

# Christ, Jesus, 02: Birth and Infancy Narratives

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Only limited information about the birth and childhood of Jesus can be historically verified, and the earliest narratives have been embellished with elements from the Old Testament and contemporary Jewish and Greco-Roman traditions about events surrounding the birth of famous figures. The oldest references to and narratives of Jesus' birth and childhood are in the New Testament: in Paul's Letter to the Galatians; the Gospels of [Mark](#), [Matthew](#), [Luke](#), and [John](#); the Letter to the Hebrews; and Revelation (all 1st cent. CE). These narratives are extensively developed on in later sources, particularly the *Protevangelium of James* and the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* (both 2nd cent. CE). These infancy gospels are key manifestations within early Christianity of the growing interest in Christ's birth, early years, and family life. Together with the New Testament narratives, they served as reservoirs and models for a number of similar stories from late antiquity and the Middle Ages, and in numerous languages. In later history and until the present, the birth and infancy of Christ and the early Christian narratives about it have continuously served as inspiration for popular legend and piety, Christian theology and doctrine, liturgy, literature, drama, pictorial art of a variety of kinds, and scientific inquiry. Sometimes motifs from birth and [childhood](#) narratives occur earlier in art than in the (preserved) texts; this indicates that there could be mutual interchanges between texts and other media, in which new elements were first introduced for example in pictures or liturgy, and only later were put into words.

In the following, the "birth and infancy/childhood narratives" of Jesus mainly cover the period from his conception until he is 12 years old, but with necessary side glances at his earlier family history and the period up to the start of his ministry at the age of about 30. The presentation, which will be chronological, does not cover all material – the material is very extensive – but focuses on some main sources, stages, and aspects in the development of the traditions on his birth and early life. Within research, some sources have been studied in great detail, whereas others have scarcely received attention, and new material is still being discovered.

## 1st Century CE and New Testament

The elements that have shaped and make up the New Testament birth and infancy stories are of mixed origin:

1. some historical recollections lie at the bottom of the narratives (e.g. the name of Jesus' mother, and Nazareth as his hometown), but these are woven together with
2. early Christian imaginary narrative material, probably primarily orally transmitted (e.g. some pre-Matthean and pre-Lukan material);
3. references to and interpretations of the Old Testament (e.g. Isa 7:14; Mic 5:2);
4. Greco-Roman traditions on the birth of famous religious and political figures, such as emperors, and signs accompanying this (e.g. Suetonius' *The Twelve Caesars*; 121 CE); and finally,
5. the overall theological and other purposes for which each author has used and reshaped these elements.

The data given in the New Testament Gospels (Matt 2:1–12; Luke 2:1–7) do not allow for a precise dating of the year and time of Jesus' birth, and a miscalculation at the introduction of the Julian (modern) [calendar](#) around 500 CE has also added confusion to the matter. Usually, however, the birth of Christ is now thought to have taken place sometime between 6–4 BCE, based on the fact that [Herod](#) the Great, who is said in both Matt 2:1 and Luke 1:5 to have been king of Judea at the time, died in 4 BCE. Although both Matthew (2:1) and Luke (2:4–6) state that Jesus was born in [Bethlehem](#), this is contested, since it inter alia can be deduced from an Old Testament prophecy (Matt 2:5–6, see Mic 5:2).

The indisputably earliest reference to the birth of Christ is in [Paul](#)'s letter to the Galatians (early 50s CE), in which the apostle briefly notes that Jesus was sent as God's Son "when the fullness of time had come [...] born of a woman, born under the law" (Gal 4:4). In the same letter, he also mentions having met Jesus' brother James, the first leader of the earliest Christian community in [Jerusalem](#), on two occasions (1:19, c. 35–38 CE; 2:1–10, c. 48–50 CE), but does not say anything more about other family members. In his introduction to the letter to the Romans (c. 55–56 CE), Paul also alludes to the birth of Christ, stating that he "was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit" (1:3–4).

