

## The Early Life of Jesus and Family

Bethlehem: From a distance you could see the low boxlike flat roof whitewashed houses on top of a low but steep ridge. The whole town had only about 300 people. Caravans stopped on the way to Egypt and people were kept overnight in individual homes or the old inn. The tombs of Ruth and Boaz were nearby and the field of Boaz was remembered where men and women still gleaned wheat in the sun. This was also the birthplace of King David. It had a history and a future if prophecy about the messiah were true. He also, was to be born here.

The gentle hills and grassy plains grew grain, flocks of sheep, grapes, figs, olives, pomegranates and other fruits. In the Spring, the fertile fields were covered with wild flowers. The clear blue Sea of Galilee, which was really an inland lake, had many fish. The people comprised a racially mixed population, ½ Jew and a mix of those who had stayed instead of passing through. They were generally industrious, happy, kind and optimistic. They spoke Aramaic, which is close to Hebrew.

Mary and Joseph had walked the 90 miles here. It took them 5 days from Nazareth. Joseph was a husky carpenter in the prime of life. Probably in his thirties. Mary was likely in her teens. The girls married early then. (This would also explain why Joseph was not mentioned at Jesus's crucifixion some 20 years later. He had likely died.) They found no room in the individual homes or the inn where Mary could give birth to the child. The best the innkeeper could manage was the manger and stable that was partly created out of the local cave niches formed by erosion, since the stone age, in the soft limestone hills. They were hot and tired and could go no further. The birth was close at hand. They were given a clay lamp filled with olive oil for their light in the cave.

The birth was likely attended by a midwife who cut and tied the umbilical cord, washed the child in water and then rubbed salt on the child to help protect against infection. Next, the babies arms and legs were tightly bound in swaddling clothes, even to the point that He could not move. These restraints were to remain in place for the first 6 months due to the belief that they were needed to assure strong straight limbs while the bones were weak. After the birth, Mary was considered unclean and was not allowed to mingle with others for 6 months. This period would have been even longer if the child had been a girl. This would seem a lot to go through for a new young mother. Perhaps, the husband could relay questions and answers from mother to midwife during this time.

Jesus was circumcised on the 8<sup>th</sup> day after the birth using a metal knife as was the custom. When the 6 months was up and when they could again travel, the proper cleansing sacrifice was made at the temple. Mary was pronounced clean and could again mingle with others. Then they went to Jerusalem, where a priest named

Simon blessed the child (Luke 2:25-35) and then to Egypt to avoid King Herod's wrath on their son. Only when Jesus was almost 2 years old and Herod had died a painful death, was it safe to return to Galilee and Nazareth in Palestine, where Joseph had grown up. Joseph found a small square one room home for the family. The houses were huddled close together on the side of a small hill, some distance from the main road. A simple one story synagogue was at the high point. It and the open marketplace at the entrance to Nazareth were the focal points of village life for the 100 or so inhabitants. Most men were farmers.

The interior walls of Joseph and Mary's home were left the natural dried mud brick color. Outside, the bricks were white washed. The floor was a hard packed mixture of dirt, clay and ash. A few mats of straw or leather were placed on the floor. Simple wooden stools and a low wood table comprised the sparse furnishings. The door usually remained open with a linen curtain to aid in filtering the outside dust. If there were windows, they also had linen curtains. Outside, a ladder led to the roof. A 1 ½ foot high parapet encircled the roof of mud, straw and lime. After a heavy rain, Joseph would have to re-pack the roof with a heavy stone cylinder to prevent future leaks. The roof was also used as a place for doing chores, drying clothes and flax and even sleeping and eating during the long hot rainless Summer.

Joseph wore a short tunic as he sought customers. He carried a wooden toolbox as he went door to door and explained how he was now available for work. Mary's day also started at sunrise with a meal of curds and bread. She wrapped her long dark hair and shoulders in a rough linen mantel probably edged with two stripes of red or blue. Underneath was a simple linen tunic held at the waist with a wide leather belt. Household chores began with making bread. On feast days, as a special treat, mint, cummin or cinnamon was added to the bread. Spinning, mending, weaving, washing and making curds from goat's milk occupied her time. Weather permitting, she might work on the roof for the better light and perhaps a breeze. When evening approached she would prepare the evening meal of fish or boiled chicken and some vegetables. For dessert there might be nuts, melons, grapes or pomegranates. There might even be fried sweet cakes. There was no sugar, but honey, grape or fig syrup was used instead. Curds or goat cheese might complete the meal. They sat on mats and helped themselves to the meal by washed hands dipping from the large communal pots and dishes, using the bread baked that day as scoops. As dark settled over the hills, the olive oil lamp was lit. When they ate, Joseph would recite stories of their Hebrew ancestors, as did all Jews since the time of Abraham some 2000 years earlier. Joseph also taught his sons the laws and commandments given to Moses along with some 600 written and oral added customs and observances that regulated most all of their daily life. Then Joseph and sons would go the synagogue for the evening meeting while Mary remained at

