

No Room in the Inn

—Richard R. Losch

As we approach Christmas with all the joy and excitement of the season, it is important that we remember that the King of Kings was born in humility. He came not as a royal prince, but as a lowly peasant infant who was laid in an animal's feeding trough. Saint Luke tells us,

“And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed. (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.) And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:) To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.” (*Lk. 2:1-7*)

Regardless of what translation of the Bible we normally use, the familiarity of the King James Version's accounts of the birth of Christ makes it seem to be the only proper one to use at Christmastime. Many of our most cherished images and traditions, and especially the King James verbiage that goes with them, are based on those accounts. No one can dispute that the King James Version of the Bible ranks high among the most beautiful works of English literature ever produced. The problem with it as a religious document is that it is not a direct translation. At least 75% of it was simply an updating and punching up of previous English translations. Some of these went back to the 1300s and were translations of a translation, coming from the Latin rather than from the original Greek and Hebrew. Also, these translations were strongly influenced by the culture of their own time rather than by the culture of the biblical times that they record. There is an important example of this that has significance in understanding the Christmas story. It is probably incorrect that Joseph and Jesus were carpenters. The Greek uses *tekton* (τεκτων), worker with stone, not *xylougos* (ξυλουγος), worker with wood. In about AD 385 Saint Jerome translated the Greek *tekton* to the Latin *faber*, craftsman, because there is no direct Latin equivalent to *tekton*. A thousand years later, in about 1385, John Wycliffe translated the Bible into English from Jerome's Latin translation. He translated *faber* as carpenter. That word comes from the Latin *carpentarius*, meaning wainwright or wagonmaker. Because Roman carts were made out of wood, wainwrights were generally skilled woodworkers. By Wycliffe's time the word carpenter had come to mean woodworker instead of wagonmaker. Wycliffe's mistranslation stuck. Almost every translation since has identified Jesus and Joseph as

carpenters, while most scholars today believe it is much more likely that they were stonemasons. Wycliff was used to there being a lot of carpenters around, since in his time in England wood was still plentiful. The houses of the common folk were made of wood and plaster. Only great edifices and castles were built of stone. Notwithstanding, the translation “carpenter” is now so rooted in our tradition that it is likely we will always think of Jesus and Joseph as carpenters rather than stonemasons. This is an important matter, however, as we will see shortly.

Saint Luke tells us that Mary “brought forth her firstborn son ... and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn” (*Lk. 2:7*). Even though Luke very likely never knew Jesus personally, there is a very early tradition that after his conversion he became a close friend of the Virgin Mary, so his accounts of Jesus’s life are probably accurate, even though some of his historical details are not. He was neither a Jew nor a historian, but a Greek physician, so there is no reason that he would have been familiar with the details of Jewish history, many of which even the Jewish historian Josephus got very wrong. We tend to forget that 2000 years ago historical research was very difficult, and historians often had to rely on documents that we now know to be quite inaccurate, because it was the only source available to them. Remember, too, that Luke wrote his gospel about 70 years after the birth of Christ. For example, he says that Cyrenius was governor of Syria when Jesus was born (*Lk. 2:2*). That would be Publius Sulpicius Quirinius. Syria was not the nation that we think of today, but the Roman province of which Judea and Galilee were a part. Quirinius was not made Governor Legate of Syria until Herod Archelaus was exiled in AD 6, and it was then that he carried out the census ordered by Augustus. However, long after Jesus’ birth, when the Holy Family was in Egypt, Archelaus was still Tetrarch of Judea, so we know that Jesus was born long before Quirinius came to Syria. It was because Archelaus was on the throne that they were afraid to return to Bethlehem, and went to Nazareth instead (*Mt. 2:22*). At the time of Jesus’ birth (sometime between 6 BC and AD 1), Quirinius was leading military campaigns in Galatia and Cilicia in what is now Turkey. Luke was not so much interested in the actual history, as in emphasizing that Joseph, and thus Jesus, was a descendent of David, fulfilling the Old Testament prophecies.

