

The Nativity of Jesus

Introduction

This morning, we're going to consider together the place and the circumstances of Jesus' birth — and why this matters.

Tradition is a powerful thing. Tradition isn't itself a bad thing. It can be a tool helping us to guard and preserve what is good, or even just giving us continuity with the past. Tradition can often be accompanied by a great deal of "sentiment" – or even "sentimentality." Sentimentality isn't itself a bad thing. I can be sentimental about the various traditions in our family, and I know there's nothing wrong with this. The question I have this morning is what place tradition and the sentimentality associated with tradition should have in relation to the word of God, and how often do they become mixed up together without our even knowing it.

One of the causes of the reformation was the Roman Catholic elevation of tradition to a place of authority equal to—and even higher than—the Scriptures. This is why one of the reformation "solas" is *sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone). The biggest issue, of course, was the church's wrong teaching on doctrines that affected the Gospel. So we think of the four other reformation "solas": *faith* alone, *grace* alone, *Christ* alone, and the *Glory of God* alone. But there were other ways that tradition was working to blind people to what the Bible actually said.

In the second half of the 16th century a Spanish scholar named Francisco Sanchez "criticized the depictions of the nativity in church paintings, and one of his criticisms was that Jesus was not born in the stable nor were his parents rejected by an innkeeper as commonly thought, but that Mary gave birth in a private home belonging to friends or relatives" (Carlson¹). That was over 400 years ago. Sanchez wasn't a reformer. He was a rationalist. His emphasis wasn't necessarily on the divine authority of the Scriptures, but simply on the grammatical meaning of the text. When Sanchez read Luke chapter two *in the Greek*, he didn't see an inn or a stable. But this got him in trouble with the Roman Catholic (Spanish) inquisition, which was concerned not with the authority of the Scriptures, but rather with the authority of the Church's tradition. How dare Sanchez suggest that the Scriptures don't actually say that Jesus was born in a stable because there was no room for Him in the local inn?

If we're not so concerned today with the authority of the church, then why might we resist so strongly any *biblical* "tampering" with the traditional story of the nativity? I wonder if the answer is sentimentality. Is it possible that even today, sentimentality may give to tradition a power and an authority that rivals the Scriptures? If we take away the inn and the innkeeper and the stable and the animals, do we feel like we've been robbed of a part of Christmas? But what is Christmas, after all? Is it the inn and the innkeeper and the stable and the animals, or is it the birth of Jesus, our Messiah, the Word made flesh? So what *do* the Scriptures say about the nativity of Jesus?

¹ <http://www.hypotyposeis.org/papers/Carlson%202010%20NTS.pdf>

I. Luke 2:1-6 — Now it happened that in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus for a census to be taken of all the inhabited earth. This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. And everyone was going to be registered for the census, **each to his own city**. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, in order to register along with Mary, who was betrothed to him, and was with child. Now it happened that while they were there, the days were fulfilled for her to give birth.

Luke says that everyone was going to be registered for the census, “*each to his own city*” (*eis ten heautou polin*). Joseph’s “own city,” therefore, was Bethlehem. But what does this mean? It probably means *more* than that this was the city of Joseph’s distant ancestors. In light of what we know about Roman census practices, and in light of Luke’s language, Bethlehem was probably—at the least—the place where Joseph was born (“**his own city**”). This would mean that Bethlehem was Joseph’s family home – the place where his parents and other relatives likely still lived and where he likely would have planned to live with Mary, his betrothed, when he took her to be his wife.²

Notice that when Joseph left Nazareth to travel to Bethlehem with Mary, she was still his betrothed (“Joseph also went up from Galilee... in order to register along with Mary, who was betrothed to him [pledged to be married to him; NIV]”).³ Jewish betrothal was far more serious than our modern “engagements.” Betrothed couples could be called husband and wife, and “divorce” was the only way to break a betrothal (cf. Mat. 1:18-19). However, betrothed couples didn’t live together because the marriage was not yet *formally* consummated with the traditional and ceremonial “home-taking.” It was while they were still betrothed that Joseph and Mary left Nazareth to travel to Joseph’s “own town” of Bethlehem. And yet by the time Mary gave birth to Jesus in Bethlehem, we know that Joseph and Mary were living together as husband and wife in a *formally* “consummated” marriage.

