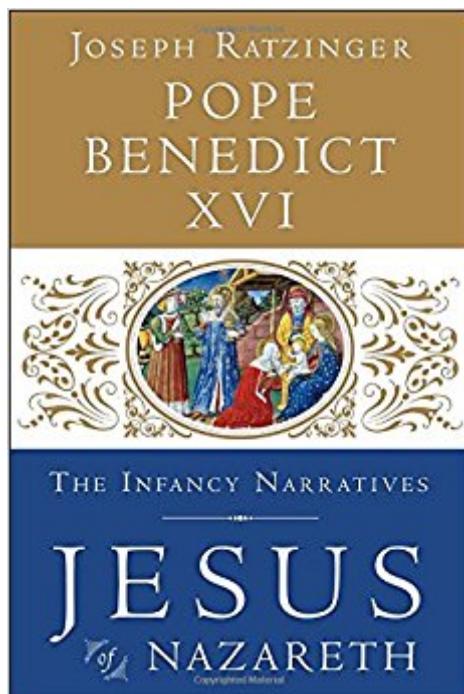


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Jesus Of Nazareth: The Infancy Narratives



Synopsis

The New York Times bestselling final volume in the Pope's Jesus of Nazareth series, detailing how the stories of Jesus' infancy and childhood are as relevant today as they were two thousand years ago. In 2007, Joseph Ratzinger published his first book as Pope Benedict XVI in order "to make known the figure and message of Jesus." Now, the Pope focuses exclusively on the Gospel accounts of Jesus' life as a child. The root of these stories is the experience of hope found in the birth of Jesus and the affirmations of surrender and service embodied in his parents, Joseph and Mary. This is a story of longing and seeking, as demonstrated by the Magi searching for the redemption offered by the birth of a new king. It is a story of sacrifice and trusting completely in the wisdom of God as seen in the faith of Simeon, the just and devout man of Jerusalem, when he is in the presence of the Christ child. Ultimately, Jesus' life and message is a story for today, one that speaks to the restlessness of the human heart searching for the sole truth which alone leads to profound joy.

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Customer Reviews

JOSEPH RATZINGER, Pope Benedict XVI, born in 1927 in Germany, was head of the Roman Catholic Church from 2005 to 2013. A prolific author, theologian and university professor, Ratzinger served as an "expert" at the Second Vatican Council, and was tapped in 1977 by Pope Paul VI to lead the German Archdiocese of Munich and Freising. In 1981, Pope John

Paul II called him to Rome to head the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, where he served until his papal election.

Chapter 1 "Where Are You From?" (John 19:9) The question about Jesus' origin as a question about being and mission While he was interrogating Jesus, Pilate unexpectedly put this question to the accused: "Where are you from?" Jesus' accusers had called for him to receive the death penalty by dramatically declaring that this Jesus had made himself the Son of God-a capital offense under the law. The "enlightened" Roman judge, who had already expressed skepticism regarding the question of truth (cf. Jn 18:38), could easily have found this claim by the accused laughable. And yet he was frightened. The accused had indicated that he was a king, but that his kingdom was "not of this world" (Jn 18:36). And then he had alluded to a mysterious origin and purpose, saying: "For this I was born and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth" (Jn 18:37). All this must have seemed like madness to the Roman judge. And yet he could not shake off the mysterious impression left by this man, so different from those he had met before who resisted Roman domination and fought for the restoration of the kingdom of Israel. The Roman judge asks where Jesus is from in order to understand who he really is and what he wants. The question about Jesus' provenance, as an inquiry after his deeper origin and hence his true being, is also found in other key passages of Saint John's Gospel, and it plays an equally important role in the Synoptic Gospels. For John, as for the Synoptics, it raises a singular paradox. On the one hand, counting against Jesus and his claim to a divine mission, is the fact that people knew exactly where he was from: he does not come from heaven, from "the Father," from "above," as he purports to (Jn 8:23). No: "Is not this Jesus, whose father and mother we know? How does he now say, 'I have come down from heaven'?" (Jn 6:42). The Synoptics tell of a similar dispute that arose in the synagogue at Nazareth, Jesus' hometown. Jesus had explained the words of sacred Scripture not in the customary manner, but by relating them to himself and his mission with an authority that went beyond the bounds of all exegesis (cf. Lk 4:21). The listeners were understandably shocked by this treatment of Scripture, by the claim that he himself was the inner point of reference and the key to exegesis of the sacred text. Shock led to denial: " 'Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?' And they took offense at him" (Mk 6:3). They know perfectly well who Jesus is and where he comes from-he is one among others. He is one like us. His claim can only be presumption. Moreover, Nazareth was not associated with any such promise. John recounts that Philip said to Nathanael: "We have found him of whom Moses in the law and also the prophets

