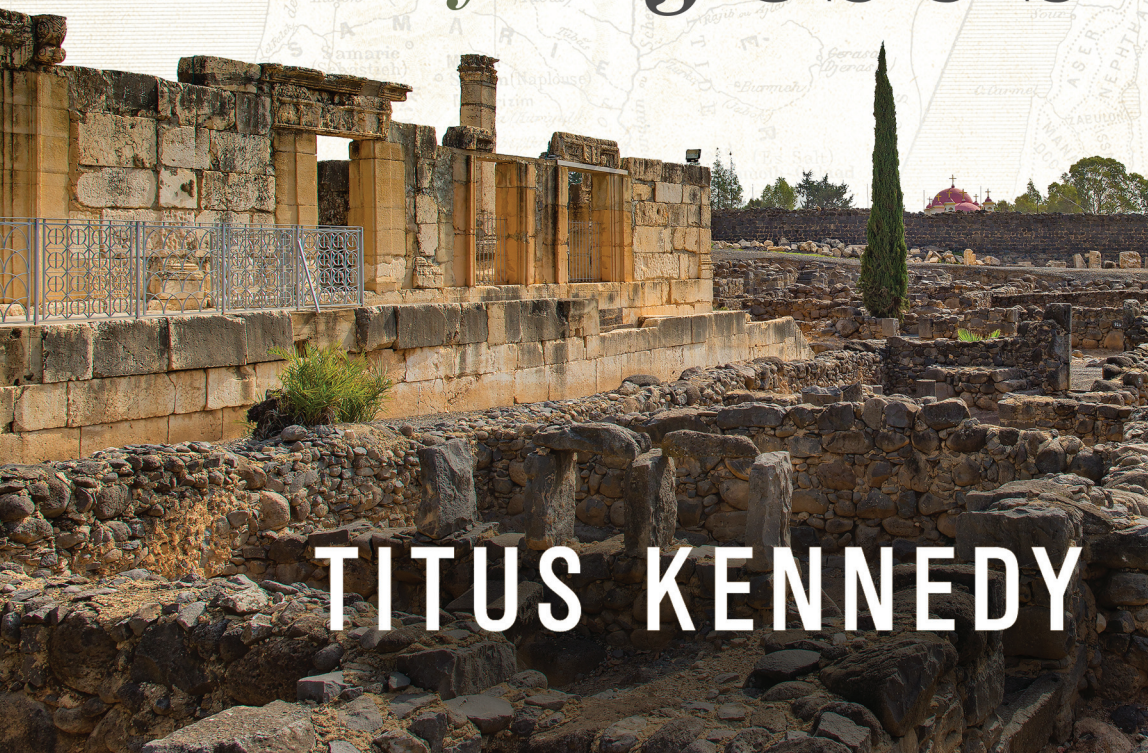


THE ARCHAEOLOGY  
AND HISTORY OF CHRIST  
AND THE GOSPELS



# Excavating *the* Evidence *for* Jesus



TITUS KENNEDY

“In this beautifully illustrated, extensively documented and clearly written book, Titus Kennedy provides the most comprehensive archaeological defense yet in print of the historical reliability of the Gospels and their account of the life of Jesus of Nazareth. Kennedy marches systematically through the different phases of the life of Jesus—from his birth to his ministry, trial, crucifixion, and resurrection—as recorded in the New Testament. As he does, he shows that in each case, a surprising body of evidence supports the reliability of the Gospel accounts of these events. Who knew that the actual site of the trial of Jesus before Pilate has been identified by archaeologists? Or that each of the major figures in that trial—Caiaphas, Herod Antipas, Pilate, Peter, and Jesus himself—have all been independently attested by archaeological and documentary historical evidence in recent years?

“Kennedy skillfully shows his readers the evidence—photographic and otherwise—that documents these important people, places, and events. A unique resource for anyone wanting to investigate the real historical Jesus.”

**Dr. Stephen C. Meyer, PhD**, History and Philosophy of Science,  
Cambridge University; author, *Return of the God Hypothesis*

“In *Excavating the Evidence for Jesus*, Titus Kennedy illuminates the world of late second-temple Judaism. Kennedy’s lucid prose simplifies complicated matters such as the nativity census of Quirinius. He explores various theories and conspiracies and presciently shows readers where the weight of evidence lies. I highly recommend this well-written and well-researched book to my students and colleagues.”

**Scott Stripling, PhD**, Provost and Professor of Biblical Archaeology  
and History, The Bible Seminary, Katy, TX;  
Director of Excavations at Shiloh and Khirbet el-Maqatir

“How credible are the Gospels, and how strong is the evidence for the historical Jesus? Kennedy’s *Excavating the Evidence for Jesus* is an exceptional in-depth companion to the Gospel accounts, summarizing the relevant archaeological finds and providing essential historical background for New Testament times.

“Organized around specific events in the life and ministry of Jesus, one can take a bite-sized deep dive into any particular question and come back with a satisfying archaeological and historical evidence-based answer each time. Of course, one also can sit down and easily flow through the book from cover to cover: Sufficient details are provided so that one feels the weight of the evidence yet is not bogged down or overwhelmed by technicalities. In some details, Kennedy offers an evidence-based alternate to the traditional interpretation that is true to Scripture and worth considering.

“What I found especially effective is Kennedy’s use of the historical evidence provided by the early scoffers of Christianity and from the records detailing the early Roman efforts to stamp out this radical cult: The descriptions provided by the ancient enemies of Jesus confirm the highlights of his life. These details could not have been invented by the church centuries later if they were common knowledge and mentioned by Christian critics in the first and second centuries.

“Easily accessible and readable, the refreshing message again and again is that behind the Gospel accounts are real places, real people, and real events—in short, real history. The Gospel writers were telling us what they saw and heard, not what they (or followers centuries later) imagined or hoped. In an age where it seems that skeptics have the microphone in the popular media, Kennedy provides a detailed and convincing response: Even 2,000 years later, striking amounts of evidence survive to show why Jesus is the most important figure in human history and worth trusting. Every Christian and seeker will be strengthened by reading this book.”

**John A. Bloom, PhD, PhD**, Professor of Physics; Director, MA of Science and Religion Program, Biola University, La Mirada, CA

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*the* Evidence  
*for* Jesus

TITUS KENNEDY



HARVEST HOUSE PUBLISHERS  
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Also deserving of much gratitude and thanks are the archaeologists and scholars who taught and trained me, the friends who explored and worked with me, the individuals and institutions who supported and encouraged me in my research, the professors who polished my writing, and the staff and editors at Harvest House Publishers. All glory and honor to Jesus Christ.

*Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write it out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus; so that you may know the exact truth about the things you have been taught (Luke 1:1-4).*



# Contents



Introduction .....	9
CHAPTER 1—The Birth of Jesus, Bethlehem, and the Magi .....	15
CHAPTER 2—Flight to Egypt, Herod, and Return to Nazareth .....	49
CHAPTER 3—Political Context, Baptism, and Galilee .....	81
CHAPTER 4—Teaching, Travel, and Miracles .....	113
CHAPTER 5—Fame and Opposition .....	155
CHAPTER 6—Bethany, the Triumphal Entry, and Gethsemane .....	189
CHAPTER 7—The Trial and Crucifixion of Jesus .....	213
CHAPTER 8—The Burial, Tomb, and Resurrection of Jesus .....	249
Conclusion .....	283
Appendixes .....	291





# Introduction



**J**esus of Nazareth is widely acknowledged as the most important and most famous figure in history, regardless of beliefs about God, religion, the Bible, Christianity, or the church. Even before researching, analyzing, and evaluating the prolific archaeological and historical material connected to Jesus and the Gospels, one must realize that the effect Jesus has had on history over the last 2000 years has been immense. Since the dawn of civilization until the present, no other person has had a more significant impact.

Looking only at the effect on history, beginning in the Roman Empire during the 1st century and going into the present age, indicates the existence of a historical person and events that happened in a defined time and place. Although Jesus was born in a small village called Bethlehem, in the client kingdom of Judea at the eastern fringes of the Roman Empire, the name of Jesus and the story of his life recorded in the four Gospels are known to some degree by billions of people around the world. It is clear that the life of Jesus and the message he brought has had global influence. Typing “Jesus” into internet search engines can yield approximately 665 billion results, which according to a study by Stony Brook University ranks “Jesus” in the number one position. Because of the influence of Jesus and his life, disciplines such as art, architecture, literature, medicine, politics, economics, society, religion, science, and history all changed.

The entire calendar year date system still used today throughout much of the world is even based around the birth and life of Jesus—BC as “before Christ” and AD as *anno Domini* “in the year of our Lord” (the BCE/CE designations

are equivalent). This system of years was originally brought into use by a monk named Dionysius Exiguus (Dennis the Humble) who was asked by Pope John I in AD 525 to compile a new chronological table, primarily for calculating the dates for Easter Sunday. Prior to this, chronologies still revolved around the Roman emperors, although earlier church scholars such as Clement of Alexandria and Eusebius of Caesarea had also counted years from the birth of Jesus.

While AD 1 does not line up perfectly with year one of the life of Jesus, in part because Dennis did not or was not able to use chronological data from Josephus when composing the new system, the results were only off by a few years and the method of absolute year dates has proved to be an extremely useful invention. About 200 years later, the English monk Bede adopted this *anno Domini* calendar system, Charlemagne endorsed the system, it was in use throughout most of Europe by the 11th century, became the standard in Russia around 1700, and today it is the international norm for historical dates.

