

THE SILENT YEARS:

The Bible has been very quiet about Jesus' childhood and period of early manhood. Jesus grew up as any other little Jewish boy. So what was life like in Israel in Jesus time? Luke's Gospel refers to Jesus childhood, so we will follow this story for a little while, then cross over to fill in some of the missing pieces by paralleling them to an ordinary Jewish boy.

The Census.

Palestine is a region of about 21,000 square kilometres on the eastern edge of Rome's vast domain. The million or so Jews living there in Jesus time were under the yoke of Rome. When Pompey's legions took Jerusalem in 63 B.C. these poor people became little more than taxpaying units in one of history's most extensive systems of taxation.

A tax was collected from all the conquered populations over Rome's empire. This tax partly funded all the great works of government, the straight roads, soaring aqueducts, the marble buildings and spacious public plazas... Paying the tax was extremely hard on the lowliest members of society. Rome periodically empowered provincial governors to conduct a census to organise Rome's tax rolls.

Mary and Joseph, parents of Jesus.

It was just such an order that sent Mary and Joseph on their 150km journey to Bethlehem. These two special people had been chosen by God to bring up his Son. We do not have to search very hard to be able to see the reason why God chose them both.

Take Mary, a young betrothed girl, sitting quietly perhaps in her parent's garden, thinking about her coming wedding as any young girl would have been doing. Suddenly she is presented with a heavenly being. Does she run away? Does she faint? No she listens in wonder to what he tells her and then quietly answers him. She does not say to the angel, "Wait I must ask my fiancé." In Luke's narrative, she just says, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word", and the angel then departed from her.

Did she then think, “Oooooops, now I have got to tell Joseph; Help Lord”?

What about Joseph? What would it have meant to him? His fiancé tells him she is pregnant and that the child she bears is from the Holy Spirit. Joseph would have been devastated. He loved her dearly and the first thing that came to mind must have been that she had been unfaithful to him. Joseph did a lot of thinking and decided to cancel the wedding arrangements quietly. A revelation such as this would have meant death for Mary.

The Lord is control at all times. Joseph was just a small problem in the bigger picture. And we all know the story of how they came to accept the Lord’s will. The benchmark’s were high, so only the very best people were needed to bring up the Lord’s son, and He picked them out perfectly.

The Journey and the birth:

We can now go on to the day of the census. Our hearts go out to the young mother, heavy with child on the back of a small donkey. Many mothers will wince at the discomfort Mary must have felt, as each footfall jolted her agonisingly.

But the choice was not Mary and Joseph’s to make. They had to go. It was the custom in those days for households to make strangers welcome, so Joseph would have expected that relatives would put them up. So they left, taking with them food and water for the journey.

The main route led them from Nazareth to Bethlehem through Jerusalem. Most likely they would have travelled by day through the burning hot sun and rested at night, seeking shelter from the cold in stranger’s or relative’s homes.

Bethlehem is situated on a low but steep ridge in the rocky hills just south of Jerusalem. The town is surrounded by green fields and lush olive groves, but close to the east is a harsh wilderness, beyond which lies the Dead Sea.

We all know the story. Many people were heading in the same direction as Mary and Joseph, with the same reason as they had, to sign in at the place of their birth.

They could have moved faster than the little donkey, but Joseph would not hurry. Each footfall had to be sure so Mary would not suffer too much from the constant buffeting as the tiny hoofs picked their way through the mountains.

The debacle at the Inn where there was no room was only the first problem to overcome.

A young mother ready to give birth would have been uncomfortable at the Inn; privacy would have been almost non-existent. The many families going to Jerusalem for the census would have been spilling out of every doorway. Travellers and their animals would have been crammed everywhere. The stench and noise of their animals would have been appalling. Fortunately there was room in the stable. Any woman who has given birth would have chosen the stable if she were in Mary's situation. The Inn was definitely not the place to give birth in.

