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The Nativity According to Luke

An original work of art

by [Ben Witherington III](#)

The Christmas portions of the gospel are, perhaps, the most beloved, and the most belabored, texts in the New Testament. Like works of art that have been lacquered with coat after coat of varnish, the original stories are hardly visible any more. Today, it is difficult to conceive the Nativity without an ox and ass, for example, although neither Matthew nor Luke mentions animals. (Rather, St. Francis, the great medieval lover of animals, is credited with building the first manger scene complete with live animals.) The three wise men are also permanent fixtures in our image of the Nativity, although they don't arrive, according to Matthew 2, until several days after the birth of Jesus (the epiphany to the shepherds does, however, take place the same day).

Perhaps revisiting the story from a historian's point of view may remove some of these mistaken impressions, these layers of lacquer, and let us see the masterpiece in its brilliant original colors.

Part of the problem today is that we tend to conflate Matthew's and Luke's accounts into one Nativity story. To counter this, in this column we will confine ourselves to a few verses from Luke.

At the time of the birth, Joseph and Mary are in Bethlehem, Joseph's ancestral home, where the couple has traveled, according to Luke 2:1–5, to participate in a census.¹

As Luke 2:5 states clearly, Joseph and Mary are engaged, and Mary is pregnant. Engagement in early Judaism was as binding as modern marriage is today. It required formal dissolution to undo such a commitment. Jewish women were usually between 11 and 13 when betrothed, and the men were generally a bit older. Marriage in early Judaism involved a covenant between one man and one woman, and the commitment was intended to be a lifetime covenant, though men were allowed certain grounds for divorce. What is important to remember is that in an honor and shame culture such as early Judaism it was a scandal to get pregnant out of wedlock or before marriage. Brides were absolutely expected to be virgins when they got married.

If Bethlehem was the town where Joseph's relatives lived, then it is natural to expect that Joseph and Mary would have first sought accommodations with family. This appears to be what they did. It is not the case that Mary and Joseph were forced to stop somewhere beside the road because Mary suddenly went into labor. Rather, Luke 2:6 tells us that "while they were there," that is, in Bethlehem, "the time came for her to deliver her child."

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Where did they stay in Bethlehem? Luke tells us that after the birth, Mary put the baby in a “manger,” or corncrib, because there was “no room for them at the *kataluma*” (Luke 2:7)—a Greek term he uses elsewhere to mean “guest room” (see Luke 22:11). When Luke wants to speak about an inn, he calls it *pandocheion* (see Luke 10:34). Thus, Luke says nothing about the Holy couple being cast out of an inn and Mary having to bear the child in a barn. Historically, it is far more likely that Mary and Joseph had their child in the humble back portion of the ancestral home where the most valued animals were fed and, in the winter, housed, because the guest room in the family home was already occupied. In any case, Bethlehem was such a small village, on a minor road, that it is not even clear it would have had a wayside inn. Admittedly, Jesus’ beginnings were humble—but we don’t need to mythologize them into some story about a baby being cast out by the world.

Luke never suggests that this birth was in any way miraculous or unusual. (The miracle is said to have happened, rather, at Jesus’ conception.) But out in a nearby pasture, there was much celestial hubbub.

In Luke 2:9, “an angel of the Lord” appears before some shepherds, who are “keeping watch over their flock by night.”

The episode about the shepherds—which takes up more space than the discussion of the birth itself—has a certain historical plausibility to it, since Bethlehem was one of the main areas near Jerusalem where sheep were raised for the sacrifices in the Temple. Due to their profession, shepherds were viewed as unclean peasants by some early Jews, but Luke sees them as exemplars of the marginalized, for whom the birth of a savior would be seen as good news indeed (see Luke 1:52, 4:18).

Throughout the Bible, angels are harbingers of divine activity and messengers of God, and the angel of Luke 2 is no exception. Luke 2:9 speaks of the glory of the Lord shining around the angel and the shepherds, a reference to the bright and shining presence, or *Shekinah*, of God. Naturally, the shepherds are frightened by the sight.

“Do not be afraid,” the angel reassures the men, “for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah” (Luke 2:10–11). The angel emphasizes that the savior is born “to you,” the shepherds—that is, to the least, the last and the lost.

The angel tells the shepherds that they will find the baby swaddled in strips of cloth and lying in a corncrib. This he offers as a “sign” or proof that he is telling the truth about the birth of the savior.

The savior language used by the angel in addressing the shepherds draws on the rhetoric of the imperial cult in Luke’s day. Throughout the empire, boastful inscriptions celebrated the birth of the emperor who had “pacified” the entire region around the Mediterranean. Caesar is described as a god walking upon the earth in the flesh. In his gospel, Luke is using this same language, portraying the Jewish infant of humble origins, Jesus, as the *real* savior, the real Lord whose coming will bring peace on earth—compared to the Emperor Augustus, who is just a pretender or counterfeit.

When the shepherds hear the news “which the Lord has made known to us” (Luke 2:15)—for they take the angel as being God’s very mouthpiece—they go to the corncrib in haste to see with their own eyes the confirming sign. They then go forth as the first evangelists or proclaimers of the good news. The good news isn’t merely about seeing Jesus—it also involves the encounter with the angel.

It is after all the angelic word that helps the audience correctly interpret the event: This child is someone special, human yet divine. This is why all who hear the shepherds’ proclamation marvel—including Mary herself. John Nolland’s translation here captures the spirit of the text: After the

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shepherds “made known” what had been told them about this child, “Mary stored up all these things, trying in her heart to penetrate their significance” (Luke 2:17, 19).² Mary is thus portrayed as teachable and thus on the way to becoming a true believer.

So the story is full of historical moment, and equally full of the miraculous. It really doesn't need all the extra Christmas hype. Ancient historians, unlike modern ones, seldom had hangups with relating things supernatural as well as natural. (We may ponder who is more enlightened—we or they?)

Whatever we make of this story, it has clearly generated a huge legacy of grace, blessing and gift-giving through two millennia. In its original form, it is a reminder that God's ways are seldom our ways. As the Scottish poet George MacDonald once put it: “They all were looking for a king, to slay their foes and lift them high: thou cam'st, a little baby thing, that made a woman cry.”

Notes

1. Much ink has been spilt on Luke 2:1–2, in regard to the apparent mistake of Luke's suggestion that Joseph and Mary traveled to Bethlehem to participate in a world-wide census conducted by Quirinius, governor of the Syrian province (which included Judea at that point). Suffice it to say here that it is perfectly feasible to translate here “this registration happened first, (before) Quirinius was governor of Syria.” While there may be some rhetorical hyperbole in the reference to “all the (known) world” being enrolled in Quirinius' census, Augustus did pursue a policy of taxation right across the imperial provinces of the empire; Judea was part of an imperial province, so an enrollment is perfectly feasible. See the detailed discussion of John Nolland, *Luke 1–9:20* (Waco, TX: Word, 1993), pp. 9–103 and all the bibliography there.

2. Nolland, *Luke 1–9:20*, p. 97. The Greek here refers to not merely storing up ideas, but valuing and evaluating them, ruminating on them because their meaning is not immediately apparent. This would be the opposite of someone who is hard-hearted and immediately rejects the message. See the discussion in Ben Witherington III, *Women in the Ministry of Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1987).

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