

# Scripture **from** Scratch

*A popular guide to understanding the Bible*



Illustrations by Vicki Shuck

## The Family of Jesus

By Elizabeth McNamer

All Christians are familiar with the story of the birth of Jesus. In Luke's Gospel we read the story of Joseph and Mary traveling from Nazareth to Bethlehem for the census. In Matthew, we read of wise men from the East consulting with King Herod about the place of the Messiah's birth.

Matthew then tells us that Jesus' parents took him to Egypt and remained there for about two years before returning to and settling in Nazareth.

We learn no more until Luke tells us about an incident when Jesus was 12 years old and got lost in the Temple at Jerusalem. Jesus returns to Nazareth and we hear nothing again until he is 30 years old and starts his public ministry.

## Brothers, Sisters and Cousins

Luke's Gospel refers to John the Baptist being a cousin. We hear nothing about siblings in the infancy narratives. It comes as a surprise, then, when we read in Mark's Gospel: "His mother and his brothers arrived and as they stood outside they sent word to him to come out" (Mark 3:31). Later we are told that their names are James, Jude, Simon and Joses; sisters are also mentioned.

Two letters in the New Testament purport to have been written by brothers of the Lord. Where did they come from, particularly if Mary was a virgin, as Catholic Tradition teaches?

St. Jerome, in the fourth century, refers to these four as cousins of Jesus. It is not unusual in the Middle East to refer to cousins who grew up together as brothers and sisters. Orthodox tradition proposes that they were children of Joseph by a former marriage. Jesus apparently grew up in a lively household at Nazareth.

### Nazareth

Nazareth was a small hamlet in Galilee. Archaeology testifies that it had about 120 inhabitants at the time of Jesus and was occupied from about a hundred years prior to his birth.

Between 700 B.C. (the time of the conquest by the Assyrians) and 100 B.C., Galilee was occupied by non-Jewish tribes. In fact, it was known and referred to by Isaiah as "Galilee of the Gentiles." But the land was conquered in 120 B.C. by one of the Hasmoneans, John Hyrcanus. He issued an order that all people who lived there either become Jews by circumcision or leave the place. Naturally many opted for



the latter. An invitation was then issued to Jews who were still living in Babylon after the Exile to return to Galilee. At this time, it is believed, the family (tribe) of Jesus returned from exile.

We learn from the writings of the early Church historian, Eusebius, who quotes from a letter written in 200 A.D. by Julius Africanus to Aristides, that the blood relatives of Jesus had settled in Nazareth and in Kochaba, which lies on the east side of the Jordan River, on the pilgrimage route between Babylon and Jerusalem.

This clan considered themselves the "royal family." They preserved their Davidic genealogies. The names they gave to their villages are significant. In Hebrew, *Kochaba* means "star of" (David) and *Nezer* means "shoot of" (Jesse). These people considered themselves to be the legitimate descendants of King David (son of Jesse).

There were expectations of the coming of a Messiah, and the main qualification was that he be a descendant of David. We notice in Matthew's Gospel the importance of connecting Jesus with David and the many references to him as "son of David." It is of interest that King Herod had tried to alter his own genealogy to connect himself to David.



## Praying With Scripture

- Look up the references to the family of Jesus as given in this article. Pray for the grace to treat your family and those you love with consideration and compassion even when their ideas are different than yours.

### Family Business

The Gospels tell us that Joseph and presumably his sons (since trades were usually passed down the generations) were builders. The word *tehton* in Greek is more akin to "master builders." They built more than tables and chairs. Not much building would have been going on in Nazareth, a village of 120 people. But much building was going on in towns around them. The town of Sepphoris was being rebuilt at this time by Herod Antipas.

Jesus left Nazareth at about the age of 30 and, after his baptism by John the Baptist, began his public ministry in the cosmopolitan area around the Sea of Galilee. He chose fishermen from this district as his disciples, and we hear very little of his family. At one point when he returned to Nazareth they tried to throw him over a cliff (Luke 4:29), and at another they came after him in Capernaum and suggested that he be locked up (Mark 3:21).

