The Story of the Birth of the Lord Jesus

Introduction

The traditional events of the Christmas Story are well known to all Christians in the West – the story of the three wise men bearing gifts, the shepherds in the fields in the middle of winter, a baby born in a stable and no room in the inn.

But Luke's account (2:1-18) implies several flaws in the traditional account. Here are some:

1. Joseph was returning to the village of his origin. In the Middle East people have long memories going back many generations. Joseph was returning to his ancestral home. So when Joseph and Mary arrived in Bethlehem and he announced, ***"I am Joseph, son of Jacob, son of Matthew, son of Eliezer"*** many of the homes in Bethlehem would have welcomed him in.
2. Joseph was a 'royal'. He was from the family of David. The family of David was so famous in Bethlehem that the local people apparently called the town 'the City of David'. Everyone else called Jerusalem the City of David. So being of this famous family, Joseph would have been welcome everywhere.
3. In nearly every culture a woman about to give birth is given special attention. In simple rural communities all over the world there are always local women who will help one of their own women in childbirth regardless of the circumstances. Bethlehem was probably no exception. It was an honour/shame culture then as now. It is a safe assumption that the community of Bethlehem would have taken responsibility to help Joseph find adequate shelter for Mary and provide the care that she needed. To turn away a descendant of David in 'the city of David' would bring shame on the whole village.
4. Mary had relatives in the nearby village 'in the hill country of Judaea'. Before the birth of the Lord Jesus Mary had stayed with her cousin Elizabeth 'in the hill country of Judaea' and Mary and Joseph would have been welcomed to stay with them. So if there was no room anywhere in Bethlehem they were but a short distance from Zechariah and Elizabeth's home.
5. Joseph had adequate time to make preparations for the birth. Luke 2:4 says that Joseph and Mary ***"went up from Galilee to Judaea"*** and verse 6 states that, ***"while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered".*** But the average story of the birth of Jesus in a Christmas play implies that the Lord Jesus was born the same night that Mary and Joseph arrived. It is true that the text of Scripture doesn't tell us the specific time when they arrived, but it is a safe assumption that there was enough time to find adequate shelter for a safe birth.

So to summarise Luke 2:1-7

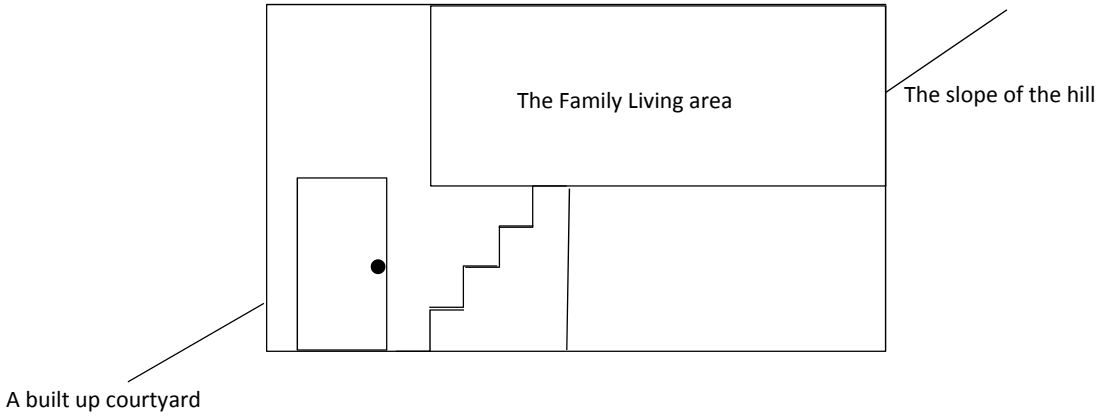
- Joseph was returning to his home village.
- Because he was a descendant of King David most doors in the village would be open to him and to Mary.
- Mary had relatives nearby and would have turned to them, but she didn't need to.
- There was plenty of time to find housing that was suitable.
- A Jewish village like this would not fail to help a young Jewish mother about to give birth.

So what was the 'inn'? Where was the manger?