wrote: Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." Nathanael's response is well known: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (Jn 1:45f.). The ordinary-dinariness of Jesus, the provincial carpenter, seems not to conceal a mystery of any kind. His origin marks him out as one like any other. Yet the reverse argument is also adduced against Jesus' authority, as in the dispute with the man born blind, after he received his sight: "We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man [Jesus], we do not know where he comes from" (Jn 9:29). When Jesus preached in their synagogue, the people of Nazareth had said something rather similar, before dismissing him as someone well-known to them and just like them: "Where did this man get all this? What is the wisdom given to him? What mighty works are wrought by his hands!" (Mk 6:2). Here too the question "where is he from?" arises- only to be dismissed straight away by the reference to his relatives. Jesus' provenance is both known and unknown, seemingly easy to establish, and yet not exhaustively. In Caesarea Philippi, Jesus will ask his disciples: "Who do people say that I am? . . . Who do you say that I am?" (Mk 8:27ff.). Who is Jesus? Where is he from? The two questions are inseparably linked. The four Gospels set out to answer these questions. They were written in order to supply an answer. Matthew opens his Gospel with Jesus' genealogy because he wants to put the question of Jesus' provenance in the correct light from the very beginning: the genealogy serves as a kind of heading to the entire Gospel. Luke, on the other hand, places Jesus' genealogy at the beginning of his public ministry, as a kind of public presentation of Jesus, in order to answer the same question with a different emphasis-in anticipation of all that is about to unfold in the rest of the Gospel. Let us now try to understand more closely the essential purpose of the two genealogies. For Matthew, two names are of key significance if we are to understand Jesus' provenance: Abraham and David. The story of the promise begins with Abraham, following the dispersal of mankind after the building of the Tower of Babel. Abraham points ahead to what is yet to come. He is a wayfarer, not only from the land of his birth into the promised land, but also on the journey from the present into the future. His whole life points forward, it is a dynamic of walking along the path of what is to come. Thus the Letter to the Hebrews rightly presents him as a pilgrim of faith on the basis of the promise: "He looked forward to the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God" (11:10). For Abraham, the promise refers in the first instance to his descendants, but it also extends further: "all the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by him" (Gen 18:18). Thus the whole history, beginning with Abraham and leading to Jesus, is open toward universality- through Abraham, blessing comes to all. From the beginning of the genealogy, then, the focus is already on the end of the Gospel, when the risen Lord says to the disciples: "Make disciples of all nations" (Mt 28:19). In the particular history revealed by the genealogy, this

