



Clarifying the Circumstances of Jesus' Birth

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Emperor Constantine assumed power over the Roman Empire in AD 306. A major development in the history of the Christian faith occurred in the fourth century, with Emperor Constantine's "acceptance" of Christianity in AD 312. The previous Emperors, Decius and Diocletian, had brutally suppressed the church by burning Bibles, destroying church buildings, and executing believers. Regarded as the thirteenth apostle by Eusebius, Constantine ended the persecution of Christians.



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When the early church was being persecuted, they anticipated the imminent coming of Christ in power and glory at the end of the age. As apocalyptic expectancy waned, the church still longed for the second coming of Christ, but not a glorious earthly millennium. As Christianity became doctrinally and organizationally institutionalized, Christians were no longer forced to worship in catacombs and caves. Christian architecture began with dissent toward apocalyptic millennialism. The church was free to worship in elegant basilicas and majestic houses of worship. Public funds were allocated for the building of church buildings. Constantine assumed a particular locale in Bethlehem as the precise birthplace of Christ, and, in AD 327, commissioned the building of the Church of the Nativity. In AD 313, he legalized Christianity with the Edict of Milan.

In AD 350, Pope Julius I declared the 25th of December to be celebrated as the official birthday of Jesus. In AD 529, Emperor Justinian declared Christmas to be a civic holiday. Certainly, they could never have imagined the contemporary observance of Christmas. Inspired by German tradition, in 1832, Harvard University professor Charles Follen is thought to be the first American to illuminate a Christmas tree with candles. One can safely assume that Follen would be shocked to observe the elaborate decorations used nowadays.

Many years have transpired since 1832, and an even greater number from 350, and yet much more from the night skies that were brightened by an unusual star from the East, announcing the birth of the Messiah. With the celebration of Christmas this month, there is another opportunity for contemplation. Moreover, in the midst of the exhilaration and all

the ornate decorations, in addition to the expensive commercialization that characterizes Christmas today, it is wise to reconsider the Christmas event and the Person whose birth is celebrated.¹

The Issue

Both the Gospels of Matthew and Luke narrate the birth of Jesus. The typical Nativity scene, with the first appearing only 800 years ago in AD 1223, exhibits figures representing the infant Jesus, with his mother Mary, and Joseph. Other characters encircling the family include sheep and shepherds, with angels displayed near the manger, which is positioned in the midst of rustic surroundings that also accommodate farm animals. Opposite the shepherds are three wise men with their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. The typical location is a cave or small stable constructed from twigs and peat moss. Scripture does assert that Mary laid Jesus “in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn” (Luke 2:7). The assumption is that mangers are found in barns and stables, and the innkeeper refused the family because there was no vacancy at the inn (some kind of first century hotel), thus allowing them to stay in his backyard stable. The innkeeper’s wife then hurriedly gathered some blankets and clean water because Mary was already in labor. The interest of this article is whether tradition has been infused into the biblical account, so that the glimmering scene hardly resembles the true historical event: the night of the Savior’s birth.

The Inn and Manger

The evidence is compelling that the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem was the birthplace of Jesus. The primary area of the church is the Grotto of the Nativity, which is a rectangular cavern beneath the church.

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In locales where there are caves, such as in Bethlehem, a cavern beneath a home or in the rear of the house would be used to store food or supplies, and could also be used to feed animals and provide them shelter from the elements, predators, and thieves.



The grotto is entered by a flight of steps near the church altar, and there is the cave that is honored as the site of Christ's birth. A silver star designates the exact location where it is believed that Christ was born. The star's Latin inscription reads, *Hic de Virgine Maria Jesus Christus natus est* ("Here Jesus Christ was born of the Virgin Mary").

Luke 2:3-5 narrates the journey of Christ's family to this location. "And everyone was on his way to register for the census, each to his own city. Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, in order to register along with Mary, who was engaged to him, and was with child." During the time of Jesus, people in Bethlehem built their homes to make provision for the occasional guest, with most houses being multileveled. The lower room was typically a cellar or storeroom. In locales where there are caves, such as in Bethlehem, a cavern beneath a home or in the rear of the house would be used to store food or supplies, and could also be used to feed animals and provide them shelter from the elements, predators, and thieves.