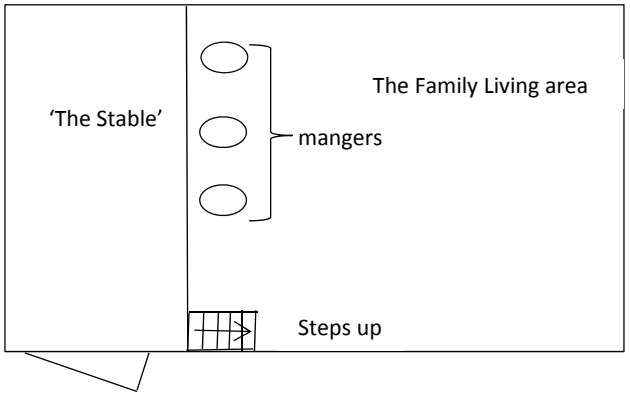
The story of the birth of the Lord Jesus is clearly authentic. Luke possibly interviewed Mary herself. The text says, ***"Mary and Joseph went up to Bethlehem"***. Bethlehem is built on a ridge ~2,250 ft. above sea level. A possible route from Nazareth (~1,600 ft. above sea level) was down the Jordan Valley and then up from Jerusalem – a climb of over 5,000 ft.

Most nativity plays are built around the concept of a stable. But in the average home in Palestine in the first century only the very rich had separate quarters in their houses for animals. Most houses in Palestine only had two rooms. One was for the family and one was exclusively for guests – a sort of 'prophet's chamber'. The main room in the house was the family room where the family cooked, ate, slept and lived. Usually lower than this area by about 3 or 4 feet was the lower floor with a door. This area was used for the animals – the family cow, a donkey and a few sheep that were driven in at night. Every morning the animals were taken out and tied up in a courtyard or taken to pasture. Each morning the animal area was cleaned out.

Such simple homes have been traced by archaeologists in Bethlehem and the surrounding area from the time of David until the 20th century. You can see them in Upper Galilee and in Bethlehem. They look something like this from the side.



This is a rough diagram of a typical village home in Bethlehem the first century from the side. The roof is flat. The door is on the lower level and serves as the entrance for both people and animals. The household <u>wants</u> the animals in the house at night because in the winter it is cold. (Bethlehem still occasionally gets snow in the winter.) Another reason is that the animals are kept safe from theft. The diagram below shows the same house looking from above.



The 'mangers' are dug out of the lower end of the living room. The Family Room has a slight slope in the direction of the stable (the animal stalls) which helps in the sweeping and washing of the floor since dirt and water can move down the slope and be swept outside the door.

If the family cow or donkey is hungry in the night they can stand up and eat from the mangers cut out of the floor of the Living Room. For sheep mangers can be put at a lower level.

This style of traditional home fits many Biblical stories. Here are just three:

- In 1 Samuel 28 King Saul was a guest in the house of the witch/medium of Endor when Saul refused to eat. The witch then took a fatted calf that was ***"in the house"*** (v. 24) and killed it and prepare a meal for the king and his men.

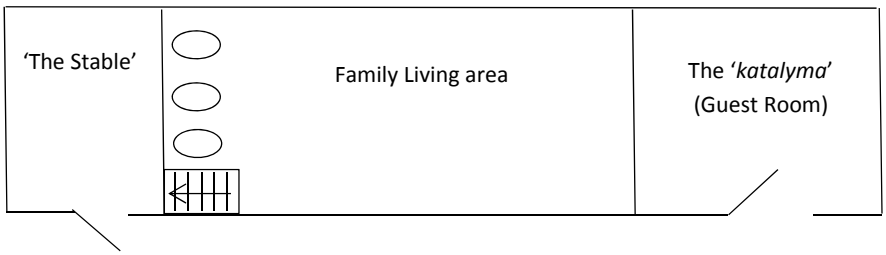
- In the story of Jephthah in Judges 11:29-40, it was clearly a one room house again with animals in the lower part of the house. Jephthah makes a foolish vow. If God gives him a victory then he will sacrifice the first thing that comes out of his house. He assumes it may be a sheep or a cow. Very sadly it was his daughter who came out first after the great victory in battle.
- In Matthew 5:14-15 Jesus says, ***"No-one after lighting a lamp puts it under a bushel (basket), but on a stand and it gives light to all in the house."*** So what the Lord Jesus had in mind was a typical one-room house where a lamp can shed light on everybody in the house.

