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The Glorious and “Shameful” Birth of Jesus

Christ became what we are so that He might make us like Him.
– Athanasius

Read: Luke 2:1-20

No Vacancy?

N*o room for them in the inn.* That is how almost every contemporary Bible translates Luke 2:7. This widespread use of inn conjures up an image of Joseph and a very pregnant Mary arriving in Bethlehem so late on the eve of Jesus’ birth that a “no vacancy” sign greets them at the only inn in town. Not only is this not true to Luke’s text, nor his context, but it also keeps us from grasping the full glory, wonder and significance of the coming of the Christ Child. To more fully appreciate that first Christmas, we need to take a closer look at the various contextual clues Luke gives us in this most “familiar” and well known Bible story of all.



Prior to the night of Jesus’ birth, Luke deliberately tells us that Mary and Joseph have already been in Bethlehem: *While they were there, the time came for her baby to be born* (NEB). We don’t know when they arrived in Bethlehem nor where they have stayed until the birth night, but one thing is clear from Luke’s words – this couple did not first arrive in Bethlehem late in the day (or night) of Jesus’ birth.

Inn or Guest Room?

Luke gives us a clue to what might be going on in Bethlehem when he deliberately uses the Greek word *kataluma* in 2:7, which most translators have preferred to render as “inn.” However as we will shortly see, from a contextual perspective the preferred understanding of *kataluma* is “guest room.” Those who would argue that *kataluma* could also mean “inn” in this verse lose the thrust of their argument when the cultural and geographical contexts of first-century “inns” are examined.

Archaeology tells us that inns populated the major trade routes in

first-century Palestine¹ and were typically located 16-18 miles apart outside of towns on major trade routes, the average daily distance traveled by a caravan. These inns were round, stone hedgerows roughly four feet tall and 40-60 feet in diameter – essentially a circular walled space that was open to the sky.² Since Bethlehem was just five miles south of Jerusalem, it would seem to be too close to Jerusalem for the placement of such an inn.

In these commercial establishments overseen by an innkeeper, there were no rooms to rent, no privacy, little security, just one shared common area. The “inns” were rough and tumble environments often inhabited by caravanner rogues plying the trade routes. These scoundrels often brought to these open lodging areas all the ambiance of a biker bar of today. When Luke makes reference to these kinds of “inns,” he uses a very different Greek word – *pandoxeion* – the word used for “inn” in the Good Samaritan story.³ One thing is clear; no self-respecting man would ever bring a pregnant woman about to give birth to a *pandoxeion*.

Judean Houses

In cities and towns, the Jews were required to give hospitality to strangers and travelers even though the humblest Judean family often lived in a one-room house. This one room was a true “family room” where parents and children lived, ate and slept. In this culture, an observant Jewish man was forbidden from sleeping in the same room with another man’s wife. Thus, in order to allow for overnight lodging of visitors while maintaining ritual purity, the structural solution was to separate off one end of this one-room living room with a partition.⁴ The small area created on the other side of this floor-to-ceiling room divider was known as the *kataluma*

– the guest room. Here visiting relatives could stay for extended periods of time. (You can see a typical Judean home in Israel today in the town of Taiybe 12 miles NE of Jerusalem that still demonstrates this first-century *kataluma* configuration.)

The “Basement”

There were dozens of variations of these small one-room (or should we say one and one-half room) homes in Judea.⁵ Often these homes were built over a recessed area – a mini cave or recessed grotto – that functioned as a holding area for the family’s animals.⁶ This area was the first-century equivalent to what we would call a shallow cellar today. This basement/cellar might be a natural depression in the stone floor or a natural half cave in the side of a hill (imagine a large ice cream scoop taking a swipe out of the side of a gentle hill).

