



Separating Truth From Tradition in the Christmas Story



The Christmas story is such an engrained part of our culture. Everyone knows about the characters—Mary & Joseph, the angels, the shepherds, the three wise men, the innkeeper; and the sheep, donkey, cattle, etc. But it is important to separate the biblical facts from the fiction in art, songs, and Christmas plays.

The biblical text of the birth of Christ comes from two passages of Scripture: Luke 2:1-20 and Matthew 2:1-12. From Luke, we learn that Mary and Joseph traveled from Nazareth to Bethlehem. We are not told that Mary rode a donkey. It is a reasonable supposition that an expectant mother may have ridden some animal instead of walking, but that detail has been added to the story. So have the sheep and cattle. The only indication of the possible presence of livestock at the birth of Jesus is that He was placed in a *manger*. The presence of an animal feeding trough does suggest animals were sometimes present in the place, but none are mentioned.

Neither does it mean that Jesus was born in a barn. And there was no innkeeper. Mary and Joseph did not go from motel to motel looking for a place to stay for the night, only to be turned away with a harsh, “No Vacancy” from frazzled innkeepers. The word Luke used for “inn” in verse 7 is not the word for the local boarding house for travelers, such as where the Good Samaritan took the injured man in Luke 10:34, (where there actually was an *innkeeper*). Instead, Luke 2 uses the word that is translated “upper room” in Luke 22:12.

So, it is more like Jesus was born in a basement, the lower level of a first-century Jewish dwelling where the animals were sometimes kept during cold weather; instead of the upper part of the house, which was probably already filled with other family members and traveling guests who had also come to town for the census. And speaking of cold weather, Scripture does not say when Jesus was born or what the weather was like. It is assumed that December would be cold weather, but He could have been born in the spring (with the Passover lambs—now wouldn’t that be rich with symbolic meaning!).

There were shepherds and angels, although the Scripture doesn’t actually say the angels “sang.” There were wise men. But Scripture does not say how many, only that three gifts were brought. We don’t know the name of the wise men either. We don’t know exactly when



the wise men arrived, except that they did not arrive the night Jesus was born.

The wise men's question to Herod indicated Jesus has already been born. Matthew used a term for "young child", not newborn, in describing the baby Jesus. And Herod sent his soldiers to kill children that were as old as two years, not just newborn.

It is not uncommon for storytellers to fill in the gaps and embellish the characters of a story. No one considers it heresy or false teaching to sing songs and act in plays that include these fictitious elements. But it is still important for us to know the facts and be able to distinguish the truth from the fictional elements. Christians of all ages should be prepared to refute the challenges and accusations of skeptics and ill-intentioned unbelievers who challenge the faith of young believers by asserting they don't know the true story of the birth of Christ.

So, if your Nativity set has wise men, set them out somewhere (to the East) on their way to find the newborn King. It's a great way to teach the truth.