There are other examples. The Lord Jesus healed a woman on the Sabbath. (Lk. 13:10-17) The leader was very angry with the Lord Jesus because He had 'worked' on the Sabbath. The Lord Jesus replied, ***"You hypocrites! Doesn't each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water?"*** So they untied their animals. The Lord Jesus "untied" this poor woman.

So what about the inn? If the Lord Jesus was born in an ordinary village home and placed in a "manger" in that home, why does Luke 2:7 mention***, "Because there was no room for them in the inn"***? Is this really a case of the people of Bethlehem rejecting Joseph and Mary?

The Greek word used by Luke is '*topos*' which means 'space'. So there was 'no space'. The Greek word for 'inn' is '*pandacheion*' – '*pan*' meaning 'all' and the rest of the word means 'to receive' – so a place that receives all – i.e. a commercial inn. So what is the word used by Luke? The word is '*katalyma*' which really means 'a guest room'. Luke uses the same word in Lk. 22:10-12 when He tells the disciples to go into Jerusalem and follow a man carrying a jar of water. Jesus tells them, ***"Say to the owner of the house, 'The teacher asks where is the guest room*** *('katalyma')* ***where I may keep the Passover with My disciples?'"***

So it is clear here that a '*katalyma*' is defined as a guest room in a private house probably up on a flat roof or attached. In Lk. 2:7 Luke tells his readers that the Lord Jesus was placed in a manger (in the Family Living room) because the guest room was already full. Perhaps it was a home like the diagram below.



So it seems that Joseph relied on the hospitality of a friend or more probably a relative whose "Guest Room" was already full when he and Mary arrived. Remember that Bethlehem would have been crowded because of the census (registration) ordered by Caesar Augustus.

So in summary, what Luke tells us about the birth of the Lord Jesus is that Joseph and Mary travelled to Bethlehem where they were received into a private home in the family's living space. The baby Lord Jesus was born, wrapped and literally '*anaklino*' (put to bed) in the manger that was built into the floor of the family room. Why weren't they invited into the guest room? This was probably because it was already occupied by other guests.

The living room would have been cleared of men for the birth of the child. The village midwife and other women would have assisted at the birth. After the child was born and wrapped Mary put her newborn to bed in a manger filled with fresh straw and covered Him with a blanket.

What about the shepherds?

In 1st century Palestine shepherds were poor and despised because rabbinic traditions labelled them as unclean. Why? Shepherds let their sheep wander over fields eating whatever they could find. So in rabbinic literature shepherds are on the list of trades that were 'proscribed'. Shepherds were considered lowly, uneducated and worthless people.

In Lk. 2:8-14 the first people to hear the message of the birth of Jesus were a group of shepherds. They heard and they were afraid. They were afraid of the awesome sight of the angels. They were probably even more afraid when they were asked to visit this 'child'. If this baby really was the Messiah then the parents would almost certainly reject the shepherds and order them out of the house. They were sure they would be rejected or even worse.

The angels anticipated their fears and told the shepherds that they would find the baby wrapped (which is what lowly peasants did with their newly born children) and lying in a manger! In other words, they would find the Lord Jesus – the Messiah – in an ordinary peasant home like theirs not in the governor's mansion. This was really good news! They were not going to experience. "Horrid unclean shepherds, be gone!"

So with this special sign of encouragement they went into Bethlehem in spite of their 'low degree'. (Lk. 1:52) On their arrival they reported their story and everyone was amazed. Then they left ***"praising God for all that they had heard and seen"***.

