CHAPTER II

A BRIEF BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF JESUS CHRIST

2.1 INTRODUCTION

To begin with, Jesus Christ did not write autobiography. The four gospels of the New Testament in the Holy Bible are the major primary and practical source of information available to any researcher. This knowledge presented in the gospel records are indeed the documentary evidence for the world about the life, words and works of Jesus Christ, that made Him a universal ideal teacher. His teaching is truly committed to the hearts and minds of the people who knew and loved Him. The Gospels, strictly speaking are not biographies at all. The earthly life of Jesus was only to thirty three and half years, but on these records, all the study of the life and teaching of Jesus Christ are based. These four gospels serve as solid bedrock of historical facts and evidences that are fixed and imperishable.

2.2 THE CHRONOLOGY OF THE LIFE OF JESUS CHRIST

During the Greco-Roman time several methods of computing eras were employed. One which came in to wide use counted the numbers of years from the birth of the city Rome. (A.U.C = ab urbe condita). A new method of computing era was proposed by the Scythian monk named Dionysius. Dionysius was a high respected theologian, astronomer and mathematician. He took the birth of Jesus Christ as the starting point for the Christian era. Dates are now computed in Anno Domini (A.D.). By the time of Charlemagne in about A.D.800, Dionysius’ system had supplanted the mode of reckoning the years A.U.C. Dionysius erred in his calculations by at least four years. Instead of correlating Jesus’ birth with A.U.C. 754, he should have placed it sometime prior to A.U.C. 750, which was the year of the death Herod the Great. The actual year of the birth of Jesus is therefore prior to 4 B.C. It was too late to attempt to rectify the mistake and to make after all previously dated documents by the time the Dionysius’ error was discovered.
Historically, three pivotal dates to be determined in the life of Jesus Christ are the date of His birth, the date of His baptism and the beginning of His public ministry and finally, the date of His crucifixion.

2.2.1 THE DATE OF THE BIRTH OF JESUS

From the four gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John in the New Testament of the Holy Bible it is very difficult to precise information regarding the year, the month, or the day of the Nativity (birth of Jesus). From the gospel of Matthew, as we read in Matthew (2:1-12) ‘After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of king Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, “where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him”. When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was born. “In Bethlehem in Judea they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written: “But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; For out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.” Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find them, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.” After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route’.

Accordingly King Herod was troubled by the arrival of the wise men asking where the King of the Jews had been born. The death of King Herod happened on or before April 4, 4 B.C. (Metzger, 1983). From the gospel of Matthew and Luke we see certain events that occurred between the birth of Jesus and Herod’s death,
including the presentation of the baby Jesus at the temple forty days after the birth, visit of the wise men, the escape to Egypt, and the murder of the male children in Bethlehem. From the gospel evidences, the birth of Jesus took place not later than January of 4 B.C. or December 5 B.C., and it may have occurred up to two years earlier as in (Matthew 2:16) “When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi”.

The custom of celebrating December 25\textsuperscript{th} as the birth day of Jesus was not followed in the third or fourth century. Prior to that time it was customary to celebrate January 6\textsuperscript{th} as the time of the coming of the wise men. According to the gospel of Luke (2:1-20) we read “In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world and everyone went to his own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her first born, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests”.

When the angels had left them and gone in to heaven, the shepherd said to one another. “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which
the Lord has told us about”. So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen which were just as they had been told.” Thus Jesus was born when Judean shepherds were out-of-doors at night. Since the rainy season in Palestine usually commences in December, it is unlikely that this was the month of the birth of Jesus. Historians are of the opinion that December 25th was chosen as the birthday of Jesus, because it may have a connection with the pagan celebration of the Dies Solis Invicti (“Day of the Invincible Sun”). Although, there is no strict evidence or proof, it may be that the early church chose this date to celebrate the birth of Jesus in order to provide Christians with an alternative festival in place of the one held in honor of the sun god, who was often identified with Mithra.