There seems to have been tension between Jesus' disciples and his brothers. We read a revealing little incident in the Gospel of John: "But when the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles was near, Jesus' brothers said to him, 'You ought to leave here and go to Judea, so that your disciples may see the miracles that you do. No one who wants to become a public figure acts in secret. Since you are doing these things, show yourself to the world.' For even his own brothers did not believe in him" (7:2-5).

## Rise to Prominence

After Jesus' death and resurrection, his family becomes prominent. Paul's letter to the Corinthians tells us that Jesus appeared to his brother James after the resurrection. We find them present with his disciples in the upper room at Pentecost (Acts 1:14).

Eusebius says that a large clan of relatives of Jesus was gathered around James in Jerusalem. Many may have moved even before the death of Jesus. While none of them had been active in his ministry, they were now believers. These people were builders by trade and needed work. Much building was going on in Jerusalem, where the Temple was still under construction, and in the surrounding villages. Emmaus was among the villages that had been destroyed by the Romans and perhaps was one of those being rebuilt at this time. Cleopas (whom tradition tells us was a brother of Joseph) and his companion (his son Simon?), who met up with Jesus on Easter Sunday (Luke 24:18), may have worked there.

Immediately after Pentecost, Peter and John took the lead in the Jerusalem church. As time goes on we hear more and more about James. Peter and the others move off stage after persecution starts in the church and James comes to the fore. We do not know what became of most of his family, but Paul implies that they traveled and preached in the company of their wives (1 Corinthians 9:5). James takes the lead in the Council of Jerusalem when the important decision has to be made about allowing gentiles to join the church without

circumcision. This took an infinite amount of courage from one who had grown up as a strict observer of the law. But James was able to adapt.

From extra-biblical sources we learn that James became the leader of the church in Jerusalem because of "his extraordinary piety and his Jewish loyalty." He was known as James the Righteous (the *Tzadic*). The apocryphal Gospel of Thomas informs us, "When Jesus is asked 'Where are we going after you?' he says, 'Go to James.'" He was the one to be consulted.



## Descendants of David

James was conscious of being of Davidic descent. At the Council of Jerusalem, he refers to the prophecy of Amos: "Hereafter I will return and rebuild the fallen house of David: from its ruins I will rebuild it and set it up again" (Acts 15:16). In the Jerusalem church, from which all the other churches sprang, he was the obvious one to take leadership. He was Jewish, and loyal to Jewish custom. He lived his life in Jerusalem. Tradition has it that he had a house on Mount Zion

and that Mary, the mother of Jesus, whom James greatly loved, lived out her life there too. She died seemingly at about the time of the Council of Jerusalem in 49 A.D.

Reading between the lines of Scripture, however, we find that James was often at loggerheads with Paul. Paul was the apostle to the gentiles. James had backed up Paul at the Council of Jerusalem on the matter of circumcision, but later when Paul brought gifts to the church in Jerusalem, James had him prove his loyalty to Judaism by performing certain Jewish rituals (Acts 21:21-26).

Many scholars are now of the opinion that the Letter of James was actually written by the brother of Jesus. The Letter of Jude also is said to be written by a brother of Jesus, although scholars are divided as to whether it is a pseudonymous letter. In any case, even an attribution indicates that Jude was an important person in the church.

## The Death of James

Eusebius tells us that when Paul was sent to Rome, his enemies turned their venom on the church in Jerusalem. Their attack on Paul had really been aimed at the head of the Nazoreans on Mount Zion, but James's respectable lifestyle and his good reputation among the people foiled any action against him for a while. The opportunity arose at Easter of 62. Josephus (*Antiquities* 20. 197-203) tells us that the Roman consul Festus had died and a new procurator was on his way. Before he arrived, the high priest, Anan, planned the attack against the Lord's brother and succeeded in having him lynched.

