken language of Jesus' time.

Neither Hebrew nor Aramaic has any word that specifically means "cousin" or "nephew." The only word they had to refer to any kind of male relative was "brother."

When the writers of the New Testament books (which were, we think, originally written in Greek) were pulling all of their resources together to tell the story of Jesus, most of the stories they'd heard had come down to them in either Hebrew or Aramaic. All of the references to Jesus' "brothers" that His Aramaic-speaking apostles had made and passed down were very simply translated into Greek, without really bothering to pick apart whether those relations were cousins, uncles, or real blood brothers at all.

Another good point to make is that there is a very important moment in which you'd think any real brothers and sisters of Jesus

*Maker of the sun,
He is made under the sun.
In the Father he remains,
From his mother he goes forth.
Creator of heaven and earth,
He was born on earth under heaven.
Unspeakably wise,
He is wisely speechless.
Filling the world,
He lies in a manger.
Ruler of the stars,
He nurses at his mother's bosom.
He is both great in the nature of God,
and small in the form of a servant.*

— St. Augustine

would be mentioned: that moment on the cross, when Jesus gave Mary into the care of His apostle John.

The implication is clear that after His death, Mary would be alone, with no one to take care of her. If Jesus did have real blood brothers and sisters, why did He need John to care for His mother?



YOU WILL NOT BE SHOCKED to know that Jesus was Jewish, steeped in the Hebrew Scriptures (our Old Testament), faithful in worship, come, as He says Himself, to fulfill the Law, not replace it.

As you well know, throughout their history, Jewish people have been subjected to prejudice and worse, and it still continues today — I've heard more "Christian" kids than I care to say use demeaning stereotypes of Jews, including as a part of their slang. Besides being terribly wrong, of course, it's more than a little crazy, don't you think? Our savior, Jesus of Nazareth, was a Jew who had nothing but reverence for the truth of Judaism, and yet some who claim to follow that same Jesus are anti-Semitic? Go figure. More importantly, don't just stand there figuring — do something when you see it happening.

So when He was around thirty, Jesus left His parents' home and began a ministry of teaching. His home base was Capernaum, a city on the shores of the Sea of Galilee — really a big lake about thirteen miles long and eight miles across. He taught, He preached, He healed and worked other miracles, and over the course of time (probably about three years, maybe less), He began to draw not only crowds, but the attention of the religious authorities as well, and not in a good way, especially as He brought His ministry south, toward Jerusalem, the center of the Jewish faith.

In fact, they were so profoundly irritated by the teaching of this rabbi Jesus and threatened by His words, that these same religious authorities convinced the Romans, who held the power of punishment in Palestine at the time, that everyone would be better off if Jesus were executed. So He was, using the most demeaning method



the Romans had at their disposal — crucifixion in public on a garbage dump outside Jerusalem.

And that, everyone thought, was the end of that.

But it wasn't, of course. It was only the beginning.



IF YOU'RE LIKE A LOT of young people I've known, there are a couple of aspects to this Jesus story that drive you absolutely batty. Actually, it's not what's said, but what's unsaid.

What did Jesus look like?

And . . .

What in the world was He doing up until His public ministry?

That last question has a lot of subheads, by the way. What was Jesus like as a child? What were His teen years like? Did Jesus ever fall in love? Did He ever have conflicts with Mary and Joseph? Did He like to have fun with His friends, or did He just sit around all day building stuff and studying the Scriptures?

(Oh yeah — about that studying stuff. If Jesus was fully God, would He have had to study and learn at all? But doesn't the Bible say that "Jesus advanced in wisdom and age and favor before God and man" (Luke 2:52)? How does all that fit together? I know, I know — but you'll just have to wait until Chapter 9 for that knotty discussion.)

In fact, some kids even get irritated at the Gospel writers for not including that kind of information.

"Didn't they know we'd be interested in that stuff?" they wonder.

The fact is, no. They didn't.

Remember what a Gospel is. It's not a modern biography, reflecting modern interests in the everyday details of a person's life. If it were a biography, that's exactly what we'd call it.

But we don't. We call it a *Gospel* — a written account of the Good News of God become human in Jesus of Nazareth. The evangelists were interested in conveying the information most pertinent to that

cause, not just heaping on all kinds of detail that really didn't relate. Not that they didn't know more about Jesus than they wrote, mind you. Listen to what John says at the end of his Gospel:

There are also many other things that Jesus did, but if these were to be described individually, I do not think the whole world would contain the books that would be written. (JOHN 21: 25)

So this is what it all comes down to: The evangelists were doing some very focused work as they listened to the stories about Jesus passed down by reliable sources. They were focused because, from a very practical standpoint, their physical resources were limited: They couldn't run down to the office supply store to pick up another ream of paper to accommodate all that they knew about Jesus. For that very practical reason, they had to make choices about what was most important to communicate.

But there was also a theological reason for the evangelists' selectivity.

Think about the times you've had to relate a story — perhaps you had to tell your parents about a rather unpleasant occurrence at school, one that you wished had never occurred, but did nonetheless, right in the middle of English class, right in front of the very surprised teacher who had no idea you felt so strongly about Geoffrey Chaucer, one way or the other.

How do you tell the story of what happened? Even if you're committed to an absolutely honest retelling, you know you wouldn't have the time to go over every little detail of the scene, nor would you be able to go into an extensive account of even your own admittedly murky motivation for saying what you said.

Just like the Gospel writers, you're limited. They didn't have a lot of papyrus to spare, and your Mom's face tells you don't have much time to waste in explaining this mess. The Gospel writers had a very specific purpose — to give the world the evidence that Jesus was the



Messiah, the Son of God; and your purpose, while much different, is very focused and precise — to tell the truth about your actions, with a minimum of fallout.

That's all just a very long way of saying this: The Gospel writers, as much as we might wish they were, simply weren't interested in what they saw as marginally important detail about Jesus' childhood and appearance. In other words, they didn't care. They cared about the essence of what Jesus was all about: the loving, forgiving, saving Presence of God among us who'd preached, healed, died, and risen.

So perhaps we should take it as a hint: If that's what they were interested in, that's what we should be up to exploring as well!

Remember ...

- The Gospels are books written with the purpose of spreading the Good News that Jesus is Lord.
- The information we find in the Gospels was chosen with that purpose in mind. They weren't written to satisfy our modern curiosity. They were written to help us see two fundamental and related truths: that God had really and truly entered history in Jesus, and Jesus is Lord.