

## December 6, 2020 | The Christmas Timeline

### Luke 2:4-7 | Jehovah in a Feeding Trough

Throughout this series, we'll look at four perspectives surrounding the Christmas story: history, Jesus' parents, shepherds, and a few faithful Jews. Each point of view will help illustrate a fundamental principle we should dwell on during this Christmas season.

Last week, we looked at the meta-standpoint of history. We learned that everything from the momentous moments to the mundane moments, God is at work to accomplish His will. Even the seemingly accidental acts of history turn out to be the predestined acts of destiny.<sup>1</sup> God uses powerful kings to move history the same way he uses a summer breeze to carry clouds.

Today, we'll be looking at the perspective of Mary and Joseph. As far as we know, they were the only two people who actually witnessed the King of kings' entrance into our world. Christ's entry into our world is a humble one and would've been without notice if not for who Jesus was. How strange that one so great as He would choose to be born in such an unremarkable way. He, who was to be served, was born much like a servant. He is the Great I Am, unique and transcendent, became an unremarkable man. He whose throne room *is* the heavens, dwelt in a stable the night he arrived on our planet.

**READ:** Luke 2:4-7 (ESV)

<sup>4</sup> And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, <sup>5</sup> to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. <sup>6</sup> And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. <sup>7</sup> And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger because there was no place for them in the inn.

Now, before we unpack this passage, I have to draw your attention to something I've already hinted at in my introduction: The birth of Jesus is told simply and succinctly. There is no account of searching. We're not told about an innkeeper who was harsh or uncaring turning away Jesus' parents. Nor is there any speculation that Mary and Joseph were too poor to find other accommodations. Instead, the only detail we are told is that the inn was full, so they took shelter in a barn.

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<sup>1</sup> Bock, Darrell L., *Luke 1:1-9:50*, The Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids; Baker Academic, 1994), p. 203.

What's more, we're not told why Mary accompanied Joseph at all. It would've been unlikely the Roman government would've required Mary to register; for Joseph, as the head of the house, would've been sufficient.<sup>2</sup> The only logical speculation is that they wanted to be together. Mary wanted Joseph to be there for his son's birth, and Joseph wanted to be with Mary because she was his wife. <EXAMPLE: Waiting in the hall alone while Emory gets prepped for her c-section.> And while we cannot know for sure the reasoning, I believe that their traveling together is a testament to their love and respect for one another. We are not told many details about Mary and even less about Joseph. But what we are told is very good.

Now, what am I to do with a passage such as this? It has been preached almost every Christmas for over two thousand years. What new spin or perspective can I give that'll give this passage a refresher? You know, what is that thing I tell you which will make you feel like you haven't wasted your time by tuning in today? Well, honestly, not much. The only thing I thought we could do was to help fill out details about this story you may have wondered at. Let's look at a few key terms in the passage that help paint a better picture of the first Christmas.

"inn" – Interestingly, while we have built up this idea that Mary and Joseph sought out lodging but being turned away because everywhere is full, the reality is that the word Luke uses for "inn" has two rather mundane possibilities.

<INSERT PICTURE – 2X> First, it can describe more of a public shelter than a traditional inn.<sup>3</sup> These types of shelters were called "khans" or "caravansaries," in which travelers would huddle together under one roof for an evening.<sup>4</sup>

<INSERT PICTURE> Or, the word inn would be better thought of as a guest room in a house than anything resembling a modern-day hotel (Lu. 9:12; 19:7; 22:11; cf. 10:34).<sup>5</sup> Remember, Joseph was from this town. He no doubt had family, relatives, and/or friends who would've gladly put him and Mary up. Especially considering she was so close to giving birth. But, we're told they stay with animals. Before I tell you what the likely reasoning is for that, I need to get you to think in first-century terminology. You see, the barn was nothing more than a simple room that housed animals and would've likely been in the same house as the living quarters. This room would've been separate from the rest of the

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<sup>2</sup> Stein, Robert H., *Luke*, The New American Commentary, Vol. 24, (Nashville, TN; B&H Publishing Group, 1992), p. 106.

<sup>3</sup> Bock (1994), p. 208.

<sup>4</sup> Stein (1992), p. 107.

<sup>5</sup> Green, Joel B., *The Gospel of Luke*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 1997), p. 128.

house, possibly adjacent or more than likely below the living space, but it would've been in a one- or two-story home enclosed on all sides.