Luke tells us almost nothing about Jesus’ physical birthplace. Many of our traditions come from the *Protoevangelium of St. James*, an apocryphal gospel written 150 years later. As soon as it was published it was rejected and condemned by the Church as inaccurate and heretical. Nevertheless, it was very popular, and is the source of many of our common Christmas images, such as Mary riding to Bethlehem on a donkey, she giving birth on the first night they arrived in Bethlehem, and Jesus being born in a stable. The Bible tells us none of these things. Over the centuries, because of the influence of medieval European farming practices, the image developed of a wooden stable on the edge of town, where Mary and Joseph were forced to take shelter amid the animals because the inn was full. Modern scholars have shown that in ancient Judea

there were no such things as stables except for the horse stalls in the Roman military garrisons and in the villas of the very rich. Even so, the traditional Nativity Scene still tenaciously clings to the thatched wooden stable, which was actually a medieval European phenomenon. If we examine the culture of Palestine in the first century, we must conclude that although he was probably surrounded by animals, it is almost certain that Jesus was born in a house. We will look at this a little more closely in a moment. To muddle the tradition further, it was not because there was no room in the inn. There were no such things as inns in Judea in those days, either. If we examine the Greek text, we see that this tradition is rooted in a mistranslation. Luke never mentions an inn. He tells us that there was no room in the *kataluma* (καταλθμα), the “accommodations” or “living quarters,” not in the *pandachéio* (πανδαχειο), the “inn.” A *kataluma* is the living area of a house. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, when Luke refers to an inn he uses *pandachéio*. That would be a roadside stopover that in Latin is known as a *publicum* or public house. Let’s examine what their journey was like.

Travel in ancient times, even under the best of circumstances, was arduous. By Jesus’ time the Romans were building a system of roads throughout Europe and the Middle East that made travel considerably easier than in earlier times. However, while they were a marvel of technology at the time, by modern standards they were very rough. They were made for the rapid and efficient transport of armies, not for the convenience of tourists. Only older women and the weak and elderly traveled in carts, called *carpenta*, and these had no spring suspension. Every stone of those hundreds of miles of roads was a jolt, regardless of how many cushions there might be in the *carpentum*. Most people walked, and only the rich rode animals (in the Middle East, donkeys). Horses were symbolic to most Jews of their Greek and Roman oppressors. The people, often even royalty, refused to use them, preferring donkeys, which actually fare better in that climate and terrain, anyway. Although cheaper than horses, donkeys were very expensive, and it is highly unlikely that Mary would have ridden one to Bethlehem. Like everyone else, including pregnant women, she would have walked. There were no inns as we think of them along the way or in the towns. The closest thing to it were “public houses,” *publica*, where one could buy food and wine (both usually very expensive and of very low quality), and spend the night. Spending the night generally meant sleeping on the floor or, if it were a luxurious *publicum* that had beds, it meant sharing a bed with one or more other people, many of whom had not bathed for a long time. *Publica* were found only along major highways between major cities, however, and even there they were rare. The road between Jerusalem and Jericho was a very important one, so it is likely that there was a *publicum* there. That would be the *pandacheio*, the inn, where the Good Samaritan brought the wounded man. When the rich traveled, they would arrange in advance to be housed in the villa of some friend or, often, of a total stranger. Aristocrats loved hosting other aristocrats, even strangers, with whom they could exchange fine gifts and share the latest news. If you were not of the elite, however, the best you could expect was to share a bed with a total stranger. In

towns, likewise, there were no inns. A large city might have a *publicum*, but it is unlikely that a town like Bethlehem would. The poor would sometimes pick up a little extra money by letting travelers stay in their homes and sharing a bit of their food. Travelers would sleep on a straw mat on the floor, just like their hosts. Beds were a luxury for the rich. People slept on their robe in mild weather, and wrapped up in it in the cold.

It appears that Mary was from Nazareth, and that Joseph was from Bethlehem (*Lk. 2:4*). That raises the question of how Joseph came to be in an insignificant backwater town like Nazareth. About four miles from Nazareth was the city of Sepphoris. It had been destroyed in a rebellion in the late first century BC, and the Romans were rebuilding it as a Roman city. Very early Christian tradition has it that Mary was born in Sepphoris, and that her parents, whom the Bible does not name but are traditionally known as Joachim and Anna, had fled to Nazareth during the rebellion. Long before Nero's fire in AD 64, Rome was known to be a firetrap of wooden buildings, and fires there were common. By the time of Jesus' birth, whenever the Romans built or rebuilt a city, they usually used stone or brick. Also, wood around Sepphoris was scarce, but stone was plentiful. As they rebuilt the city, there would have been many well-paying jobs for skilled stonemasons. If Joseph were indeed a stonemason rather than a carpenter, it would have been worth his while to move from Bethlehem to Galilee to get a good job. As for living quarters, a faithful Jew would have been far more welcome in a town like Nazareth than in Sepphoris, which was made up mainly of Romans, Greeks, and Hellenized Jews. These were Jews who had adopted the Greek culture and language, and had abandoned much of their traditional Judaism. Nazareth was only four miles away, which in those days was a reasonable commute by foot.