Typically, this small basement was a dark, windowless area no more than four and one-half feet tall that afforded the family’s animals protection during the night. A feeding trough (“manger”) hewn out of a rectangular block of stone or fashioned from mud and straw would lie on the floor of this area.⁷ Sometimes this feeding trough was only a depression in the floor. In addition to protection, this basement provided a natural heating system during winter as the animal’s body heat would rise and help warm the family and guests sleeping above it.

In light of this historical information about inns and houses, we need to look more closely at Luke’s narrative for further contextual clues regarding Jesus’ birthplace.

Mandatory Hospitality

Luke reminds us that Joseph is part of David’s Bethlehem clan.⁸ In this culture, hospitality is

mandatory, especially to visiting members of the clan and especially to a pregnant woman about to give birth. At the time of Jesus, the population of Bethlehem is estimated to be at least 2,000 people.⁹ If we assume that the average family size was two adults and four children, there are at least 300 (mostly small) homes, each one with a *kataluma* (guest room). Since Mary's high-priority need for such a room was self-evident, why is it that no one in the Davidic clan is willing to offer the use of their *kataluma* to Mary and Joseph? What is Luke communicating to us in 2:7 with the deliberate use of the word *kataluma*?

A Revealing Clue

Luke gives us an additional clue in 2:5 when he again informs us that Joseph is with Mary his betrothed wife who was *expecting a child* (NEB). Why does Luke repeat these facts when he already told us this in Chapter 1? What Luke seems to be underscoring for us by repeating this betrothed-with-child fact is the reason no one in Bethlehem will offer this couple the use of their *kataluma*.

According to first-century marriage customs, when Mary was betrothed to Joseph, a scribe in Nazareth drew up a betrothal contract documenting that the two of them were now legally married as husband and wife.¹⁰ However, a marriage would not be consummated until the girl/woman began to menstruate, which typically occurred between 12 and 12 and half years of age.¹¹ When that reproductive capability became evident, a multi-day wedding feast would be announced to the family clan (remember Jesus traveled from Nazareth to Cana for a wedding in John 2). Only after such wedding festivities could a bride co-habit with her husband and their marriage sexually consummated. Furthermore,

since Joseph likely visited Bethlehem each summer to participate in the Davidic wood offering in the Temple in Jerusalem,¹² the Davidic clan would be knowledgeable about Joseph's life, especially of his prior betrothal to Mary and whether or not there had been a wedding feast.

Questions and No Answers

Thus when Joseph arrived in Bethlehem for the census along with a very pregnant betrothed Mary, what do you think was the first question the clan asked Joseph? "We have not heard about any wedding feast. How could you have consummated your marriage?" And so the word would have spread very quickly – we have an adulterous couple in town and she is about to give birth. What to do? Well for one thing, no one is going to allow this couple to abide in their *kataluma*. Maintaining ritual purity would not permit any house to be so defiled. Fortunately, however, there must have been at least one family who was moved enough with compassion to allow this couple the privacy afforded by their dark, half-cave, animal holding basement – most likely the truly humble birth place of Jesus.

A Shameful Situation

By now the implicit contextual backdrop of this blessed event should be coming into focus – culturally perceived shame. The birth of Jesus the Messiah was indeed glorious from heaven's perspective. But from the perspective of Joseph's clan, it had the scandalous stench of adultery. That misperception never entirely left Jesus and, when given the opportunity, the Jerusalem establishment never let Him forget His alleged "illegitimate" status.¹³ Interestingly, this perspective is still with us as Jewish scholars continue to reject Jesus as the Messiah because of his "illegitimate" birth. Their "evidence" comes from

citing the characterization of Mary in the Babylonian Talmud as one that “played harlot with carpenters.”¹⁴ These contrasting motifs of heavenly glory and earthly shame further enrich our understanding of the significance of the birth of the Christ Child.