The shepherds had clearly seen the quality of the hospitality that they observed on arrival. Clearly they found Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus in perfectly adequate accommodation, not in a cold and dirty stable. If they had found a smelly stable, a frightened young mother and a desperate father they would have said, "This is terrible! Come home with us. Our families will take care of you." And within minutes they would have moved the little family into their own homes. Why? The whole honour of Bethlehem would rest on their shoulders and they would have done their duty. In fact they walked out! Why? The shepherds left this little family praising God for the birth of the Messiah and for the quality of the hospitality in the home in which He was born. The Lord Jesus was born for the likes of these shepherds – poor, lonely and largely rejected by society. He also came for the rich and the wise who came later with gold, frankincense and myrrh. (Mt. 2:1-12) Verse 11 of this passage says, ***"And going into the house they saw the child with Mary His mother …."*** This confirms Luke's account that describes the birth in a private home.

The Wise Men and the vision of Isaiah 60:1-7 and Matthew 2:1-2.

"Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea during the time of King Herod, Magi from the East came to Jerusalem saying, 'Where is He who has been born King of the Jews …… We have come to worship Him.' "

Where did the Magi come from? If the Magi were from the east of Israel – say Persia – and they saw the star in the East, they should have gone to India! obviously they travelled west. In Hebrew the word "East" is the same word as "rising". The New RSV translation reads, ***"We saw the star at its rising"***.

So where did the wise men come from? Were they Gentiles? The shepherds were from the Bethlehem area and were certainly Jews. But the wise men were Gentiles. So the new King of the Jews was to be worshipped at His birth by both Jews and Gentiles. So who were these wise men? Where is 'the East'? The answer of course depends on where the person asking the question lives!

Today in Palestine/Israel 'east' is over the River Jordan – 'the east bank' – today called Jordan – and more generally the desert area and the desert area south of the river Jabbock (called Ammon, Moab, Edom, Midian, and down to Dedan – today northern Saudi Arabia. According to Matthew 2 the wise men arrived with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Rich people usually possess gold and gold was mined in Arabia and still is. Biblical writers note that gold came from Arabia, Sheba (Yemen) and Ophir. (1 Kings 9:28; 10:2; Job 28:16) Frankincense and myrrh came exclusively from the desert areas of Oman and southern Yemen.

The early church (at least in A.D. 160) knew that the wise men came from Arabia to Bethlehem and worshipped the child and offered Him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Justin Martyr was a Palestinian believer who wrote about this. Tertullian and Clement of Rome affirmed this in the early second century.

In the 1920s a British scholar was doing research in Jordan. He came across a Muslim Bedouin tribe called the Al Kaokabani. In Arabic this name means 'those who study the planets'. The scholar asked

the tribal elders why they called themselves by this name. They replied that it was their ancestors who studied the planets and who had travelled west to Palestine to show honour to the great prophet Jesus when He was born.

But does it make any difference where they came from? I think it does! For there is a connection to some great promises in Isaiah 60 made familiar to us in Handel's oratorio – The Messiah, ***"Arise, shine, for your light has come and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples; but the Lord rises upon you and His glory appears over you. Nations will come to your light and kings to the brightness of your dawn."*** Who are the 'you'? ***"Your sons come from afar and your daughters are carried on the arm."*** (v. 1-4)

"Herds of camels will cover your land – young camels of Midian and Ephah. And all from Sheba will come bearing gold and incense and proclaiming the praise of the Lord. All Kedar's flocks will be gathered to you and the rams of Nebaioth will serve you. They will be accepted as offerings on My altar and I will adorn My glorious temple." (v. 6-7)

Midian and Ephah are tribal lands in northern Arabia. Sheba is south-west Arabia. Isaiah saw "the house" as "Jerusalem" and that is how it was interpreted. Clearly Matthew and Luke saw the fulfilment of the very great promises of Isaiah 60 taking place around the person – the birth – of the Lord Jesus – ***"the great light and the glory of God"***.

So the shepherds visited a child not a city. The ***"glory of the Lord"*** shone around the child. The earthly Jerusalem is de-absolutized. The new community would form **not** around the city, but around a child!