The Jewish leaders demanded that James, now in his 70s, make a public declaration of his adherence to the Jew-



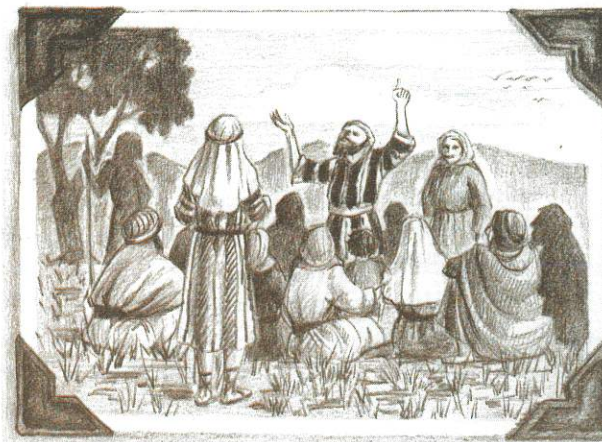
## Living the Scriptures

- **Resolve to listen more to what your children and spouse tell you. Maybe they will not always agree with you or you with them. Respect the differences, but don't let these alienate you from them.**

ish faith through a gesture in the Temple. They stood him up on the parapet of the sanctuary of the Temple so that all around could hear his words. We learn from an early writer, Hegesippus, that James showed “undreamed of fearlessness” in the face of the throng and instead gave a splendid sermon insisting that Jesus was the Son of God. Some among the crowd were convinced by his words and began to chant, “Hosanna to the son of David.” This further enraged the authorities, who rushed at him and threw him off the parapet, a drop of some 100 feet. But seeing that he was not dead from the fall, they stoned him and finally clubbed him on the head. When the Roman proconsul arrived, he had the high priest removed for acting illegally.

After the death of James, the leaders of the church came together to choose a successor and the lot fell to Simon, son of Cleopas, and cousin of Jesus. Simon was to lead the Jerusalem church through much turmoil for the next 40 years.

The Zealots rebelled against Roman rule and precipitated the Roman Jewish wars, which were to end in the complete destruction of the Temple and of Jerusalem. Simon took his flock and fled across the Jordan to Pella until things settled down. When they returned to Jerusalem, a shrine of Jupiter had been erected on the Temple



grounds and, Hegesippus tells us, the emperor had ordered the execution of all descendents of David.

Eusebius writes: “And those who survived of the Lord’s family were grandsons of Jude, who was said to be His brother, humanly speaking. These were informed against as being of David’s line, and brought by the *evocatus* before Domitian Caesar, who was as afraid of the advent of Christ as Herod had been. Domitian asked them whether they were descended from David and they admitted it....When asked about Christ and His Kingdom what it was like, and where and when it would appear, they explained that it was not of this world or anywhere on earth but angelic and in heaven, and would be established at the end of the world, when He would come in glory to judge the living and the dead and give every man payment according to his conduct. On hearing this, Domitian found no fault with them but despising

them as beneath his notice let them go free and issued orders terminating the persecution of the Church.” In 105, Simon was betrayed, so Eusebius tells us, by a member of a heretical sect and tortured for several days before being crucified. The place of Simon Bar Cleopas was taken by Justus, who was also of the family of Jesus, a descendant of David. Until 135, at the time

of the rebellion of Bar Kochaba, the bishops of Jerusalem continued to be of the family of Jesus. After that time, Jews were forbidden to live in Jerusalem and gentile bishops took over. ■

*Elizabeth McNamer, one of the general editors of Scripture From Scratch and a frequent contributor, teaches at Rocky Mountain College in Billings, Montana.*

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## Talking About Scripture

- **Jesus seems to have separated himself from his family during his public ministry and they seem to have been bitter about this. Do we always know when to give space to our children as they grow?**
- **Does the knowledge that Jesus grew up in a large family change your idea of Jesus in any way?**



## Reading About Scripture

- **Eusebius. *The History of the Church*. New York: Dorset Press, 1965.**