

## *No Room in the Inn*

—Richard R. Losch

As we approach Christmas with all the joy and excitement the season engenders, 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.” (Luke 2:1-7, KJV)

Regardless of what translation of the Bible we normally use, the familiarity of the King James Version's account of the birth of Christ that makes it seem to be the only one to use at Christmastime. Many of our most cherished images and traditions, including the verbiage that goes with them, are based on those accounts. No one can dispute that the King James Version of the Bible, along with the 1549 Book of Common Prayer, and the writings of Christopher Marlowe and William Shakespeare, are the greatest and most beautiful works of English literature ever produced. The problem with the King James Version 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. Also, they were strongly influenced by the culture of their time rather than by the culture of first century Galilee and Judea. For example, it is probably incorrect that Joseph and Jesus were carpenters. In about AD 385 Saint Jerome translated the Greek *tekton*, worker in hard materials, to the Latin *faber*, craftsman, because there was no direct Latin equivalent to *tekton*. A thousand years later, in about 1385, John Wycliffe, who translated the Bible into English from Jerome's Latin translation, translated *faber* as carpenter. That word comes from a Latin word meaning wainwright, or wagonmaker. In Wycliffe's day the word meant more what we would call a cabinet-maker today. Nonetheless, 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 plentiful. Only great edifices and castles were built of stone. That translation “carpenter” is now so rooted in our tradition, however,

that it is likely we will always think of Jesus and Joseph as carpenters in the modern sense of the word.

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.” Even though Luke almost certainly never met Jesus before the Resurrection, there is a very early tradition that after his conversion he was a close friend of the Virgin Mary, so his accounts of Jesus’s life are probably accurate, even if 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. The KJV says that Cyrenius was governor of Syria when Jesus was born. That would be Publius Sulpicius Quirinius. Quirinius was not made Governor Legate of Syria until the Tetrarch 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. 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 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 on a donkey, her giving birth the night they arrived in Bethlehem, and Jesus being born in a cave used as a stable. 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 stables except 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. If we examine the facts of 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. 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 bad translation. Luke never mentions an inn. He tells us that there was no room in the *accommodation, kataluma*,, not in the *inn, pandachéio*. *Kataluma* is the living area of a house. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, when Luke refers to an inn uses *pandachéio*, which would be a roadside stopover that in Latin is known as a *publicum* or public house. Let’s examine what this would mean.

Travel in ancient times, even under the best of circumstances, was arduous. By Jesus' time the Romans had built 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. Only older women and the weak and elderly traveled in carts, called *carpenta*, and these had no spring suspension. Every cobble of those hundreds of miles of roads was a jolt, regardless of how many cushions there might be in the cart. Most people walked, and only the rich rode animals (in the Middle East, donkeys). In the Middle East horses were symbolic to most people of their Greek and Roman oppressors. The people, often even royalty, refused to use them, preferring donkeys. Donkeys were expensive, however, 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 bad), and spend the night. Spending the night generally meant sleeping on the floor or, if it were a very luxurious *publicum* that had beds, it meant sharing a bed with one or more other people. *Publica* were found only along major highways, however, and even there they were rare. The rich 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 gossip. If you were not of "the 1%," however, the best you could expect was to share a bed with a total stranger who may not have bathed in weeks. 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 the floor just as their hosts did. Beds were a luxury for the rich. They 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 originally from Bethlehem. That raises the question of how Joseph came to be in Nazareth. About four miles from Nazareth was a city called 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 Rome was known to be a firetrap of wooden buildings, so by the time of Jesus' birth, when 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 Nazareth than in Sepphoris, which was made up mainly of Romans, Greeks and Hellenized Jews. Nazareth was only four miles away, which was considered 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” is a mistranslation. The Greek word is *apográphesthai*, 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 currently lived. As we have mentioned, Luke was not a historian. It is clear that he wrote his gospel to tell who Jesus is and what he did, not as a history or time-lined biography.

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,” but this is a mistranslation. The Greek states that she was his *betroted* wife, 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. A betrothed couple were considered legally man and wife in every respect except that their union was not consummated 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 long distance away. We are told that Joseph’s family was from Bethlehem, and it is entirely reasonable that his parents still lived there. It is therefore also reasonable to conjecture that Joseph brought Mary to Bethlehem to be married in his father’s house, according to the custom. 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 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 or tent-cloth 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. When the weather was bad they moved inside the house. Its single main room was divided by a high platform, probably layered with straw. This section was the *kataluma*, which means the accommodation, that the KJV translates as the Inn. This was the living quarters. The lower portion had a dirt floor where the animals were housed, at least 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. Inside there might be a sheep or two, one or two milk goats, and probably several chickens. To keep the animals' food clean and dry, away from the damp floor, there would be a manger, which was a low feeding box 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.

Unless the family were rich enough to hire a special place, which was unlikely with Joseph's family, 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. In those days, weddings did not take place in synagogues or (for the pagans) in temples, but at home. 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 then affirm in the presence of witnesses that they were now married, and usually the groom's father would give a blessing to the couple. From that point on Mary's family would no longer have had any legal authority over her whatever. Other than the fact that they believed every aspect of life was religious and the Torah had laws governing it, marriage was not considered a religious matter. As in every culture in the world at the time, marriage was a solemnly binding business contract designed to unite families and control inheritances. If they loved each other, that was just considered an extra blessing to the marriage. There might be a rabbi there to bless the union if he were a friend or if the family were important, but that was a nicety rather than a necessity. Following the marriage there was a celebratory party of some sort. For those who could afford it, this might be a huge affair like the one at Cana of Galilee, and could go on for days. In the case of Joseph and Mary, on the other hand, it was probably quite subdued.

Despite claims that Jesus was born in the spring or fall between 6 and 4 BC, there is reasonable evidence that he really was born on 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 was already crowded, and as Luke tells us, “there was no room for them in the *kataluma*.” The only alternative was for them to take a corner of the lower section where the animals were kept, and the softest place for Mary to lay Jesus was in the hay in the manger. Also, she would have been ritually unclean for 7 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 both for a new mother and for a 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*, young child, rather than *brephos*, infant. The trip from Persia to Jerusalem would have taken weeks, and as an official delegation from the Persian emperor they would have stayed at Herod’s palace for at least a few weeks. That could have been less, however, since Herod was in a hurry to send them to Bethlehem to find Jesus. Nonetheless, this would explain why Mathew says that the Magi found Jesus “when they had come *into the house*.”

The Holy Family fled into Egypt to escape Herod. Egypt in those days extended all the way 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, his authority did not extend into Galilee, so instead of returning to Bethlehem they returned to Mary’s home town, Nazareth of Galilee, where 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, was also Herod the Great’s son. It was this Herod that killed John the Baptist and tried Jesus. It was in Nazareth that Jesus was brought up, and where he lived until he moved to Capernaum after he began his public ministry at about the age of 30.

This scenario makes perfect sense, 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, shepherds were considered the very lowest level of society, not much above slaves. Regardless of the details, whether it was in a stable or in a poor man’s house, what is important is that the incarnate Son of God, the King of Kings and Prince of Peace, was humbly born and laid in a manger, not in the gilded bed of a prince.

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