

2024
DECEMBER

What about Jesus's Childhood?

by Jim Phillips, Ph.D.

Teaching Fellow, C.S. Lewis Institute

The biblical narrative offers relatively little information about the childhood of Jesus. Instead, the Gospel writers focus on the public ministry chapter of Jesus's life, His teaching, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. Yet many have speculated about Jesus's early years as a child and young adult. One attempt to fill this gap was written by a Gnostic who wrote the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* to conveniently provide the information that we wish were present in the Bible. This account proposes that Jesus was beyond human because of His ability to perform amazing miracles. New Testament scholar Michael J. Kruger describes the *Infancy Gospel* as “a flamboyant and entertaining account” of Jesus's childhood in Nazareth. He continues:

The boy Jesus restores a man's foot after it was injured by an axe, carries water in his cloak after his jug broke, expands a piece of wood to help his carpenter father, jumps off a rooftop without being hurt (did he fly?), plants a single grain of wheat that produces a hundred bushels, and even raises people from the dead.

Despite these miraculous deeds, however, the wunderkind Jesus isn't a net benefit to his hometown. For much of the *Infancy Gospel*, he proves to be a petulant and volatile child, terrorizing the villagers.

As for the origins of the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, Kruger further explains that it was likely written in the late second century:

Such a late date . . . means it couldn't have been penned by Thomas or any other apostle. In fact, the attribution to Thomas is missing in the earliest versions of the *Infancy Gospel*. Thomas's name was likely added sometime in the Middle Ages, probably as a late attempt to bolster the book's credibility.¹

What little information we have in the biblical record refutes the characterization of Jesus's childhood in the *Infancy Gospel* and provides all we need to know about His childhood. There are four biblical references that shape my opinion. First, John tells us that early in Jesus's ministry His brothers did not believe in Him (John 7:5). This suggests that Jesus did not do the miraculous things claimed by the Gnostic writer of the *Infancy Gospel* else it would have left His brothers no choice but to admit His uniqueness, if not divinity. Second, Luke records Jesus becoming separated from His parents at age 12, and it was a day before they noticed His absence (Luke 2:41–52). Luke says they did not notice because they thought He was with their relatives. But this demonstrates their trust in Him—that His being absent for a day did not cause them to be alarmed. I could press this further to say that when they did find Him in the temple—sitting among the teachers, listening to them, asking questions and giving answers—Jesus seemed to be surprised that they would not know He would be in His “Father's house.” This suggests that while

What about Jesus's Childhood?

He may not have been performing miraculous wonders at home in front of His family and brothers, He was trustworthy and mindful of having a special relationship with God.

The last two references involve what His half-brothers, James and Jude, said about Him in their Epistles years after His resurrection. James, in the introduction of his letter, says, “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ” (James 1:1 NIV 1984). And Jude says, “They are godless men, who change the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord” (Jude 1:4 NIV 1984). Both address Jesus as “Lord,” using the same word from the Old Testament that was given to Moses to tell the people who had sent him to deliver them (Exodus 3:15). Jude, in verse 5, credits Jesus as the One who delivered Israel from Egypt.

Something significant happened between John’s record of “even his own brothers did not believe in him” (John 7:5 NIV 1984) and James and Jude calling Him “Lord.” The life, miracles, death, and resurrection of Jesus convinced His brothers that Jesus was divine, their “only Sovereign and Lord.”

These four references suggest the following: First, Jesus’s childhood was not filled with supernatural miracles that would leave one to believe He was divine, as the Gnostic writer suggests, else His brothers would have believed in Him before His ministry began. Second, there is nothing sinister in His childhood that would prevent His brothers from pronouncing His divinity after His life, death, and resurrection; He was not a petulant and volatile child who terrorized the villagers with His fits of rage—as the *Infancy Gospel* would suggest.

Therefore, while we do not know much about the childhood of Jesus, we know enough to see Him as a trustworthy, respectful, human child who had a keen sense of being in a special relationship with His Father. The Gospels also provide us what we need to know from His adult life and ministry to proclaim Him as Lord and Savior.

Questions for discussion: Do you find the biblical narrative sufficient to support the deity of Christ? What more can be said from the biblical narrative of Jesus’s childhood to support His deity? Might God the Father have had good reason for Jesus’ miracles to start after His childhood?

¹“What’s the Earliest Record of Jesus’s Childhood?: Evaluating a New Manuscript of the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*,” July 9, 2024, www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/earliest-record-jesus-childhood/