II. Matthew 1:18–20, 24–25 — Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: **when His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph**, before they came together she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit.⁴ And Joseph her husband, being a righteous man and not wanting to disgrace

² There is no way of knowing why Joseph was in Nazareth or for how long he had been there.

³ Most commentators say that this is Luke’s way of saying that Mary was still a virgin. But the natural import of Luke’s language is that Mary was still “only” Joseph’s betrothed (pledged to be married; cf. NIV; NET; LEB). It is difficult to see how Luke’s readers would have assumed they were actually “fully” married (cf. Matthew’s language: Mat. 1:18-20, 24-25). The commentators argue that Joseph and Mary could not have travelled together if their marriage had not been formally consummated. But these same commentators never offer any proof of this assertion. Certainly, Joseph and Mary would not have “cohabited” on the journey, but there is no proof that they could not have travelled together (perhaps in a larger caravan of people including other friends/family (see Carlson).

⁴ The angel Gabriel’s announcement to Mary is phrased in the future tense (“you will conceive... the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you”; Lk. 1:31, 35; cf. Lk. 1:45). After the angel departed from Mary, we read: “Now at this time Mary arose and went in a hurry... and entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth” (Lk. 1:39-40). Was Elizabeth’s greeting to Mary (with her baby leaping in her womb for joy) effectively the announcement that Mary had conceived (cf. Lk. 1:41-45)? This would mean that when Mary left Nazareth for Judea, her pregnancy was not yet known even to herself and therefore that she was not yet married to Joseph. This second assumption is supported by the fact that Mary stayed with Elizabeth about three months (an unusual thing for a “just-married” woman to do) and then returned to *her* (Mary’s own) home (Lk. 1:56).

her, planned to send her away secretly. But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, **do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife**; for the One who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit... And Joseph got up from his sleep **and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took Mary as his wife, but kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a Son**; and he called His name Jesus.

When did Joseph take Mary as his wife? Certainly not the very day that he “got up from his sleep.” The point is that when Joseph got up from his sleep, he immediately began setting in motion the plans to formally consummate his marriage to Mary.⁵ When did Joseph take Mary as his wife? Not immediately after his dream, but (apparently) only *after* he had travelled to Bethlehem with his betrothed (Lk. 2:4-5) and *before* Mary gave birth to Jesus in Bethlehem (Mat. 1:24-25).

And where was it traditional for a man to take a woman as his wife? In his “own city” – the place of his family home. On the day of the wedding, there was a ceremonial “home-taking.” The groom would take his betrothed home, and this home was often the home of the groom’s parents where the new couple would stay in a separate room connected with the main dwelling (whether an “upper room” [a room built onto the roof; cf. 2 Kings 4:10] or a room built on to the side of the house). This helps to explain the biblical language of “taking” a wife. The NIV even translates: “And Joseph took Mary *home* as his wife” (Mat. 1:24). So it seems that it was *after* they had arrived in Bethlehem and *before* Jesus was born—that Joseph “took Mary home as his wife” (until that time, Mary was perhaps staying with other friends or family [with her relative Elizabeth?]; cf. Lk. 1:36, 39-40).

Notice how Luke says, “Now it happened that *while* they were there [while they were staying in Bethlehem], the *days were fulfilled* for her to give birth” (Lk. 2:6). The clear implication is that Mary did not give birth as soon as they arrived in Bethlehem (there was no urgent search for an inn). Instead, there was a significant period of time that passed in Bethlehem before Jesus was born (“while they were there, the days were fulfilled”). We might assume based on a comparison with Matthew that it was during this extended period of time in Bethlehem that the wedding of Joseph and Mary (or, the home-taking) was celebrated. This being the case, it seems most likely that Joseph had a home and family in Bethlehem and that it was to this home that he took Mary upon their being wed – and that it was in this home that Jesus was born.