The Father had different ideas for the entrance of His Son into the earth. The occupants of the Inn were not to witness the Messiah's birth. The quietness of a humble stable, a midwife's gentle ministrations to the new young mother and a husband's quiet assurances were the only human witnesses at Christ's birth. Animals were also present; their warmth and gentle lowing a soothing influence in the harshness of the surroundings.

Later, after the child Jesus had been wrapped and lay in a manger full of warm hay, the lowly shepherds from a nearby hillside were told by a horizon full of angels that they would be the ones to welcome the greatest shepherd of all times.

We remember that Jesus was taken to Egypt when King Herod, in a jealous rage wanted him killed. Why would the King of Israel want a small baby from one of the humble classes killed?

The three wise men, who came from the East to worship the new King, had alerted Herod that a new King had just been born. Herod was not at all pleased to hear that one to whom the crown of Israel really belonged had arrived. So he sent out his troops to find the new baby king. This act caused much tragedy to some of the mothers in Israel, as Herod's soldiers carried out his evil instructions to kill all the infants under two in Bethlehem, this being the age he calculated Jesus to be.

Joseph was warned in a dream by an angel that Herod's had commanded the children to be killed so the heavenly child was safely taken out of the country before any harm could come to Him. The family travelled to Egypt and stayed there until, once again in a dream, Joseph was told that it was safe to return to Nazareth after the death of King Herod.

Joseph would have to be very open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit at this time. His precious burden, so young and innocent, needed a man of extreme mental stability and trustworthiness to bring him safely through his youthful years.

Fulfilling the Law.

Eight days after his birth Jesus was circumcised, in accordance with the Jewish law.

Mary was also under the law so she had to remain separate from all religious rites for 40 days. For the first 7 days she was considered to be unclean. When Mary had completed the 40 required days, the little family travelled the five miles to Jerusalem for the rites of purification and the accompanying sacrifice at the Temple. There Jesus, as the firstborn, had to be presented to God. The law demanded that a firstborn son must be redeemed in memory of God's sparing of the firstborn of the Israelites when he slew the firstborn of all the Egyptians.

It was also required for Mary to sacrifice two pigeons or doves, (which Joseph probably purchased in the courtyard of the temple). This would have been very hard on the little family. Joseph was only a poor carpenter so it must have been hard to purchase the doves and pay the five shekels to redeem his firstborn.

It was at this time that the little family encountered an old man named Simeon and a prophetess named Anna.

Simeon and Anna both prophesied concerning the baby Jesus' future. This prophecy would have brought foreboding to Mary's heart, but she kept this hidden deep within her.

From this time on that we only have tantalising glimpses of our Lord. How did he grow from childhood to a grown man? The scriptures are silent.

We know that he would have lived the life of a normal boy alongside all his relatives and friends so we can gain insight into this from the way that life was lived at the time.

Social structure of village life.

What was life like in a village in Nazareth in the region of Galilee? The Galileans spoke in Aramaic and were considered to be unsophisticated by those living in Jerusalem. They were also suspected of not strictly observing the Law.

Galilean social life centred around the family. Families were usually large and everyone was extremely hard working. The husband was the spiritual and legal head of the home and had the final say in all issues dealing with the welfare of his wife and family. The wife would have recognised this, by addressing her husband as *Baal* (lord) or *Adon* (master.). In return the husband took all the responsibility for feeding, protecting and sheltering his family. We may have lost something of the security that this offers a woman in today's quest for gender equality.

Everyone was governed by the same strict system of moral, religious, and social codes. Husbands had clear obligations to their wives, and wives to their husbands. Children were instructed early to honour their parents. Parents knew with certainty what their duties to their children were. And every important event in a Nazarene's life from birth to marriage, from parenthood to death, had its proper time, proper rules and rituals. Many of these involved prayer.

The family home.

So what about the family home? Parents, young children, unmarried adults, married sons and their spouses might all live under the one roof, with little or no privacy and very few material comforts.