The oldest Gospel, the Gospel of Mark (70–75 CE), has no reference to Christ's birth. His mother [Mary](#) is mentioned twice, together with his brothers and sisters (3:31–35; 6:3), but focus is on their family relations as adults. In both cases, Mark emphasizes the contrast between Jesus' old family of origin and his new family of believers. Except for the mention of Nazareth as Jesus' earliest hometown (6:1–6), Mark gives no specific information about his childhood. Thus, beyond stating the human birth of Jesus as a matter of fact, the earliest sources (Paul and Mark) show no interest, whether theologically or other, in his birth and early life per se – it does not have a role to play within their theology at large.

Differently from Paul and Mark, Christ's birth and the circumstances surrounding it are considerably developed on in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke (both 75–85 CE), with several similarities between the two, but also marked differences. Important common elements are the focus on Jesus' lineage, his conception by a [virgin](#), Mary and Joseph as his (social) parents, his birth in Bethlehem, the naming of Jesus, and the family's return to Nazareth as his hometown. The common elements in Matthew and Luke are taken partly from their common source Q and partly from material special to each Gospel (the "M Source" and "L Source"), but each author has also adapted the material in accordance with their own theological interests. Except for Luke 2:41–52 (Jesus as boy in the Temple), Matthew and Luke have very little to add about Jesus' family relations and childhood – most of what they say is borrowed from their common source Mark.

Matt 1–2 presents the genealogy of Christ from [Abraham](#) on (1:1–17), the annunciation of his birth to Joseph and the birth itself (1:18–25), the visit of the wise men (2:1–12), the flight of Jesus' family to [Egypt](#) (2:13–15), the massacre of infants (2:16–18), and the family's return to Nazareth (2:19–23). Characteristic features in Matthew's narrative are especially the focus on Joseph (e.g. 1:19–25), the importance of dreams (1:20–21; 2:12; 2:13; 2:19–20), the numerous formula citations referring to the Old Testament ("fulfilment citations," e.g. 1:22 "All this took place to fulfill"), and the prominent role King Herod plays (2:1–22). Outside of the

infancy narrative, Jesus' mother and his adult siblings are mentioned twice (12:46–50; 13:55–56, here only brothers are named). In comparison to Mark, the tension between Jesus' original family and his new family of faith is somewhat softened (12:48–50). Jesus' father is referred to only once, as “the carpenter” (13:55). Given the central position of Joseph in Matt 1–2, his absence in the rest of the Gospel is striking. Historically speaking, this may reflect that Joseph died at an early point of time in Jesus' life, or – as has also been suggested in scholarship – that he was a peripheral figure in Jesus' life, or even unknown. Beyond the mention of his hometown, Matthew too gives no further information about Jesus' childhood.

Luke 1–2, which is about twice the length of Matt 1–2, extends the narrative to events preceding Christ's birth: after the prologue (1:1–5), Luke relates predictions of the birth of John the Baptist to his father Zechariah (1:5–25) and of Jesus to his mother Mary (1:26–38), Mary's visit to her relative Elizabeth (1:39–56), the birth of John and Zechariah's prophecy (1:57–80), the birth of Jesus (2:1–7), the shepherds' vision of the [angel](#) choir (2:8–20), the circumcision and presentation of Jesus in the [Temple](#) in Jerusalem (2:21; 2:22–38), and the family's return to Nazareth (2:39–40). The Gospel rounds off the birth and infancy narratives with the 12 year old Jesus' visit to the Temple (2:41–52). Except for the mention of Nazareth as Jesus' original hometown (see also 4:16), this is the only explicit reference in the New Testament to Jesus' childhood. The historicity of the event is strongly contested in research, but can possibly be taken as evidence that Jesus' family during his childhood had the habit of visiting Jerusalem at Passover (see also John 7:8–10). In addition, Luke after presenting Jesus as the Son of God at the baptism (3:21–22) extends his genealogy back to Adam and, eventually, to God (3:23–38). Differently from Matthew, Luke traces Jesus' genealogy backward and links him up with Adam, as representing humanity as a whole, whereas Matthew starts with Abraham (and [David](#)), and thus specifically links Jesus up with the history of [Israel](#). Characteristic features in Luke's narrative are the hymnic material (esp. 1:46–55; 1:68–79; 2:14; 2:29–32, modeled on OT poetical texts), the attention to Jewish practices and rites (e.g. circumcision, purification time, presentation in the Temple), the central place of [John the Baptist](#) and his family, and the focus on female figures, particularly Mary but also her relative Elizabeth. In spite of her central role in Luke 1–2, Mary is only mentioned once later in the Gospel, and together with Jesus' siblings (8:19–21). Mary and Jesus' siblings are, however, also mentioned once in Acts (1:14). In comparison to Mark and Matthew, Luke deemphasizes the tension between Jesus' family of origin and his new family of believers, leaving it open for his old family also to be part of the new family (8:21). Surprisingly, in 4:16–30 (Jesus in the synagogue in Nazareth) only Joseph and not Mary is mentioned (differently from the parallels in Mark and Matthew). However, Mary may be alluded to in 11:27–28, in a woman's exclamation: “Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you!”

