

# THE FIRST CHRISTMAS: THE PLACE

(Advent 2021)

## Scripture:

*<sup>4</sup>So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. <sup>5</sup>He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. <sup>6</sup>While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, <sup>7</sup>and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them. (Luke 2:4-7)*

*“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.” (Micah 5:2)*

## Message:

**Many of us think we know the Christmas story so well we could tell it in our sleep.** Joseph and Mary arrive in Bethlehem late one night from a long tiring journey from Nazareth. They need a place to sleep, but the local inn was at capacity. But this young couple is desperate because Mary is nine months pregnant and ready to deliver.

Where will they stay?

The innkeeper, who obviously observes Mary's condition, feels sorry for them, and directs them out back to a stable where the guests' animals are kept. And during the night, the infant Jesus is born

**Perhaps you've heard it a million times in church and Sunday School;** maybe you've read it a thousand times in various stories; heard it told in messages and Sunday School programs, and watched it dramatized on television. But is it the way we've traditionally heard it (and the way we remember it), actually the way it happened?

Probably not. Not if you've studied **Luke 2** and know a bit about Eastern culture. Over the centuries we've embellished the Christmas story with things that are not actually found in the text or consistent with Eastern culture. In fact, if we look closely what the Scripture says and doesn't say in light of the Biblical and cultural context, we might understand a few things quite differently.

This Advent, we're going to go back to the first Christmas and take a closer look at the story of Jesus birth - with our Bibles open and our "tradition caps" off.

## THE EXAMINATION

As we do that, we are going to test your Christmas knowledge each week and we'll see how we do. Sometimes we can be definitive (we know for certain); often we can offer an educated probability.

1. Bethlehem is located just five miles southwest of Jerusalem. True or False?
2. Bethlehem was well-known for raising sheep. True or False?
3. There was snow on the first Christmas. True or False?
4. Mary came to Bethlehem riding a donkey. True or False?
5. Bethlehem is an exhaustive, three-day journey from Nazareth. True or False?
6. The innkeeper offered Mary and Joseph the use of his stable. True or False?
7. The "stable" was probably a cave. True or False?
8. Mary and Joseph arrived in Bethlehem (on Christmas eve) and during the night, Jesus was born. True or False?
9. Jesus was born on December 25. True or False?
10. Mary wrapped Jesus in cloths and laid him in a wooden crèche or manger. True or False?

**Let's examine some of these questions together.**

## THE EXPLANATION

**THE CITY was Bethlehem.** Bethlehem is located about five miles south of Jerusalem; Beit-Lechem, literally the *House of Bread*, is an important city in the Bible. **(PIC)**

It was prophesized that Messiah, "*the bread sent down from heaven to feed the souls of mankind*" would be a descendant of King David. And, according to the prophet, Messiah would be born in the city where David, the celebrated shepherd king of Israel had been born – in Bethlehem.

The prophet **Micah** announced, "*But you, Bethlehem, Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.*" **(Micah 5:2).**

Outside of being the birthplace of King David, Bethlehem was known for their sheep and **lambs**. Lambs were important because they were a crucial part of worship in the temple.

Just a stone's throw from Jerusalem, **lambs** were born and raised in Bethlehem. Each unblemished first born lamb was considered holy and was set aside for **sacrifice** in Jerusalem (Are you starting to see some connections here?)

Generations of shepherds tended to the sacred flocks day after day and throughout the night. Periodically, perfect firstborn male lambs were sorted out from the rest and driven to Jerusalem where they would be purchased by those who wished to **sacrifice** them to atone for their **sins**. They would then be sacrificed on the same mountain where Abraham had offered his son, Isaac, to the Lord.

An unblemished lamb plays a vital role in Passover, a central Jewish celebration. Passover commemorates the story of God's rescue of the families of Israel, God-followers, who sacrificed an unblemished lamb and spread his blood on the posts and lintel of their home. God's grace in sparing the lives of their firstborn, is anchored in the death of that perfect, first-born lamb.

Some years after his birth, John the Baptizer would call Jesus—not only the “*Son of God*” (**John 1:34**) but also the “*Lamb of God*” (**John 1:36**). The “*Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world*” (**John 1:29**) would come from the same place where sacrificial lambs had been born for generations – from Bethlehem. Where else would people assume THE LAMB to be born if not in Bethlehem among the sacred temple flocks? This is a picture not to be missed!

In addition to David's birth, Bethlehem is the setting for the story of Ruth (our kinsmen redeemer) and where Samuel anointed David King of God's people. It was the anticipated birthplace of the great “*son of David*” or “*Messiah*” who most believed would liberate the land from foreign control.

But Bethlehem was, first and foremost, a sheep town; a small town of maybe 200. It was not a place you'd imagine a king would be born, only shepherd's babies and lambs. But Jesus would become the **Passover Lamb** sacrificed for people's sins – from Bethlehem.