And yet, in modern times, Jesus of Nazareth is often regarded as either a mythological character or as an almost unknowable person whose legend accrued and increased over time. The ancient writings of the four Gospels and New Testament letters, which relay information about the life of Jesus, are often dismissed as unreliable religious books with little basis in fact. But archaeology and ancient historical texts, which contribute to our knowledge about the life of Jesus and the plausibility of the reliability of the Gospels, paint a different picture.

Archaeology over the last 150 years has not only contributed to our understanding of the historical context of Jesus, the Gospels, and the 1st-century world, but many discoveries have directly confirmed the accuracy of the Gospel accounts about his life and historical existence—and new discoveries continue to be uncovered and mysteries untangled.

Initially, the only followers of Jesus were a few disciples, but by the end of his time on earth this number seems to have been at least several thousand. By AD 100, there were church communities and Jesus followers in over 40 different regions. By the 4th century, Christianity had spread through much of the Middle East, Asia Minor, North Africa, and southern and western Europe. In the kingdom of Armenia, Christianity was adopted as the state religion in AD 301. Soon after, in 313, Emperor Constantine issued the Edict of Milan, legalizing Christianity in the Roman Empire. The story of Jesus and belief in him continued to spread, and in 380, Emperor Theodosius I issued the Edict of Thessalonica, making Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire.

In just over 300 years, Jesus had gone from relative obscurity on the fringes of an empire built on polytheism that had even persecuted Christianity, to the figure that many in the empire, including the emperor, followed and worshipped. The effects of this transformation in thinking can be seen throughout the centuries that followed.

It seems uncanny that Jesus, who lived on the eastern edge of the Roman Empire and never left the area, who had only several thousand followers at his death, and who was shunned by both the religious and political establishment of the time is not simply remembered two millennia later but became the most famous and influential person in all of human history. While many may disregard the teachings of Jesus, or even make the outrageous claim that he never existed, no one can deny the tremendous and unparalleled impact Jesus has had on history.

It is noteworthy that the four Gospel accounts of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—which are the primary sources describing the life of Jesus—were composed during the 1st century AD using eyewitness testimony according to the claims of numerous ancient writings and supported by the historical and archaeological evaluations of many scholars throughout the centuries. Literacy in the Roman Empire has been estimated at up to 30 percent, and in the Christian community, particularly because of the importance placed on the written word of the Bible, literacy was high enough that the accounts about Jesus could be widely read and heard.

The Gospels, proliferated through meticulous hand copying and usually in the form of a codex, also have by far the highest representation of ancient manuscript copies in comparison to other writings of antiquity. Now, almost two thousand years removed, the autographs are no longer in existence. However, because of meticulous and careful copying over the centuries, the Gospel texts available today are essentially the same as those first written nearly two millennia ago.

Thanks to the preservation of ancient texts in libraries, monasteries, and churches, and the uncovering of additional ancient texts due to archaeology, there are presently hundreds of existing ancient manuscript copies of the Gospels. At least 43 papyri and 14 parchment Gospel manuscripts are known from the period covering only the first three centuries after the autographs were written. While the parchment manuscripts are fewer in number, they are also more complete, including two codices that contain nearly the entire four Gospels. If each Gospel is counted separately, then the number rises to 63 Gospel manuscripts from the first three centuries after the Gospels were first written.

The most numerous of these ancient Gospel manuscripts are of Matthew (26) and John (23). The earliest of these known manuscripts is usually considered to be P52, which contains a small section of John covering the trial of Jesus, and by the analysis of a few scholars it could date to as early as AD 90 or so. However, manuscripts of Matthew, Mark, and Luke from the 2nd century have also been preserved. Additionally, ancient translations of the Gospels into other languages exist in Syriac, Latin, Coptic, Slavic, Ethiopic, and Armenian.

At first glance, this may not seem particularly impressive. However, when compared to existing manuscript copies of other ancient works, such as the *Iliad* of Homer, *Gallic Wars* of Caesar, *Annals* of Tacitus, plays of Euripides, Flavius Josephus, and Philo of Alexandria, the four Gospels are much better attested than anything else from antiquity.

The specific literary genre of the Gospels has also been examined at length and debated, with opinions ranging from ancient biography to aretalogies (mighty deeds of a divine man) to historical narrative to theological documents. In the ancient world, however, all types of historical writings contained the worldview of the author or the culture, and at least a sprinkling of the supernatural or theological could be seen.

Undoubtably there is a uniqueness about the Gospel documents and a blend of various elements present in the texts, in addition to specific differences between the writings of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, which is why even the specific genre of the Gospels continues to be studied and debated. While archaeology alone cannot fully answer the question of genre, an archaeological analysis of these accounts about Jesus does allow one to assess their historical credibility regarding the information about the life, times, and person of Jesus. All of these factors are important when assessing the historical accuracy and transmission of the primary sources for the life of Jesus and evaluating the likelihood of egregious errors or the introduction of mythical elements for an audience that might have had access to an eyewitness, a second degree connection, or official records.

How could the story of Jesus spread so far and so rapidly, and those who followed him increase at such a rapid rate during the Roman period, if Jesus were merely a legendary character or only an obscure teacher whose actual life was shrouded in mystery and myth? What if Jesus was not simply a historical person, but one whose actions, words, and following caused such an intense wave in history that the world was forever changed?

A plethora of books have been written about Jesus, including volumes about

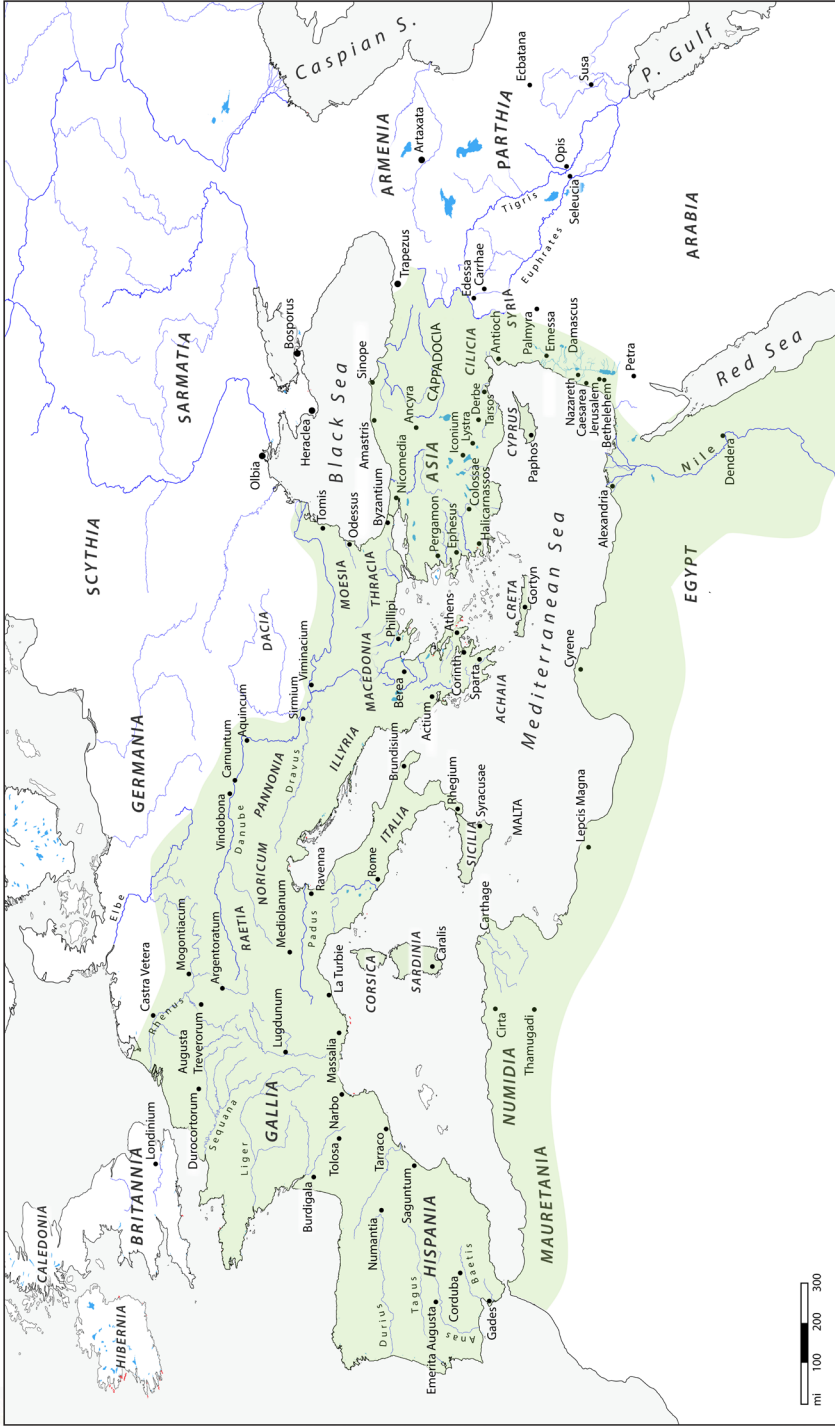
the historical context of Jesus and books about the archaeology associated with Jesus. These writings range in perspective from Jesus being a fictitious character on one extreme, to the Gospels being absolutely accurate on the other side, and a wide spectrum in between. Books written for a general audience and books tailored for academic experts have appeared on the subject.

