

Discovering Jesus Course

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The Toddler Years of Jesus

The Bible is surprisingly silent about the early childhood years of Jesus. This silence tempted many in the second and third centuries of Christianity to concoct apocryphal accounts of Jesus' childhood – the so-called Infancy Narratives. Here is a sample from *The First Gospel of the Infancy of Jesus Christ*:¹

- **1:2** – The newborn Jesus speaks while still in the cradle, and says to his mother: “Mary, I am Jesus the Son of God...” He later also speaks, predicting his death.
- **3:2-10** – Mary gives the wise men one of the swaddling clothes of Christ. Upon returning to their home, the wise men worship the swaddling cloth. They then throw it into the fire, but it emerges unburnt.
- **4:6-23** – While in Egypt, an idol proclaims Jesus is the Son of God, then falls down and is smashed on the ground.
- **6:34** – A woman with a leprous son washes the baby Jesus in perfumed water, and afterwards pours the same water upon her son, who is instantly healed.
- **15:1-6** – As a child, playing with other children in Nazareth, Jesus makes clay birds and brings them to life.

We need not go further. Like all the Infancy Narratives, this one portrays a precocious child who is magical, aloof, arrogant and sometimes vindictive – in short, a show off. He performs miracles left, right and center – completely out of character with the Jesus portrayed in the Gospel record (note **Luke 4:3-12; 11:16,29-30**). He changes the colors of dyed cloth and miraculously shortens or lengthens the wood with which Joseph worked. He transforms his playmates into goats and when he is about to be whipped by his teacher for being impudent, the teacher's hand withers and he dies. As the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* explains:

“[The Infancy Narratives] are very largely concerned with a record of miracles wrought by Jesus before He was 12 years of age. They depict Jesus as an extraordinary but by no means a lovable child. Unlike the miracles of the canonical Gospels those recorded in this gospel are mainly of a destructive nature and are whimsical and puerile in character. The wonder-worker is described...[as] wielding the power of the Godhead with a child's waywardness and petulance.”²

This short excursion into the Infancy Narratives is important for today's study, for it shows us the stark difference between the historical Gospel record and the legendary works produced by an adoring but inventive imagination. If the Gospel record was indeed a myth concocted one or two centuries after Christ, as some scholars have claimed, then these are exactly the flights of fancy we would read.

It's for this reason that C S Lewis makes this diagnosis of the true Gospel record:

“If [the skeptic] tells me that something in a Gospel is legend or romance, I want to know how many legends and romances he has read, how well his palate is trained in detecting them by the flavor; not how many years he has spent [reading] that Gospel...I have been reading poems, romances, vision-literature, legends, myths all my life. I know what they are like. I know that not one of them is like this.”³

J B Phillips concurs:

“I have read, in Greek and Latin, scores of myths but I did not find the slightest flavor of myth [in the Gospel narrative].”⁴

We need to understand why the Gospel accounts say so little about the early years of Christ. His was a very ordinary childhood! There was nothing supernatural about him. He grew up just like any other Jewish boy. Despite Christmas carols to the contrary, he cried just like any other baby. He learned to crawl, and then to walk, like any other child. He spoke his first words at the usual age. People would have undoubtedly recognized him as a bright child, a well-behaved child. But that is all. For if his childhood had been extraordinary in any way, why would the people of Nazareth have feigned surprise in **Mark 6:2-3**, saying:

“Where did this man get these things?...What's this wisdom that has been given him, that he even does miracles! Isn't this the carpenter?...”

The Gospel writers simply did not think it necessary to elaborate on the childhood years of Jesus. It appears sufficient to say, as Luke does in **Luke 2:52**:

“And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.”

But there is one account of Jesus' early childhood years that Matthew considered important to his narrative. For when Jesus was a toddler, strange foreigners arrived in Bethlehem, searching for the one they called the King of the Jews.

¹ Extracted from “The First Gospel of the Infancy of Jesus Christ,” *The Lost Books of the Bible and the Forgotten Books of Eden* (1927), pp.38-59.

² *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, excerpted from QuickVerse 6.0, Deluxe Edition.

³ C. S. Lewis, quoted by Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence That Demands A Verdict* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), p.xxxvii.

⁴ J B Phillips, quoted by Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence That Demands A Verdict* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), p.xxxvii.

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