Okay, so why did they spend the night in the animal portion of a home? Well, understand, the problem was that once the room was given away, you kind of had to take what you could get. Remember, though Joseph had a place to stay, the city burst with visitors due to Augustus' census. Everyone would've been lacking sufficient enough room to handle the influx of travelers. So, Mary and Joseph had to settle for the "barn" portion of the house. Admittedly, this would not have been the best accommodations, and no doubt Mary and Joseph would've preferred a guest room instead of a barn; but half a loaf is better than none. When the choice is either sleep on the streets or in the safety of a barn, a barn doesn't seem so bad.

**"betrothed"** – Luke's use of this word does not imply that Joseph and Mary weren't married yet. He uses this word to indicate that though they were husband and wife, they had, in fact, been married (Devote Jews wouldn't be traveling with the opposite sex if they hadn't already been married.), they had yet to consummate their marriage.<sup>6</sup> This not only affirms Matthew's testimony (cf. Mat. 1:25), but it ensures that Mary was still a virgin at the birth of Jesus (cf. Lu. 1:31). It further highlights the unusual nature of Mary's pregnancy.<sup>7</sup> No one had been born this way, and no one would ever be born like this again. Life was created apart from any interference of man. Jesus was not only the firstborn of Mary but the firstborn of a new kind of human being (cf. Ps. 89:27; Col. 1:15-18). And if Christ's birth was unique, we should find it no surprise that his death would likewise be unique (cf. 1 Cor. 15:20).

**"firstborn son"** - Without telling us his name, Luke says that Jesus was Mary's "firstborn son." The term he uses is **πρωτότοκος** (*pro-tah-tok'os*) and serves a variety of functions in the narrative. For instance, it indicates that Mary had other children; Jesus was just the first in a sequence of other children. And, obviously, this is contrary to the perpetual virginity of Mary, which all Catholics believe.

However, this is not the main reason for Luke's use of this term here in our passage. *Protahtok'os*' primary role was to mark Jesus' inheritance as the firstborn son is not only in his immediate household, i.e., Joseph and Mary but

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<sup>6</sup> Garland, David E., *Luke*, The Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, Clinton E. Arnold, Editor, (Grand Rapids; Zondervan, 2011), p. 120.

<sup>7</sup> Green (1997), p. 128.

also in the broader family in King David's lineage.<sup>8</sup> Just as Jesus was the primary recipient of Joseph's estate (cf. Jn. 19:26-27), so too was Jesus, the rightful recipient of all the regal benefits of King David (cf. Ex. 13:2; Num. 3:12-13; 18:15-16; Deut. 21:15-17; 2 Chr. 21:3). Jesus is the promised King of the Davidic line.

**READ:** Jeremiah 23:5-6 (ESV)

<sup>5</sup>"Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as King and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. <sup>6</sup>In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: 'The Lord is our righteousness.' [*Jehovah Tsidkenu*]

The point is this: Jesus king by divine right and birthright. He is not only God who is outside time and does whatever He wants. He is also the rightful ruler of Israel by birth. Both on a universal scale and an earthly scale, His right to King David's throne is unassailable.

"**manger**" – **<INSERT PICTURE>** though this word is technically correct, due to how dramatized the Christmas story has become, this word is in danger of losing some of its original shock value. A manger was nothing more than a feeding trough for animals. **<INSERT PICTURE>** No one sings "Away in a feeding trough" because it doesn't sound as poetic and lyrical as "Away in a Manger," which is precisely the point.<sup>9</sup> Luke didn't want to bring any exaggeration to this account or bolster it with flowery language. No. Luke specifically used a word that would be better translated as "feeding trough" to highlight that God, maker of the heavens and the universe, laid his head down in a place where farm animals eat. **<INSERT PICTURE>** In fact, the whole principle of the upside-down kingdom, *the* significant reversal of the first becoming last and the last becoming first, finds its first commencement in the fact that the supreme ruler of everything was born poor, lowly, and without consequence.<sup>10</sup>

It brings a whole new meaning to what Jesus will say later:

**READ:** Luke 9:57-58 (ESV)

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<sup>8</sup> Bock (1994), p. 207.  
<sup>9</sup> Garland (2011), p. 120.  
<sup>10</sup> Stein (1992), p. 49-50; 107.

<sup>57</sup> As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." <sup>58</sup> And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."

Jesus did not have a bed. He had a feeding trough.