home. Before retiring for sleep she lit the oven fire for warmth. The family slept on the mats they used to sit on during the days meals.

Jesus likely helped Mary between the ages of 4 to 6. After that, when school was done, the sons might go with Joseph to help and learn a trade or would hire out to help watch a neighbor's sheep or work in the fields. Little changed in daily life. But, the Sabbath was special. When the first evening star appeared on Friday night the temple cantor on the roof of the synagogue blew 3 sharp blasts on the shofar rams horn signaling the beginning of the Sabbath. By now, all weekly chores were completed, 3 meals for the next day had been prepared, the lamps were full of oil and the necessary jugs were filled to the brim with fresh water. Tools were put away and all cleansed themselves and put on scented olive oil. Clean tunics were worn to the evening synagogue service. Wives had prepared special treats in honor of the Lord. The mood of quiet joy and thanksgiving continued until the next day's sunset, when the shofar trumpeting was again heard.

Jesus and his brothers began temple schooling at the age of 6 as was required of all boys. They carried a lunch of bread and wine as they walked to the synagogue where they were greeted by the Rabbi. He appeared stern in his long white belted tunic with a tasseled prayer shawl draped over his head. The classes were held in the same meeting hall used for evening services. Along 3 sides were wooden benches and stools. At the far end stood a curtained chest or ark containing the sacred scrolls of scripture. In front of the chest were lamps that burned continually. The boys arranged themselves in a semi-circle. The Rabbi would unwrap one of the scrolls of the Old Testament out of its linen wrapping and leather case and sit in the center of the pupils. The Rabbi rhythmically recited the scroll text for memorization. Their fathers has spoken in Aramaic, but they learned in Hebrew. They also studied writing, learning the 22 letters of the alphabet. Their everyday Aramaic language used the same alphabet, but without vowels. They wrote on a wax covered wooden tablet. Using a pointed stylus of bone, bronze or wood. Accomplished writers later wrote on sheets of parchment, using reed pens dipped in black ink.

After school, the boys worked and had some free time to explore the countryside and marketplace. They watched the potter creating jugs and pitchers from large lumps of clay. The weavers made lengths of linen cloth on large horizontal looms and the dyers plunged the fabrics into stone vats filled with bright red and blue liquid dyes. They could also watch the farmers planting or harvesting or talk with the shepherds. There were tales to be heard, told by travelers of far distant lands. They could then climb the local hills, where they could see for miles and daydream of what lay beyond their sight. They saw the enormous plain of Esdraelon and imagined their heroes of Barak,, David, Guideon and Saul or the Maccabees. How they had battled Assyria, Babylonia, Persia and Greece in earlier

years.

Jesus also grew in spiritual wisdom as the Father intended. He thought on how Israel had wandered from God's desire for real fellowship. How some of its kings had vacillated and encouraged idol worship and how some sought fulfillment in earthly pleasures and things. His heart ached for his people and for the hurt His heavenly Father endured when individuals had turned their back on God and chose instead other paths of wasted self desires instead of God's plan. A plan for real love without man made restraints that imposed burdens instead of true joy and freedom. A joy that overflowed from the heart and was not limited by buildings or other people or place or time. God desired so much more for man and Himself.

Jesus spent a lot of time in prayer, alone in the hills or perhaps on the roof or by a quiet stream. Anywhere in the quiet away from the distraction of others. He learned the truths He must tell mankind and found God's power through the Holy Spirit. At times, he likely astounded the Rabbi with his wisdom in the meaning of the scrolls they studied in school. All too quickly, in the Spring, about the age of 12, His family would again travel to Jerusalem, the Holy city, for Passover, as was their yearly custom. His ministry would begin and God's purposes would be fulfilled. (Luke 2:42-49)

Pages 1 through 3 edited and condensed from Readers Digest, 1974, "Great People of the Bible and How they Lived."

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