Shameful Shepherds

Luke’s narrative continues with the “Good News” of the birth of Jesus being first announced to shepherds living *out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night*. While Psalm 23 portrays the role of a shepherd in a most honorable way, by the time of Jesus, shepherding was viewed as a despised profession – one scorned by observant Jews as unclean.¹⁵

There were also rabbis during this time who held that shepherds, because of the wandering trespass nature of their profession, could never be forgiven because they could never make retribution for the grasses their flocks ate (stole) from someone else’s land.¹⁶ For the purpose of more fully appreciating Luke’s birth narrative, shepherds are reprehensible people practicing a shameful profession. It was to just this kind of a hopeless person living in chronic, cultural shame that God directed the angels to announce His incredible Good News!

Motif of Shame

Are you starting to see the consistent motif of “shame” that starts with the birth of Jesus and continues through His life and death?

- At the beginning of His earthly life, Jesus was likely born in culturally perceived, shameful circumstances and His birth was first announced to shepherds living in shame.
- Throughout His three-year ministry, Jesus brought God’s Miracle of Compassion, Mercy and Grace to people systematically marginal-

ized and excluded as He rescued them from their no-hope prisons of “sinner” shame.

- At the end of His earthly ministry, Jesus died a horrific death on a Roman cross – the most shameful way to die.

Have you ever wondered with whom those Bethlehem shepherds first shared this incredible Good News? Certainly not with the “righteous” observant Jews who despised them! Only other shepherds likewise living in shame would ever listen to these Bethlehem shepherds. Thus, the first oral communication of the “Good News” of the coming of Jesus the Messiah was spread from one shameful person to another.¹⁷

For me, this added motif of shame further enriches the meaning and significance of this incredible God-has-come-to-be-with-us event. Jesus, whose Semitic name *Yeshua* means “The Lord Rescues,”¹⁸ so identified with rescuing those living in shame that He was willing to be born in the midst of perceived shame.

Being Misunderstood

The next time you ponder the traditional “familiar” Bethlehem crèche scene, see it for the unfamiliar event it most likely was – a 13-year old girl/woman giving birth to the Savior of the world in a dark, half-cave cellar of a modest Judean house, all the while being misunderstood by the Bethlehem Davidic clan. Someone once said that the greatest burden in life is to be misunderstood and to realize there is nothing you can do about it. Mary must have felt the weight of that reality as she held “The Lord’s Rescuer” in her arms and pondered again the unpredictable and improbable ways that God accomplishes His purposes.

The Sounds of Silence

The most prevalent sound of this incredible birth-in-a-cellar-cave evening is one of silence.

Before those “shameful” shepherds came, and after they left, only the sounds of some animals rustling about and an occasional cry from the newborn Christ Child interrupted this scene – an ideal setting for Mary to further ponder how God does things. May your next (usually frenetic) Christmas season afford you periods of solitude and silence to ponder this extraordinary scene of how *Yeshua* – the Lord’s Rescuer – came to rescue you from your issues of shame, guilt and sin, and bring you Home to be with Him forever in a fully restored condition.

Not So Familiar After All

By now, you should be getting the idea: the full message of even the most well known of Bible events is embedded in the original context that

surrounds it. Restoring that context allows us to better understand what really happened in Bethlehem and to delve more deeply into what Luke intended his narrative to reveal to us.

When returned to its original setting, the Miracle of Christmas is actually much more awe-inspiring and evoking of praise, wonder and gratitude than the traditional motif that has been promulgated for centuries. With more of that original context put back into place, we are able to praise God even more, not just for what He did at Bethlehem, but also for the intentional way that He eternally chose to do it. May that same wonderment and joy stir and soothe your soul as you ponder this scene during future Advent seasons.

Reflections to Journal and Share

- What did you learn about God in Luke’s second chapter?
- Does the “shame” motif enhance or hinder the glory and wonder of the birth of Jesus for you?

Ponder

You may be wondering: if this kataluma-basement-shame motif is indeed more contextually correct, why don't our Bibles reflect it that way? A significant number of translators and commentators through the years have documented that "inn" is an inappropriate contextual translation for *kataluma* in Luke 2:7. So why doesn't that word treatment get changed?