*Excavating the Evidence for Jesus* does not seek to replace all of those previous works, nor is it meant to be a comprehensive examination of the world in which Jesus lived. Rather, this book focuses on the archaeological and historical discoveries that directly and indirectly relate to the life of Jesus and the accounts of his life in the Gospels. While it cannot answer every question connected to the archaeology and history of Jesus, it seeks to offer an updated and supplemental source from the perspective of an archaeologist who has studied the archaeology, history, literature, geography, and Bible associated with Jesus, excavated at sites where Jesus was, researched and visited nearly all of the locations where Jesus walked, and examined the known artifacts connected with the life of Jesus.

It is my hope that with a thorough presentation and analysis of the archaeological remains associated with Jesus, arranged in an attempted chronological sequence, the reader will better understand the 1st-century world of Jesus, become familiar with the archaeological discoveries and historical arguments, and recognize the vast and varied evidence demonstrating the historical existence of Jesus and the reliability of the Gospel accounts about his life.

At this time there was a wise man called Jesus, and his conduct was good, and he was known to be virtuous. Many people among the Jews and the other nations became his disciples. Pilate condemned him to be crucified and to die. But those who had become his disciples did not abandon his discipleship. They reported that he had appeared to them three days after his crucifixion, and that he was alive. Accordingly, he was perhaps the Messiah, concerning whom the prophets have reported wonders. And the tribe of the Christians, so named after him, has not disappeared to this day.—Josephus, *Antiquities* 18:63-64, ca. AD 93 (Agapius version).

# THE ROMAN EMPIRE AT THE TIME OF JESUS



## CHAPTER 1

# The Birth of Jesus, Bethlehem, and the Magi



**T**he world of Roman-and-Herodian-dominated Judea and Galilee in which Jesus of Nazareth lived goes back to 63 BC when the Romans annexed the area and enlarged the Republic. Previously, the region had been a kingdom under the direct control of the Hasmonean Dynasty, but following the end of the Third Mithridatic War in 63 BC, the Roman general Pompey conquered the area and subdued Jerusalem. After initially being let into Jerusalem and occupying the city, Pompey besieged the temple complex to defeat those inside, breached the northern wall, defeated the Judeans who continued to resist, and then pulled down the walls of Jerusalem to prevent future rebellion.

After the defeat of the Hasmoneans, the Romans decreased the size of Hasmonean territory by giving back control of various conquered cities to their inhabitants. Most of those released areas are what came to be known as the Decapolis, and many of their coins show the institution of a new era once Pompey gave them relative independence. Once Herod the Great was dubbed king of the Judeans by the Roman Senate in 40 BC, and practically took power with the conquest of Jerusalem in 37 BC, his kingdom began to expand the lands under its control as a client state of Rome.

The Roman Empire itself officially began in 27 BC when Octavian was made *princeps*, or “first citizen,” by the Senate, was given the power of imperium,



and the title Augustus, or “venerated,” was bestowed upon him. This occurred after Octavian avenged the assassination of Julius Caesar by 42 BC, then sub-



Roman statue of Caesar Augustus

sequently defeated the other two members of the Second Triumvirate, Marcus Lepidus and Mark Antony, by 31 BC. Although Julius Caesar had a short time as dictator (ca. 49–44 BC), this position was different than the later role of emperor, and his exercise of power and opposition within in the Senate eventually led to his assassination. Discovering that the will of Julius Caesar had named Octavian (Augustus) as heir, he also adopted the family name Caesar, which after the end of the Julio-Claudian dynasty and the year of the four emperors became a title indicating the office of emperor in AD 69.

Augustus offered to return power to the Senate in 27 BC, but it refused, and cleverly, Augustus never took titles such as king or dictator, and even surrendered his position as consul in 23 BC.

Yet, the Senate then granted him the power of a tribune and a censor, allowing him to effectively control the Senate and laws and enact censuses. Augustus also had the power to command the military forces in Rome, to impose his will on the governors of provinces, and to directly control the newly reclassified imperial provinces.

The extent of his power had never before been matched in the Roman Republic, and yet he was so trusted and beloved that his effectiveness as a ruler was unsurpassed by later Roman emperors. While legally the Roman Republic still existed during his reign, in practice it was now the Empire, as Augustus had essentially complete power and the love of the people, though a new constitution would eventually come into effect once Tiberius became emperor. Since Augustus had eliminated rival factions and consolidated power, Rome entered a time of internal peace called the *Pax Romana* or “Roman Peace.”

During the period of the Gospels, life was relatively peaceful throughout the

Empire. While there were border wars, two of the most violent periods inside the Empire during the Pax Romana were rebellions in Judea Province after the time of Jesus in AD 66–73 and 132–136. Reflecting a time of peace, the number of Roman legions was reduced from 50 to 28, which required the expensive settlement of tens of thousands of military veterans in colonies around the Empire. This placed former Roman soldiers throughout the provinces and further Romanized many areas. The Praetorian Guard was kept in Rome to maintain order and assure that a rebellion against the emperor could not occur, although the Praetorian Guard eventually became a dangerous institution for many emperors.

Since Augustus controlled the finances and paid the legions, they were loyal to him. Augustus also personally owned the province of Aegyptus (Egypt), which was the largest grain producer and allowed him to distribute food to the masses and gain their gratitude and favor. Augustus also enacted many significant building projects in Rome, including aqueducts and the first permanent amphitheater in Rome. It was recorded that Augustus said he found Rome a city of brick and left it a city of marble (Suetonius, *Augustus* 29.149).

Ancient historical sources for the life and reign of Augustus are numerous, and in numerous cases these writings overlap with the context of the life of Jesus (*Res Gestae Divi Augustus*; Suetonius, *Augustus*; Livy, *History of Rome*; Velleius, *History*; Seneca, *Controversiae and Suasoriae*; Tacitus, *Annals*; Cassius Dio, *Roman History*; Josephus, *Antiquities*).

During the reign of Augustus, a brilliant general named Tiberius also rose to prominence, and in 39 BC, he became the stepson of Augustus. However, Augustus already had a son, Agrippa, and a nephew and son-in-law, Marcellus, who were expected to be his heirs. Tiberius was given certain privileges, but his personal success in politics, exploration, and especially military victories earned him the respect of many in the Empire. In 23 BC Marcellus died, in 12 BC Agrippa died, and in 9 BC his brother Drusus died, leaving Tiberius as the clear candidate for heir of Augustus.

It is around this time that the first events in the Gospels occur—the angel appearing to Zechariah, the pregnancy of Zacharias and Elizabeth, and the betrothal period of Joseph and Mary (Luke 1:5–38; Matthew 1:18). Meanwhile, Herod the Great (ca. 40–4 BC) was a client king of Rome ruling over the kingdom of Judea while Augustus (ca. 27 BC–AD 14) was at the height of his power and Tiberius was emerging to eventually succeed Augustus. Combined as a single historical narrative, the four Gospels would cover the period of

Herodian and Roman rule in Judea and Galilee beginning with the announcement to Zechariah and ending with the ascension of Jesus—perhaps a span of



Coin of Herod the Great reading “King Herod”

around only four decades in which history was drastically affected (Matthew 1:18–2:1; 27:45–28:20; Luke 1:5–2:1; 23:44–24:52).

During the reign of Herod the Great and subsequently his sons and Roman prefects, Judea was a kingdom ultimately subject to Rome, including Augustus and Tiberius—the first two emperors of the new Roman Empire and among the most powerful political leaders in antiquity. The lands of these kings, tetrarchs, and prefects comprised the areas of Judea, Samaria,

Idumea, Galilee, Perea, Gaulantis, Iturea, Batanea, Trachonitis, and Aurantis, which encompasses much of what today comprises modern Israel, the Palestinian Territories, northern Jordan, and southwestern Syria. It was this world into which Jesus of Nazareth was born.

## THE ANNUNCIATION AT NAZARETH

The village of Nazareth in the region of Galilee where Jesus spent most of his life was so small and insignificant that there are no recovered written records mentioning Nazareth prior to the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John in the 1st century AD. Yet as the home of Jesus from childhood until his public ministry, and the village in which Mary and Joseph lived prior to the birth of Jesus, it is an essential site in an archaeological and historical investigation of Jesus (Luke 1:26–2:4; Matthew 2:23; 4:13; Mark 1:24; John 1:45).

Because Nazareth is located on a ridge approximately 1150 feet (350 meters) above sea level, the name has sometimes been connected to a Hebrew word for watch or guard. However, Nazareth may be derived from another Hebrew word using the same consonants that translates as branch, which is often connected to a prophetic passage in the Book of Isaiah about a “branch” from the root of Jesse, father of David (Isaiah 11:1). This Hebrew rendering of Nazareth is supported by a Hebrew inscription from the 3rd or 4th century AD found at

the synagogue of Caesarea Maritima that refers to priests in Nazareth just after the Bar Kokhba Revolt in about AD 135. Several other references to Nazareth in the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th centuries are known, including by Tertullian, Origen, Julius Africanus, Eusebius, and Epiphanius.

Because of the lack of 1st-century documentation about Nazareth from sources outside of the Gospels and Acts, a few scholars have claimed Nazareth was not in existence during the time of Jesus, while a minority have accepted a 1st-century Nazareth but altered the story by proposing that Jesus was born in Nazareth rather than Bethlehem.

Although for many years no definitive archaeological evidence had been recovered from ancient Nazareth that demonstrated the existence of the village during the time of Jesus, excavations and research eventually revealed both materials and structures dating to the 1st century in Nazareth. Archaeological remains have been found at Nazareth from the Bronze Age and Iron Age, then after an abandonment period of centuries, the village seems to have been resettled in the 2nd century BC during the Hasmonean period, and it had a primarily Jewish population through the time of Jesus and the early church.