2.2.2 THE DATE OF THE BAPTISM OF JESUS AND THE BEGINNING OF HIS PUBLIC MINISTRY

To determine the date of the baptism of Jesus, several pieces of evidences have to be taken into account. The gospel writer Luke places the beginning of John the Baptist’s preaching in the wilderness “in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar (Luke 3:1). Tiberius Caesar had been exercising co-regency with Augustus Caesar in the years just prior to the latter’s death in August A.D.14, but he did not come to full imperial authority until September 17, A.D. 14. From the Lucan gospel, it is not clear about the period of co-regency. In Syria, it was customary to date regnal years from October 1, A.D 14; his fifteenth year therefore would have run from October 1, A.D 27 to September 30, A.D 28. Immediately after his account of the baptism of Jesus, Luke states that “Jesus, when he began his ministry, was about thirty years of age” (Luke 3:23). If Jesus was born about 5 or 4 B.C, this would be about A.D 26 or 27. At the season of Passover not long after Jesus’ baptism, the gospel of John represents the Jesus as saying that the
reconstruction of the temple complex was forty six years in building as in John 2:20 “The Jews replied, “It has taken forty six years to build this temple and you are going to raise it in three days?”’. Since according to Josephus, Herod the Great began the work of reconstruction in the eighteenth year of his reign (i.e. 20 or 19 B.C); the forty-sixth year would be A.D 27 to 28. In the light of this conflicting and debating data, it appears that Jesus was baptized and began his public ministry sometime between A.D 25 and 28; a date early to 27 is also as likely to happen (Metzger, 1983).

2.2.3 THE DATE OF THE CRUCIFIXION OF JESUS

The period of Jesus ministry and consequently the years of His death are to be fixed by the number of Passovers which elapsed from the time of his baptism. From the synoptic gospels (gospels of same general view) i.e. the gospel of Matthew, Mark and Luke, we understand that the Jesus’ Ministry lasted only for a year. But the gospel of John records at least three Passovers (John 2:13; 6:4; 13:1) and the feast referred in John 5:1 was also a Passover. If so, Jesus’ ministry included four Passovers, at the last of which He died. Taking this into consideration, Jesus was baptized early in A.D 27, His first Passover thereafter was in April of that year, and He died in the spring of A.D 30. For those who think that the feast in John 5:1 is not a Passover, the death of Jesus occurred in A.D 29. According to solar calendar, the Passover fell on a Wednesday. The Jews followed the lunar calendar, according to which in A.D 30, the full moon fell either on Thursday, April 6, or on Friday, April 7. The Jewish authorities in the time of Jesus started and determined the beginning of the month by observation of the new moon and on cloudy weather, the exact time of the celebration would differ. The different groups of Jews therefore celebrated the Passover of that year according to two different reckonings and that both are reflected in the Gospels. The hour of crucifixion is also recorded differently by different evangelists. According to Mark Gospel, (Mark 15:25). ‘It was third hour when they crucified him’. (9.00 a.m.). According to John 19:14 “It was the day of preparation of Passover week, about the sixth hour (noon time) and
therefore the crucifixion took place still later. For Jews a new day starts at sunset and ends at midday.

The four gospels put the crucifixion on Friday, the resurrection three days later. It was usual among the Jews, with whom a new day begins at sunset, to calculate time inclusively and to count parts of days as whole days. Therefore the time from Jesus’ death was calculated as follows. Friday afternoon until sunset on Friday was counted as one day, Saturday was the second day and the period from sunset on Saturday to early Sunday morning was the third day.

2.3 THE EARLY YEARS OF JESUS’ LIFE

The gospel of Matthew and Luke records fundamental details concerning the Jesus’ birth with a specific point of view. In Matthew’s account the narrative is unfolded from Joseph’s point of view and in Luke’s account from Mary’s point of view. The central features of both the gospels in agreement are:

1. Mary, the mother of Jesus was a virgin at the time of his birth.
2. Joseph, to whom Mary was betrothed; was a descendant of King David,
3. Though Joseph was the legal father of Jesus, Jesus’ conception was due to the divine intervention.
4. Jesus was born in Bethlehem during the reign of King Herod.
5. The child was named in accord with an angelic command as ‘Jesus’ signifying that he would save his people from their sins.

Thus the truth of the gospel narratives is the testimony of incarnation.

