

Chapter Three

**The King
Is Born**



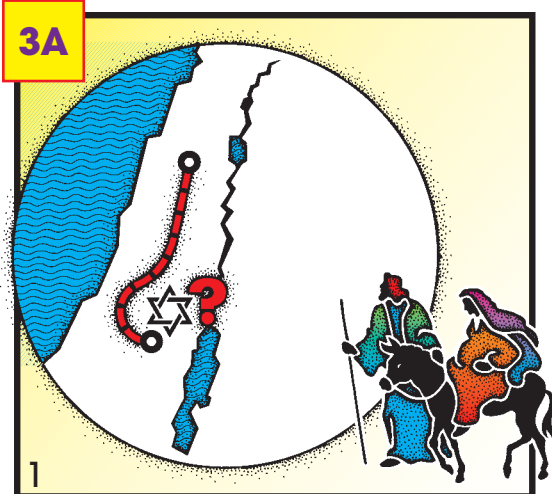
CROSSWAYS
INTERNATIONAL



The “Traditional” Christmas Story—Told

We now come to one of the most loved of all biblical narratives: the birth of Jesus. Traditions have developed around the text, and the story is often told as follows (ILLUSTRATION 3A, Frames 1–3):

ILLUSTRATION



Frame 1

The Roman emperor issues a decree that an empire-wide registration is to be held. In Palestine, all go to their own towns to be registered. **Joseph and Mary** travel south from **Nazareth to Bethlehem**—a distance (*dashed red line*) of about seventy miles (113 kilometers). They have roots there. Joseph walks. Mary, who is in the advanced stages of pregnancy, rides on a **donkey**. In view of Mary’s condition, the couple takes the direct route through Samaria, and passes through Jerusalem along the way. They do not know where they will stay in Bethlehem.



Frame 2

Joseph and Mary arrive in Bethlehem late in the afternoon or in the early evening. They seek accommodation at an **inn**, but are told that there is no room. Some versions of the story suggest that the **innkeeper** acted rather brusquely in sending them on their way.



Frame 3

They find, or are offered, accommodation in a cave or a **stable**—and only just in time, for Jesus is born soon after they settle in. **Joseph and Mary** wrap Jesus in swaddling cloths and place Him in a **manger**.

That very night, some **shepherds** visit Jesus. While they are still with the holy family, or soon after they leave, **three wise men** arrive on camels. They come from a distant country and bring with them gifts of **gold, frankincense, and myrrh**.

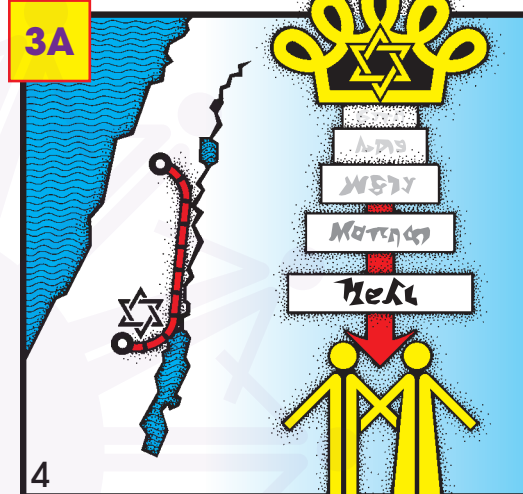
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The “Traditional” Christmas Story—Questioned

Let’s now look at the biblical text and the traditions of Jesus’ day (ILLUSTRATION 3A, Frames 4–6):

ILLUSTRATION



Frame 4

When Jewish people traveled south from Galilee to Judea, they usually followed the **Jordan River** to ensure access to water for the three- to four-day journey. They also usually avoided traveling through Samaria since Jews and Samaritans disagreed strongly about whether Mt. Gerizim or Jerusalem was the only valid place for worship, John 4:2–20–26, Luke 9:51–56. Is it not likely that Joseph and Mary would have avoided Samaria, too?