Archaeological studies of Nazareth have clearly demonstrated that a village of approximately four hectares (about ten acres) existed in the 1st century BC and 1st century AD during the life of Jesus. The small size and agricultural character of Nazareth has led to population estimates of around 400 people, showing why the village was unlikely to appear in historical texts and how the question “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” was probably indicative of the insignificance of the tiny agricultural village (John 1:46).

These excavations have specifically uncovered significant remains from approximately the 1st century such as houses, olive oil presses, wine presses, water cisterns, a vineyard tower, a mikvah (ritual bath), quarries, tombs, pottery, coins, and ritual stone vessels. A tomb inscription also demonstrates the use of



Old Nazareth and Mary's Well

## 20 Excavating *the Evidence for Jesus*

Aramaic in Nazareth. The site of the synagogue in Nazareth, however, remains unknown (Luke 4:16).

Nazareth was the location of one of the first events recorded about the life of Jesus—the annunciation of the birth of Jesus Christ set near the end of the 1st century BC. According to the Gospel of Luke, the angel Gabriel was sent from God to tell Mary that through the power of the Holy Spirit she would conceive and bear Jesus, the Son of God (Luke 1:26-38). To commemorate this momentous event, an ancient church was built at the site thought to be the house where Mary lived before her marriage to Joseph.

Ancient written sources and archaeology suggest that the Byzantine Church of the Annunciation was constructed in the 5th century AD after the reign of Constantine the Great, but that an earlier Christian building existed at the location in the 4th century AD or before. Underneath the modern Basilica of the Annunciation and the Crusader-period church of the 11th century, the remains of a 5th-century AD Byzantine church were found, measuring approximately 20 meters by 8 meters. A mosaic floor from this Byzantine-period church had a dedication reading “for Konon, deacon of Jerusalem” in Greek, and a decorative cross. Below the building, a baptismal font, mosaic floors including decorative crosses, plastered walls with various graffiti, and steps leading into a cave were discovered. The graffiti had phrases such as “Lord, Christ, help your servant



Archaeological ruins at the Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth

Valeria . . . and give the palm to pain . . . Amen” and “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, help Geno and Elpisius, Achille, Elpidius, Paul, Antonis . . . servants of Jesus.”

The base of a column also has the name Mary carved into it in Greek, further linking the site with the tradition of Mary and the annunciation, although the inscription comes from after the church was already established. The pilgrim Egeria, writing in ca. AD 383, mentions the “cave in which Mary lived,” and the altar placed near the entrance, which was apparently associated with an early church there (Egeria, *Itinerarium Egeriae*). However, she does not mention a formal church or basilica, which suggests that Constantine did not have a commemorative church, like those in Jerusalem and Bethlehem, built there during his reign.

A coin minted around the middle of the 4th century AD was found in the plaster, demonstrating that Christians used the site at least as early as the 4th century, and this building could be the church Joseph of Tiberias planned to build in Nazareth during the early 4th century (Epiphanius of Salamis, *Panarion* 30). There are suggestions from archaeological excavations that a building where Christians met may have even existed there as early as the 3rd century AD.

Archaeological excavations also revealed remains of various parts of the village of Nazareth from the 1st century AD underneath this church, nearby, and in scattered locations around the area, confirming that Nazareth was indeed occupied during the time of Jesus.

When Joseph and Mary were living in Nazareth before the birth of Jesus, the couple was betrothed and not yet formally married, which is why Joseph had been concerned about avoiding a scandal (Matthew 1:19). Similar to many ancient societies, Israelite parents were often involved in the selection of a husband or wife, but the son or daughter usually had significant say in who they would marry, and in many cases the decision was completely up to the potential bride and groom (Genesis 21:21; 24:1-9; 26:34-35; 28:1-5; 34:4; 38:6; Judges 14:1-3; Ruth 3:1-13; 1 Samuel 18:20-21). By the Roman period and the time of Jesus, men and women might arrange the marriage themselves, use an intermediary, or go through their parents.

Betrothal was the typical practice in the 1st century, which was similar to a legal contract and more binding than engagement (Matthew 1:18; 2 Corinthians 11:2). In the eyes of the community, the couple was legally or contractually married, although not practically married. During the time of the Roman Empire, the law required a couple to be married within two years after their betrothal, and therefore long and drawn out “engagements” were probably rare

(Cassius Dio, *Roman History*). Under the traditions of Judaism in the Hellenistic and Roman periods, which illuminate the typical customs for those living in Judea and Galilee during the time of Jesus, couples seem to have usually married one year after their betrothal. Once the potential match had been made, the future groom and the father of the bride would sign the betrothal agreement, which was an actual contract, and in some cases celebrate this occasion over wine or a meal (Tobit 7:11-14; Babylonian Talmud).

The ages of the bride and groom would usually be in the late teens for women and early twenties to early thirties for men, while the man was almost always older, often by several years. Generally, the average age of married couples in the Hellenistic and Roman periods seems to have been the late teens, although similarly the women would be slightly younger and the men slightly older. During the Roman period, a high percentage of girls were married in or by their late teens, and the laws of the Empire even permitted girls to be betrothed at age ten and married at age twelve, although this seems to have happened very rarely. In the literature of Judaism, marrying early was advocated in order to propagate the family and to protect from temptation, and eighteen to twenty was a recommended age for men (Pseudo-Phocylides, *Sentences*, 175-76; Rule of the Congregation 1QSa). Therefore, it is probable that Mary was in her late teens while she and Joseph were betrothed and awaiting their marriage.

Then, in about 8 BC, Augustus issued a decree for a census of the Empire, eventually reaching the client kingdom of Herod and the regions of Galilee and Judea, which were connected administratively to Syria Province (*Res Gestae Divi Augustus* 8; Luke 2:1-3).

## THE CENSUS OF QUIRINIUS AND THE BIRTH OF JESUS

According to the Gospel of Luke, just before the birth of Jesus, a census throughout the Roman Empire was enacted (Luke 2:1). This empire-wide census recorded in Luke uses a word meaning “the inhabited earth,” or in the context of ancient Rome, the Roman Empire. This census also seems to be recorded in official Roman records, specifically in *The Deeds of the Divine Augustus*, which mentioned censuses of between approximately four and five million citizens, indicating that the scope of these censuses were indeed empire-wide and not merely localized (*Res Gestae Divi Augustus* 8). Specifically, these three censuses recorded the number of male Roman citizens as 4.063 million in 28

BC, 4.233 million in 8 BC, and 4.937 million in AD 14, demonstrating overall population growth in the empire. The census taking place just prior to the death of Herod the Great in 4 BC could only have been the census of Augustus initiated in 8 BC. Because Luke stated that the census covered the Roman Empire, only a massive census such as those recorded by Augustus would fit the requirements; a localized and possibly unpreserved census record cannot be the census mentioned in the Gospel of Luke.

If a census was also imposed on Judea as part of the larger Empire, Joseph could have been required to participate. After learning of the census, Joseph traveled back to Bethlehem because apparently his family home was located in Bethlehem—not Nazareth where he was currently living (Luke 2:4). While none of the Gospels indicate that Joseph was originally from Nazareth, it is possible that Mary may have been from or at least lived in Nazareth, and the three eventually returned to Nazareth in Galilee rather than live in Judea during the brutal reign of the ethnarch Archelaus (Matthew 2:19-23).

This transition of control from Herod the Great presiding over the entire region to his sons Archelaus, Antipas, and Philip acting as ethnarchs and tetrarchs also places the census and the birth of Jesus just prior to the death of Herod the Great. Records from the Roman Empire relating to censuses demonstrate that they involved all those residing away from their own districts, not only Roman citizens, and summoning people to their homes for the registration of the census was the normal protocol. For example, a census edict from Egypt Province ca. AD 104 (British Museum papyrus 904) provides insight into this practice:

Gaius Vibius Maximus, Prefect of Egypt: Seeing that the time has come for the house to house census, it is necessary to compel all those who for any cause whatsoever are residing out of their



*Res Gestae Divi Augustus* inscription



provinces to return to their own homes, that they may both carry out the regular order of the census and may also attend diligently to the cultivation of their allotments.

Another Roman census document from about AD 48 (Oxyrhynchus papyrus 255), relating to a census during the time of Emperor Claudius, records the testimony of a man named Thermoutharion and states that people living with him, probably a reference to specific family members previously mentioned in the document, have returned to his house for the census. Many other similar census papyri are known, including those which indicate that the census responses occasionally came in the year following the original census order from the emperor (cf. P. Mich. 176-180). Thus, not only is an empire-wide census consistent with historical data, but the census being imposed in Judea and Joseph and Mary going to Bethlehem to register are also actions consistent with Roman records from the period. Further, registration records suggest that at times people did not or were unable to respond to the census until the year following the initial issue date, meaning Joseph may not have arrived in Bethlehem for the census until the year after it was ordered by Augustus.

The Roman official administering the census near the birth of Jesus was recorded as Quirinius, designated as a ruler in Syria Province at the time (Luke 2:2). Publius Sulpicius Quirinius was a Roman aristocrat who lived from ca. 51 BC to AD 21, attaining the rank of consul in 12 BC by the appointment of Caesar Augustus (Tacitus, *Annals*; Cassius Dio, *Roman History*).