But doesn’t Luke imply that Joseph travelled to Bethlehem because of the census (and not to get married)? The fact is that Joseph may have gone up to Bethlehem *both* for the census *and* to get married (the marriage and the census “happened” to coincide). So why mention the census at all? There are two reasons. First, this is another way for Luke to emphasize Joseph’s descent from David, which has been a major theme for him in chapter one (Lk. 1:27, 32, 69). *Why* did the *Roman census* bring Joseph to *Bethlehem*? Because *Bethlehem* was Joseph’s place of birth, and,

How was Mary eventually “found” to be with child? Did she tell Joseph? Was she discovered because she was beginning to show? In any case, Joseph needed his own angelic visitation in order to convince him not to divorce Mary secretly, but rather to take her as his wife.

⁵ Matthew compresses events, never mentioning the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Luke also compresses events, never mentioning Joseph’s sojourn in Egypt (see note 7).

as it happens, Bethlehem was Joseph’s place of birth because he himself was “of the house and family of David” who also hailed from Bethlehem. (It’s important to remember that not everyone whose “own town” was Bethlehem was of the house and family of David.) Second, Luke is showing how the decree of the Roman Emperor was subservient to God’s sovereign decree that Israel’s Messiah should be born in Bethlehem (cf. Jn. 7:42; Mat. 2:4-6 & Mic. 5:2-5).

In short, what I’m suggesting is that Joseph went up to Bethlehem not *only* in order to register for the Roman census, but *also* in order to take Mary as his wife. This explains why Mary accompanied Joseph to Bethlehem in the first place. The historical evidence indicates rather strongly that Mary would either not be counted (as a woman) or would not need to be present with Joseph to be counted (as a member of his household). If this is so, and if there was no other pressing reason for Mary to accompany him, why didn’t Joseph make the two-week journey to and from Bethlehem by himself (leaving his betrothed [who was pregnant] to rest with her family in Nazareth)? Mary accompanied Joseph to Bethlehem, I would suggest, because it was in Bethlehem that Joseph would take her home as his wife.

Not only does it seem that there was a significant period of time spent in Bethlehem *before* Jesus’ birth (“*while* they were there, the days were fulfilled”), but also that there was a significant period of time spent in Bethlehem *after* Jesus’ birth.

III. Luke 2:21–22 — And when eight days were fulfilled so that they could circumcise Him, His name was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before He was conceived in the womb. And when the days for their cleansing according to the Law of Moses were fulfilled [forty days; Lev. 12:1-4], [Joseph and Mary] brought Him up to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord...

This almost certainly means that Joseph and Mary continued living in Bethlehem for at least forty days after Jesus was born. (They wouldn’t have made a 180 mile, two-week round trip with a newborn baby when they had to be back in Jerusalem in less than six weeks [Bethlehem was only five miles from Jerusalem].)

We know from the offering that Mary presented for her purification (a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons; Lk. 2:22-24) that Joseph and Mary were not wealthy (cf. Lev. 12:8). We certainly shouldn’t imagine that they were paying for an inn all this time. Neither should we imagine that they were living in a stable all this time. But if they weren’t paying for an inn and if they weren’t staying in a stable, then where were they living? Again, it seems best to assume that they were living in their own lodgings – most likely in Joseph’s family home – the home where Joseph had taken Mary to be his wife and where Jesus was born.

After the forty days and their trip to Jerusalem for Mary’s purification and the presentation of Jesus at the temple, where did Joseph and Mary go? Not to Nazareth (Mary’s family home), but back to Bethlehem (Joseph’s family home?). How do we know this?