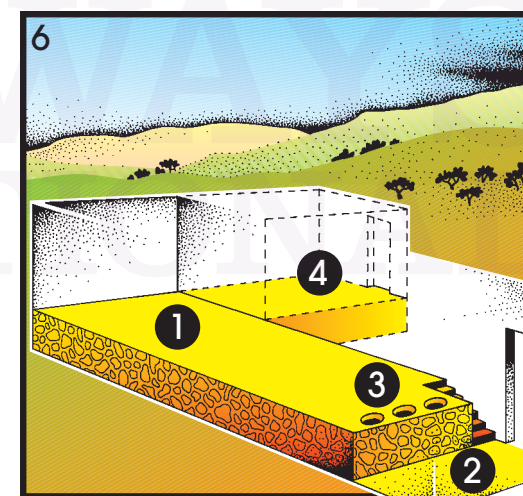
Joseph was a descendant of David (Luke 2:4, **Star of David within crown**), the most famous king in Jewish history, and was on his way to David’s birthplace. Would finding accommodation in Bethlehem really have been a problem?



Frame 5

Joseph and Mary were traveling to Bethlehem (**buildings on skyline**) to comply with a census decree. Joseph had strong family and historical ties to the town, and possibly had been born there, Luke 2:3,4.

It is likely that his lineage would have ensured him a place to stay, either with immediate relatives or with others who had links to David (**welcoming figures**).



Frame 6

The Greek word (*kataluma*) translated as “inn” (Luke 2:7) can also mean “guest room.” (It is translated as “guest room” in Luke 22:11.) In Jesus’ day, a traditional home had a living area ①, space for the family’s animals ②, and mangers where the animals could feed ③. Some had a guest room ④. It is possible that some of Joseph’s relatives had a house with a guest room attached to it, and Joseph and Mary could not be accommodated in it because it was already occupied.

How can we be sure about all this? Let’s look at the evidence in detail.

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What the Gospels Say

1 The Gospels and the Nativity Narrative

The Gospels tell us that, in Jesus, the Creator clothed himself in flesh and visited this tiny planet on which we live and die. He walked its dusty surface, breathed the air we breathe, and stained its surface with His blood—so that we might be forgiven and have life abundant, now and forever.

Only Matthew and Luke tell the story of Jesus' actual birth in Bethlehem. Bethlehem, about five miles (eight kilometers) south of Jerusalem, plays a prominent role in the nativity narrative. David was born there (1 Samuel 17:12), and his great-grandmother Ruth lived there, Ruth 1:19, 4:11. Micah prophesied that the fortunes of Judah would be restored through a ruler born in Bethlehem of the house of David, Micah 5:2.

Although in general Matthew and Luke follow Mark's Gospel closely, Mark tells us nothing about the birth of Jesus. Mark's purpose is to present in narrative form the message of Jesus' Messiahship and His atoning death and resurrection.

John does not present a birth narrative either. However, he does refer to the expectation that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, 7:49–52. Perhaps John wanted to emphasize that heaven is Jesus' real home, and the historical circumstances of His birth were of little consequence, 1:1–4.

In his Christmas story, Matthew does not report any journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem *prior* to Jesus' birth, 1:18–25. However, he does state that the Holy Family returned to Nazareth *after* Jesus' birth, 2:19–23. He also describes Herod's attempt to kill Jesus and the flight to Egypt, 2:1–18.

Although both Matthew 2:1 and Luke 2:4 refer to Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, only Luke refers to Bethlehem as "the city of David." However, in the Old Testament, *Jerusalem* is called "the city of David" after David captured it from the Jebusites, 2 Samuel 5:6–10. For Jesus, Jerusalem becomes the city of death. His enemies lived there and eventually crucified Him.

2 Good News Announced

According to Matthew 1:18–25, after Mary found herself to be "with child from the Holy Spirit," Joseph was understandably taken aback. Although Joseph and Mary were betrothed, they were not as yet living together. The traditional expectation was that Joseph should divorce Mary, but had he done this, she might have been stoned to death for apparent "unfaithfulness" to him. However, after God communicated to Joseph in a dream the true cause and reason for Mary's condition, he retained her as his wife.