2.4 EDUCATION

From the four gospels, we know little about His education except by inference. The books that were open before Him are the Holy Bible (Old Testament), Man, Nature and Environment. He must have received His early
education at home and in the synagogue-school. Its staple was the law, the prophets and the tradition. The Gospels show His knowledge of the scriptures. He did not handle scripture like a scribe with an unerring instinct; He goes to the deeper side. Much has been written about His mother tongue. It is certain that He preached and taught in His mother tongue Aramaic. Probably He could also read Hebrew as in Luke 4:16, where He read from a Hebrew scroll in the synagogue at Nazareth. From the gospels, much cannot be gathered regarding the formal education of Jesus. But for exception the gospel of Luke narrates about boy Jesus in the temple (Luke 2:41-51). “Every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the feast of the Passover. When he was twelve years old, they went up to the feast, according to the custom. After the feast was over, while his parents were returning home, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but they were unaware of it. Thinking he was in their company, they travelled on for a day. Then they began looking for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they went back to Jerusalem to look for him. After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him, they were astonished. His mother said to him, “Son why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you.” Why are you searching for me?’ he asked “Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?” But they did understand what he was saying to them. Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. But his mother treasured all these things in her heart. And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and men.”

When Jesus visited the synagogue of Nazareth soon after He began His ministry, the scriptures were handed over to Him by the servant of the synagogue, and Jesus read the scriptures from Prophet Isaiah as in (Luke 4:16-22). “He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: “The spirit of the Lord is on me because he has anointed me to preach the good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of
sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, and he began by saying to them, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips.” Isn’t this Joseph’s son?” they asked.

This means in the past Jesus must be reading scriptures in Nazareth synagogue. This served as the evidence regarding the education of Jesus.

2.5 THE PUBLIC MINISTRY OF JESUS CHRIST

The baptism and the beginning of public ministry took place in early A.D 27 and his death occurred probably on April 17 of A.D 30. The time between these dates are divided into three periods, each roughly one year in duration. They are

First period     -   The year of obscurity
Second period -   The year of public favour
Third period   -   The year of opposition   (Metzger, 1983)

2.5.1 THE YEAR OF OBSCURITY

The period is called the year of obscurity, partly because the records of it which we have are limited and partly because during it Jesus seems to have been only slowly emerging into public notice. With His disciples Jesus ascended from the valley of Jordan to Galilee and Jerusalem. This is the period where Jesus performed the first miracle in a wedding place at Cana a small village in Galilee, turning water into wine (John 2:1-11) where He revealed his glory, and His disciples put their faith on Him. During this period Jesus started preaching and teaching and He gathered several disciples. But due to the envious attitude of few people Jesus decided to retreat to Galilee. Thus the first period of His ministry came to an end during which the nation slowly became aware of His presence as a healer and teacher.
2.5.2 THE YEAR OF PUBLIC FAVOUR

The year of public favour was characterised by the increasing popularity and fame in Galilee on the work of Jesus. Within a very short span, a larger number of people were attracted to His teaching. The number of His followers increased in a rapid manner with a lot of miracles and healing services. This was a period marked with His universal teachings on the ‘Sermon on the Mount’ and teaching through ‘Parables’. His teachings concentrated on the spiritual nature of the ‘Kingdom of God’, holistic development of man and man’s relation to himself that would determine his fate in the ‘Day of Judgment’ which contributes to eternal life. The major share of His activity, which lasted for nearly fifteen months, was confined to Galilee.

2.5.3 THE YEAR OF OPPOSITION

This was the period when public favour ebbed away and Jesus’ enemies multiplied and finally they managed to secure His execution. The first part of this period was spent in Galilee and the last part in Palestine. There were occasional hostility of Scribes and Pharisees against Jesus. This increased day by day. The Jewish leaders, however in their minds had serious grounds of opposition against Jesus. He rejected their elaboration of the Mosaic Law and rebuked them for paying so much attention to the detailed rules in tradition and forgetting the values of mercy and justice. Jesus himself did not encourage His disciples to practice the many ritual acts of purification such as the ceremonial washing of the hands before meals, which the Jews generally considered as the marks of the saintly man. Jesus’ declaration of Sabbath as “the Sabbath was made for man, not man for Sabbath, and boldly implied that he was lord of the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27-28), increased His rivalry among Jews. This was a period where Jesus preached less to the multitudes and devoted Himself to instructing His disciples the values of humility, self sacrifice and love. This period is also remarked by the beautiful Parables of Jesus as we see in the Parable of the Good Samaritan, the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost son, the unjust steward, the Pharisee and the tax collector. From the John gospel, we get a clear picture of Jesus’ journeys in Judea and Perea, the miracle of the raising
of Lazarus in Bethany in Jerusalem, the trials under the leadership of Caiaphas, the high priest and their decision to destroy the influence of Jesus by crucifixion.