The Gospel of John (80–95 CE) refers only once to the birth of Christ: “For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth” (18:37), and elsewhere only alludes to it: the “[Word](#) became flesh and lived among us” with “the glory as of a father's only son” (1:14), who is “God the only Son” (or “an only Son, God” or “the only Son”, the ancient manuscripts differ; 1:18). Here, “only (Son)” renders Greek *μονογενής/monogenēs*, which does not refer to birth, but to a unique position. Differently from Matthew and Luke, John does not refer to a virginal conception or birth; instead, the singularly close relationship of Jesus with God (Son/Father) is emphasized, to the extent of the idea of Jesus being coeternal with

God (see 1:1–2). Jesus' mother is mentioned three times (2:1–5; 6:42; 19:25), but remains unnamed. She appears, however, at two crucial points in the story, at the start of Jesus' mission and at the [crucifixion](#), and seems to have a symbolic function for John, perhaps signifying the community of believers. Except for one brief reference to Jesus' earthly father (6:42), Joseph is not mentioned at all. Jesus' relationship to his family is configured somewhat differently from the other Gospels: Jesus' siblings never appear together with his/their mother, and they are explicitly said not to believe in him (7:1–10). Nothing at all is said about Jesus' childhood. Clearly, John has no specific interest in these stages in the life of Jesus: the Gospel's focus is strictly on theological matters, in particular on developing on the relationship between Jesus as Son and God as his heavenly Father.

From the data given by the four gospels on Jesus' early life, we are on fairly safe historical grounds in saying that he was born between 6 and 4 BCE, possibly in Bethlehem; that he grew up in Nazareth in Galilee; that his mother was Mary, that his – at least social – father probably was Joseph; and that he had both brothers and sisters (whether the children of Mary and Joseph, or of Joseph), some of whose names (of brothers) are known. Beyond this, the Gospels only supply us with information of a more implicit nature. Since the only story from Jesus' childhood takes place at a point of transition into adult life for a Jewish male at the time (Luke 2:41–52) and is historically unverifiable, we are left with a marked narrative and historical lacuna in Jesus' life, spanning from his early infancy until he is 12. Another even broader lacuna occurs in the years following: nothing is explicitly said about his youth and young adult period until he starts his ministry at about the age of 30 – surprisingly, and very differently from Jesus' early childhood, this long period has scarcely been developed in later tradition. In addition, however, a few more things can be inferred about Jesus' childhood and youth: that he received some basic education that probably made him able to read (Luke 4:16–20; also Mark 2:25) and possibly to write (John 8:6–8); that he probably was early trained as a carpenter, likely by his father (Mark 6:3; Matt 13:55); that he came as a young adult into contact with John the Baptist and his movement (Mark 1:1–9 and parallels); and that there developed some strain in the relations with his family, at least at the start of his adult ministry.