The reason for Mary and Joseph traveling from Galilee to Bethlehem is not at all clear. It is universally accepted that the KJV phrase "all the world should be taxed" (*Lk. 2:1*) is a mistranslation. The Greek word is *apográphesthai* (ἀπογραφῆσθαι), to be "written down," or "registered." It was a census, not a tax. That would have been Quirinius's census, and it took place in AD 6, well after the birth of Jesus. Even if the timing did fit, it would make no sense to have people go to their birthplace to be counted. The purpose of a census is for taxation or military conscription, and the count would be of no use if it were not taken where the people actually lived. Also, neither the Jews nor the Romans would have taken their wives, and certainly not their betrothed, on a business trip like that. Joseph would have gone alone if that were his reason for going there. The Romans did not conscript Jews into their army, so Quirinius's census was clearly for taxation purposes. This explains the mistranslation "that all the world should be taxed." As we have mentioned, Luke was not a historian. It is clear that all four Evangelists wrote their gospels from their own perspectives to tell who Jesus is and why he did what he did, not as histories or time-line biographies.

The most plausible explanation of why Joseph and Mary went to Bethlehem is that they went there to get married. The Bible never mentions when they got married, but it does tell us they were not married when Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit, or even when they started off for Bethlehem. Again, the KJV calls Mary “his espoused wife” (*Lk. 2:5*) but this is a mistranslation. The Greek says that she was his *betrothed* wife (ἐμνηστευμένη), meaning that they were engaged, but not yet married. Betrothal was much more binding than a modern engagement, even to the point that a legal divorce was required to break it. Betrothal usually lasted at least a year. A betrothed couple were considered legally man and wife in every respect except that the “bride-price” (dowry) was not yet paid, and the union was not consummated. That would not happen until after the wedding. It was customary for a man to bring his betrothed to his family home for the wedding, even if that were a great distance away. Sometimes brides traveled so far that they never again saw their families or birth homes. Joseph was from Bethlehem, and it is reasonable that his parents still lived there. It is therefore also reasonable that according to the custom, Joseph brought Mary to Bethlehem to be married in his father’s house. These were not rich people, however, so their home would have been a typical middle- or lower-class house. That is where Mary and Joseph would have stayed, where they would have been married, and where Jesus would have been born. Matthew tells us that the Wise Men visited him in a house, not in a stable.

Now let us consider what such a house would be like. It would have a spacious courtyard where many of the routine chores such as cooking, pressing olives and making wine would take place. The courtyard would probably have a roof thatched with palm. The house itself would have one main room, with a flat roof accessible by a staircase on the outside of the building. The roof would usually have a palm-thatched covering somewhat like a modern picnic canopy, providing it with shade and protection from rain. In mild weather most family activities, including eating and sleeping, would have taken place in the courtyard or on the roof. The Palestinian climate would have permitted this for most of the year. Recall that David, from his palace, saw Bathsheba bathing on the roof of her house (*2 Sam. 11:2*). When the weather was bad, they moved inside the house. Its single main room was divided by an earthen platform, probably layered with straw. This section was the *kataluma*, which means the accommodation, that the KJV translates as the Inn. This was the inside living quarters. The lower portion had a dirt floor where the animals were housed at night to protect them from predators or thieves. They were not likely to have had any donkeys or cows, since these were very expensive. There might be a sheep or two, one or two milk goats, and probably several chickens. To keep the animals’ food clean and away from the dirty floor, there would be a manger, which was a low feeding trough on short legs. The word manger comes from the French *manger*, to eat. It might contain either grain or hay, or both. Because the house was meant mainly for protection from the weather, there would be only a few small unglazed windows for ventilation, perhaps with a cloth over them to keep out the dust, and a door just large enough for the people and animals to pass through. The house

would be smelly, stuffy and usually crowded. It was mainly for protection from bad weather, because when the weather permitted, which was most of the year, the family activities took place in the courtyard or on the roof. The majority of people did not have beds or bedrooms. They slept on straw mats on the floor, on or wrapped up in their own robes. Beds were for the privileged.