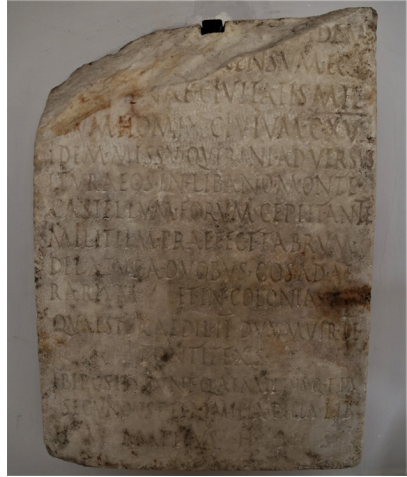
However, Caius Sentius Saturninus, a consular, served as imperial legate of Syria Province from ca. 9–6 BC when the aforementioned 8 BC census of Augustus would have taken place. Tertullian around AD 200 noted that Sentius Saturninus did hold a census according to the orders of Augustus, that it also took place in Judea, and it was relevant to the birth of Jesus (Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem* 4.19).

Yet, matters are often further confused because in the late 1st century AD, Josephus mentioned Quirinius along with Coponius in Judea around AD 6 taking account of the substance of the province, taxing, and spending the money left by Archelaus after his exile, and this is often incorrectly assumed to be the census that Luke mentions (Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.1-3). Not only was this event recorded in Josephus, a localized assessment type of census connected to transition of government in Judea, but the Quirinius census of Luke and the Quirinius assessment of Josephus seem to be separated by several years.

Although it is often assumed that Luke claims Quirinius was the Roman legate of Syria at this time, the term used can have a general meaning of ruling, commanding, or leading. The word used could refer to the legate of a province, such as an imperial province like Syria, but it is also the term used in Luke 3:1 to describe the position of Pontius Pilate, who obviously was not a legate, as a prefect of Judea. Therefore, the Gospel account notes only that Quirinius was a ruler in Syria Province who administered a Roman census around the time of the birth of Jesus.

While Quirinius was the legate of Syria Province in AD 6, he was also in the area earlier functioning as a military commander. According to Roman records, Quirinius held a military command that placed him in the province of and around Cilicia, including the area of Syria Province, and he was the leader of several legions in the area before eventually being appointed *legatus propraetor* of Syria Province as a former consul (Tacitus, *Annals* 3.22-48; cf. Florus, *Epitome of Roman History* 2.31; Suetonius, *Tiberius* 49). While commanding legions in Galatia, Cilicia, and Syria, Quirinius would have held a position of high authority in the Roman Empire. His presence in these regions occurred sometime between 12 BC and AD 1, but we are unsure of specifics in time and position because of the lack of detailed chronological information.

However, this does place Quirinius in the area of Syria around the time that Jesus of Nazareth was born, and it may also be significant that when Saturninus was legate of Syria Province, there were multiple governors—suggesting that Quirinius, as Luke states, could have been a ruler of Syria ca. 8 BC or 7 BC (Josephus, *Antiquities* 16.280, 285, 357, 361). Therefore, a possible scenario is that Saturninus was the legate and Quirinius the highest ranking military commander in Syria (Josephus, *Antiquities* 17.89). Why the Gospel of Luke mentions Quirinius in connection with the census rather than Saturninus is due to the function of Roman government. Roman records demonstrate that military officials oversaw and administered censuses, and Quirinius is even



The Quirinius census inscription “Lapis Venetus”

mentioned as a legate in the context of a census in Syria Province during the reign of Augustus.

The Lapis Venetus is a Latin funerary inscription dedicated to the Roman officer Q. Aemilius Secundus and found in Beirut, which in Roman times was part of Syria Province (Lapis Venetus, *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* vol. III, no. 6687). It states that by order of P. Sulpicius Quirinius, who is called a legate of Caesar in Syria, Secundus conducted a census of the city-state of Apamea, Syria. This inscription also notes that Quirinius ordered Secundus to fight the Ituraeans on Mount Lebanon, an area north of the Sea of Galilee, which was part of the kingdom of Herod the Great and later in the tetrarchy of Philip.

Occasionally, the inscription is erroneously connected to a regional tax assessment and acquisition of the money of the deposed Herod Archelaus in Syria and Judea, carried out by Quirinius and Coponius (Josephus, *Antiquities* 17.354, 18.1-102). However, the census in this inscription, which was not a localized tax assessment, more logically connects to the census of the Empire documented in the Deeds of the Divine Augustus and initiated in about 8 BC. The inscription demonstrates that the census was a military affair, ordered by a legate and carried out by officers at the local level. Quirinius may have held the position of *legatus legionis* in Syria Province, commanding at least three legions in the area at this time, which agrees with his portrayal as legate and military commander in the epitaph. Because it was Roman practice for a military official, such as Quirinius, to administer the census, it is logical that the Gospel of Luke would associate Quirinius the military commander with the census rather than Saturninus the governor.

Thus, the census mentioned in this inscription may have been conducted around 8 BC and following as part of the census of the Empire that Augustus commanded and Luke recorded in relation to the birth of Jesus. Because Quirinius held a military command in the province of and around Cilicia and was the leader of several legions in the area before eventually being appointed *legatus propraetor* of Syria as a former consul, it is plausible that Augustus may have appointed Quirinius to another position of high authority while fighting the Homanadensian War in Cilicia, which was a province bordering Syria (Tacitus, *Annals*; Florus, *Epitome of Roman History*).

Another inscription that occasionally has been connected to Quirinius is the Lapis Tiburtinus, found near the ancient villa of Quintilius Varus at Tivoli, east of Rome. The inscription records the career of a distinguished Roman, but unfortunately the inscription is damaged and the name is unreadable. The text

states that this person became proconsul of the province of Asia; it also appears to mention being the proconsul of Syria, and that he had been honored with two victory celebrations. An explanation has been suggested that the inscription implies this unknown person was the proconsul of Syria twice, and combining that with an assumption that Quirinius twice was the governor of Syria during both the birth of Jesus in Luke and the time of Coponius in Josephus. However, the inscription states that this official was once proconsul of Asia and then of Syria, which does not match what is known of Quirinius.

Because the wording is ambiguous and the fragmentary condition of the inscription makes it even more difficult, the Lapis Tiburtinus should only be attributed to a Roman consul based on a comparison of career and the archaeological context in which it was found. Since the inscription was found very near the villa of Quintilius Varus, but it also may describe a career similar to that of L. Calpurnius Piso, it might be attributed to either.

Combining the sources of Luke, Josephus, Justin Martyr, Tertullian, and the Lapis Venetus, the census order may have been relayed by Saturninus, the legate of Syria from ca. 9 to 6 BC, while Quirinius as a military leader may have administered the census. If Quirinius was a military leader in Syria at this time, Roman protocol demonstrates why Luke would mention Quirinius the military leader administering the census instead of Saturninus the legate.

This scenario could also be supplemented by two inscriptions found in Pisidian Antioch that mention Publius Sulpicius Quirinius as a *duumvir*, a title that describes a pair of joint magistrates. Perhaps Quirinius was a temporary procurator of the sub-province of Judea, or Quirinius could have been the military legate while conducting the census, sharing powers with Saturninus.

The Roman census data from the writings of Augustus and contemporary papyri demonstrates that there was a census ordered in 8 BC for the Empire, and that people were called to their hometowns to register for the census. The funerary inscription of Secundus mentions a census administered by a military official in Syria Province, the legate Quirinius, and the Emperor Augustus. Documents describing the life of Quirinius demonstrate that he was a Roman official holding positions of both high military and civil authority before, during, and after the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, and information places him in Syria sometime around that time.

An analysis of the available information suggests that Quirinius was not the governor of Syria Province at the time of the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, but that as the military commander he would have administered the census ordered by

Emperor Augustus, possibly in conjunction with Saturninus. In this scenario, after the census of Augustus was initially ordered in 8 BC and Joseph and Mary eventually received word in Galilee, they traveled to Bethlehem, settled into their makeshift accommodations, and eventually Jesus was born, placing the birth around 8 BC or perhaps more likely in 7 BC.

## BETHLEHEM

The town of Bethlehem in Judah, only a few miles south of ancient Jerusalem, has existed for thousands of years. Until the time of Jesus, however, it was relatively obscure. Bethlehem (“house of bread”), also called Ephrath, was occupied from at least the time of Jacob, then into the times of Joshua, the judges, the Israelite monarchy, and Jesus (Genesis 35:19; Joshua 15:59 LXX; Judges 17:7; Ruth 1:1-2; 1 Samuel 17:12; Micah 5:2; Matthew 2:1; Luke 2:4).

Archaeological discoveries have also demonstrated that Bethlehem was a town during these times, with materials found at the site from the time of the patriarchs in the Middle Bronze Age, a possible mention in the Amarna Letters of the Late Bronze Age, the time of David in the Iron Age II, and the time of Jesus in the Roman period. In ancient times, farming and shepherding were



Traditional birth location of Jesus in a cave underneath the Church of the Nativity

common economic activities around Bethlehem. For centuries it was a small village of little importance, but due to the Gospels and the story of Jesus, Bethlehem has become a town known all over the world.

Matthew and Luke record the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, while unnamed people in the Gospel of John refer to this idea (Matthew 2:1-6; Luke 2:4-7; John 7:41-42). Because Joseph was from the line of David and his family home was in Bethlehem, he was required to go there for the registration of the census (Luke 2:4-5). Because of the prophecy found in the Book of Micah, the link to King David, and the birth of Jesus there, Bethlehem quickly became a crucial location in the gospel story (1 Samuel 17:12; Micah 5:2). Due to its importance, the location of the birth of Jesus was remembered, and soon after the time of Jesus, Christians seem to have visited the place regularly.

