

Bible Studies

The Census, Inn & Manger

There are many questions about the nativity account that never get asked. So much of our understanding of the subject comes from nativity plays and Christmas cards. It is good to do a reality check every now and again.

Read Luke 2v1-7

Where did Joseph normally live?



The Census

The problems start with Quirinius. Syria was the Roman administrative centre over Israel at the time. The problem is that Quirinius was governor of Syria between 6-9AD. Too late for the birth of Christ. We know he conducted a census in 6AD. Acts 5v37, *Josephus Antiquities 18v26*. We also know that in Egypt a census happened every 14 years.

Jesus was born around (or before) 4BC. So how are we to explain Quirinius being Governor of Syria at that time?

There is some evidence (an incomplete inscription) that Quirinius had a previous term of duty in Syria between 10BC and 7BC. If so the census would date from this time.

Why does Luke describe this as the first census?

Probably to differentiate it from the second, more famous one, he mentions in Acts 5v37. (Luke and Acts are two volumes of the same work). Why would he say first if there had only been one?

The second possibility also centres around the word 'first' it can mean prior or before. In which case Luke is saying the *Census before the one under Quirinius*.

Josephus does record that about this time the whole Jewish nation swore an oath of allegiance to Caesar *Antiquities 17v42*. This could well be Luke's census.

Justin, a Christian author in the middle of the second century, writing to Roman Christians, claimed that Quirinius' census could still be examined. I Apology 34

As far as we know Augustus did not give an edict proclaiming a census across the whole Roman world at one time. We do know that he was very keen on taxation and statistics. According to a Roman historian (Tacitus) after Augustus' death, tax statistics from the empire were found to have been written in his own handwriting! This command was probably a general one compelling each province to return such data, rather than a command for a specific empire wide census.



The return to Bethlehem

Why did Joseph go to Bethlehem?

Joseph's clan originated in Bethlehem and it appears most of his family still lived there.

Why was it important for Joseph to return to Bethlehem?

The Messiah had to be descended from King David. Isaiah 11v1, 2 Samuel 7v12-13, "*The days are coming,*" declares the LORD, "*when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: The LORD Our Righteousness. Jeremiah 23:5-6* What is more Jesus had to be born in Bethlehem. Micah 5v2, Mathew 5v2.

Generally with a census, you want people to stay still, not move. The order to return to your ancestral home seems very strange, and unlikely to help in collecting the tax.

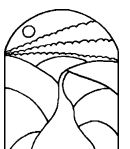
We know of an Egyptian census in 104BC where exactly this command was given. Dio Cassius, a Roman writer also describes the process of collecting taxes around the time of Christ's birth. According to his explanation people returned to property they owned so that it could be assessed and taxed. This is probably the reason for Joseph's journey,

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he owned or had inherited, property in Bethlehem, a field or even a house. It is fascinating that the location of Jesus birth, prophesied in Scripture was facilitated by the Roman Emperor.

The journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem would have taken the best part of a week.



**Would you take your pregnant wife of such a journey?
How would you cope with a donkey ride in such a condition?
Why did Joseph take Mary with him?**

There must have been a compelling reason and it is unlikely that the census required her presence. Mary's position, pregnant and unmarried was precarious. By not divorcing her Joseph took responsibility for the baby and included himself in the scorn. They were probably glad to get away from Nazareth's gossip and perhaps worst.

We envisage Joseph and Mary arriving in Bethlehem the evening of Jesus birth.

Does Luke actually say this?

While they were there, is what Luke says, no time frame is given. Our traditional understanding could be right. Mary spent the first three with Elizabeth her cousin. She must have been in the last trimester of her pregnancy.

Why was it a problem finding accommodation?

Joseph must have had family in Bethlehem why not stay with them?

You would expect a pregnant women to be given generous treatment. Was it because Mary was pregnant and unmarried?



The Inn

Our understanding of the Christmas story has Joseph knocking on the door of a 'motel' and being turned away. This is quite unlikely

This kind of inn was not common in Israel. . It was very un-Jewish and associated with the seedier side of life. It is highly unlikely that Bethlehem had this kind of an inn. (The story of the Good Samaritan uses a totally different word for inn). The Jews took hospitality very seriously and entertained strangers in their homes.

The word used for inn is *Katayma*, it is the same word translated *guest room* in Luke 22v11. It could be used of an inn, but it usually meant a room, in a private home, dedicated to hospitality . If the family was poor it could be a corner of a room. Depending on the context, it could mean a billet for soldiers or even a camp site.

We do not know how long they were there, or where they stayed, before the baby was born.

Several scenarios are possible; That they arrived the night of the birth to find no room. Or that they were staying in a *Katayma* but because of the crowding had to move out for the birth or wanted to move out for the birth.



In a manger

Does Luke say that Jesus was born in a stable?

Why do we assume this?

A poor families house was often divide between a higher area for the family and a lower one for the animals. It could have been a shed adjacent to the house. Or as tradition says a cave. It is even possible that it was out of doors.

Why is it significant that no room was found for Jesus birth?



What were the conditions that marked Jesus birth?

Why do you think God planned this kind of birth?

(What points do you think He wanted to make?)

Do any of the themes in Jesus birth recur in his life?

What contrasts spring to mind?

How does Jesus birth fit with His character and purpose?

What effect is this story intended to illicit in us?

What difference should it make to the way we live?

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Some ideas for answering the last questions

What were the conditions that marked Jesus birth?

Poverty, rejection, humility, shame, obscurity, secrecy.

Why do you think God planned this kind of birth?

(What points do you think He wanted to make?)

King David came from obscurity to be king.

That Jesus was one of us. He suffered the same indignities we suffer.

It put Jesus among the ordinary people.

It showed servanthood.

Do any of the themes in Jesus birth recur in his life?

Yes Jesus continued to live a simple life.

He associated with ordinary people.

He came to serve not to be served.

Luke 9:58 Jesus replied, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head."

He continued to be found by those who would humble themselves. And missed by those who wouldn't

What contrasts spring to mind?

Glories of heaven, usual kind of king, second coming,

The ways that He could have been born

The way the Jews expected Jesus to come.

The way we expect important people to behave

The honour we want for ourselves.

2 Cor 8:9 For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.

How does Jesus birth fit with His character and purpose?

It describes these things Very well. His care for ordinary people, humanity, simplicity

Can you imagine a Jesus born in regal splendour acting the way he did or humbling himself on the cross?

What effect is this story intended to illicit in us?

This is a Jesus we can relate to, know and love.

What difference should it make to the way we live?

Loose our pride or insistence on position and respect.

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. Phil 2:5...

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