Joseph and his pregnant wife, Mary, traveled from Nazareth to Bethlehem on account of the census. In

the Jewish society of Jesus' time, it would have been customary for them to lodge in the guest room of Joseph's ancestral home (where his family originated and where it is likely that some relatives still resided), not to room in a local inn. In the Hebrew culture of the era, Joseph's family would consist of an extended group of relatives, with a male head (patriarch) of the family. Married children and their families typically lived with or near their father and mother. Relatives from other towns would be welcomed by the patriarch and would be protected by remaining in his village.

The word translated "inn" is the Greek word *kataluma*, which normally refers to a guestroom. The word *kataluma* is used only two other times in Scripture—Mark 14:14 and Luke 22:11—wherein both refer to the upper room in which Jesus gave instructions to His disciples at His Last Supper. Luke 10 (vv. 25-37) includes the account of the Good Samaritan, yet the Greek word *pandocheion* ("inn," v. 34) was used, which designates "an inn, a public house for the reception of strangers," with an "innkeeper" (Gk. *pandocheus*, v. 35) as host, not a patriarch.² The "inn" of the birth narrative in Luke 2 refers to the guestroom in the family home. In the circumstances of Jesus' birth, there were no guestrooms available in any pa-

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triarchal homes due to family members returning for the census. Not to mention these would have been crowded and not given enough privacy for Mary to give birth. The warmth of the storeroom cellar would grant discretion (in contrast to the thronged *kataluma*), and also provide security within the family home.

Mary did not give birth the night she arrived with Joseph in Bethlehem; rather, there was time to make proper accommodations while she completed the days for giving birth (Luke 2:6). Verse 7 does assert that Jesus was laid in a manger (or feeding trough for animals), yet this does not mean that He was born in a stable. Finding a child lying in a manger was indeed unique; however, the circumstances were not the result of complete abandonment and isolation; rather, Joseph and Mary received compassion and protection, as characteristic of family life in first century Jewish societies. Moreover, the traditional location of Jesus' birthplace in Bethlehem is in the middle of the city, where the homes would have been in the Lord's time, and not in the surrounding countryside that would be characteristic of farming communities. The manger was certainly modest and uncommon, yet it was sufficient to serve as a crib for the newborn Messiah. All this occurred within the confines of the family ancestral home.

Jesus was born safely in the city of David, just as the angel of the Lord announced to the shepherds (Luke 2:11). The role of the shepherds may be all the more appreciated when considering that it was possible that they were guarding the sacrificial lambs. Jesus was “the Lamb of God” who would remove “the sin of the world” (John 1:29). The shepherds would have been the first witnesses of Jesus, who would sacrifice Himself as the propitiation for sinners (1 John 2:2). Probably two years later (not the night of the birth), the wise men arrived to present gifts to the Lord Jesus (Matt 2:1-12). The Greek word *paidion*, translated “Child” (v. 9), indicates a “young child, a little boy.”³ If the Lord were no longer an in-

fant when the wise men arrived, it would indicate why Herod eventually ordered the slaughter of “all the male children who were in Bethlehem and all its vicinity, from two years old and under” (v. 16). While the Bible does not indicate the number of wise men, it has been assumed that their number was three due to the quantity of gifts.

Conclusion

With a biblical understanding of the circumstances of Jesus' birth, the Nativity scene can be more meaningful. *The most fundamental aspect* of Christmas is to comprehend that Jesus came to earth as the Savior of all those who would repent of their sin and believe in Him (John 3:16-18). A secondary consideration is to understand that Joseph and Mary were not alone when the Lord Jesus was born; rather, family members, who provided compassion and protection, would have surrounded them. God the Father was certain to have His Son surrounded by family when He was born into the world. The Christmas narrative demonstrates the importance of our biological family, and how essential they are for our wellbeing. Beyond our biological family is our spiritual family, which is equally important. Jesus prioritized the significance of spiritual family when he remarked, “For whoever does the will of My Father who is in heaven, he is My brother and sister and mother” (Matt 12:50). The Christian life is not one of isolation, for God desires us to have family with whom we may fellowship. Especially during the holiday season, we are reminded of the significance of biological and spiritual family.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 James W. Cox, ed., *The Minister's Manual: 1994* (San Francisco: Harper, 1993) 254.
- 2 Joseph Henry Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1885) 475.
- 3 *Ibid.* 473.