According to Luke's version, the angel Gabriel told Mary what was to take place in her life, 1:26–38. Mary then visited her cousin Elizabeth—who already seemed to know what had taken place, 1:39–45. Mary then burst forth in a hymn of praise, today referred to as the Magnificat, 1:46–55. After spending three months with Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah in the hill country of Judea (near Jerusalem and Bethlehem!), Mary returned to Nazareth, 1:56.

3 A Decree in Rome—A Journey to Bethlehem

According to Luke, Joseph and Mary's place of residence was *Nazareth*. However, the prophet Micah (5:2–5) had predicted that eventually a true and faithful King from the line of David would be born in *Bethlehem*. But why should Joseph and Mary go there? God brought it about through a man the Romans acclaimed as a "god"—their Roman emperor, Caesar Augustus. Augustus issued a decree that some kind of a census was to



be carried out, and that each family was to return to the place of its origins. So, Joseph and Mary began the 70–100 mile (110–160 kilometer) journey south.

4 An Arrival—a Birth

Luke writes, "And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the *inn*," 2:7. Were Mary and Joseph turned away from an *inn*? Was Jesus born in a *stable*, in the midst of the scene that Christmas cards portray? Let's look at the evidence.

What Greek word does Luke use for "inn"? The Greek word translated as "inn" in Luke 2:7 (*kataluma*) can have five meanings, three of which are "house," "guest room" and *sometimes* "inn." The same word is translated as "guest room" in Luke 22:11—a guest room being part of a house. When Luke makes reference to an "inn," he knows and uses the appropriate Greek word for it, *pandocheion*, as found in the story of the Good Samaritan, Luke 10:34.

Was there an inn in Bethlehem? Although there certainly were inns in the Palestine of Jesus' day, they were usually built on Roman roads. Traders and Romans stayed in these inns; their language, culture, and politics were different from those of Palestine's citizens. Bethlehem was not on a Roman road, and there is no written or archaeological evidence that there was an inn in Bethlehem when Jesus was born.

Even if there had been an inn in Bethlehem, would Joseph have asked to stay there? It is likely that Joseph was born in Bethlehem, and that he had family roots there. If, on arrival, someone had asked him, "Who are you?" he would have replied, "I am Joseph, son of Heli, son of Matthat, son of Levi"—and so on. The immediate response would have been, "You are our kinsman! You are most welcome! What can we do for you?" A welcome of this kind was assured, even if his grandfather had left Bethlehem 100 years previously. Such is the custom still today among Palestinians where the culture of extending hospitality remains very strong.

Even if Joseph had no immediate relatives in Bethlehem, he would have had to say only that he was a descendant of David, and every door in the town would have opened to extend a warm welcome to him and Mary. Possibly, at that time Bethlehem's population was only about 150 to 200 people.

Even if no accommodation was available in Bethlehem, Mary had earlier visited her cousin Elizabeth, Luke 1:39. Elizabeth lived only a few miles to the northwest of Bethlehem. Without a doubt, Elizabeth would have offered Joseph and Mary accommodation had they needed it.

Furthermore, it would have been socially unacceptable, even insulting, for someone with relatives and roots in Bethlehem to seek accommodation in an inn, and it would have been socially unacceptable for Jesus to have been born in an inn. Babies at that time and place were born in houses.

5 Where did Mary and Joseph stay? (ILLUSTRATION 3B)

Joseph and Mary were welcomed into a home that had a guest room, but the guest room was already occupied ("there was no room in the *guest room*," Luke 2:7). The host could not ask those who were already living in the guest room to leave. However, since people in that land at that time were used to living in close quarters and slept on mats on the floor, it would not have been a problem to find room for Mary and Joseph elsewhere in the house. At night, mats were rolled out for sleeping. In the morning they were rolled up again and stored against the walls—so that sleeping space might again become living space. Where might the



3B



guest room have been? A guest room was usually attached to the rear of the house or on an upper level. Not all houses had a guest room; many comprised just one room, as some Middle East homes still do today. Understanding this helps us discern Jesus' message in Matthew 5:15, where He speaks of a person lighting a lamp that gives light to all in the house; one lamp could light a house when it had only *one room*.