**THE WEATHER** is an issue of constant discussion. Sixteenth century European woodcuts show Joseph and Mary all bundled up braving the blizzards of a Northern Germany winter on the way to Bethlehem. Christmas cards often show a blanket of freshly fallen snow across in idyllic scene of shepherds and sheep gathered around a fire.

The shepherds and sheep were in the fields. Sheep were allowed into the fields only after the harvest, and only after the “gleaners” had had adequate

time to scourer the fields. When the “gleaners” were finished, shepherds were allowed into the fields with their sheep to eat the stubble and whatever else remained. With Israel’s harvest schedule, this would have been the beginning to middle of **August**.

Would the holy couple have encountered snow? Not very likely. Bethlehem is in a subtropical climate; it’s located about 32° North latitude or about where Atlanta, GA or Phoenix Arizona are. And being located alongside the Mediterranean Sea, the weather is usually **very mild year-around**. The probability of snow is extremely low, but it is not impossible. In January 1950, twenty inches of snow fell; in February 1920, they received 29 inches. At the same time, there is **no evidence** that Jesus was born in winter or on December 25.

Our traditional understanding of Mary and Josephs’ **ARRIVAL** pictures Joseph going door to door late at night desperately begging for shelter because Mary, his betrothed, was in labor. This story has always tugged at our heart strings and provided an empathetic cord in the Christmas story – there was no place for the Christ in people’s homes (or hearts).

But is that realistic? When did Mary and Joseph likely arrive in Bethlehem? While most people seem to **think** the very night Mary and Joseph arrived in Bethlehem, Jesus was born. The truth is the **text** doesn’t say that. We’re told “*while they were there, the time came for the baby to be born*” (2:6).

The distance from Nazareth to Bethlehem is about seventy miles—which in those days would have been a very ambitious and vigorous **three-day walk** on foot or by donkey. It is unimaginable in that culture – or any other culture for that matter – that a husband would make his wife walk (or put her on a donkey) for three strenuous days of travel when she was nine months pregnant. (Doctors today tell women not to fly toward the end of their pregnancy). And what mother-to-be would love to make that trip at that time?

It is far more likely that Joseph and Mary made the trip weeks in advance and that, as the text says, “*while they were there*” (i.e., weeks or months later) the time came, and the baby was born.

And then there is **THE INN**.

Luke tells us, “*There was no room for them in the inn*” (**Luke 2:7**). Some would suggest that implies a last-minute, late-night arrival in Bethlehem? Except, if you know the text, it doesn’t.

The word Luke selects for “inn” (*katalyma*) is not the Greek word (usually) used for a **commercial** inn or an ancient hotel. And Luke knew the correct Greek word because he uses it a few chapters later when he shares Jesus’ parable of the **Good Samaritan** (**Luke 10:34**). He writes, “*Then [the Good*

*Samaritan] put the man on his own donkey, took him to an **inn** [pandocheion] and took care of him."*

In **2:7**, Luke uses the same word he uses in **22:11** where Jesus is instructing his disciples to go and prepare for the **Passover sacrifice** of the Lamb: "*Say to the owner of the house, 'The teacher asks: Where is the **guest room** [i.e., a room in a private residence], where I may eat the Passover with my disciples.'*" (We can blame the King James Version for the confusion). (From the "lamb" in a guest room of Bethlehem to the "lamb" in a guestroom celebration of the Passover Lamb).

Does this mean that in Bethlehem there was no room for the holy couple in someone's (likely an extended family members) guestroom? In the time of Jesus, Palestinian homes were often constructed with an extra room—a **guest room**—at the end of the house. This room was set aside for visiting relatives and friends, for a recently married son and his wife, or in the spirit of Middle East hospitality, for anyone in need.

Luke is telling us that there was no room for Mary and Joseph in the *guest room* - in their family members home (remember Augustus had called for a census so relatives were to go back to the city of their forefathers). The city was bustling (there were a lot a people *from* Bethlehem.)

Then what about the nameless innkeeper who refused them refuge and who is typically enshrined alongside Judas in the Christian tradition. Doesn't that suggest a commercial inn?

But didn't he also – or was it his sympathetic wife – remember the cave or stable behind the inn where the animals were sheltered and graciously offer it to the homeless, hapless couple? Check your Bibles. There is no mention of an innkeeper (or an innkeeper's wife) anywhere (we have totally made it up).

**But what about THE MANGER. Isn't a manger a feeding trough for animals?**

Doesn't that suggest a stable out back, or the use of a nearby cave used to protect animals in the cold—some place away from people's homes? Again, not really.

Even peasant homes in Jesus' day were often built, not only with a guestroom at one end but with a small indoor **stable** at the other end (The animals would provide warmth for the home). In between was a large single room that served as the family living quarters.

In fact, the living area was often open to the stable, but the **floor** of the living quarters was often three-four feet higher than the floor of the stable. Mangers were often built into the stone floor at the end of the living area—at just the right height for a cow or donkey standing in the stable to be able to feed.

**(PIC).** One of these built-in mangers likely served as the first bed for Jesus. Wooden mangers were non-existent; wood was precious – too precious to use to feed animals.