According to early church writers of the 2nd and 3rd centuries, Jesus was born in a cave in Bethlehem that was apparently known in antiquity, and Origen reported that the pagans spread the word about Jesus being born in a specific cave of Bethlehem (Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 78; Origen, *Contra Celsum* 1.51). Based on the presence of the manger, the cave was perhaps an animal shelter connected to a house. During the time of Hadrian, when he was rebuilding Jerusalem as Aelia Capitolina and covering major sites associated with Jesus, he had a shrine to Adonis placed over the location of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem in about AD 135 (Jerome, *Letter 58 to Paulinus*). Therefore, even the pagan Roman authorities recognized the significance and importance of Bethlehem as the place where Jesus Christ was born. Finally, Emperor Constantine ordered the Church of the Nativity constructed to commemorate the site in AD 327.

## THE BIRTH OF JESUS AND THE CHURCH OF THE NATIVITY

The story of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem stretches back 2,000 years to the time of the Pax Romana, when Caesar Augustus ruled the extensive and powerful Roman Empire. The Gospels of Matthew and Luke, which both state that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, are the primary sources for this account. Because manuscript and textual evidence indicates that Matthew and Luke were composed in the middle of the 1st century AD, several writings from the 2nd century AD support the existence and acceptance of these Gospel accounts, and early copies and fragments are still in existence, these narratives must not be far removed from the life of Jesus.

In addition to the birth stories found in Matthew and Luke, secondary sources from antiquity also reference the birth of Jesus and corroborate details within the biblical narratives, and archaeological investigation has uncovered remains from the 1st century-village of Bethlehem and a 4th-century church that was supposedly built over the cave where Jesus was born.

The Gospel birth accounts begin by noting the betrothal of Mary and Joseph and the conception of Jesus by the Holy Spirit (Matthew 1:18-21; Luke 1:26-45). All of this occurred late in the reign of Herod the Great (ca. 40–4 BC), a prolific builder but paranoid king who seems to have died around March of 4 BC (Josephus, *Antiquities* 17.167-191; Matthew 2:1; Luke 1:5). During the



Ancient stone manger found at Nazareth

pregnancy of Mary, a decree for a census of the entire Roman Empire was issued by Caesar Augustus. Since the Herodian Kingdom was a client state of Rome and administrators of Syria Province were responsible for official Roman matters there, the census was directed by a military commander named Quirinius according to Roman protocol (Luke 2:1-2). Emperor Augustus (reigned ca. 27 BC–AD 14) ordered his second known census of the Roman Empire in ca. 8 BC, which appears to be the census associated with the birth of Jesus (Augustus, *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*). Meanwhile, Quirinius was a

commander of legions in Cilicia and Syria to the north, apparently as one of two rulers in Syria Province at the time (Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem*; Tacitus, *Annals*; Josephus, *Antiquities*).

Joseph and Mary traveled to Bethlehem to register for the census because that was the family hometown of Joseph who was in the line of David (Luke 2:3-5). By the time Joseph and Mary arrived in Bethlehem, there was no place for them in the guestroom (*kataluma*) of the house, perhaps because other relatives were occupying the available space during the census. While this word is often translated “inn,” Luke uses it elsewhere clearly as a guestroom or extra room in a house, while a separate word (*pandoxeion*) is used for an actual inn (Luke 22:11; Luke 10:34). It is also unlikely that Bethlehem even had an inn,

since it was only a small Judean village at that time and inns were more common in Hellenistic areas, major highways, and larger cities.

So, they instead went to where the animals were kept at night, which was probably a cave under or adjacent to the house according to early sources. Jesus was then born and placed in a manger in Bethlehem (Luke 2:6-7). The manger would have been stone, which was the typical type of manger used in the area of Bethlehem in ancient times. Stone is abundant and found almost everywhere, while wood that can be used in construction is relatively scarce.

Caves next to, under, or integrated into the house were often used as storage areas for homes in the 1st century. Animals could have been kept in a cave or in a stone pen near the house, while the courtyard of the house would typically not be used for animals. Records that state Jesus was born in a cave rather than in an animal pen, outside, or in a courtyard go back to writings of the 2nd century AD. Excavations in the caves under the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem found evidence that they were used during the Roman period in the 1st century, demonstrating that people in Bethlehem around the time of Jesus did indeed use the caves.

As might be expected of such a significant event for Christianity, over the generations many people remembered and passed on the knowledge of the



Section of the original mosaic floor from the 4th-century Church of the Nativity



birthplace, and specifically the cave, in which Jesus was born, although initially no public building or memorial structure existed there. Prior to the 2nd century AD, many were aware that the birth of Jesus occurred in Bethlehem, and Emperor Hadrian (reigned ca. AD 117–138) even attempted to erase, defile, and syncretize the memory of the birth of Jesus by constructing a shrine to the god Adonis over the cave (Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*; Origen, *Contra Celsum*; Jerome, *Letter 58 to Paulinus*; Anonymous, *Protoevangelium of James*).

However, the memory of the birthplace of Jesus persisted despite the attempts by Hadrian, which may have actually helped preserve the location. After the conversion of Constantine, the emperor ordered a church to be erected over the cave in about 327 AD, which his mother, Helena, oversaw (Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*; Sulpicius Severus, *Sacred History*; Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History*). The Church of the Nativity, mostly completed by AD 333 but totally finished in 339, was one of four major commemorative churches that Constantine had constructed in the Holy Land.

This church had an elaborate mosaic floor, Corinthian columns, five aisles, a nave on the east end, and stairs by the nave that went down into the cave where it was thought that Jesus was born. Although this original version of the church was burned down in the 6th century during the Samaritan revolt, it was rebuilt soon after by Emperor Justinian. Remnants of the original church have survived, including sections of the mosaic floor, foundations, columns, and the cave.

As with many sites and events associated with Jesus, claims have been made that this particular cave was originally a cult site to Adonis, and Christians merely took this site over and built a church there. Yet, multiple writers in the 2nd century AD attested to the birth of Jesus having occurred at this cave, and slightly later sources from antiquity relate that Emperor Hadrian built a shrine to Adonis at the location as part of his wider campaign to obscure the historical memory of Jesus in the hope that Christianity could be eliminated from the Empire (e.g., the Roman temple built over the tomb of Jesus in Jerusalem). Astonishingly, details such as Jesus being born in a village of Judea (Bethlehem) were acknowledged and recounted in the 2nd century AD by a pagan Roman philosopher named Celsus who wrote a polemic against Christianity (Celsus, *The True Word* in Origen, *Contra Celsum*).

Celsus also wrote about Mary and even mentioned the story of the virgin birth of Jesus. The record of the virgin conception and birth of Jesus is found in both the Gospels of Matthew and Luke (Matthew 1:16-25; Luke 1:26-38). A few other New Testament writings suggest knowledge of the virgin birth in early

Christianity (John 8:39-41; Galatians 4:4-5; Romans 1:1-4; Philippians 2:6-8; Hebrews 7:3). According to early church writers, such as Tertullian, Irenaeus, Justin Martyr, Ignatius, and Aristides, the belief in the virgin birth of Jesus was widely accepted in the early 2nd century, rather than invented around that time or later.

In the writings of Celsus, which are partially preserved by quotations referenced by Origen and were probably composed around AD 175, acknowledgment of the belief in the virgin birth of Jesus by Christians is shown to be known even in pagan circles of the 2nd century. Celsus, however, claimed that this was simply a fabricated story and instead offered his own version—that Jesus, who was born in a village of Judea of a poor woman of the country, invented his birth from a virgin because his mother was sent away by her carpenter husband after she was convicted of adultery, and that the biological father was actually a Roman soldier named Pantera (Origen quoting Celsus, *The True Word*, in *Contra Celsus*, 1.28).

Pantera (sometimes rendered Panthera or Pandera, Latin meaning “panther”) was a common male name in use during the Roman period, and representative of a typical Roman legionnaire. The discovery of a 1st-century AD tombstone of a Roman soldier named Tiberius Julius Abdes Pantera, who served around the time of Jesus and was probably about ten years old when Jesus was born, demonstrates usage of the name but would have no connection to the allegation (CIL XIII 7514). This tombstone was discovered in the Roman cemetery at Bingerbrück, and the soldier was from Sidon, but he was only slightly older than Jesus and would not yet have been a soldier. Rather than refuting the story of the virgin birth of Jesus, Celsus demonstrated that the belief was known throughout the Roman world by the 2nd century AD, even by those outside the Christian community. Jesus as the son of Pantera or Pandera is also related by the Jerusalem Talmud around AD 200 and the Tosefta in the 2nd century AD, with the implication that Jesus was conceived out of wedlock. Both Celsus and the Talmud probably received their information from a common story that was circulating in the Roman Empire by the 2nd century.

However, the fact that both Celsus and sources such as the Tosefta recount and retell the unique circumstances surrounding the birth of Jesus demonstrates that knowledge of the nativity story was widespread. It is also important to note that the pagan and Jewish sources do not dispute the birth of Jesus in a village of Judea under what could have been typically regarded as a scandalous situation, with Mary pregnant before the wedding occurred.

Clearly, the ancient accounts, including those outside of the Gospels, state

that Jesus was born in either Bethlehem specifically or in a village of Judea. Yet, a few scholars have even claimed that Jesus was not born in Bethlehem of Judea. These hypotheses are merely unwarranted speculation completely contrary to all the evidence.

