

FAQs About the Bible Stories of the Birth of Jesus

The following answers reflect the current consensus of objective biblical scholars (that is, of scholars who seek the truth as opposed to religiously indoctrinated academics who only seek to validate their own beliefs).

When were the stories written?

Matthew was written sometime between 50 and 85 years after the death of Jesus. Luke was written a few years after Matthew. So, at least two generations passed between the time the events were said to occur and their being written down.

Who wrote the stories?

There are many lengthy articles and documents devoted to answering that question, but it is sufficient here to merely say that no one knows for certain. There is general agreement that neither of the authors was a witness to the events described or ever met any of the characters in the stories. Matthew was not the tax-collector turned disciple. Luke was possibly the same person who wrote Acts.

Are the two stories consistent with one another?

Other than the basics that Jesus was born of Mary in Bethlehem, the stories of Matthew and Luke have very little in common. Matthew tells of astrologers (wise men) following a star and giving gifts to the babe — Luke tells of shepherds seeing angels. Matthew has the newborn in a house — Luke places him in a stable. Matthew claims that the family fled from Bethlehem to Egypt in fear for their lives — Luke states that they went to Jerusalem to have Jesus circumcised and then went home to Nazareth. This latter contradiction is absolute and cannot be reconciled in any sane manner. One of the stories (at least) is not totally correct.

Are the stories historically accurate?

Neither governments nor historians of the time paid much attention to births, so it is not surprising that there are no records of Jesus' entry into this world. There are, however, several elements of the biblical narratives that ought to be confirmable and are not; three key ones are the star, the tax (or census), and Herod's bloody reaction.

Why is the star significant?

Although many people have tried very hard to find a reasonable celestial explanation for Matthew's "Star of Bethlehem" — supernovas, planetary conjunctions, comets, etc. — none of their theories really hold water. And, even though the Romans, the Egyptians, and the Chinese were very good at both watching the heavens and keeping records, no one noted any such event.

Couldn't the "star" have been a local event such as a meteor or simply a unique and miraculous phenomenon?

Miracles are notoriously tough to disprove, but consider this: If the star was a local phenomenon, how could it have been seen by astrologers in Persia (the "wise men")? And if it were visible from a great distance (and thus very high), how could anyone tell over what house it "stopped"? (Present-day illustrations often picture a celestial light with a tail pointing downward to illuminate the blessed scene, as a UFO might shine a brilliant beam upon some isolated shack.... Of course, we can't entirely rule out that explanation either.)

Why is Luke's taxation/census a problem?

Four reasons: First, because there is no record that Caesar Augustus, or any other Roman dignitary ever issued such a decree, and the Roman bureaucracy kept good records of matters concerning money. Second, because the governor named in the story – Quirinius – was not appointed until after Herod's death. Third, because uprooting families all over the province and having them all travel simultaneously to the paternal birthplace would be economically disruptive and politically impossible, not to mention unnecessary and downright stupid. And fourth, in the event that such an insanity did take place, only men would need to take part because wives neither voted nor paid taxes. Are we to assume that Joseph put his about-to-give-birth wife on a donkey and traveled over 100 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem just because he enjoyed her company?

What's wrong with Matthew's story of Herod?

One of the most tragic stories in the Bible is of King Herod ordering the killing of all the infants in Bethlehem; it is also one of the most clearly fictitious. Herod was despised by the great majority of his subjects. Historians of the time took great care to document his every evil deed — and there were enough to fill volumes. Yet in all the records of Herod's crimes, both petty and terrible, there is not one mention of any such murderous decree. It is hardly conceivable that none of Herod's legion of enemies bothered to take note of such a barbarity. And, even if you *could* conceive of such an oversight, there is no way that any king (even a beloved one) could get away with murdering the newborn sons of everyone (including merchants, princes, soldiers, generals, priests, etc.) in a city.

But, why would Matthew and Luke make up all those strange events?

Quite simply, because their audiences expected it.

Matthew was a scribe who identified strongly with his Jewish heritage. He wrote his story to convince Jews that Jesus was the incarnation of God and the fulfillment of their messianic expectations. He included lots of miraculous events that his Jewish readers would understand as a drawing of parallels to earlier scripture. He was thereby saying something about the character of Jesus rather than giving a factual history. The tale of Herod's slaughter of newborns, for example, was meant

to evoke images of the Egyptian Pharaoh seeking to kill the infant Moses; thus linking Jesus and Moses in the readers' minds.

Luke was a gentile who wrote to convince the Romans that Christianity was a natural outgrowth of an accepted and law-abiding religion (Judaism) that included all peoples – as opposed to a dissident cult whose members made should be fed to the lions. By the time Luke was compiling his tale, the story had spread that Jesus was a Galilean, whereas a legitimate messiah should be born in Bethlehem. So, Luke invented the taxation decree both as a device to have Jesus born in Bethlehem and to demonstrate that the family of his hero was obedient to Roman law.

Both writers took much of their tale from other traditions known throughout the world. The primary example of this is the divine insemination of Mary. Being fathered by a god used to be an almost universal qualification for saviors and other great men. Prior to Jesus, those said to be so favored included: Zoroaster, Krishna, Apollonius, Alcides, Osiris, Hercules, Mars, Vulcan, Plato, Pythagoras, Alexander, Augustus, and Ghengis Khan. Over the decades, verbal traditions would likely have incorporated this feature in an attempt to put Jesus in league with such luminaries. Luke, whose Roman audience would appreciate, even expect, divine fatherhood of a savior, makes a very big deal of it. Matthew, writing for Jews with no such tradition, barely mentions it.

But being impregnated by a god did not typically require one to be a virgin. That little twist to the story apparently stems from the fact that Matthew could read Greek but not Hebrew. In an attempt to show that Jesus' birth was the fulfillment of prophecy, Matthew cites a passage from the book of Isaiah. The Greek version of the scripture that he referenced, however, inaccurately read "Behold a virgin shall conceive ..." The original Hebrew text actually reads "Behold a young woman shall conceive ..." This mistake was recognized long ago, but don't expect the Catholic church to start building shrines to "the young woman Mary" anytime soon.

Are there other stories of Jesus' birth?

Yes, several books telling of the birth and early life of Jesus did not make it through the selection process that took place in the late fourth century. The early church leaders wanted to have four gospels because there were four winds and the Holy Spirit was thought to be embodied in the wind. Some candidates were judged supplementary and some were rejected because they contradicted the ones chosen in matters of doctrine. Some, such as the book called "Infancy II" were likely rejected because they painted a less than flattering picture of Jesus. For example, in one scene, a boy running through the streets brushes against Jesus' shoulder, whereupon Jesus strikes him dead; and, when witnesses complain, Jesus causes them all to go blind.

Many of these books are available in the collection: *The Lost Books of the Bible* (see www.momentpointmedia.com for access).