In those days, weddings did not take place in synagogues or temples, but at home. They were usually in the late fall after the last harvest. The wedding would take place in the courtyard. Also, since Mary was pregnant (or possibly had already delivered Jesus), and this was a scandal to the Jews, it would have been an intimate family affair. A Jewish wedding consisted of the couple's fathers publicly affirming their approval of the marriage contract, either personally or by a document that was read aloud. The couple would affirm in the presence of witnesses that they were now married, and usually the fathers, at least the groom's father, would give them a blessing. From that point on Mary's family would no longer have had any legal authority over her whatever. Other than the fact that the Jews believed every aspect of life was religious, and the Torah had laws governing it, marriage was not considered a religious matter in the way that many think of it today. As in every culture in the world at the time, marriage was a solemnly binding business contract designed to unite families, legitimize heirs, and control inheritances. If the couple loved each other, that was considered an extra blessing to the marriage. The Jews were different from most cultures of the time, however, in that they rarely forced their children to marry someone that they did not want, although legally they could do so. Following the marriage there was a celebratory party. For those who could afford it, this might be a huge affair like the ones in Jesus' parables or the one at Cana of Galilee, and these often would go on for days. In the case of Joseph and Mary, on the other hand, it was probably quite subdued.

There are strong arguments that Jesus really could have been born in AD 1, and that it could well have been close to December 25. Mary and Joseph would have showed up to stay with Joseph's family during the time of the wedding. If Jesus was born in December they would have arrived sometime in the very late Fall or early winter, because we read that Mary was "great with child." Late Fall would have been the time the early cold rains began to force people inside. The house would already have been crowded, and as Luke tells us, "there was no room for them in the *kataluma*," the living quarters. The only alternative was for them to take a corner of the lower section where the animals were kept, and the softest and cleanest place for Mary to lay Jesus was in the hay in the manger. Also, she would have been ritually unclean for seven days after the birth, and by Jewish law she would have had to have been kept separate from the other people. They may have stayed at that house for several weeks or longer, since the journey back to Nazareth would have been very dangerous for a new mother and newborn baby.

The visit of the Magi was unquestionably quite a while after Jesus had been born. One indication of this is that Matthew refers to Jesus as *paidion* (παιδιον), young child, rather than *brephos* (βρεφος), infant. The Magi were almost certainly aristocratic Persian court astrologers, and were very likely sent as a delegation from the Persian emperor to congratulate Herod. They had interpreted the astrological signs to mean that Herod had had a new son. Their trip from Persia to Jerusalem would have taken weeks, and as an official delegation from the emperor they would have been expected to stay at Herod's palace for at least a few weeks. That could have been less, however, since Herod was anxious to send them to Bethlehem to find Jesus. This would explain why Mathew says that the Magi found Jesus "when they had come *into the house*" (Mt. 2:11).

The Holy Family fled into Egypt to escape Herod. Egypt in those days extended up into the Negev Desert, not very far from Bethlehem, and yet it was out of Herod's jurisdiction. That would have been Herod the Great. When he died, his son Herod Archelaus came into power. He was every bit as vicious as his father, but unlike his father, the Romans did not trust him, so his authority did not extend into Galilee. Instead of returning to Bethlehem, the Holy Family returned to Mary's home town, Nazareth of Galilee, where they raised Jesus. There they would be out of Herod's reach. Other than these references, almost every other time Herod is mentioned in the gospels it means Herod Antipas. He was the Tetrarch of Galilee, and was also Herod the Great's son. It was this Herod that killed John the Baptist and tried Jesus. Jesus grew up in Nazareth, and he lived there until he moved to Capernaum after he began his public ministry.

This scenario, while not the popular tradition, makes perfect sense. It is completely consistent with the Bible, and in no way detracts from the significance or the humility of Jesus' birth. That humility is the hallmark of his earthly ministry, and is emphasized by the fact that Jesus' first visitors were shepherds. In those days, unlike earlier times, shepherds were considered the dregs of society, socially not much better than slaves. Regardless of the details, whether it was in a stable or in the animal section of a poor man's house, what is important is that the incarnate Son of God, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, was humbly born and was laid in a manger, not in the gilded bed of an earthly prince.