The Letter to the Hebrews (60–95 CE) describes God as the Father of Christ (in a way similar to the Gospel of John), but also as giving birth to Jesus: “For to which of the angels did God ever say, ‘You are my Son; today I have begotten [Gk γεννάω/*gennáō*] you’?” (1:5; also 5:5; see Ps 2:7). In [Revelation](#) (final form in the 90s CE), the birth of Christ is probably described in 12:2 and 5, in the strongly apocalyptically colored language characteristic of this work: here, a woman “clothed with the sun” [...] “was pregnant and was crying out in birthpangs, in the agony of giving birth.” [...] “And she gave birth to a son, a male child, who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron.” None of these writings, however, shows any theological or other interest in, Jesus' birth and early life. This is also the case with the Pastoral Epistles (1–2 Timothy and Titus), even though they display considerable interest in family relations and children's place within the family.

## Transition from the New Testament to Later Periods

Characteristic of post-New Testament times is that the material added does not provide us with any scientifically verifiable information about the early life of the historical Jesus; rather, it should be seen as generally building on and supplementing the canonical (or

rather, later canonized) writings. Characteristic is also the striking continuity in how later generations developed on the earlier material: the same narrative and theological creativity that is visible in later centuries is already at work in the 1st-century CE material. This is said in opposition to much earlier research, which has held that the post-New Testament birth and infancy narratives were qualitatively different from and even inferior to the canonical writings. Instead of setting up a contrast between the early and the later sources, all should be read on their own terms (as interesting in themselves, e.g. for their particular [Christology](#)) and also all as equally reflecting their specific contexts (whether theological, social, or other).

In the subsequent tradition-historical stages of the birth and infancy material, some narrative cycles proved particularly popular: Jesus' family (particularly Mary's but also Joseph's family), Jesus' birth, the wise men, the flight to Egypt, and Jesus' childhood. Over the centuries, these and other cycles developed into a large and vary varied quantity of material, so that the preserved texts on Jesus' birth and childhood make up one of the most voluminous segments of the early Christian apocryphal writings. Probably, much of the transmission and narrative development took place orally and in interplay between the oral and the written.

The reasons for the development of this material are many and complex: clearly, general human curiosity about Christ's early life played an important part, and the scarcity of material in the New Testament Gospels clearly functioned as a call upon posterity to supply the stories with more detail and to fill the considerable narrative gaps. This development was also in the interest of early Christian piety and served to defend and strengthen theological positions, such as the belief in the conception and birth of Jesus by a virgin. The creation of this material was also very much shaped by factors relating to social and ethnic background, gender, and age: in style, format, and contents, the material would appeal to and reflect the interests of specific kinds of audiences, whether the elite or the lower social segments; persons of Greek, Roman, Jewish or other origin; women or men; and children or adults. Some of the material would serve apologetic and polemical aims, even anti-Christian polemical aims.

## 2nd to 3rd Centuries CE

In the 2nd to 3rd centuries CE, traditions on the birth and childhood of Jesus were developed further, with more embellishment and even new elements being added, occasionally with features in tension with the 1st-century CE material. In the 2nd century CE, Jesus' family history and his childhood seem to have been of particular interest. The clearly most important reflections of these developments are the *Protevangelium of James* and the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, which deal with the childhoods of Mary and Jesus, respectively. Both became very popular, even until the Renaissance and beyond, and they were translated into a variety of languages. Within art, scenes depicting the nativity appear on sarcophagi already in the 3rd century CE, and small sculptures from as early as the 4th century CE represent Jesus as a young boy.

In the *Protevangelium of James* (also called the *Infancy Gospel of James* or *Protevangelium Jacobi*; mid/late-2nd cent. CE; Greek), which aims at defending belief in the virginal conception/birth and promoting reverence for Mary, events preceding Jesus' birth are given

ample space, such as the stories about Mary's parents Anna and Joachim (1–4), Mary's childhood (5–8), and her platonic relationship with Joseph (9–16). Jesus' birth is described in the final chapters (17–24; 25 is an epilogue); here, the gospel builds particularly on Matthew's narrative, but adds some new elements, such as time standing still at the birth (18) and the presence of midwives (19–20). Possibly different from Luke (2:7), Jesus is not laid in a manger (Gk φάτνη/*phátne*) at birth, but is born in a cave (18:1, Gk σπήλαιον/*spēlaion*). The birth in a cave is also mentioned by [Justin Martyr](#) as early as circa 160 CE (Just. *Dial.* 78:5). Motifs from the *Protevangelium of James* have been frequently used in both ecclesiastical and secular art, even until the present, and Anna, the mother of Mary, was later made a saint.