**"wrapped him swaddling clothes"** – Just as it is today, it was ubiquitous for mothers to wrap their child after birth. <INSERT PICTURES - 2x> I like to call it the "baby burrito." In fact, swaddling refers to tearing strips of cloths as one would do when covering a cut or broken arm, and so "swaddling" could also be translated as "bandages."<sup>11</sup> The purpose of doing this with a baby is obvious. It ensures that the newborn stays warm, and the bandages keep their hands from flailing about and potentially hurting themselves.<sup>12</sup>

Now, this wouldn't be worth noting if it weren't for two things.

First, this "wrapping" is mentioned three times in a span of just a few verses: here, in verse 12, when the angels tell the shepherds of Jesus' birth, and in verse 16, when we are given the actual scene of the shepherds finding Jesus. Seems unimportant to us, but any time the bible repeats itself, we should notice, especially when it is in the same passage. You see, the wrapping and the manger act as a sort of marker for the shepherds to identify Jesus. Apparently, finding a baby in a feeding trough would've been just as unusual and just as easy to spot back then as it would be today.

But there is a second, more important reason to take note of this wording. For the keen reader, there is a sub-text in this wrapping and laying down here in chapter 2, which foreshadows another kind of wrapping and another kind of laying down later on in Luke's gospel. Here's what I'm talking about:

**2:7 - And she gave birth... and wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger**

**23:53 - Then [Joseph of Arimathea] took down [the body of Christ] and wrapped it in a linen shroud and laid him in a tomb cut in stone.**

Just as they wrapped the bodies of newborn babies, they wrapped the bodies of the recently deceased. Thus, it appears, Luke was signaling the primary reason

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<sup>11</sup> Phillips, John, *Exploring the Gospel of Luke: An Expository Commentary*, The John Phillips Commentary Series, (Grand Rapids; Kregel Publications, 2005), p. 75.

<sup>12</sup> Garland (2011), p. 120.

for Christ's birth even in such a festive scene like this. Luke was hinting at Christ's death alongside Christ's birth.<sup>13</sup> That, even though this was a joyous occasion, it foreshadowed a much darker scene later. Upon his birth, Jesus was wrapped and laid down in a borrowed manger. Upon his death, he was bound and laid down in a borrowed tomb. Combine this with Simeon's blessing to Mary later in this chapter, which includes anticipatory language about Christ's death, and you have a rather obvious connection to the crucifixion (cf. 2:34-35). This baby boy was born to die.

Isn't it interesting that the King of kings would have such a humble beginning? I know we hear this detail every Christmas season. But I really want you to sit and think on this for a moment: upon entering our world, the Messiah lodged in a room designed more for animals than men, and He slept His first night on a thing that was intended more for feeding animals than a bed for men. How unbelievably bizarre?! The One who was "to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death," and "to guide our feet into the way of peace" had straw for bedding and nothing but two parents and some farm animals for company that first Christmas day.

#### **SO, WHAT'S THE TAKEAWAY?**

**The manger scene is our fallen world.**

A dusty barn was the Savior's first throne room. A borrowed feeding trough was the Messiah's first bed. A stinking crowd of domesticated beast was the King of kings' first audience. And, likewise, calvary's hill was the Savior's last throne room. A borrowed tomb was the Messiah's last bed. And a stinking crowd of jeering beasts was the King of King's last audience.

In this manger scene, we hear the echo of that future calvary scene. Jesus steps from his perfect throne room into our fallen world to die. He came humbly, and, except for a heavenly chorus to some shepherds, he was born with little fanfare. He clothed his divine majesty in human flesh. Why? So that he might reconcile us to God.

This very aspect of the Christmas story would be used by Paul when he would later admonish the church of Philippi to remember when they dealt with one another. He says...

#### **READ: Philippians 2:1-11 (ESV)**

<sup>1</sup> So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, <sup>2</sup> complete my joy by being of the same mind,

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<sup>13</sup> Green (1997), p. 124.

having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.<sup>3</sup> Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. <sup>4</sup> Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.

<sup>5</sup> Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, <sup>6</sup> who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, <sup>7</sup> but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. <sup>8</sup> And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

<sup>9</sup> Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, <sup>10</sup> so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, <sup>11</sup> and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

What manner of love is this that one so great would stoop so low for us. Oh, how great is the One who traded a robe of light for a garment of flesh. Praise be to Jesus Christ, born in a barn and laid in a manger. Glory to the One who lived a sinless life yet was murdered on a cross. May we worship the Messiah who laid in a tomb only three to rise from the dead to live forevermore.

In his birth is our new birth. In his death is our new beginning. In his resurrection is our new life.