

# **Why on earth did Jesus come?**

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In the time it takes you to read this page, over 100 more people will have been born, and before you have read the whole of this booklet the world population will have increased by well over 6,000.

Of the sixty billion people who have lived on our planet most have left almost no trace of their existence. Many others have left tiny ripples because of things they said or did. Some have affected thousands, even millions of people over many years. Then a few — very few, when you come to think of it — have left a major mark on history and are recognized universally. Philosophers, scientists, rulers, politicians and the founders or leaders of religions are among those on this 'A list'. Yet in this elite group one person towers above all the others. No other person has attracted such a mixture of love and hatred, admiration and criticism, adoration

and opposition. Every one of his recorded words and actions has been studied and sifted, analysed and assessed. As you read this sentence millions of people are reading what he said and did and trying to apply his teaching and example to their lives. The person concerned is Jesus — sometimes known as Jesus Christ or Jesus of Nazareth (his home town) — who was born in Israel about 2,000 years ago. It is his birth that centuries later sparked off the annual celebration of Christmas on 25 December, though many of the things we do around that date have little or no connection with the original event and spectacularly miss the point of what Christmas is all about.

### **The *uncertain certainty***

We have even got the date wrong! We have no exact record of Jesus' date of birth, but it was almost certainly not 25 December. The Bible tells us that at the time of his birth in Bethlehem 'there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night' (Luke 2:8), but sheep were usually brought in from the fields for the winter months for shelter, as temperatures sometimes dropped below zero.

Another clue is that during his mother's pregnancy the Roman authorities carried out an empire-wide census: 'In those days a decree went

out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered' (Luke 2:1). This was done for taxation purposes, and household heads had to register in their ancestral home towns. For some, this would mean a journey of a week or longer, even in good conditions, which in the depths of winter would have been very difficult for many and impossible for some. As the authorities would not have wanted anyone to use this as an excuse to evade paying tax, they would have arranged the census at a suitable time of year. Experts say that soon after harvest, in or around September, would have been the best time for this.

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Speculation as to the correct date for celebrating Jesus' birthday did not arise until the third century AD, and over the next 100 years or so eight different dates were suggested. In the fifth century, the Western church finally settled on 25 December, apparently to counter a Roman feast held on that day in honour of the pagan sun god.

## As to the year ...

Trying to find the exact year of Jesus' birth produces another 'uncertain certainty', though we do have some clues that help us to narrow things down.

In the first place, the Bible records that Jesus was born during the reign of the Roman ruler Caesar Augustus, which lasted from 27 BC to AD 14. This gives us a time slot of over forty years, though we can get much closer than that.

We are also told that Jesus was born 'in the days of Herod the king' (Matthew 2:1). Herod was Governor of Judea from 37 to 4 BC, but we can be much more precise. Some time after the birth of Jesus, 'wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?"' (Matthew 2:1). We can ignore the unsubstantiated legends that they were kings, that there were three of them and that their names were Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar. What we do know is that a remarkable sign in the sky led them to Bethlehem, where they found the child Jesus and 'worshipped him' (Matthew 2:11).

When Herod (who had been given the title 'king of the Jews' by his Roman overlords) heard of their arrival, he feared some kind of Jewish revolt, or a possible rival to his throne, so he asked them to tell

him where Jesus was, on the pretext ‘that I too may come and worship him’ (Matthew 2:8). But after they had visited the child and presented gifts of ‘gold and frankincense and myrrh’ (Matthew 2:11), God warned them to steer clear of Herod and ‘they departed to their own country by another way’ (Matthew 2:12).

When God warned Joseph that Herod planned not to worship Jesus but to kill him, ‘he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt and remained there until the death of Herod’ (Matthew 2:14–15). Herod was ruthlessly cruel and when he realized that he had been outwitted he flew into a rage and ‘killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under’ (Matthew 2:16). Immediately after Herod died in 4 BC, God told Joseph to bring Mary and Jesus back to Israel. This is a great help in the timing, as Jesus was still a ‘child’ (Matthew 2:21) when this happened. This points to a birth date between 8 and 4 BC.

## **Defining history**

Now it begins to get *really* interesting! When Larry King, the renowned CNN television talk-show host, was asked who in all of history he would most

like to interview he replied, 'Jesus Christ'. When asked, 'And what would you like to ask him?', King replied, 'I would like to ask him if he was indeed virgin-born. The answer to that question would define history for me.'<sup>1</sup>

## **What set Jesus apart is not how he left his mother's womb, but how he entered it**

Whatever King meant, to speak of Jesus as 'virgin-born' can be misleading, as there was nothing unusual about his birth. As far as we know, he left his mother's womb in the same way as we all did. What set Jesus apart is not how he left his mother's womb, but how he entered it — and the Bible's testimony about this is startling. It says that he was conceived in Mary's womb without sexual intercourse — that is, she became pregnant while still a virgin. This makes Jesus unique. Those who argue that in vitro fertilization, embryonic transfer and artificial insemination now make it perfectly possible for a woman to give birth without sexual intercourse miss the point that in every case male sperm is needed. In the case of Jesus there was none. We will come back to this later, but it is more accurate to speak of the virgin conception of Jesus

rather his virgin birth, and we will focus on this as we consider the evidence.

## **The civil servant's report**

The best evidence about the birth of Jesus comes from two writers, each of whom held a position in society that called for accuracy in recording facts. The first was Matthew, a civil servant working in Capernaum as a tax collector for the occupying Romans. An intelligent man, who understood both Hebrew and Greek, he would have kept strict business records. This is his testimony about the birth of Jesus:

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, 'Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins' (Matthew 1:18–21).