The typical village house was little more than a basic dwelling, constructed of mud brick and consisting of just one or two all purpose rooms.

Doorways were narrow and low, forcing a man to bend a little when entering. The doors were hung on leather hinges; doors were left unlocked, or fastened with wooden bolts or iron bars that were simply pulled through sockets on the inside.

As animals were often kept in part of the house at night, interiors were often designed with two levels. The lower portion was used to shelter the animals and a raised portion, perhaps 50cm higher, was where the family ate and slept, away from the domestic beasts. Bedding was also very sparse, family members usually laid down on mats, covering themselves with their tunics or cloaks.

There was no need for many storage cabinets or closets. An entire family's total material wealth might fit in a single chest. The "kitchen" consisted of an oven, some pottery, a few utensils and a stock of stored food. The only light in the house came from the dim glow of oil lamps, which were perched in wall niches or on shelves or stands. There were no bathrooms. Matters of personal toilet – washing for example – were done in the courtyard or in the street, where the discarded water could seep away without turning the dirt floor of the house into a bed of mud.

The roofs were flat and made of brushwood branches woven together and laid on rafters and then covered with a thick layer of clay that filled the spaces between the branches and formed a smooth, hardened layer of plaster. To keep the roof from washing away, the owner needed to keep it well maintained. Maintenance included rolling over the roof after a heavy rain storm with a device very like a modern lawnmower; applying fresh coats of plaster when needed, and replacing the entire roof or sections of it if needed. The roof was generally made accessible by a ladder or an outside staircase.

The roof was a very popular place. People used their roofs to eat on, taking their food up into the cool night air. It was used for meditation, private talks, shouting good news to their neighbours, dancing and other festivities. On hot nights, people even slept on the roof. The roofs were also used for drying fruit and wet clothes in the sunshine. If the family grew too large for the house an additional room may have been built on the roof. To make it safe for all the activity that took place there, the roof was enclosed with a parapet perhaps some 50cm high.

Women who were not called upon to help with farming chores worked in and around the house. They worked long and hard. Much of their work was done in the busy courtyard where the children played and animals were kept. Wool had to be spun before making their clothing; grain had to be ground into flour before baking bread, and goats had to be milked for making cheese or curds. Everything had to be done from scratch. There were no supermarkets around at that time.

Education.

What kind of an education would a young boy like Jesus have been given? He would learn firstly through the teachings of his mother, and also through the many ceremonies that were held each year. Each child was taught a text of scripture containing the same letters as his name. Here we see an ancient stress on the significance of the name in Hebrew religion. He also had to know several psalms by heart and, in strict households, the “Shema”, the great statement from Deuteronomy (Deut 6.4) “Hear O Israel the Lord our God is one Lord”, was said at the beginning of the day. This text was often placed in a little container called the *Mezuzah* which was inserted in the lintel of the door as a frequent reminder of the faith. The quotation from Ps., 31.5, “Into thy hands I commend my spirit”, is thought to be a prayer taught by mothers to their children as they go to sleep.

Training in the Torah began at the earliest possible age, even before formal schooling, for it was the obligation of the father to teach his children by both word and example. A child would observe the father binding on his arm and on his forehead the phylacteries or *tefillin*, small boxes containing verses of the Torah. When asked “What are you doing?” the parent could answer in the words of Deuteronomy 6:5-8, that it was everyone’s duty to “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your might.” The clearest example of this is the elaborate training in history and ritual associated yearly with the Passover. The youngest boy was required to ask the leading questions about the reason for the ceremony of his elders.

Between the ages of five and six the child began school. This was held in the synagogue, although there might have been a special school house. Teacher and pupils either stood or sat in a semi circle on the

floor and the day began by the teacher tracing out the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet for them. After that, the children were introduced to individual words and then whole phrases from the Torah. Because Hebrew at that time was written without vowels, they could learn the sounds of the words only by listening to the teacher and repeating aloud after him. Memorisation became an important skill, and those boys who could commit many passages to memory could become outstanding scholars.