It is far more likely that Jesus was born in Bethlehem in a private home rather than in a barn or cave on the edge of town.

Dr. Lyle Bierma (Professor of New Testament at Calvin Seminary) says the story likely unfolded like this: *“Mary and Joseph travel to Bethlehem for the census decreed by Caesar Augustus. They arrive—not late on Christmas Eve—but some weeks beforehand because of Mary’s condition. Since Bethlehem was the town of Joseph’s ancestors, he quite possibly had relatives there, who would have immediately taken the couple into one of their homes. But even if Joseph had been a total stranger, Middle Eastern hospitality was (and is) such that some family in the village would have invited him and his pregnant soon-to-be wife to stay with them. When the time came for Mary to give birth, she delivered her baby in a home, as was customary at that time. The boy was placed in a manger in (or near) the family living quarters, next to the stable. Why were Mary and Joseph not in the attached guest room—because it was already being used. So when the wise men later visit Bethlehem, they find Mary and Joseph and the baby in a house (Matthew 2:11) - probably the same house where Jesus was born.*

Listen to our text from the Complete Jewish Bible: *“So Yosef, because he was a descendant of David, went up from the town of Nazeret in the Galil to the town of David, called Beit-Lechem, in Y’hudah, to be registered with Miryam, to whom he was engaged, and who was pregnant. While they were there the time came for her to give birth; and she gave birth to her first-born child, a son. She wrapped him in cloth and laid him in a feeding trough, because there was no space for them in the living-quarters. (Luke 2:4-7)*

The incredible paradox of history occurs in Bethlehem—history’s greatest figure is born—not in a palace or mansion, but in a peasant’s home in lamb country, laid in a trough from which even the lambs ate.

## THE ELUCIDATION

1. Bethlehem is located just five miles southwest of Jerusalem. (**True**)
2. Bethlehem was well-known for raising sheep. (**True**)
3. There was snow on the first Christmas. (probably **False**)
4. Mary came to Bethlehem riding a donkey. (not very likely; **False**)
5. Bethlehem is an exhaustive, three-day journey from Nazareth. (**True**)
6. The innkeeper offered Mary and Joseph the use of his stable. (**False**)



7. The “stable” was probably a cave. (**False**)
8. Mary and Joseph arrived in Bethlehem (on Christmas eve) and during the night, Jesus was born. (Not very likely; **False**)
9. Jesus was born on December 25. (Highly unlikely; **False**)
10. Mary wrapped Jesus in cloths and laid him in a wooden crèche (manger). (**False**)

**This is obviously interesting stuff, but question is, “so what?” What difference does it make? Does it change anything?**

On a superficial level, I think it does. Our traditional pictures of Christmas would (should) change: Our crèche scenes, our Christmas Cards, the words of some of our carols, the nativity skits in our Christmas programs should all be adjusted. Why would we promote a false narrative?

It’s probably not as marketable; not the stuff that inspires moviemaking; but there has to be some significance to getting it right, to actually knowing and embracing what the Scripture says, to finding our meaning in the Truth.

But a more Biblical understanding will also change our understanding of Christmas at a deeper level. I’m not talking about essence of Christmas – that is, that Jesus was incarnate, became flesh, and dwelt among us to offer himself as a sacrifice for our sins. We get that right. I am talking about how we see the broader meaning and respond to the Christ of Christmas.

If we get the facts, the Truth, into sharper focus, we will more clearly understand how ordinary and how extraordinary (at the same time), the birth of Jesus was.

If it is truth that Jesus was born in an ordinary house on an ordinary street in an ordinary village among ordinary people, then Jesus is like us (sin excepted). At first glance, there appears to be nothing unusual about this birth or baby.

At the same time, contrary to folklore, it appears Bethlehem did not turn its back on the holy family; it offered them the hospitality one would hope for and expect – especially in the Eastern culture.

Jesus was not born in a barn on the outskirts of the city, but on Main Street, in the **middle** of **God’s people**. If the angel hadn’t told the shepherds what was really going on, no one would have thought about the birth twice.

In many tellings of the story of the Nativity, it appears no one assisted the couple. That contradicts every facet of Middle Eastern hospitality. And with a closer reading of Scripture and understanding of the culture, it would appear false. They were welcomed into a home—though the guest room was full.

**That is what Christmas is all about.** At the center of the Christmas story is what we call the **incarnation**—God taking on human **flesh**; God assumes human nature. Our flesh. Our nature.

And it is not just about skin and bones; it is about the total human experience; being enveloped in what we consider to be the normal rhythms of everyday life. From the beginning, God is here with us. He comes into our **ordinary** world, joins our lives in the **ordinary** ways and **ordinary** places, and seeks – as Jesus did – to turn our ordinary into extraordinary.

If we understand Jesus was born in an ordinary house in the ordinary city of Bethlehem, the incarnation becomes an even more **amazing gift** to us and to our world.

Dr. Douglas Kamstra  
Covenant CRC  
7171 Willard Ave. SE  
Grand Rapids, MI 49548