2.6 THE CRUCIFIXION OF JESUS CHRIST

According to the generally accepted chronology, Jesus died late Friday afternoon April 17, A.D. 30 (Metzger, 1983). The place of crucifixion was a short distance outside the city at a spot called ‘Golgotha’, which means the place of a skull. Here the roman execution squad, in charge of centurion, nailed Jesus to His cross and then dropped the cross in the hole prepared for it. With Him, two criminals were crucified, one on either side of him. Arrangements for the burial of His body were made by Joseph of Arimathea, a disciple of Jesus. According to all the four gospels, this man, a respected member of the council went to Pilate, the Roman Governor and asked for the body of Jesus (Matthew 27:57-61; Mark 15:43; Luke 23:50-56; John 19:38-42). “Later, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jews. With Pilate’s permission he came and took the body away. He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy five pounds. Taking Jesus’ body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs. At the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb, in which no one had ever been laid. Because it was the Jewish day of preparation and since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there, the entrance of which a great stone was rolled. From the gospel of Matthew, we read that the Jewish leaders set a guard at the tomb for several days (Matthew 27:62-66) “The next day, the one after preparation Day, the chief priests and the Pharisees went to Pilate. “Sir, they said, “we remember that while he was still alive that deceiver said, ‘After three days I will rise again’. So give the order for the tomb to be made secure until the third day’”. Likewise orders were given to guard the tomb.
2.7 THE RESURRECTION AND ASCENSION OF JESUS CHRIST

The evidence for the resurrection of Jesus Christ is overwhelming. The disciples believed that after being crucified, dead and buried, Jesus Christ rose again from the tomb on the third day. During the forty days following the resurrection Jesus appeared to His followers and disciples at various times and places. From the Luke gospel we get an account of the ascension of Jesus (Luke 24:50-52) “When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. Then they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy”. Taking into consideration the Lucan account of ascension, Jesus’ body had passed into a condition new to human experience. The gospel records that the risen Jesus was not living at any place in Jerusalem or Galilee. Instead He passed into a mode of being out of which He disappeared from the world to be with father God in Heaven.

2.8 JESUS CHRIST AS A TEACHER

The world has considered Jesus as the great teacher of all times, a true ideal teacher. ‘Teacher’ was a title with which even His enemies were prepared to confront with Him. Even without any professional education and training He is called as ‘Teacher’. From the gospels of (Matthew 22:16; Mark 12:14, Luke 20:21) we see that when the Pharisees came to him with a testing question, they began by saying: ‘Teacher, we know that you are true, and teach the way of God truthfully’. The Gospel writers retain the word ‘Rabbi’ for ‘Teacher’ (Matthew 26:49; Mark 9:5; 10:51; 11:21; 14:45). Rabbi literally means ‘My great one’, and was the standard Jewish title for a distinguished and acknowledged teacher. Rabbi was the standard word for an accepted teacher in Jewish terminology. Jesus is an undisputed, reverberating, transforming and moulding teacher who attracted the entire world irrespective of caste, creed, religion, gender and nationality.

The central theme of His teaching and preaching was the ‘good news’ or gospel about the ‘Kingdom of Heaven’ ascribed as the greatest goal of human life’ (Mark 1:14-15). As an ideal teacher, He has set a level, one should attain in life. He
taught great things using simple objects, closely identified with nature. The public ministry of Jesus Christ can be seen from three major dimensions.

**Preaching** - To the multitudes

**Teaching** - To the disciples

**Healing** - To the afflicted/sick ones

The target group comprised people of all strata of society. His teaching community included fisher folk, sinners, common man, intellectuals and the high priests. This we see in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Teaching formed the major part of Christ’s public ministry. He used different teaching methods and situation around the needs of the learners. As a teacher He is concise, clear and authentic with the subjects. All His teachings went to the heart of the matter. His model of teaching did not conform to any strict or traditional pattern, either of content or method. He had twelve disciples whom He designated as ‘Apostles’ for the mission. He taught great spiritual truths in unholy places, at the shores of the lake, by the well, along the road and in the homes of unclean people. He had theological discussion with high priests and they were through his down-to-earth actions. Ideal teachers will have disciples who will proclaim the greatness of their master over the centuries. This we see in Jesus. Thus Jesus as an ideal teacher set a perfect example and held a high standard of personality for mankind to follow.

The following map shows the land of Palestine in the time of Jesus.
2.9 CONCLUSION

This chapter throws light on the birth, life and mission of Jesus Christ.
REFERENCES


