

The story of the Birth of Jesus has been tweaked so much by our Western Culture that I doubt that the original people involved, if they were still alive, could recognize the story. Jesus warned against following tradition and leaving the scriptures, but it is no wonder that we do this because we are so far removed from the source language and land that we naturally view everything in the light of our own culture.

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. And everyone went to their own town to register. Luke 2:1 (NIV)

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 {extended family} and line {linage} of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child.

Luke 2:3-4 (NIV)

The trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem:

Reason: Caesar Augustus wanted a census – Why? TAXES!

This trip is approximately 85 miles and they walked. It is estimated that it took from 4 to 7 days. They didn't go alone, as in the movies; they would have traveled with others that were headed to Jerusalem. The rest of the extended families of Mary and Joseph living in Nazareth would be of lineage of David and would be going for the same reason.

Mary probably did not ride a donkey. There would probably have been at least a few in the group that had carts and she could have ridden in the cart if/when she tired. But people were very used to walking during this period of history, and she was a young girl.

So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. Luke 2:6-7 (NKJV)

The first misleading part of the translation is *that there was no room for them in the inn* (malon). That word can mean inn or dwelling-place. Since Bethlehem had a population of around 1000 during this time, it is unlikely that they had an inn. The dwelling place was most likely a relative's house. Remember, Joseph and Mary would have had many relatives in Bethlehem. Since there were so many distant relatives of David coming

to the city it is likely that most if not all of the guest rooms in the homes would have been filled, but it would have been unthinkable to turn away family. So probably a place was made in the lower part of the house where the animals were kept. Or if this was one of the single level homes near a hill it may have been a cave in the side of the hill where they kept the animals. In either case she would not have been alone as there would have been many relatives near and the women would have been eager to help with the birth. The birth of a child was considered "a gift from God" and the women in the house would have been all over the situation. The fact that the child was her first child and a male would have caused even more joy in the household.

In the movies we see Joseph scurrying from place to place to find lodging because Mary was beginning labor. But that is not what the scripture says. It says: *...while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered.* This doesn't indicate that the delivery was eminent, only that while they were there she did deliver.

So they wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger. Parents and midwives would wrap the newborn in swaddling cloths, which were long strips of cloth, to help the child's limbs to grow straight.

Mary would not have wanted to lay her infant on the dirt floor. Instead, the manger would be a convenient alternative: the hay was soft; it was up off the ground, and the sides tall enough to keep her child safely inside.

Mangers were located wherever livestock were kept. People who kept animals would keep their mangers well-supplied with fodder at all times so the animals would never go hungry. The animals can walk up to a manger at any time, and then spend long, leisurely hours feeding.

In a metaphorical way we can look at Jesus being placed in a manger as our spiritual food. He is our spiritual sustenance. *Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.* John 6:27a (NIV)

Praise God that we never lack for our spiritual food.

Next week – Jewish customs surrounding a birth

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