Where was the manger? Traditionally, even a one-room house had two sections. The family members lived in one section and the animals in the other section. The family section was about three or four feet (about one meter) above ground level, with steps leading up to it. The smaller section was at ground level, and served as the family stable. Each night the family's animals were brought into the house to spend the night in the "house stable." Thus, they could not be stolen, and they contributed their body heat to the house during the night. They were taken out first thing in the morning, and if necessary, the space set aside for them was cleaned.

Set into the upper platform level were one or more mangers (p.23) where the animals, standing in the lower section, might feed after being brought in at night. So the house where Jesus was born would have had built-in mangers.

6 What about the "stable" tradition?

Why does tradition suggest that Jesus was born in a stable? Although the text nowhere refers to a stable, interpreters have guessed that Jesus was born in a stable because of the references to Jesus being placed in a manger and to there being "no place for them in the inn." Westerners conclude that if Jesus was placed in a manger, He must have been born in a stable. Good Western logic, but inaccurate interpretation!

Only Matthew describes the visit of the Wise Men, Matthew 2:1-12. When the Wise Men came into Jesus' place of residence, they entered a "house," 2:11. The suggestion that the Holy Family moved from a stable to a house does not do justice to the cultural elements described above.

7 When was Jesus born?

Luke writes, "Joseph went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child," 2:5. It is unlikely that Joseph would have asked Mary to make the long journey south if she was already eight months pregnant. Nowhere does the text say that she rode a donkey. Nowhere does it say that Jesus was born the night they arrived.

Not only that, but if it was obvious when Joseph and Mary arrived in Bethlehem that Mary was about to have a child, it is unlikely that the women of Bethlehem would have ignored and neglected Mary in her hour of need. The "honor and shame" culture of the Middle East sees it as a disservice not to offer hospitality.

After reporting the couple's arrival in Bethlehem, Luke goes on to say, "While they were there..." (2:6), thereby indicating that the infant Jesus might have been born some months after their arrival. Most likely, when Mary was about to give birth, the women of the house and village would have come to her aid, and supplied the necessary bedding and hot water. The men of the house would have vacated it for as long as necessary. After Jesus was born, He would have been wrapped in swaddling cloths (see Ezekiel 16:4), and placed into one of the mangers.

It emerges, then, that David's "greater Son" was born in a simple house in a small village among ordinary people. This simple but profound story sows the seeds for the grand truths that eventually burst forth in the Gospels.



You Do the Digging

Chapter Three

1 Check out various Bible translations, and note any that refer to Jesus being born in a place other than an inn, Luke 2:7.

2 According to Matthew 2:11, where were the members of the Holy Family living when the Wise Men visited them?

3 The Bible tells us nothing about the kind of house in which David was born; however, it does tell us that he built himself a house or palace in Jerusalem after capturing that city, 2 Samuel 5:11,12. Possibly, Solomon was born in it, 2 Samuel 5:13–16. Although the Bible does not describe David's residence, it does describe Solomon's palace complex, 1 Kings 7:6–12; 10:18–22.

In view of Luke's Christmas narrative and Luke 9:58, what difference was there between the home surroundings of Solomon and those of Jesus?

4 After the death of David, what did Solomon provide for Bathsheba, his mother, 1 Kings 2:19?

How might Mary's material lifestyle have compared with that of Bathsheba?

5 The late postexilic writings known as the Apocrypha contain insights that enhance our understanding of New Testament events and teachings. One such book is Sirach, or Ecclesiasticus. Read Sirach 29:21–28.

What does it have to say about:

a. What things constitute the necessities of life? _____

b. Being a host? _____

c. The use of a guest room? _____

6 What do the contents of Chapter Three teach us about the importance of understanding cultural backgrounds when interpreting biblical events?

7 Read Ezekiel 5:5 and 38:12.

a. How did Ezekiel view Jerusalem's location?

b. What change took place with the birth of Jesus?
