

## ENGAGE

- This final installment of this year's Christmas Bible studies is a bit unique. We have looked at Joseph, Mary and the Angel's message.
- This week I will be speaking on the manger. Focus will be on the sustaining fulfillment Jesus offers.
- The region of Judea (Judah) which means praise, the area of Ephratah which means fruitful, the town of Bethlehem which means house of Bread, the Manger which literally means place of eating and the Christ Child who is the bread of Life
- I will also be looking at the place of praise which brings us to the place of filling. To learn to Be Still and know that He is God.

## EXAMINE

Was there an urgency upon approaching or entering Bethlehem? Luke 2:6 says, "While they were there, the time came for her to give birth" (emphasis added), not "as they were approaching." He doesn't mention whether they were there for five minutes or five weeks, but it could allow for both. Luke does not portray that her time for giving birth came as she was approaching the city, so there was no reason for panic or urgency. There is no evidence that the baby was pressing as they arrived. But if they got to Bethlehem and Mary was fine, why couldn't Joseph find adequate housing? Zechariah and Elizabeth were nearby, they were in a hospitable culture, and he was from the line of David. Why did he put his pregnant wife into a stable filled with animals?

The HCSB says they "laid Him in a feeding trough" (Luke 2:7). When you read "feeding trough," images of a stable probably come to mind. However, there are three options for the location of the feeding trough. First, feeding troughs were placed outside homes in a stable. This is the traditional understanding: wealthy homes in first-century Israel would have a stable. Countering the traditional view are two other options. Understanding how houses were typically constructed will help comprehend the other options.

A first-century house in Israel would have a large family room where the family would eat, cook, sleep, and do general living. At the end of the room there would be some steps down to a lower level, going down only a couple of feet. That lower level would be the "animal room" of the house. There was no wall separating the rooms, just one room with two parts: the family room and the animal room. They would construct it so it slanted slightly toward the animal area for easy cleaning because the exterior door would be in the animal area. On the raised surface in the family room would be a feeding trough for the larger animals carved out of the floor. The larger animals in the animal area, like a cow or a donkey, could walk over and eat out of this trough. The smaller animals, like sheep, would have a smaller manger that would be carved out of the floor in the animal room, or the family might have a wooden trough that could be brought inside.

Scripture offers no explicit description of this design, but archeological evidence and implicit evidence from Scripture suggest that this was the general design of houses. Animals are mentioned being inside houses in a few biblical stories. First Samuel 28:24 describes Saul going

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to the witch of Endor. As they were talking, she decided to slaughter the “fattened calf in the house” (ESV, emphasis added). Judges 11 tells the story of Jephthah making a vow. He asked the Lord to help him win the battle. Then, if the Lord helped him, he promised to sacrifice the first thing that came out of his house (Judges 11:31). When he arrived home, the first thing out of his house was his daughter. Since animals were kept in the house, he probably expected a calf or sheep to come out.

The design of one-room houses can be seen in verses like Matthew 5:15, where Jesus mentions a light on a lampstand giving light to all who are in the house. If there were multiple stories, multiple rooms, hallways, and bathrooms, that would be impossible. But when the house has one big room with one section being a little lower for the entrance and animals, it becomes clear how a light on a lampstand would give light to the whole house.

The larger manger is in the family room, and the smaller manger is in the animal room. These are the other two options for its location. The most likely location for Jesus’ manger is the one in the family room. But the traditional understanding of the story doesn’t say Jesus was born in a house. It says the family was turned away from the inn so they went to a stable. Why am I describing a house?

Notice how the HCSB translates Luke 2:7: “And laid Him in a feeding trough—because there was no room for them at the lodging place.” Most translations use the word “inn” rather than “lodging place.” The word “inn” or the phrase “lodging place” bring to mind the idea of a hotel, which did exist in first-century Israel. I don’t know if one existed in first-century Bethlehem (though that seems unlikely since it was a small town), but the parable of the good Samaritan in Luke 10:34 says, “Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him.” The following verse even references an innkeeper. This is a reference to public lodging, like a hotel. So there were inns in first-century Israel.

But the Greek word used in Luke 2:7 (*kataluma*) is different from the Greek word used in Luke 10:34 (*pandocheion*). The word *pandocheion* occurs only here in the New Testament. The word *kataluma* occurs two other times, once in Mark and once in Luke (which are parallel verses). Luke 22:11 says, “Tell the owner of the house, ‘The Teacher asks you, “Where is the **guest room** where I can eat the Passover with My disciples?’”” (emphasis added). The Greek word *kataluma* is translated in Mark 14:14 and Luke 22:11 as “guest room” in most translations. However, most translations have “inn” in Luke 2:7.

### A Closer Look at Luke 2:7

The NIV says, “Because there was no guest room available for them” (Luke 2:7, emphasis added). This is probably the most accurate translation of Luke 2:7. It was the only translation I examined that had *kataluma* translated the same way in all three places. The guest room in Luke 2:7 most likely referred to a room added on to a single-story house. The guest room (*kataluma*) would have its own exterior entrance.

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Another piece of evidence implies that Joseph and Mary had attained adequate accommodations when they got to Bethlehem and were not in a stable. The shepherds were told by an angel that they would see a baby lying in a feeding trough (Luke 2:12). After the shepherds saw this, Luke says, "The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had seen and heard, just as they had been told" (Luke 2:20). In a culture that prized hospitality so highly, it would have been unimaginable that the shepherds would have walked away and left the family with a newborn baby in a stable. The more you understand Middle Eastern hospitality, the more powerful that verse becomes.

## QUESTIONS

- What significance is it that the region of Judea (Judah) which means praise, the area of Ephrathah which means fruitful, the town of Bethlehem which means house of Bread, the Manger which literally means place of eating and the Christ Child who is the Bread of Life?
- How does praise prepare us for being filled by God?
- How does complaining get in the way of God's blessing and being sustained?
- Do you know anyone who bakes great bread, or a favorite bakery? What makes it so good?
- Jesus claimed very clearly "I am the Bread of Life." Why do you suppose he used the analogy of bread?
- What did it cost Jesus in order to give us this Bread? (John 6:51)
- How do we "eat" this bread? (List some tangible ways.)
- What are several benefits of eating this Bread?
- How would you know if you weren't getting enough Bread? (How could Matthew 6:11 apply here?)
- Read John 6:67-69. Can you identify with Peter's answer?
- Where have you looked in times past for satisfaction but not found it?
- How would you encourage someone who is just now beginning to discover Jesus?

## Sources

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