IV. Matthew 2:1–11

When the magi from the east came to see Jesus, we know from Matthew that they found Him *in Bethlehem*. And when did the magi arrive in Bethlehem? We know Joseph fled from Bethlehem to Egypt *as soon* as the magi had departed for their own country (Mat. 2:13-14). Therefore, we can assume that the magi must have found Jesus in Bethlehem *after* He had already been presented at the temple and *after* Mary's purification on the 40th day. The other clue that the magi arrived in Bethlehem after the forty days for Mary's purification is that Joseph and Mary could still only afford the offering for the poor ("a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons"). If they had already received the gifts from the magi (gold, frankincense, and myrrh), they could certainly have afforded the lamb that was prescribed in the law of Moses (Lev. 12:8).

The long and the short of this is that after the forty days for Mary's purification, Joseph and Mary returned (*home?*) to Bethlehem and continued living there until after the magi had come and gone and they were warned by the angel to flee to Egypt (this could have been another couple of weeks or even several months; cf. Mat. 2:7, 16). And where were Joseph and Mary living in Bethlehem? Matthew tells us that "coming into *the house* [the magi] saw the Child with Mary His mother" (Mat. 2:11). What house was this in Bethlehem? Very likely Joseph's family home, the same home where he took Mary to be his wife and where Jesus was born (at the very least it would have been the home of some close relative or family friend).⁶

We know that it was from his hometown of Bethlehem that Joseph fled with Mary and Jesus to Egypt. And when it was finally safe to return to the land of Israel, where did Joseph go?

V. Matthew 2:22–23 — When he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea [where Bethlehem was located] in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there [implying that Bethlehem was the place to which he would naturally have returned]. Then after being warned by God in a dream [not to return to Judea; to his family home in Bethlehem?], he departed for the district of Galilee, and came and lived in a city called Nazareth.⁷

Why did Joseph choose to live in Nazareth? At the human and practical level, because this was *Mary's* hometown (Lk. 1:26, 56). At the level of the divine plan and purpose, "so that what was spoken through the prophets would be fulfilled: 'He shall be called a Nazarene'" (Mat. 2:23).

Now that we have the "big picture," we're in a better position to understand the smaller "details" of Jesus' birth in Luke chapter two, verses 6-7.

VI. Luke 2:7 — Now it happened that *while* they were there, *the days were fulfilled* for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son; and she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because they did not have a place [to lay Him] in their apartment [*katalyma*].⁸

⁶ Perhaps now a larger apartment had been built onto the house (see below).

⁷ Luke compresses the historical chronology (cf. Lk. 2:39). For Luke's "to their own city" (or, "to a city of their own"; *eis heauton polin* without an article [contrast with Lk. 2:3 which has the article]) see Carlson.

⁸ "They did not have room," instead of "there was no room *for them*" takes the dative *autois* as a dative of possession (see Carlson). "Their [apartment]," instead of "the [apartment]" understands the Greek article to be anaphoric,

Where did “apartment” come from? This certainly doesn’t have the same (sentimental?) “ring” as, “there was no room for them in the inn”! The Greek word, “*katalyma*” can refer generally to any place of lodging (cf. Carlson). Luke uses this very word in chapter 22 to refer to the “guest room” of a private home.

- Luke 22:11–12 (cf. Mk. 14:14-15) — “And you shall say to the owner of the house, ‘The Teacher says to you, “Where is the *guest room* [*katalyma*; the inn?] in which I may eat the Passover with My disciples?’” And he will show you a large, furnished upper room; prepare it there.”

A “guest room” might be large or small. It might be an upper room or an attached room on the ground level. In light of the fact that Luke uses *katalyma* to refer to the guest room of a private home in chapter 22, and in light of the fact that it already appears from the “big picture” that Jesus was born in a private home (Joseph’s family home), it would seem most natural to translate in Luke 2: “because there was no place for them in the guest room.” In fact, when Luke wants to refer to an “inn” and an “innkeeper” he uses the specific Greek words for “inn” and “innkeeper.”

- Luke 10:34–35 — “And [the Samaritan] came to [the Jew who had been beaten and robbed] and bandaged up his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them, and he put him on his own animal, and brought him to an *inn* [*pandocheion*] and took care of him. “And on the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the *innkeeper* [*pandocheus*] and said, ‘Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, when I return I will repay you.’”