The whole style of teaching was geared to a culture in which the spoken word was passed down through the generations. So the schoolroom and the narrow streets around it resounded each day with the rhythmic chanting of little boys committing their lessons to memory.

The curriculum was divided into three stages. Up to age ten, the boys learnt exclusively from the Old Testament; between ten and fifteen they were taught the traditional law; after fifteen they went on to study and discuss theology. This was essentially a religious training. There was no mathematics or physical education; no music – elements considered essential by the Greeks.

The mode of teaching by question and answer, which is the Socratic Method, was apparently followed. This can be seen when Jesus, in the temple, asked and answered questions from the doctors of the Law.

When a young boy reached twelve or thirteen he could be accepted into the congregation and receive his tallith or prayer shawl, the sign of his entry into the adult privileges of the synagogue. The ceremony performed today for Jewish boys of thirteen is called *Bar Mitzvah*. On the Sabbath following it, he puts on his tallith and reads the Law for the first time in the synagogue. Jesus would have had this kind of schooling when he was a child.

Leisure time.

After a day of hard work children could take time from their duties and studies and relax. They could play ball games and what appears to have been hopscotch and jacks. Evidence of whistles, rattles, wheeled animals, hoops and spinning tops have been found by archaeologists.

Older children and adults played various kinds of board games, including a form of checkers.

The evening meal and scattered times of play were not enough to give hard workers sufficient rest. As part of the religious observances that touched every part of their daily lives, Jews were required to set aside one day of the week for the Lord. The Sabbath was a day of rest, which began at sundown on Fridays and ended at sundown on Saturdays. The Sabbath was so established and ritualised in Jesus time that no farmer would dream of going into his fields, no craftsman to his trade, no woman to her housework. The Sabbath was a special time of rest and prayer for God's children.

Before the Sabbath the men finished up the week's work and the woman cleaned with special care, refilling lamps, preparing meals in advance and washing clothing. Every Friday evening as the first evening stars appeared the *hazzan* a synagogue official, called the villagers to prayer with three sharp blasts from a ram's horn and the faithful would gather at the synagogue for prayer. Friday's supper was a joyful occasion, notable by its special foods and the recital of the Kiddush, a blessing said over the wine. The family attended the synagogue again on Saturday for more prayer and readings from scripture before the Sabbath ended with another signal from the Ram's horn.

The life of a carpenter.

We know that Joseph owned a carpentry shop. What would that have meant to a young boy growing up in Jesus time? Most villages supported a number of independent craftsmen, including carpenters, blacksmiths, potters, dyers, basket weavers and mat makers, and tanners and leather workers. These craftsmen often bartered their services in exchange for grain, oil, vegetables and other foodstuffs.

Carpentry was one of the most respected trades and whilst most villages could support at least one carpenter, it is believed that Nazareth was known as a town of carpenters and early in the first century AD, Joseph must have been among them.

Each artisan learnt his trade from his father, grandfather or another male relative. According to tradition, one of the chief duties of a father is to

see that his son learns a useful trade. A young boy learnt early by watching his elders at work, but a formal apprenticeship usually began at about age fifteen. So Jesus would be learning from Joseph at about that age.

Joseph's carpenter shop may have been one in a row of craftsmen's shops at the centre of town. Joseph would have most likely worked in his doorway or just outside his house, but he probably stored his tools and materials inside the shop. Joseph would have owned a substantial kit of tools, some of which he accumulated in his own lifetime, some of which he inherited from his father. Basic carpenter's tools included an axe for chopping down trees, an adze for shaping wood and a hatchet. Also essential were iron saws for cutting wood to precise sizes. A bow drill and bits for drilling holes through wood, a stone-headed hammer for driving nails, a wooden mallet for pounding chisels or hammering wooden surfaces together, iron chisels and files for shaping and carving, awls for putting small holes into wood and leather and a supply of nails. Joseph might have even owned one or more wood planes and a spoke shave, a recent innovation. Among his measuring tools were a rule, a compass or dividers, a chalk line, and, of course, some pencil-like markers to score his patterns and to guide him in his cuts.