Many have also asserted that there is no archaeological evidence that Bethlehem was occupied in the 1st century BC and 1st century AD, and therefore the birth story must be unhistorical. However, recent archaeological excavations in and around the Church of the Nativity have confirmed that the village was indeed occupied during the Roman period and the time of Jesus. Rather than the accounts in Matthew and Luke being historically inaccurate or the only sources relating to the birth of Jesus, the birth itself and various details are both illuminated and corroborated by archaeological discoveries and various writings from antiquity. A thorough examination of the evidence demonstrates that Jesus of Nazareth was born at the end of the 1st century BC in Bethlehem, probably in a cave that was part of a house, and now underneath the Church of the Nativity.

### THE DATE OF THE BIRTH

Traditionally the birth of Jesus Christ is celebrated on December 25, although objections have been made that this date is an inaccurate result of religious syncretism (combining beliefs and practices) or speculation. The most common criticisms of December 25 being a plausible date for the birth of Jesus include allegations that the day was originally a pagan festival day, eventually chosen as a replacement sometime after Christianity was legalized in the Roman Empire, or that the weather during December in Bethlehem does not agree with details in the birth narrative of the Gospel of Luke.

The Roman festival of Saturnalia, honoring the god Saturn, is often cited as the inspiration behind the church-sanctioned date for Christmas, but Saturnalia was celebrated from December 17–23, not on December 25, and therefore it was not a replacement festival or holy day. According to the Gospel of Luke, when Jesus was born, shepherds were watching over their sheep at night in the area outside of Bethlehem (Luke 2:8). Some suggest that if Jesus were born in December, shepherds would not be out in the fields at night because it would be too cold, and thus Jesus must have been born during a warmer month.

However, this claim has two major problems. First, according to weather data, Bethlehem in December is not cold enough to prohibit shepherding or

staying with the flock at night. The average high in Bethlehem in December is 57° F (14° C), the average low is 45° F (7° C), and there is typically about one snow day in the month. Ancient pastoralists in other regions routinely carried out their duties in much colder temperatures, such as the Eurasian steppe, Mongolia, the Himalayan region, and many other areas. Although changes in modern times have been drastic, nearly eliminating the ancient ways of the nomadic pastoralist, one can even today witness shepherding in the Levant during the month of December. These current shepherds, however, usually have some type of permanent structure or location that they live in, rather than setting up temporary structures as they move their herds around the region.

Second, staying with the flock at night by sleeping at the gate of the sheepfold was a common practice of shepherds in pre-industrialized society, and survives today in some areas. The birth narrative in the Gospel of Luke mentioning the shepherds is plausible with what would have been taking place during antiquity around Bethlehem in December.

According to information in the Gospel narratives, synced with dates of festivals from the Law of Moses, another argument can be made for the birth of Jesus in late December. In the Gospel of Luke, Zechariah was carrying out his priestly duties, possibly in connection with the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), which takes place on the tenth day in the month of Tishri (September–October), when he was told that his wife Elizabeth was going to have a child (Luke 1:8-13; Leviticus 23:26-28). Just after the period of Zechariah's priestly service in connection with the holy day, Elizabeth became pregnant during the second half of the month of September (Luke 1:23-24). Six months later, in approximately late March of the following year, Mary became pregnant (Luke 1:26-45). After a nine-month pregnancy, Jesus would have been born around late December.

For those who may object to the idea that Zechariah was participating in duties related to the Day of Atonement or one of the other festivals or holy days in the month of Tishri, evidence from early Christian writings suggests that Jesus was born on the 25th of December. Some of these accounts specifically place the conception of Jesus in late March, as the Gospel of Luke appears to indicate. The church father Irenaeus, writing in the late 2nd century, placed the conception of Jesus on March 25 and the birth of Jesus nine months later on December 25 (Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*). The historian Sextus Julius Africanus of the late 2nd century and early 3rd century, recorded that March 25 was the day of the conception of Jesus Christ, which extrapolates to an approximate

December 25 birth (Sextus Julius Africanus, *Chronographiai*). A commentary from the early 3rd century may also attest to the idea that Jesus was born on December 25 (Hippolytus of Rome, *Commentary on Daniel*).

Another church father writing about the same time, ca. AD 200, recounts that some calculated the birth of Jesus to be the 25th of the Egyptian month of Pachon (Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*). Although it has been proposed that this would equate to May 20 in our current calendar, the ancient Egyptian calendar was originally a wandering calendar prior to the reform of the Coptic calendar. This means that ancient Egyptian months would not consistently correlate to any of our current calendar dates, and the exact year must be known.

Further, Clement only mentions that he had heard of sources making this calculation, and not that it was the accepted date. Finally, in the 4th century, a chronological work states December 25 as the day that Jesus Christ was born in Bethlehem, and another sermon on December 25 commemorated the day as the birth of Christ (Valentinus, *The Chronography of 354*; Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration*).

Interestingly, these accounts are not concerned with the celebration of Christmas, but merely with recording the dates of the conception and birth of Jesus Christ. Therefore, evidence is strong at least for a very early tradition that Jesus was born on the 25th of December. These writings also demonstrate that the date was established prior to Emperor Constantine becoming a Christian and legalizing Christianity throughout the Roman Empire.

Thus, the December 25 date had nothing to do with religious syncretism or attempting to replace pagan holidays with Christian holidays after the legalization of Christianity. In fact, there is not one suggestion in any of the early writings that the date for Christmas was chosen to supplant a pagan celebration, and this idea only appeared in the 12th century and finally became popularized in comparative religion studies of the 19th century. On the contrary, early Christians were not only societal outcasts but also sought to clearly separate their beliefs and practices from those of the imperial cult or other pagan systems. Numerous early manuscripts suggest that the birth of Jesus probably occurred on or around December 25, and it remains a possibility.

## THE MAGI

After the birth in Bethlehem and once the 40 days of purification were completed, Joseph and Mary took Jesus to Jerusalem to offer a sacrifice according to

the Mosaic Law (Luke 2:22-24; Leviticus 12:1-4). There at the temple, the couple offered two birds because they did not have the financial means to purchase a lamb (Luke 2:23-24; Leviticus 12:8).

Excavations from ruins adjacent to the southwest corner of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem found a stone vessel fragment with the Aramaic inscription *QRBN* (“sacrificial offering”) along with a drawing of two upside-down birds dating to the 1st century, illustrating this practice of offering two doves or pigeons as a sacrifice during the time of Jesus. Following an undefined but short time in Jerusalem keeping the requirements of the Law, the three returned to the tiny village of Nazareth, where Joseph and Mary had lived prior to the census (Luke 2:39). It was there in Nazareth that the magi seem to have encountered Jesus when he was a child about two years old or younger, while Bethlehem remains a less probable location due to chronological and narrative issues (Matthew 2:16).

Near the end of the 1st century BC, Joseph, Mary, and Jesus were eventually visited by the enigmatic and misunderstood “magi” from the east (Matthew 2:1-16). Popularly, these magi are often referred to as “three kings,” but very little is known about who these men were, how many there were, or precisely where they came from. The Gospel of Matthew is the earliest surviving record of these mysterious magi who visited Jesus as a young child—the other three Gospels do not mention this occurrence, and no reference is made to their visit in any other New Testament book.

The idea that there were three magi is connected to the three gifts presented to Jesus as recorded by Matthew—gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Although coinage was standard in the 1st century, gold was still used to trade and make purchases, but its wide circulation gives no clue as to the origin or route of the magi. Myrrh, a spice used in anointing and embalming, and frankincense, a valuable resin used in perfume, medicine, embalming, and incense, were both acquired and traded by the Nabateans whose kingdom was based at Petra and stretched east towards the Euphrates River, with trade routes going all the way to the Persian Gulf (Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca Historica*).

These three gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh were also given by Seleucus II Callinicus Pogon in 243 BC as part of an offering to Apollo at Miletus. The offerings and their sources indicate that the magi did come from the east, and that their gifts were appropriate during that period for an offering to divinity.

That Joseph and Mary had to offer two birds at the temple in Jerusalem because they could not afford to buy a lamb for sacrifice is another indicator that

the magi did not visit them and give them the gifts in Bethlehem, including the gold, before they departed for Jerusalem to make the sacrifice (Luke 2:23-24).

At least two apocryphal sources probably composed in the 2nd century AD also discuss the visit of the magi, and multiple early church fathers also include this visit in writings about the birth and early life of Jesus. The *Protoevangelium of James* and its discussion of the magi has been known for centuries, and a 3rd- or 4th-century AD manuscript of this work is still in existence (Papyrus Bodmer 5).

Another ancient manuscript, however, was rediscovered in the Vatican Library and claims to be a first person account of those magi who visited Jesus. Called the *Revelation of the Magi*, the existing copy is an 8th-century AD Syriac manuscript, but the original account may have been composed as early as the 2nd century AD. This document, unfortunately, does not give us all the answers about the magi, nor is it completely consistent with the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke or the visit of the magi in Matthew. It is also considered pseudepigraphal as it was not written by the actual magi who visited Jesus, although it reflects 2nd-century AD knowledge of those magi.