Luke knows the specific word for “inn” (*pandocheion*). He uses that word in chapter 11. Luke does *not* use that word in the story of Jesus’ birth. Instead, he uses a word that he uses elsewhere to refer to the guestroom of a private home (*katalyma*). This fits perfectly with the idea that Joseph had married Mary while in Bethlehem and that they were now living in Joseph’s family home where there was a “guest chamber” set aside for the newly married couple. Perhaps we could think of this guest chamber as Joseph’s and Mary’s “apartment” lodgings.

So what does Luke mean when he says that “they did not have a place [*topos*; to lay Him⁹] in their apartment”? He means that their one-room apartment lodging was too tiny and cramped to accommodate their new baby. We have to remember that Joseph and Mary would still have done their “living” in the main living space of Joseph’s family home. Perhaps there were plans to build a larger apartment onto the house as soon as possible, but for right now, there was no convenient place in their current apartment for them to lay their newborn baby.

pointing back to the lodging necessarily assumed in verse 6 (see Carlson). If we assume that what Luke is referring to is the guest chamber attached to the family home, then translating “*the apartment*” (or “*the guest room*”) would still seem entirely appropriate. The translation “there was no room for them” is grammatically legitimate, but seems to assume the traditional picture of being turned away by an innkeeper. The translation “they did not have room” is even more grammatically appropriate and makes better sense in light of the rest of the biblical testimony concerning Jesus’ nativity.

⁹ Cf. Nolland, WBC

Notice that Luke says nothing about Joseph and Mary being ostracized because of the shame of Mary conceiving out of wedlock (we would expect such ostracism to be a continuing obstacle to Joseph and Mary finding lodging in Bethlehem). The only reason he gives for Jesus being laid in a manger is practical (“no place/room”). The character of Joseph and Mary must have been well-known to Joseph’s family and they likely believed the independent accounts of Joseph’s and Mary’s angelic visitations, and perhaps also the testimony of Mary’s relatives, Zechariah and Elizabeth (Lk. 1:5-25, 39-45).

So what about the manger? Even today, peasant families in certain cultures will bring their animals into their house at night and in inclement weather. In “first-century Judean village houses... [t]ypically, the main room was divided into two sections at different elevations... The animals were housed in the lower section, the people slept [and lived] in the upper section, and mangers were located between them” (Carlson; see illustration on p. 7). In other words, Mary wrapped Jesus in cloths and laid Him in a manger that was located in the larger, main room of Joseph’s family home. We can assume that the manger was thoroughly cleaned and lined with some kind of bedding (not *necessarily* hay; perhaps wool?), and that any animals were kept away from the manger – if not even kept outside. The presence of animals in traditional nativity scenes is largely due to medieval artists who would often depict the ox and the donkey “knowing” Jesus as a sort of “fulfillment of Isaiah 1:3 (cf. Lenski).

- Isaiah 1:3 — An ox knows its owner, and a donkey its master’s manger, but Israel does not know; My people do not perceive.

In fact, the Bible never says that there were any animals present at Jesus’ birth or at any time while He was laid in the manger.

And so we see that there was no inn, and there was no innkeeper, and there was no desperate search for lodging, and there was no “stable” (in the traditional sense of that word), and there likely weren’t any animals. On the other hand, there almost certainly *was* extended family (and most likely other local women) attending the birth and welcoming Mary’s firstborn baby into the world. It was likely to these people gathered at the birth that the shepherds told what they had heard from the angels.

- Luke 2:16–20 — So they went in a hurry and found their way to Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger [this doesn’t mean that others were not present]. And when they had seen this, they made known the statement [while they were still there at the house] which had been told them about *this* Child. And *all* who heard it marveled at the things which were told them by the shepherds. *But Mary* was treasuring all these things, pondering them in her heart. And *the shepherds went back*, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen, just as was told them.