Part of any carpenter's skill revolves around the knowledge of which kinds of wood and which section of the tree are most appropriate for the intended purpose, whether structural or decorative. In Joseph's time, the principal choices were sycamores, a porous but durable soft wood from a species of fig tree; olive wood, a fine-grained amber coloured hardwood, which grew in abundance in the area; and maybe oak wood.

Joseph (and Jesus) would have spent his time making farm tools, house construction parts, furniture, and kitchen implements. Farm tools ranged from wooden carts with wooden wheels to threshing boards, ploughs, winnowing forks, yokes, and handles for various metal tools. House parts would include an assortment of posts and beams, door and door frames, tables, chairs and an assortment of storage boxes.

It is inspiring to know that the child Jesus learnt to make all these common things, and we can often see references about things he knew personally in his parables.

Growing up.

From this small amount of information about the raising of Jewish children in Jesus time we can perhaps imagine the life our Lord had whilst he was growing up.

Jesus would have followed the same pattern of life as any small Jewish boy but He also learned from observing His Heavenly Father's work. He heard His Father's voice in every sound of nature; saw His Father's hand in every beautiful scene; absorbed the peace of His father's universe under the starry skies of Jerusalem. Through observance and study He discovered His pathway, His inheritance, His duty and His future. He also knew all about poverty and self-denial. His life was one long struggle against the powers of darkness.

But we still have a few years to account for.

According to Dean Farrar, who wrote "The Life of Christ", we read, "According to Juda ben Tema, at the age of *five* a boy was to study the Scriptures, at the age of *ten* the *Mishna*, at *thirteen* the Talmud; at *eighteen* he was to marry, at *twenty* to acquire riches, at *thirty* strength, at *forty* prudence and so on to the end".

We read in the Gospels about Jesus' visit to Jerusalem when He was twelve years old. He was debating with the teachers as He had been taught, but He was far wiser than a normal child and therefore had the Pharisees wondering. How could the child that sat before them have a more intimate knowledge of Jehovah than they did?

But what happened after that?

There is not a lot of information written about Joseph, Jesus' earthly father. The gospels are quiet about him after Jesus was found in the temple with the Pharisees. Perhaps he died while Jesus was still young. If this is so, then Jesus as the eldest son would have been responsible for the little family.

Mary and Joseph had other children besides Jesus and as the eldest; Jesus would have worked the carpentry business of His earthly father to provide for His mother and His siblings.

Jesus would have taken care of His family right up to the time when the youngest was able to survive outside of the family unit, which is possibly why He didn't begin His ministry till He was about 30.

Mary however, stayed with her son all the way through to the end. We are privileged through the gospel of Luke, to read how Mary followed her Son all the way to the cross. We also know that Jesus' brothers and sisters did not believe in His special status. But Mary knew different. How hard it would have been for her to keep this difference under control in the family situation. Also to follow her son in the later years of His ministry. Was she treated differently to the others who followed Jesus, or did she become the matriarch of the little group? The gentleness that Mary displayed to Jesus in His childhood would have helped keep the small group together. Maybe she became the pivotal point in the management of the group; the one who knew Jesus better than anyone else; the one who could anticipate, soothe and control the outer parts of Jesus' circle.

Jesus was travelling all the time, so mundane every day workings such as the setting up of the nightly sleeping areas, and the arranging of the food serving, may have been handled by His mother. Mary would have had other hands to help her in this as there were other women who supported Jesus' and followed Him around.

After Jesus' baptism we have much information to guide us and help us understand Jesus and His ministry. I trust that this small insight has brought you some pleasure as you contemplate the silent years of our Lord's childhood.

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