movement toward the whole is present from the beginning: the universality of Jesus' mission is already contained within his origin. Both the genealogy and the history that it recounts are largely structured around the figure of David, the king to whom the promise of an eternal kingdom had been given: "Your throne shall be established for ever" (2 Sam 7:16). The genealogy that Matthew puts before us is steeped in this promise. It is constructed in three sets of fourteen generations, at first rising from Abraham to David, then descending from Solomon to the Babylonian captivity, and then rising again to Jesus, in whom the promise comes to fulfillment. The king who is to last for ever now appears-looking quite different, though, from what the Davidic model might have led one to expect. This threefold division becomes even clearer if we bear in mind that the Hebrew letters of the name "David" add up to fourteen: even in terms of number symbolism, then, the path from Abraham to Jesus bears the clear imprint of David, his name and his promise. On this basis one could say that the genealogy, with its three sets of fourteen generations, is truly a Gospel of Christ the King: the whole of history looks toward him whose throne is to endure for ever. Matthew's genealogy traces the male line, but in the course of it, prior to Mary who appears at the end, four women are mentioned by name: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and the wife of Uriah. Why do these women appear in the genealogy? By what criterion are they chosen? It has been said that all four women were sinners. So their inclusion here would serve to indicate that Jesus took upon himself their sins-and with them the sins of the world-and that his mission was the justification of sinners. But this cannot have been the determining factor for the selection, not least because it does not in fact apply to all four women. More important, none of these women were Jewish. So through them the world of the Gentiles enters the genealogy of Jesus-his mission to Jews and Gentiles is made manifest. Yet most important of all is the fact that the genealogy ends with a woman: Mary, who truly marks a new beginning and relativizes the entire genealogy. Throughout the generations, we find the formula: "Abraham was the father of Isaac . . ." But at the end, there is something quite different. In Jesus' case there is no reference to fatherhood, instead we read: "Jacob [was] the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ" (Mt 1:16). In the account of Jesus' birth that follows immediately afterward, Matthew tells us that Joseph was not Jesus' father and that he wanted to dismiss Mary on account of her supposed adultery. But this is what is said to him: "That which is conceived in Mary is of the Holy Spirit" (Mt 1:20). So the final sentence turns the whole genealogy around. Mary is a new beginning. Her child does not originate from any man, but is a new creation, conceived through the Holy Spirit. The genealogy is still important: Joseph is the legal father of Jesus. Through him, Jesus belongs by law, "legally," to the house of David. And yet he comes from elsewhere, "from above"-from God himself.

The mystery of his provenance, his dual origin, confronts us quite concretely: his origin can be named and yet it is a mystery. Only God is truly his "father." The human genealogy has a certain significance in terms of world history. And yet in the end it is Mary, the lowly virgin from Nazareth, in whom a new beginning takes place, in whom human existence starts afresh. Let us take a look now at the genealogy found in Luke's Gospel (cf. 3:23-38). Several differences strike us vis-à-vis the list of ancestors supplied by Saint Matthew. We have already established that this genealogy introduces the public ministry, it so to speak legitimizes Jesus in his public mission, whereas Matthew presents the genealogy as the very start of the Gospel, proceeding from there to the account of Jesus' conception and birth, and thus unfolding the question of his provenance in its dual significance. A further striking difference is that Matthew and Luke agree on only a handful of names; not even the name of Joseph's father is common to the two. How can this be? Apart from elements drawn from the Old Testament, both authors have based themselves on traditions whose sources we cannot reconstruct. It seems to me utterly futile to formulate hypotheses on this matter. Neither evangelist is concerned so much with the individual names as with the symbolic structure within which Jesus' place in history is set before us: the intricacy with which he is woven into the historical strands of the promise, as well as the new beginning which paradoxically characterizes his origin side by side with the continuity of God's action in history. A further difference consists in the fact that whereas Matthew climbs from the beginnings-from the root-to the present, to the top of the "tree," Luke on the contrary descends from Jesus, the "treetop," down to the roots, in order to show that in the end the ultimate root is found not in the depths but rather in the "heights"-God is there at the beginning of human existence: "Enos, the son of Seth, the son of Adam, the son of God" (Lk 3:38). An element common to Matthew and Luke is that the genealogy breaks off and comes to a stop when it reaches Joseph: "Jesus, when he began his ministry, was about thirty years of age, being the son (as was supposed) of Joseph" (Lk 3:23). Legally he was considered Joseph's son, as Luke tells us. Yet Jesus' true origin had already been made clear in the first two chapters of Luke's Gospel. Whereas Matthew gives a clear and theologically symbolic structure to his genealogy, with its three sets of fourteen names, Luke arranges his 76 names without any outwardly recognizable pattern. Yet here too a symbolic structuring of historical time can be detected: the genealogy contains eleven times seven members. Luke may have known the apocalyptic formula that divides world history into twelve parts and at the end consists of eleven times seven generations. So this could be a discreet way of indicating that with Jesus "the fullness of time" had come, that with him the decisive hour of world history had dawned: he is the new Adam, who once again comes "from God"-but in a more radical way than the