The *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* (mid-2nd cent. CE; Greek), which is less literary and more popular in style than the *Protevangelium of James*, tells about Jesus' childhood age 5–12 (with emphasis on 5–8). Its aim was probably to develop on what Jesus might have been like as a human child while at the same time being divine. The gospel consists mainly of stories about his miracles (chs. 2–4; 9–12; 15–16) and his visits to school to learn the alphabet (6–8; 13–14), interspersed with his precocious discussions with adults (e.g. 5; 6). The gospel ends with a retelling of Luke 2:41–52 (17, the boy Jesus in the Temple). To the cycle about Jesus' childhood belong also a number of individual episodes, which turn up at various places in the narrative tradition, some of which may be of equal age with this infancy gospel. Examples are Jesus' raising of a dead baby, his raising of a dead laborer, Jesus and the dyer, and Jesus riding the sunbeam.

The story in Matt 2:1–12 about the wise men (Gk μάγος/*mágos*) proved early to be popular, at least from the late 2nd century CE on, and was frequently embroidered upon. These figures could serve as representatives of wisdom and science, at a time when the emerging Christian movement strived to be regarded a new and ultimate “philosophy.” From the mention of the three gifts brought to Jesus (Matt 2:11), Origen (185–254 CE) deduces that there must have been three magi; no later than in the 6th century CE they are named Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar (in Or. *Exc. Lat.*; Latin, translated from a Greek original). A probably very early and exceptionally extensive version of the story is the *Revelation of the Magi* (2nd–3rd cent. CE; preserved in Syriac). In it, the [Magi](#) are said to be 12 in number (2:3); they are presented as descendants of Seth, the third son of [Adam and Eve](#) (2:6; see Gen 5:3); and the star they follow is Jesus himself (13:10). A related story is the *Liber de Nativitate Salvatoris* (“Book on the Birth of the Savior”; possibly 2nd cent. CE and of Syrian origin; preserved in Latin), which has many features in common with the *Revelation of the Magi*, and at the same time appears to be independent from the *Protevangelium of James*. A later development of the Magi cycle is seen in the popular *Legend of Aphroditianus* (c. 5th cent. CE; preserved in various languages). In it, the statues of the divinities in a temple of Juno fell to their faces when the star appeared, and when the Magi after Jesus' birth returned to the temple, they replaced the statues with a true-to-life painting of Mary and her child. The story of the Magi also became very popular in art: as early as the 4th century CE, it is portrayed on several sarcophagi and in catacomb paintings.

In his *Refutation of All Heresies* (early 3rd cent. CE; Greek), Hippolytus of Rome retells a story about the angel Baruch's visit to the 12 year old shepherd boy Jesus (Hipp. *Haer.* 5.26.29–30). The Nag Hammadi writing *Pistis Sophia* (3rd cent. CE; Coptic) has stories about how Jesus before his birth sowed in Elizabeth and Mary divine power as a preparation for

his own and [John the Baptist](#)'s birth, and how the union of the child Jesus and the [Spirit](#) came about (*Pist. Soph.* 7–8 and 61).

## 4th to 6th Centuries CE

During the 4th to 6th centuries CE, attention seems to have been paid also to other narrative aspects of Jesus' early life: one of the most popular was Jesus' and his family's stay in Egypt (see Matt 2:13–15). This was a period in which Christianity flourished in Egypt. Serapion's *Life of John* (purportedly late 4th cent. CE, in Greek; preserved in Arabic, 7th–8th cent. CE) renders a legend about how the child Jesus while still in Egypt sees and cares for the orphaned John the Baptist, who is on his way in the desert back to Nazareth. In a variant of the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, the story begins with three chapters describing Jesus' stay in Egypt with his family and miracles performed there (Delatte, 1927). The fragmentary single-leaf *Papyrus Cairensis 10735* (6th–7th cent. CE; Greek) mentions the flight to Egypt and Elizabeth's birth of John.

