

The Manger Sign

When Jesus was born of Mary in Bethlehem the Bible says it occurred outside of the guest room, possibly in a cave barn where the family's livestock stayed because there was no guest room available to them. After the delivery of Jesus, Mary laid him in a manger. A manger is an open box in a stable (a trough) designed to hold feed or fodder for cattle., especially cows and sheep. Luke's straight forward account reads: *While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, 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 2:6-7

The angels who appeared to the peasant shepherds nearby made much over the manger scene. The angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." Luke 2:10-12 The angel pointed to the fact that the first bed for the incarnate Son of God was a feeding trough for animals (Luke 2:10-12). How could this be a sign? Perhaps because this would be a very unusual baby bed. A feed box for cattle is not where new born babies are placed! Thus they were directed a barn like area and there among the livestock in a feed box would be found the Christ child! No wonder the shepherds said to one another- *Let's go straight to Bethlehem and see what has happened which the Lord has made known to us.* They hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby who was lying in the manger. Luke 2:15-16

According to the angel the manger was a sign of the Messiah. The manger sign showed more than where the baby Christ would be located. The manger also spoke of who he was, his mission, and his experience. This we learn from the broader story of Jesus and from his adult ministry as teacher, prophet and to the apostolic witnesses to his death-burial and resurrection and ascension.

Upon reflection then *To what does the manger testify?* **First**, the manger speaks of **humiliation**. It was humbling enough that the Son of God left heaven's glory for the shame and darkness of this fallen world. He humbled himself and was born a sinless man in a world of sinners. It was as more humbling for Jesus Christ to be born among sinners as it would be for us to be born in a barn among animals.

Because of his great love for us, Christ was willing to become our Savior. His conception and birth was only the first step in a life of humiliation, culminating in His death on the cross.

Jesus' love was so great that he descended to our level so that he might rescue us and bring us to heaven. He laid aside his royal dignity for a time that we might take on the dignity of the children of God forever.

Mary was nine months pregnant and ready to deliver when she and Joseph arrived in Bethlehem. Because of the large number of travelers who had come to Bethlehem to register for Caesar's mandatory census, all the rooms at the public inn were already rented out. It is likely that such public inns also had a stable or barn where the travelers could place their animals for safe-keeping and feeding, such as their horse, or donkey, or maybe a lamb they were bringing to the Temple to be offered as a sacrifice. This type of stable was the only place that could be found for Joseph and his wife Mary, who was "great with child" as the King James Bible states.

Cecil Alexander in his hymn- Once in Royal David's City expresses this truth:

He came down to earth from heaven

Who is God and Lord of all;

And his shelter was a stable

and his cradle was a stall:

with the poor and meek and lowly

lived on earth our Savior holy.

Second, the manger also speaks to us of Christ's **humanity**. When he was born, he was born helpless, just like any other baby. He had to have a place to be laid where he wouldn't fall out and be injured – a cow's feeding trough had tall sides which would prevent this. And like any other baby he needed warmth. So he was laid on a bed of straw under the cloths Mary wrapped him in. He would be sleeping, sometimes crying, in the manger until his parents picked him up to love on him. His mother lifted him up from the trough to breast-feed him. And of course, his diapers had to be changed like every other baby. Never believe the nonsense of the lines

*the poor Baby wakes,
But little Lord Jesus,
no crying He makes;*

As human baby when hungry and in need of a change I am sure he demand attention with baby alert system of a loud cry!

So throughout his life, Jesus grew and matured like every other human. He was fully man, completely like us in every way, except he had no sin and he had a heavenly origin before he came to earth.

There's a **third reason** that the sign of the manger is important. It is an example of the **divine providence** of God operating to fulfill his eternal purpose. Had the Roman emperor Caesar Augustus not decreed that all the subjects in his empire should return to their hometown to be registered, Mary and Joseph would not have been in Bethlehem but in Nazareth. But the prophet had predicted the Messiah who would be of David's line would be born in Bethlehem. That it was God's will that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem as we read in Micah 5:2:

*"But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah,
who are too little to be among the clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to be ruler in Israel,
whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days or more literally
From you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel.
His goings forth are from long ago,
From the days of eternity." NASB*

Therefore it was the providence of God that led the Caesar to issue a universal tax. We read, *Now it happened that in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus to register all the empire. ...* ³ *And everyone went to be registered, each one to his own town.* ⁴ *So Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family line of David,* ⁵ *to be registered together with Mary, who was legally promised in marriage to him and was pregnant.* This is what brought about the Messiah's birth in a town overrun with out-of-town visitors which necessitated the use of an animal manger for the sleeping place of the infant Christ.

There is a **fourth reason** the manger sign is important. Although Joseph and Mary were not denied a room because of some cruel plot against them, it does remind us of the fact that Jesus would endure **a life of rejection**. In fact, to be our Savior he must be rejected of men and acquainted with our sorrow as the prophet Isaiah said, *"He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces, he was despised, and we esteemed him not"* (Isa. 53:5). Christ's manger bed signifies his work as the unwanted Savior. He was unwanted because he did not conform to men's idea of a mighty political military deliverer. John 1:11 says, *"¹¹ He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him."*

There is another way in which this manger was a sign to us of greater things than at first meets the eye. This manger was a feeding trough, a tool that shepherds used to feed their flock. The sign was given to shepherds. They were the first to come and see the Christ child. How very fitting! Christ the Lord was born to be our Shepherd-Savior! He came from heaven above to seek God's lost sheep, to feed them words of eternal life, and to guide them safely home.

Hear the words of the prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel.

Isaiah 40:11

*Like a shepherd He will tend His flock,
In His arm He will gather the lambs
And carry them in His bosom;*

He will gently lead the nursing ewes.

Ezekiel 34:23 NASB

"Then I will set over them one shepherd, My servant David, and he will feed them; he will feed them himself and be their shepherd.

The food of eternal life is Christ himself. So Jesus said he would feed us his life given up in death and restored in his resurrection. In Jesus God became our shepherd. He is the Good Shepherd who came to give his life for his sheep.

Christ's manger speaks of his role as the Shepherd of our souls and the One to whom we can turn for all the necessities of life. The Lord Shepherd was first found in a manger where sheep are fed.

Another thought- Now often sheep were kept in a stall just prior to sacrifice in the temple. Thus, it is likely that some of the animal attendants at Christ's birth would very likely soon be offered in sacrifice. This too prefigures Christ's ministry as the bleeding Sacrificial Lamb. He was the perfect human sacrifice in the time appointed to take away our sin.

The manger did more than tell the shepherds where Jesus could be found. The manger sign also tells us that he had humbled himself in becoming a man to be rejected by men. But in so doing he would be the shepherd of God's sheep who would give his life that they might live – eternally!

Wayne Conrad
Dallas, TX 75228