first Adam, not merely breathed into being by God, but truly God's "Son." While for Matthew it is the Davidic promise that permeates the symbolic structuring of time, Luke, in tracing the line back to Adam, wants to show that humanity starts afresh in Jesus. The genealogy expresses a promise that concerns the whole of humanity. In this connection, another reading of Luke's genealogy is worth mentioning, one that we find in the writings of Saint Irenaeus. The text he was using had not 76 but 72 names. 72 (or 70) was the number, derived from Ex 1:5, that indicated the number of people in the world-a figure that appears in the Lucan tradition of 72 (or 70) disciples, whom Jesus set alongside the twelve Apostles. Irenaeus writes as follows: "To prove this, Luke shows that the genealogy of our Lord, which extends to Adam, contains seventy-two generations, and so he joins the end to the beginning and points out that it is he [Christ] who recapitulates in himself all the nations that had been dispersed from Adam onward, and all the tongues, and the human race, including Adam himself. Hence Paul, too, styled Adam a type of the one who was to come" (Adv. Haer. III, 22,3). Even if the authentic Lucan text does not contain at this point the symbolism of the 70, on which Saint Irenaeus' exegesis depends, nevertheless the underlying intention of Luke's genealogy is correctly grasped here. Jesus takes upon himself the whole of humanity, the whole history of man, and he gives it a decisive re-orientation toward a new manner of human existence. John the evangelist, who repeatedly raises the question of Jesus' provenance, does not present a genealogy at the beginning of his Gospel, but in the Prologue he grandly and emphatically proposes an answer to that question. At the same time he expands his answer to the question into a definition of Christian life: on the basis of Jesus' provenance he sheds light upon the identity of his followers. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . and the Word became flesh and dwelt [pitched his tent] among us" (Jn 1:1-14). The man Jesus is the dwelling-place of the Word, the eternal divine Word, in this world. Jesus' "flesh," his human existence, is the "dwelling" or "tent" of the Word: the reference to the sacred tent of Israel in the wilderness is unmistakable. Jesus is, so to speak, the tent of meeting-he is the reality for which the tent and the later Temple could only serve as signs. Jesus' origin, his provenance, is the true "beginning"-the primordial source from which all things come, the "light" that makes the world into the cosmos. He comes from God. He is God. This "beginning" that has come to us opens up-as a beginning-a new manner of human existence. "For to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God; who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God" (Jn 1:12f.). One version of the manuscript tradition preserves a reading of this sentence not in the plural but in the singular: "who was born, not of blood . . ." This makes the sentence into a clear reference to the virginal conception and birth of Jesus.

Jesus' being from God, as affirmed by the tradition preserved by Matthew and Luke, would be concretely underlined once more. But this is only a secondary reading: the authentic text of the Gospel speaks quite clearly here of those who believe in Christ's name and who receive a new origin through that name. Yet the connection with the confession of Jesus' birth from the Virgin Mary is undeniably present: those who believe in Jesus enter through faith into Jesus' unique new origin, and they receive this origin as their own. In and of themselves, all these believers are initially "born of blood and of the will of man." But their faith gives them a new birth: they enter into the origin of Jesus Christ, which now becomes their own origin. From Christ, through faith in him, they are now born of God. So John has recapitulated the deepest meaning of the genealogies, and moreover he has taught us to understand them as an interpretation of our own origin, our true "genealogy." Just as the genealogies break off at the end, because Jesus was not begotten by Joseph, but was truly born of the Holy Spirit from the Virgin Mary, so it can now be said of us that our true "genealogy" is faith in Jesus, who gives us a new origin, who brings us to birth "from God."

This was my first exposure to the writings of Pope Benedict, and I was blown away by how well he takes complex (and intimidating) ideas and concepts and puts them into common and meaningful terms for the non-scholar reader. I was under the impression that as a religious scholar his works would be of a level beyond the typical layman; however, this and the subsequent two books on Jesus of Nazareth are thought-provoking, educating, and quite easy to read. What sets Pope Benedict's writing apart is his ability to weave the life of Jesus into historical context, one that aligns with non-Biblical history, to help the reader see how it all fits. This particular book covers the aspects of the Old Testament that prophecy the birth of Jesus as well as the events directly leading up to his birth and what we know of his youth. The two other books in the series - "From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration" and "Holy Week..." - complete the story.