Even as God provided for the burial of Jesus (Mat. 28:57-60), so God also provided for the birth of Jesus. Jesus was born into a humble, but warm and loving peasant home and laid in a manger converted to serve very nicely as a cradle.

Conclusion

Over 400 years ago, the “traditional” view of the nativity was challenged and the man who challenged it was brought before the Spanish inquisition. One hundred sixty-six years ago, in 1857, “William Thomson, a Presbyterian missionary to Lebanon, Syria and Palestine... wrote...: “It is my impression that the birth actually took place in an ordinary house of some common peasant, and that the baby was laid in one of the mangers, such as are still found in the dwellings of farmers in this region.”¹⁰ Today, there are a growing number of voices challenging the traditional nativity scene.

So why is the traditional nativity scene still so universally accepted? If someone wasn't convinced by the biblical testimony we've seen this morning and still believed that Jesus was born as an outcast in a stable, what *might* this tell us about his commitment to the authority of tradition over the authority of the Scriptures? Or if we *are* convinced by the biblical testimony, but we feel now like we've been robbed of a part of Christmas, what might this tell us about how we've sentimentalized Christmas? After all, is Christmas the inn and the stable and the animals, or is it the birth of Jesus, the Messiah — or is it somehow both? If we *are* convinced by this biblical testimony, can we still, in good conscience, put up the traditional nativity scenes and sing Christmas carols with “oxen lowing” and Jesus being born in a “cattle shed” and laid in a manger that was “rude and bare”? If so, what *might* this tell us about how we've in some ways turned the story of Jesus' birth into the equivalent of a fairy tale that comes in different versions?¹¹ At a deeper and more fundamental level, is our Christianity rooted in the historical record of Scripture or is it rooted in tradition? Is our Christianity something that's been romanticized and sentimentalized or is it truly the result of the new birth and the Spirit's witness within us to Christ crucified and raised from the dead?

R.T. France writes: “The problem with the stable [as traditionally depicted] is that it distances Jesus from the rest of us. It puts even his birth in a unique setting, in some ways as remote from life as if he had been born in Caesar's Palace. But the message of the incarnation is that Jesus is one of us. He came to be what we are, and it fits well with that theology that his birth in fact took place in a normal, crowded, warm, welcoming [Judean] home, just like many another Jewish boy of his time.”¹² It's not very “romantic.” In fact, it's utterly common and mundane and unexceptional. And that's the point. What is the “*sign*” of the baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger (Lk. 2:10-12, 16)? It's not rejection and ostracism. Other babies born into peasant families might occasionally have been laid in a manger. The sign of the baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger is that God's *Messiah* and the *King* of Israel has come into this world as one of the lowly in order that He might raise up the lowly and the “poor in spirit” and humble the proud and the mighty of this world (cf. Stein, NAC). Mary exulted over God's promise to her in the birth of her Son:

¹⁰ <https://www.psephizo.com/biblical-studies/jesus-wasnt-born-in-a-stable-and-that-makes-all-the-difference/>

¹¹ The traditional nativity (publicly displayed) might still be a reminder and witness to the world while the biblical nativity would be lost on the world. Might this be a case where the traditional nativity could still be displayed even by those who don't believe it is historically accurate?

¹² <https://www.psephizo.com/biblical-studies/jesus-wasnt-born-in-a-stable-and-that-makes-all-the-difference/>

- Luke 1:51–53 — “[God] has done a mighty deed with His arm; He has scattered those who were proud in the thoughts of their heart. He has brought down rulers from their thrones, and has exalted those who were humble. He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent away the rich empty-handed.”

And so the “sign” of Jesus wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger compels us to ask if *we* are the humble and the poor in spirit. Are we those whom He came to exalt? The “*sign*” of Jesus wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger is that God’s Messiah has come into this world “not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many” (Mat. 20:28). How much more, then, should we be willing to be the “servants” and the “slaves” of one another (cf. Mat. 20:26-27; Phil. 2:1-11)?