The story claims that the magi who visited Jesus were a large group—at least twelve men rather than three—of monk-like mystics from a distant land called Shir at the shore of the Great Ocean, and descendants of Seth who had been awaiting a centuries-old prophecy that a brilliant star would one day appear to herald the birth of God in human form. This prophecy has been suggested as a possible reference to the star mentioned by Balaam and there may be a veiled reference to it in Isaiah (Numbers 24:17; Isaiah 60:3). While the exact location of Shir is unknown, there are locations in Persia named or containing the component “shir,” and the “Great Ocean” could refer to bodies of water such as the



Magi visiting the infant of Jesus, from the tomb of Severa ca. AD 250

Persian Gulf or Arabian Sea connecting to the Indian Ocean, indicating that Persia was thought to be the region from which they came.

This “star in the east,” star of Jesus, or star of Bethlehem as it is sometimes incorrectly referred to, is only recorded in the Matthew account—the only Gospel that also cites the Old Testament prophecy about Bethlehem from the Book of Micah and the only book in the New Testament that mentions the magi. Because this star, as it is described in Matthew, does not fit the properties of a common star, it has led to much inquiry and speculation, and its identification has often been debated.

The Greek word for “star” (*aster*) used in the New Testament had a variety of meanings in ancient literature, including planet, comet, angel, or light, including a divine light (cf. Matthew 2:1-10; Revelation 1:20). The Hebrew word *kokav*, which is commonly rendered as “star,” is also often used to refer to angels and equated with “the sons of God,” or angelic beings (cf. Job 38:7; Daniel 8:10). Divine lights were also used to guide the Israelites, and one appeared before Paul on the road to Damascus (Exodus 13:21; Acts 9:3). Thus, it is linguistically possible that the “star” could mean an angel or a divinely sent light, and not just a star, comet, or planet.

If the “star” was a planet or a comet, only certain dates for the appearance of the star are possible. A conjunction with Jupiter and Saturn dating from 7 BC has been proposed, or alternatively with Jupiter and Venus in the Leo conjunction in 2 BC. Conjunctions, however, are regular astronomical occurrences and not unique events. Comets have also been suggested, but the closest known comet dates to 11 BC, years before the birth of Jesus, they were often interpreted as bad omens, and they move rapidly across the sky rather than linger and reappear over a long period of time.

In addition to the chronological restrictions—two of which from 11 BC and 2 BC do not agree with known historical information associated with the birth of Jesus found in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke—the language used in the Matthew narrative does not accommodate planets, comets, or even stars. The account of Matthew states that it was the “star” of Jesus and that this “star” moved and went directly over the specific house where Jesus and his family were residing. “The star, which they had seen in the east, went on ahead of them until it came to a stop over the place where the Child was to be found” (Matthew 2:9).

The “star” was described in anthropomorphic terms, as if it were an angelic being or being controlled by an intelligent agent. Matthew states only that a star appeared, as if it had not existed or was not visible before. The star then



disappeared by the time the magi arrived in Jerusalem and saw Herod, which was approximately three weeks of travel from the Babylon area. Finally, once the magi were told of the prophecy about Bethlehem and left their audience with Herod in Jerusalem, the star reappeared with perfect timing, leading them to the exact house and standing over where the child Jesus was with his family in Nazareth (Matthew 2:9; cf. Luke 2:21-39).

The way in which this “star” and its actions are described makes a star, comet, or planet interpretation impossible. Stars, comets, and planets cannot pinpoint an exact location such as a house in the small village of Nazareth. Stars do not disappear and reappear, do not move through the atmosphere of the earth, and do not come to rest over a house. That the star was “leading” the magi is language pointing to a sentient agent, such as an angel or divinely controlled light.

Significantly, the earliest sources outside of the Gospels and the description in Matthew all agree on a single understanding for the star, increasing the probability of a correct interpretation. The *Protoevangelium of James*, composed about AD 140–170, with an existing manuscript from the 3rd century AD, describes the “star of Bethlehem” as an angel that guided the magi. This is the earliest known manuscript that describes the star associated with Jesus.

The recently rediscovered *Revelation of the Magi* relates a similar understanding of the star the magi followed. The story records that the star was a luminous child directing them to Judea, which seems to be the author’s depiction of an angel. This general interpretation is found in various writings, as angels are often associated with bright lights and with guides in ancient literature (Enoch 18:13-16; Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca Historica* 16). Therefore, the usage of “star” in the context of the nativity of Jesus was probably referring to an angel, perhaps projecting a light that guided the Magi from the east to meet and worship Jesus.

Although the *Revelation of the Magi* and the *Protoevangelium of James* contain historical memory and relevant information from antiquity, these stories were written more than a hundred years after the time of Jesus and may not have used eyewitness testimony. While consistency is found in certain details, such as mention of the cave in Bethlehem associated with the birth of Jesus, the visit of the magi, or the identification of the star, other components appear to conflict between sources, such as Joseph and Mary living in a house in Bethlehem or the magi visiting Jesus immediately after his birth (Anonymous, *Revelation of the Magi*). Several particulars may have been fabricated or based on speculation, so caution and comparative analysis should be used when evaluating these sources.

A variety of ancient documents give a more comprehensive and accurate picture of who these magi were. The word *magi* (plural) originally seems to derive from Old Persian *magush*, transmitted through Greek as *magos* (singular) and *magoi* (plural). This Persian word is the origin of the word *mage*, which typically refers to a practitioner of magic. The earliest reference to magi comes from the Old Persian Behistun Inscription of Darius (ca. 520 BC), but it does not give any specific meaning or description. A Greek text of Heraclitus (ca. 6th century BC) claims the magi participated in impious rituals—likely rituals that were contrary to Greek practice.

Later texts are clearer about who magi are and what they do. Herodotus recorded two meanings for magi—one as a tribe of the Medes, and the other as a special caste whose duties included interpretation of omens and dreams (Herodotus, *Histories*). Pliny the Elder wrote that magi practiced some type of magic and wrote magical texts (Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*). Strabo placed them in Media and remarked that they lived a sedentary life, which would accord with their status as scholars, advisors, and astrologers (Strabo, *Geography*). Other Hellenistic period authors additionally associate magi with astrology, magic, and dream interpretation. This association seems to have been generally understood during antiquity, as the Greek term for magi is used in the Septuagint (LXX) version of the Book of Daniel in reference to advisors of Nebuchadnezzar who were consulted for making decisions and interpreting dreams (Daniel 1:20; 2:2; 4:7; 5:7).

In the New Testament, two additional people described as magi are recorded in the Book of Acts—Simon and Elymas (Acts 8:9; 13:8). Details about what specifically these two men did are not included in the text, but Simon is said to perform amazing “magical” acts and Elymas appears to be a trusted advisor of Sergius Paulus the proconsul.

Josephus mentioned magi who were advisors and dream interpreters of Nebuchadnezzar, and he also recounted a later story about a man who pretended to be a magi and seemed to have powerful skills of persuasion working in the court of Felix (Josephus, *Antiquities* 20.142). Texts from the Hellenistic and Roman periods convey the same meanings for magi. All of these texts about magi suggest that the magi who visited Jesus were generally similar in their training and abilities—educated, intelligent men who were experts in astrology, interpreted dreams, and served as advisors to rulers. The magi in Matthew followed a “star” to find Jesus, they were apparently a class of men revered as knowledgeable and wise since they were requested to advise Herod and his

experts about the birth of the Messiah, they were “warned in a dream” to avoid Herod, and they originally came from “the east” (Matthew 2:1-12).

The place in “the east” that the magi traveled from appears to have been either Persia, which encompassed Media after the 6th century BC, or farther south



P52 manuscript fragment of the Gospel of John from ca. AD 90-175

in Chaldea, where the magi class originated and where astrological advisors and dream interpreters called magi had been active for centuries. The reference to “Shir” in the *Revelation of the Magi* suggests the area of Persia. Regardless, both Persia and Chaldea were part of the Parthian Empire in the 1st century BC, and at the time that the magi left to visit Jesus, Phraates IV was king (ca. 37–2 BC). Ancient artwork illustrating the magi who visited Jesus also shows their origin in the Parthian Empire through their distinctive clothing and hats. The way in which these magi are depicted on a visitation of Jesus scene from the tomb of Severa from about AD 250 in Rome matches with images

of Parthian men around the time of the birth of Jesus, including a denarius of Augustus struck in 19 BC showing a Parthian man kneeling in submission and returning the Roman standards captured from the Battle of Carrhae.

It should come as no surprise that masters of astronomical observation, dream interpretation, advisement, and probably divination came from the area of ancient Mesopotamia, since many of these activities had been in practice there for thousands of years prior to the magi mentioned by Matthew. The general information about the magi in the Gospel of Matthew matches what is known from other ancient texts about magi spanning the 6th century BC through the 1st century AD. Although we may never know exactly how many magi visited Jesus, their names, or the specific city they traveled from, the existing ancient texts give a moderate understanding of who they were and demonstrate that the details about them recorded in the Gospel of Matthew are historically consistent.

Manuscript copies of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, containing the

accounts of the birth of Jesus, have survived for nearly 2000 years. Probable 2nd-century AD manuscripts of both Matthew and Luke, including P4, P67, P75, P103, and P104 have preserved sections of the two Gospels that include the nativity narrative in copies that were made only several decades to a little over a century from the original writings.

In addition to Matthew and Luke, secondary sources from antiquity, including even those hostile to Christianity, reference the birth of Jesus and corroborate details found within the narratives. An archaeological and historical analysis of the birth narratives from the Gospels also demonstrates that these accounts are reliable in details such as geographic locations, names and positions of officials, political situations of the era, procedures of the Roman Empire, cultural norms in Galilee and Judea, and that knowledge of specific events around the birth of Jesus was widespread in antiquity.