I am currently participating in a book club in my parish and this was our December read. I'm so glad! This is an absolutely lovely little book - very clear, very insightful, easy to read and profound. Don't miss this one!

In what amounts to Vol I of a three volume work (though NOT the first written), Benedict XVI continues to debunk not-so-scholarly scholars who would attempt to use biblical criticism to debunk the Faith! The four chapters of this work cover "WHERE ARE YOU FROM", THE ANNUNCIATION OF THE BIRTH OF JOHN THE BAPTIST AND THE ANNUNCIATION OF THE BIRTH OF JESUS,

THE BIRTH OF JESUS IN BETHLEHEM, and THE WISE MEN FROM THE EAST AND THE FLIGHT INTO EGYPT. The Epilogue covers THE TWELVE YEAR OLD JESUS IN THE TEMPLE. I found this volume to be deceptively thin. It is NOT quick, easy beach reading. Benedict evidences profound insights in each paragraph. After "Volume II" S intro, AN INITIAL REFLECTION ON THE MYSTERY OF JESUS, Benedict XVI follows with chapters on THE BAPTISM OF JESUS and THE TEMPTATIONS OF JESUS. Specifically discussing Jesus' temptation by the devil in the latter, he notes in a seemingly wry manner: "The devil proves to be a Bible expert who can quote the Psalm exactly. The whole conversation of the second temptation takes the form of a dispute between two Bible scholars. Remarking on this passage, Jonathan Gnilka says that the devil presents himself here as a theologian....The alleged findings of scholarly exegesis have been used to put together the most dreadful books that destroy the figure of Jesus and dismantle the faith" (p. 35). Wow! The third chapter focuses on THE GOSPEL OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD, while the fourth Chapter is dedicated to THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT, the fifth to THE LORD'S PRAYER, the sixth to THE DISCIPLES, the seventh to THE MESSAGE OF THE PARABLES, the eighth to THE PRINCIPAL IMAGES OF JOHN'S GOSPEL, the ninth to TWO MILESTONES ON JESUS' WAY: PETER'S CONFESSION AND THE TRANSFIGURATION, and the final chapter to JESUS DECLARES HIS IDENTITY.

I had no idea that the pope was such a good communicator. His style is conversational, and easy to follow. Although his positions are based on scholarly research, the text is not tedious or overly academic. A very good read. I was able to read this book in two evenings.

Pope Benedict XVI's book on Jesus up to his visit to the temple, is a surprisingly enjoyable and insightful read. While having the thorough approach of a well-researched work it is very readable and brings fresh insights into Jesus's early life on earth as well as the amazing faith of Mary and Joseph. Whether you are a member of the Catholic Church or not (I am not) this book is excellent reading and provides some fresh insight. Whether pointing out Mary's faith in accepting the Holy Spirit's blessing or the timing of Jesus presenting his message during the Roman Empire's greatest expansion, The Infancy Narratives pragmatically present the historical significance of Jesus as well as the spiritual and religious aspects of his life. All of this is wrapped in an enjoyable reading format. An excellent example, typical of the whole book, is the context of how the wise men would have found Jesus: "In our story both elements can be seen in the first instance, the star leads the wise men as far as Judea. It is quite natural that their search for the newborn king of the Jews

should take them to Israel's royal city and to the king's palace. That, surely, is where the future king must have been born. Then they need the direction provided by Israel's sacred Scriptures-the words of the living God-in order to find the way once and for all to David's true heir."I would highly recommend this short book to anyone who would like to reflect on Jesus. The focus on Jesus and the faith of those around him is during a period of his life frequently given just brief attention. An especially relevant read for the Christmas season.

In my opinion this third volume of Joseph Ratzinger's life of Jesus, is not as satisfactory as the two previous ones. Some significant studies on the infancy narratives are not taken into account or even mentioned, and some important episodes are completely left aside (such as the Visitation). Instead minor points are elaborated needlessly. I believe the informed reader will find here few new insights.

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