Consider your own way of thinking. Would you want to buy a Bible that presents this shame-in-the-cellar contextual reality of the birth of

Jesus? For over a millennium, this Westernized got-to-town-too-late-no-vacancy-birth-in-a-stable-with-a-wooden-elevated-manger tradition has been espoused. That is a very long time and has made this mythological version of Jesus' birth more believable than the profound reality of that first Silent Night. As a result, for many this tradition has become the truth. In fact, tradition has such a grip on our understanding of the birth motif of Jesus that most people would dismiss the contextual reality of His birth as full of obvious error. Such is the paradox of Christmas!

*Think of yourself the way Christ Jesus thought of himself.
He had equal status with God but didn't think so much of himself
that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what.
Not at all. When the time came, he set aside his privileges of deity and took
on the status of a slave, being human! Having become human,
he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn't claim special privileges.
Instead he lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death –
and the worst kind of death at that – a crucifixion.*

*Because of that obedience, God lifted him high and honored him
far beyond anyone or anything, ever, so that all created beings in
heaven and earth – even those long ago dead and buried – will bow
in worship before this Jesus Christ, and call out in praise that he is
the Master of all, to the glorious honor of God the Father.*

—Phil 2: 5-11, **The Message**

The early Christians did not say in dismay, "Look what the world has come to," but in delight, "Look who has come to the world!"

—**Carl C. F. Henry**

The mystery of the humanity of Christ, that he sunk himself into our flesh, is beyond all human understanding.

—Martin Luther

The divine Son became a Jew; the Almighty appeared on earth as a helpless human baby, unable to do more than lie and stare and wriggle and make noises, needing to be fed and changed and taught to talk like any other child. The more you think about it, the more staggering it gets.

—J. I. Packer

The awful majesty of the Godhead was mercifully sheathed in the soft envelope of human nature to protect mankind.

—A. W. Tozer

Visual Resources

For some incredible visuals that make the birth of Jesus come contextually alive, see the “Birth and Early Years” images in Preserving Bible Time’s Overview of the Gospels DVD, particularly the interior images of the Taiybe, Israel house “living room,” kataluma, and cave “basement.”

Notes and Sources

¹Harry N. Wendt, *Christmas: The Real Story*, (Minneapolis, MN.: Crossways International, 1998), p. 22.

²I am indebted to Dr. James C. Martin of Bible World Seminars for this conversational description of a first-century commercial inn.

³Luke 10:34

⁴James C. Martin, *The Gospels in Context* (Amarillo, Tex.: Bible World Seminars, 2002), p. 42-43.

⁵Gustaf Dalmann’s work as cited by Kenneth Bailey, “The Manger and the Inn: Cultural Background of Luke 2:7,” *Theological Review 2* (November 1979) Reprint, p. 6.

⁶James C. Martin, *The Gospels in Context*, p. 42.

⁷Kenneth Bailey, “The Manger and the Inn: Cultural Background of Luke 2:7,” *Theological Review 2* (November 1979) Reprint, p. 4.

⁸Luke 2:4

⁹Karen Lamb, “New Look at an Old Story,” Associated Press, December 10, 1994 as reprinted by University of the Holyland, 1999.

¹⁰Alfred Edersheim, *Sketches of Jewish Social Life in the Days of Christ*, (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 1984), p. 148.

¹¹James C. Martin, *The Gospels in Context*, p. 33.

¹²Mishnah: Taanith 4:5.

¹³John 8:41

¹⁴Babylonian Talmud: Sanhedrin 106a

¹⁵Kenneth Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 1976), P. 147.

¹⁶Kenneth Bailey, “Shocks in the Christmas Story: For Whom Was He Born?” *The Presbyterian Outlook*, December 18-25, 1991, pp. 7-8.

¹⁷Luke 2:17-18

¹⁸James C. Martin, *The Gospels in Context*, p. 33.