

The Christmas Story Through Middle Eastern Eyes

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The story is charming, heartwarming, intriguing, but its context was not. The Roman Empire dominated the area. Israelites lived under their empirical rule which granted them some autonomy yet as any other minority they experienced dominance and oppression. It was a time of political and economic turmoil as well as religious tension. Life was not easy. As a result, Israelites waited for a Messiah to come and save them from political oppression. Surely this Messiah would be the son of a royal king, who would come with power and might, fight, conquer the enemy and save the people from oppression and injustice.

The story begins with the decree of Emperor Augustus "so all the world can be registered." The Roman governor had ordered a census. Mary and Joseph who were betrothed, started their journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, approximately 100 mile distance. If Joseph and Mary set off to Bethlehem from Nazareth today, they would have to cross several Israeli checkpoints, one major security check, and a 30 foot wall, West Bank barrier.

Betrothal was a period of one year between engagement and marriage, which is still practiced in the Middle East, when both bride and groom-to-be, lived in their parents 'home. At the conclusion of the year the bride would move to the groom's home and become part of the clan.

Traveling was done mostly on foot or on a donkey. The average peasant was not wealthy enough to own a donkey. But Mary, since she was pregnant, probably used one. Traveling was also done in groups. It was a matter of safety. Usually a guide, someone who knew the way, headed the group. Travelers greeted one another on the road and shared information about the safety conditions of the road. Remember the time when Jesus was 12? Jesus and his parents had gone to Jerusalem for the celebration of Passover. On their way back, after a day's journey, his parents realized that Jesus was missing. They assumed Jesus was in the group of travelers, relatives, who had gone ahead of them.

Based on these cultural norms, it is safe to assume that Mary and Joseph traveled with a group, most probably their family. In addition, if Joseph had to go to Bethlehem to register, so did his household. And no one would allow Mary, advanced in her pregnancy to travel with Joseph alone. For, in case of an emergency, Joseph, a man, would not know what to do.

Mary, Joseph and the group arrive in Bethlehem. The family had relatives there. Remember Joseph according to the genealogies of Jesus is of the family of King David. He is of royal lineage. Surely in Bethlehem which is called the city of David, Joseph had family. Besides, in that part of the world people will always have relatives in the city of their origin. Family could be 10 generations removed but they are still family! And since Joseph is from family of David, everyone would know, recognize and welcome him.

So most probably, the group or several groups, arrived at the home of their relatives, and the families used this opportunity for a reunion. To this day most Middle Easterners do not like to travel alone. Only businessmen do. They also do not travel for a few days. The required duration of a visit is one month. One of the first questions guests are asked, especially if they have come from faraway is - how long are you staying? If the answer is less than one-month disappointment will be expressed by all.

Hospitality is a characteristic of the Middle East even to this day. No one who had family was "allowed" to stay in a hotel. It would be disrespectful to family and relatives. Guests have to stay with family. And, it takes money to stay in a hotel and most people could not afford it.

In such a cultural setting it is impossible for Mary and Joseph to have gone to an inn, a hotel. No one who returned to the town of their origin could do so. Even if one had no family, which is highly unlikely, no one would turn away a young couple in need, a woman in labor, or at the verge of giving birth… In fact, the opposite would happen. People would not only take her in, but they would go fetch a midwife, find resources to help, they would apologize for whatever is lacking, they would do everything they can to help.

The "inn" which is translated from Greek *kataluma*, means a lodging place, a place to rest. Its literal translation is *the place where they were staying*. It is the same word Jesus used when he was to eat Passover with the disciples in Luke 22, translated as *guest room*. While in the story of the Good Samaritan the *inn* is a different word *pandohoken* that literally translates to *hotel*. Hotels were big houses with courtyards. The guest rooms were upstairs for people. The animals stayed downstairs in the courtyard. Usually only businessmen who traveled alone stayed there.

In addition, Mary's time to deliver did not happen while they were traveling, or on their way, or the night they arrived… it happened "*while they were there.*" It seems, Mary and Joseph were in Bethlehem at least a few days if not weeks when Mary began to have labor pains. So, after their arrival and family reunion, "*while they were there*" enjoying family the "*time came for her to deliver her child.*"

In all probability what happened is this – as the relatives were gathered, the one big room house was filled with guests. One room houses had two floors: the ground floor was a stable for animals, the second was for the family. The floors were only a few steps apart. A one room house could also have a stable across a narrow dirt road, both on ground level. Or, it could have a section close to the door that included a manger for the small animals who would stay in the room with the family for the night. This was so because animals were part of people's livelihood, they could not be left unattended, far away. Every house had a stable somewhere nearby. There were no isolated stables around. And, the word *manger* finds its root in the Old French *mange* which means *to eat*. Manger was where the young, baby animals ate and slept.

Mary had to give birth. The house was filled with people. The women took Mary to the stable so she could deliver in privacy, away from the men and the children. Young ones were sent to fetch a midwife. The women gathered to help Mary in labor. The men waited to hear the news. And once the news of a baby boy's birth was announced, it traveled through town quickly and people celebrated.

So, most likely Jesus was born in the midst of people, among family and relatives, in a town whose residents came to visit, celebrate and extend good wishes. The whole event was probably one of noisy celebration, with food, singing, dancing and joy. It did not happen in silence. It was a time of festivity. It was not a silent night. It was a night of joyful noise. Mary and Joseph had their first child, and it's a boy! Mary's status was confirmed as the mother of a boy who would carry on the family name, and that in itself was reason to rejoice, sing and dance!

The birth of Jesus was not much different from any other happy birth. Jesus was born as all others with hard labor and pain. He arrived crying and screaming. There were tears and heartache as well as joy and celebration. The birth was as human and as messy as all others. It happened in an ordinary home, in a common, traditional manger, in the midst of family and relatives who rejoiced at his birth.

Traditionally the story has been interpreted as if Mary did not have to struggle to give birth, Jesus the baby never cried or made noise, they were all alone in the wilderness and it was all silent and still. Culturally and contextually, that makes no sense.

Yet, although the first Christmas was not a silent night, it was a holy night, a sacred night as LOVE was born in community, on an earth moaning with pain and sorrow. It was a holy night as PEACE was born in the midst of political oppression and economic turmoil. It was a sacred night JOY was born in the midst of pandemic, loss, grief and uncertainty. It was a hallowed night as HOPE was born in the midst of isolation and despair, injustice and prejudice.

That is the wonder of Christmas – that the holy can be born, the light can shine and the earth can be touched by heaven and made sacred in spite of the earth's brokenness. For the manger in our hearts the manger in the world's heart continue to groan for the Love that heals, redeems, makes whole and sacred.

Note:
I am indebted to Rev. Dr. Kenneth E. Bailey, my New Testament Professor and Near East School of Theology, Beirut, Lebanon, from whom I learned contextual interpretation. Dr Bailey is author of many books including Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes, Cultural Studies in the Gospels.