The *Life of the Blessed Virgin Mary* (also called the *Life of Mary*, c. 5th cent. CE; Syriac) combines parts of the *Protevangelium of James* with additional material, such as episodes from the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* and several independent stories. Examples of the latter are stories in which contact with infant Jesus' swaddling bands and bathwater works miracles, or in which Jesus as a child heals persons from his later life, such as the disciples Judas and Thomas. The *Life of Mary* was later translated and reworked to form the *Arabic Infancy Gospel* (also called the *Arabic Gospel of the Infancy*, 8th cent. CE; Arabic). Here, the birth narrative is recounted in chapters 2–35 (out of 55), in which 2–9 deals with events at the immediate time of Jesus' birth, whereas the stay in Egypt is described at considerable length in 10–25. The stay is said to last three years, and focus is particularly on healing miracles. On his way back home from Egypt in 26–35, Jesus performs additional miracles.

Similarly, the *Armenian Infancy Gospel* (also called the *Armenian Gospel of the Infancy* and *Script of the Lord's Infancy*, 6th cent. CE; Armenian), which probably goes back to a lost Syriac source, contains reworked material from the *Protevangelium of James*, episodes from the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, and individual stories from Jesus' childhood in Egypt and Palestine, particularly Galilee. Here, the nativity story is theologically linked with the creation of the first human beings: the midwife assisting at the birth is Eve; however, she arrives only just after the birth itself, which takes place without human intervention. *Ta'amra 'Yasus* ("The Miracles of Jesus"; 6th cent. CE; Ethiopic) is a large collection of stories about Jesus, in which chapter 8 deals with Jesus' childhood.

Representing a fairly isolated narrative cycle is the *History of Joseph the Carpenter* (4th–5th cent. CE, possibly somewhat later; Coptic), in which Jesus himself tells the life story of his earthly father. It may have served as a hagiography for a monastic community with a special relationship to Joseph as a founding figure. Chapters 2–11 (out of 32) is a retelling in particular of elements from the *Protevangelium of James* and the Gospel of Matthew (from Mary's childhood via Jesus' birth to the return to Nazareth from Egypt), but also with the addition of details from the widower Joseph's first marriage. Special attention seems to be given to Jesus' and his family's stay in Egypt (27) and to a mixture of events from his childhood (17).

Motifs from infancy narratives also appear in other segments of the apocrypha. An interesting example of such intertextuality is the *Gospel of Nicodemus* (also called the *Acts of Pilate*, c. 4th cent. CE; Greek), which develops on the [passion](#) of Jesus. At the trial, Jesus has to defend himself against accusations from the Jewish leaders of being born from an act of fornication, that his birth led to the massacre of infants, and that his family fled to Egypt out of fear to face the people (*Acts Pil.* 2:3), a scene that clearly reflects early Christian [apologetics](#).

During these centuries, both the New Testament material and the other early infancy gospels played a central role in the development of the Christian liturgy and ecclesiastical calendar and also in doctrinal debates on the relationship between the divine and the human natures of Christ.

## Later Developments and Reception

As noted above, some of the post-2nd-century CE narratives dealing with Jesus' birth and childhood had their origin in other languages than Greek, the language of the New Testament. In addition, variants of several of the postcanonical Greek narratives were already during the 3rd and 4th centuries CE translated or retold in languages such as [Latin](#), Syriac, and [Coptic](#), and at least from the 6th century CE in Armenian, Ethiopic, and Georgian. From the 6th century CE on, as also indicated, one more trend emerged in both eastern and western Christianity and in various languages, with stories about Jesus' family, birth, and childhood being linked together to form long and continuous narratives. These factors are all evidence of the general popularity and broad dispersion of these kinds of stories. These developments continued also in the period following (from the 7th cent. CE on), with stories being translated, produced, and combined, now in languages such as Irish, Arabic, and Slavonic.

