

The Nativity: No Room in the “Inn”?

Why History Matters

Most people today, might summarize the Nativity of Our Lord Jesus, the Christ like this: “Joseph & Mary went to Bethlehem. When it was time for Mary to deliver the baby Jesus, they tried to stay in the inn. Since there was no room in the inn, Mary had to give birth to Jesus in a manger. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.”

In reality, we miss out on a great deal when we skip out on studying the biblical texts concerning Jesus’ birth (as found in the Luke (1:1 – 2:40), Matthew (1:1 – 2:23); and John 1:1-14).

For example, did you know?: Bethlehem was a small village in ancient Palestine. In Hebrew it is בֵּית לֶחֶם, which actually is a combination of two words, which mean “house” (Beth as in Beth-el, “house of God”) and “bread” (lehem).

As we may remember, the Gospels were written mainly in the Greek language by the writers. The word used in sacred text for the place of Jesus’ birth is the Greek word, *kataluma*, which accurately means “lodging place” and can be translated as “upper room”, but not “inn” (as we know it today). It generally referred to a room of a house, where out-of-town guests could spend the night or even just a dining room. For example, in Mark 14:14, Jesus celebrated the Jewish Passover with his disciples in an “upper (guest) room” (the same Greek word, *kataluma*, is used here).

In Luke 10:34, the writer intentionally used another Greek word, “*pandocheion*,” when he spoke about a public inn or lodging facility as the location where an individual was taken to rest.

Of particular importance for us to remember today is that Bethlehem was a tiny little village, with perhaps a few hundred people living in it at the time of Jesus’ birth. Modern day historians, archeologists and scripture scholars believe there was probably no Bethlehem “inn” for travelers.

Bethlehem was tiny

Joseph went to a little town called Bethlehem—his ancestral home—for the Roman census; because that is where his immediate family’s lineage was from. We hear so much about this area during the Season of Advent and Christmas that it may be hard for us to imagine that the village of Bethlehem actually wasn’t even located or mentioned on most ancient area or regional maps.

Think of a small town that doesn’t have a motel or hotel (like Elizabeth or Kiowa, for example).

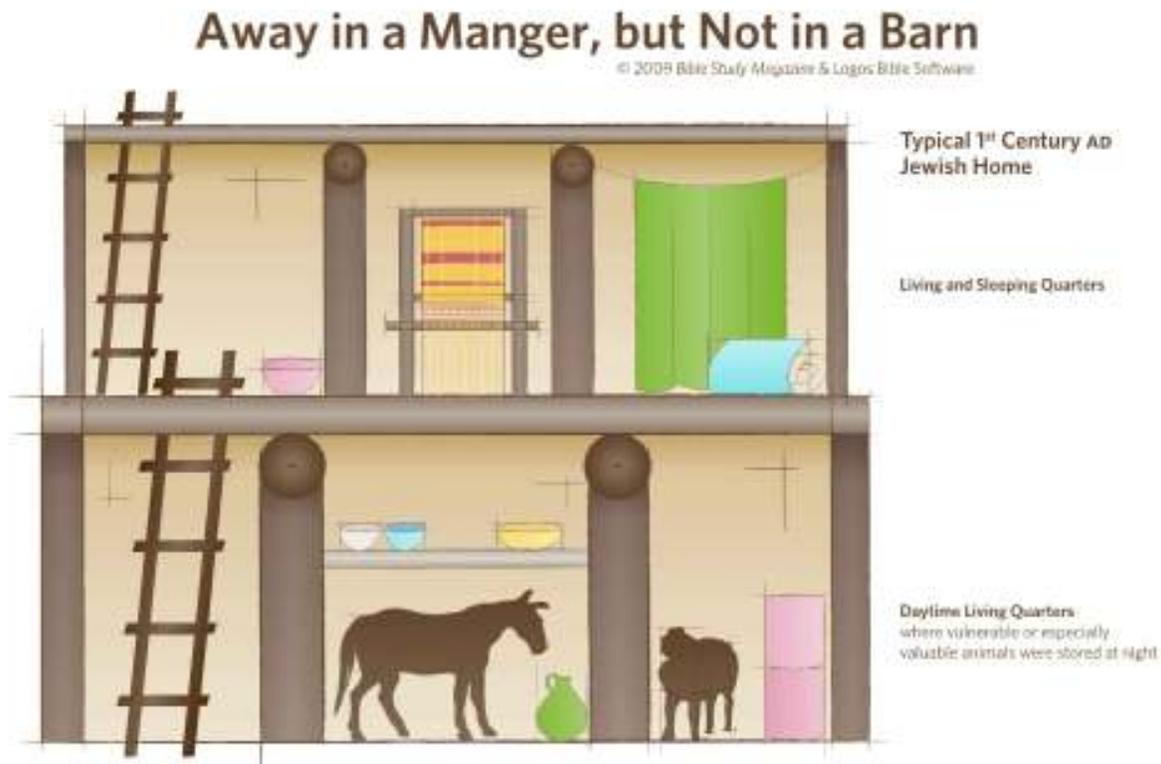
Jewish hospitality was huge

Joseph wouldn’t have been turned away from his ancestral home, even if there was no room, especially since Mary was pregnant. This would be a big taboo in Jewish tradition and culture.

If there wasn't any available space in the upper room (because of other family relatives who travelled to Bethlehem to participate in the Roman census also), Mary and Joseph would have logically been moved into the adjacent, covered stall area, where the homeowners kept their animals. In those days, a home and a "stable" were co-located and attached to each other.

This explains why Jesus was laid in a manger (in the "stable" with the animals). The manger (ordinarily, the animals' food (hay) trough) would have dually functioned as a make-shift crib.

One possible example in the time of Jesus' birth



The Reason for the Season

It might seem like there's nothing special about a stable, a cave, or whatever the lower part of a house looked like. But that's an interesting point in all this: Luke and the other gospel writers resisted the temptation to make the physical location of Jesus' birth any better than it really was. It seems totally unexpected and unfathomable to have the Jewish Messiah born in the dirt and grime of lowly, everyday life. But that was God's plan, which played out in Jesus' life – he gravitated and ministered to the poor, the sick, the marginalized, the abandoned and the lost.

Turns out, studying "all this historical stuff" actually does help us better understand "what the Bible means." But, even if the whole innkeeper shouting "*No vacancy here!*" part of the traditional Nativity story is a bit inaccurate (due to natural human inference and assumption), we can still confidently and proudly celebrate the meaning of Jesus' birth during this season: For He remains the reason for the season. The Word became flesh and dwelled among us (John 1:14). The second person of the Blessed and Holy Trinity; the source of our peace, joy and salvation.