Today the earthly Jerusalem is a place of worship, pilgrimage and reflection for all three of the Abrahamic faiths and it should be shared equally among them. But we who are followers of the Lord Jesus, the Messiah, know that the Jerusalem that really matters is the heavenly Jerusalem that comes down as the great gift of God at the end of history. (Rev. 21:9-27) No wars should be fought and no blood spilled over an earthly city for Luke tells us that the glory of the Lord shone not around a city but around a child.

Isaiah promised special blessing for the City of Jerusalem. But the Magi would come with gifts and the shepherds would appear with their worship. ***"A great light shone"*** – not on the city but on the Lord Jesus. The hopes and dreams of all the years are forever found in the child born in Bethlehem. So at the birth of the Lord Jesus despised Jewish shepherds and Gentile Arabs came in worship of the child in the manger. This is also what we should do.

Herod's atrocities and Simeon and Anna

Why is this violent account included in the birth of the Lord Jesus?

I'm glad to say that the slaughter of the baby boys is never part of Christmas pageants. Why this conspiracy of silence? Why do we exclude this? Why does Matthew include it?

It has been suggested that Matthew wished to present the Lord Jesus as ***"the greater than Moses"***. Moses was born in the midst of the slaughter of all the male Hebrew babies (Ex. 1:8-22) and so Matthew relates a parallel story of what happened after the birth of the Lord Jesus – the 'Slaughter of the Innocents'.

Those of us who have lived in the Near East in the last 75 years have seen almost constant wars. Some were quick and brutal. Many were protracted. My wife and I were evacuated out of Jordan in 1967. We experienced bombing raids in Lebanon. People were killed by bullets, rockets and explosions of all kinds. How do people retain their faith in the Lord Jesus in such conditions?

It is a help to remember this Christmas Story and the Cross. A bloody, mindless atrocity took place at the birth of the Lord Jesus. We are aware of the potential for terror at any time. We are reminded again of what happened immediately prior to the Crucifixion and on the Cross of the Lord Jesus. So at the beginning of his Gospel Matthew presents the depths of evil that the Lord Jesus came to redeem. This shows an astonishing willingness on the part of God to be very vulnerable. This is at the heart of the Incarnation.

The part played in the Christmas Story by Simeon (a male) **and Anna** (a female) **–** Lk. 23:25-32

This is often left out of **our** Christmas Story. The old, righteous and devout Simeon came up to the baby Jesus. The Holy Spirit had told him he wouldn't die till he had seen the Messiah. On seeing the baby Jesus Simeon said, ***"My eyes have seen Your salvation that You have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to Your people Israel."*** (Lk. 2:30-32)

Then Anna, a prophetess, came up. We don't know what she said. Perhaps, years later, Luke couldn't find an eyewitness to recount what Anna had said, but he included it to demonstrate that the Lord Jesus came to be the Saviour of the World – both men and women.

Simeon's prophecy given to Mary (Lk. 2:34-35)

"This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed and a sword will pierce your own soul too."

All around the Cross is a lake of compromise. The disciples believed in the Lord Jesus, but only John stayed at the Crucifixion. The high priest wanted to preserve the temple. The Romans wanted to keep the peace and not violate their sense of justice. But at the Cross Mary chose to remain to the end and witness the suffering of Her Son until His death. She was free to leave, but she chose to remain and ***"a sword pierced through her heart"***.

Unspeakable brutality characterises the beginning and the end of the life of the Lord Jesus. His ministry then and now is within and to a violent world. Matthew wants us to see the Lord Jesus as a new and greater "Moses" come to set His People free. So he includes the parallel between the birth of Moses and the birth of the Lord Jesus by including the account of the murder of all the male babies.

Both men and women are prominent in the ministry of the Lord Jesus. This concern for all humankind is demonstrated three times in His birth story.

Mary is presented to us as a great model of discipleship. Through her suffering she participates in exposing the very great evil that needs to be redeemed in us and this participation is foreshadowed in the words of Simeon, ***"And a sword will pierce your own soul also"***. (Lk. 2:35)