In the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew* (*Liber de ortu beatae Mariae et infantia Salvatoris*, 6th–8th cent. CE; Latin), the *Protevangelium of James* is linked together with additional stories about Jesus' and his parents' stay in Egypt and later in medieval times also with the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* and other stories. In the western area of Christianity, *Pseudo-Matthew* was extremely popular all through the Middle Ages: it is preserved in about 200 manuscripts and was translated into languages such as French, German, Anglo-Saxon, and Welsh.

The *Latin Infancy Gospels: Arundel Form* (J Composition; late 7th–early 8th cent. CE) combines *Pseudo-Matthew* and the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, but from another source adds otherwise unknown events taking place at Jesus' birth (a discussion between Joseph and a son named Symeon, and statements about Jesus and Mary by the midwife and the Magi, chs. 66; 70–76; 93–94) and during the stay in Egypt (a story about a compassionate robber, 111–125). Jesus' birth is here described in considerable detail, but primarily as a manifestation of divine light, not as a real, human birth (72–74).

In Irish, there exists a versified translation of about two thirds of the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* from circa 700 CE (mainly chs. 2–14). Similarly in Irish, *Liber Flavus Fergusiorum* retells the nativity story up to Jesus' birth and *Leabhar Breac* the story from Jesus' birth to the deaths of Herod and Zechariah (both 9th cent. CE); the former mainly takes its point of



departure in the Gospel of Luke and the *Protevangelium of James*, the latter in the Gospel of Matthew.

The Qur'an (7th cent. CE) also preserves traditions from the birth and childhood narratives. In surah 3:45–49, the birth of Jesus is described. In 3:46, it refers indirectly to the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* as a story, and in 3:49 and 5:110 to a specific episode in which Jesus makes 12 clay sparrows come alive (*Inf. Gos. Thom. 2*), with the difference that the Qur'an only speaks of one bird.

The *Toledot Yeshu* ("The Life Story of Jesus"), which is of Jewish origin, can be characterized as a polemical counterbiography of Jesus from a Jewish, Christianity-critical perspective. Here, Jesus is described as illegitimately born, having stolen the "Ineffable Name," performing heretical works, and having died a disgraceful death. This narrative cycle, which is preserved in a variety of forms and languages (e.g. Hebrew, Aramaic, and Latin), and to a large extent transmitted and developed orally, is impossible to date, but probably had its origin in the 3rd–4th century CE, but continued to be developed on far into the High Middle Ages.

## Historiography

The standard work on the New Testament birth and infancy narratives is R.E. Brown (1993); it should be supplemented by J. Corley (2009), which has an updated research history. Standard works on the 2nd century CE infancy gospels are R.F. Hock (1995), R. Aasgaard (2009), and T. Burke (2010), with T. Burke being the standard text-critical edition on the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*. Updated scholarly contributions on the New Testament and later birth and infancy narratives are C. Clivaz (2011) and J. Schröter (2013); both books have introductions that discuss the prospects of further research. General introductions to the New Testament apocrypha, including the infancy gospels and related material, are J.K. Elliott (1996), F. Lapham (2003), H.-J. Klauck (2002), B.D. Ehrman (2003), P. Foster (2009), and T. Burke (2013). Contributions that from various perspectives contextualize the narratives are R.A. Horsley (1989), S.K. Roll (1995), E.D. Freed (2001), D.R. Cartlidge and J.K. Elliott (2001), J.F. Kelly (2004), L.C. Vuong (2013), and S.J. Davis (2014). See the bibliography for individual translations and collections of translations (some of them with parallel primary texts), text critical editions of later sources, and studies of a more specialized nature.

Within research, the New Testament material has been relatively extensively studied, and from a variety of perspectives; some work has also been done on the 2nd-century CE infancy gospels. All the same, much work remains to be done also on these early sources, particularly on issues of context and tradition history. On the later sources, not least the sources in languages other than Greek and Latin, much research is needed, and on textual, contextual, and reception-historical aspects. Some of this material has scarcely been the object of scientific study.

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