

Lectionary Gospel Commentaries

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Based on the Lectionary Pericope Covering:

Luke 2:1-14 (15-20)

SOLA-LSB (Lutheran Service Book): Years A, B, and C - Christmas Eve, Text: Luke 2:1-14 (15-20)
RCL (Revised Common Lectionary): Years A, B, and C - Christmas Eve, Text: Luke 2:1-14 (15-20)

People come to the Christmas story with many assumptions and embellishments that have been added over the years by popular tradition. Some of the “traditions” referred to below are based on late second century apocryphal (non-authoritative) writings, e.g., The Gospel of James. For example:

- *Tradition* (not the text) says that Mary, in the advanced stages of pregnancy, rode on a donkey.
- *Tradition* (not the text) implies that Joseph and Mary arrived in Bethlehem late in the afternoon or in the early evening — immediately prior to Jesus’ birth.
- *Tradition* (not the text) suggests that they sought a room at an inn, but that none were available.
- *Tradition* (not the text) implies that they found accommodation in a stable — and only just in time, for Jesus was born soon after they settled in. Another tradition suggests that Mary gave birth to Jesus in a cave.
- *Tradition* (not the text) suggests that the shepherds (in Luke) and the wise men (in Matthew) visited the Holy Family at the same time.

Luke 2:1–7: The Roman emperor issues a decree for an empire-wide registration. In Palestine, all go to their own towns to be registered. Joseph apparently had family and historical ties to Bethlehem, and possibly had been born there (Luke 2:3, 4). So Joseph and a pregnant Mary travel south from Nazareth to Bethlehem, a journey of about 80 to 90 miles.

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 harbored long-standing resentment toward one another and disagreed strongly about whether Mt. Gerizim or Jerusalem was the only valid place for worship (John 4:20–26; Luke 9:51–56).

Only Matthew and Luke tell the story of Jesus’ actual birth in Bethlehem. Bethlehem, about five miles 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 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 live there and eventually crucify Him there.

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). 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.

The Greek word for “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 — i.e. a guest room being part of a house. When Luke makes reference to an actual “inn,” he knows and uses the appropriate Greek word for it, *pandocheion*, as found in the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:34).

Joseph was a descendant of David (Luke 2:4), the most famous king in Jewish history, who had been born in Bethlehem. Thus, Joseph’s lineage would likely have ensured him a place to stay, either with immediate relatives or with others who had links to David.

Finding accommodation would have been no problem. Even if there had been an inn in Bethlehem, would Joseph have stayed 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 hospitality is strong.

Even if Joseph had no immediate relatives in town, he would only have had to say that he was a descendant of David, and everyone would have welcomed him. At that time, Bethlehem’s population was probably only about 150 to 200 people. Even if no accommodations were available in Bethlehem, Mary’s cousin Elizabeth (Luke 1:39) lived only a few miles northwest of Bethlehem. Elizabeth would have certainly taken them in.

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 a baby to be born in any place other than a house.

In Jesus’ day, traditional homes had a one-room raised living area, with space for the animals at ground level, just within the entrance door. Mangers where the animals could feed were located at the edge of the raised family living area adjoining the stable area.

Joseph and Mary were welcomed into a home that had a guest room which was already occupied (“there was no room in the guest room” [Luke 2:7]). The host could not ask those in the guest room to leave. However, since people were used to living in close quarters, it would not have been a problem to find room for Mary and Joseph elsewhere in the house. Mats were rolled out for sleeping at night and were rolled up again and stored against the walls in the morning. Where might the 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. Family members lived in one section and the animals in the other. The family section was about three or four feet (one meter) above ground, with steps leading up to it. The smaller stable section was at ground level. Set into the upper platform level were one or more mangers 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. Each night the 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 the stable was cleaned.

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.

When was Jesus born? “Joseph went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child (Luke 2:5).” It is unlikely that Joseph would have asked Mary to make a long journey south if she were 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. Indeed, Luke says, “While they were there ...” (2:6), thereby indicating that the infant Jesus might have been born some months after their arrival.

However, if it were obvious when Joseph and Mary arrived that she was about to deliver, the women of Bethlehem would not have ignored and neglected Mary. The “honor and shame” culture of the Middle East sees it as a disgrace to the entire community not to offer hospitality. 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 would have vacated the house for as long as necessary. After Jesus was born, He would have been wrapped in swaddling clothes 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 burst forth in the Gospels.