

Bite Size Bible Study

Jesus' Birth, pt 1 #243

By Lee Logue

Most of our Christmas stories and nativity scenes center on what happened around Jesus not what He probably experienced. I would like to take a "step out on the limb" and from what little is mentioned in the scriptures, and the Jewish cultural norms and try to imagine what Jesus might have experienced during and after His birth.

If you are interested in what I have written about the events surrounding His birth I invite you to read Bite Size Bible Studies 59-63, 110-111, & 190-193.

Luke tells us in Luke 2:1-7 CJB:

Around this time, Emperor Augustus issued an order for a census to be taken throughout the Empire. This registration, the first of its kind, took place when Quirinius was governing in Syria. Everyone went to be registered, each to his own town. So, Yosef, because he was a descendant of David, went up from the town of Natzeret in the Galil to the town of David, called Beit-Lechem, in Y'hudah, to be registered, with Miryam, to whom he was engaged, and who was pregnant. While they were there, the time came for her to give birth; and she gave birth to her first child, a son. She wrapped him in cloth and laid him down in a feeding trough, because there was no space for them in the living-quarters.

Let's begin with Mary and Joseph entering Bethlehem. We all know the story we were told – "Joseph running from place to place to find a place for Mary to give birth and eventually finding a cave or a stable for the birth."

While the Bible doesn't explicitly state the month of Jesus's birth, some interpretations, based on calculations involving the Hebrew calendar and the timing of events in the Gospels, suggest it was likely during the month of Tishri, which aligns with late September to mid-October. This is often linked to the fall.

So, Joseph and Mary were probably coming to Jerusalem to celebrate this Jewish festival season. They probably wanted to arrive early to celebrate the several holy days that occur before the Feast of Tabernacles (Sukkot). Possibly they were arriving even before Rosh Hashanah in order to celebrate this Jewish New year and all the festivals in this month, as well as report for the census.

Rosh Hashanah, (aka Feast of Trumpets or the Ingathering), is a Jewish holiday celebrated the first day of the New Year. Even though it is the 7th month, called Tishri, in the Hebrew calendar, it is also celebrated as the first month dating from creation. Its biblical origins are found in Leviticus 23:23-25 and Numbers 29:1-6. It is a day of rest, a holy convocation, and a memorial of blowing trumpets, with no work permitted, that would include travel.

Yom Kippur (aka Day of Atonement) is the holiest day of the year in Judaism. It occurs annually on the 10th day of Tishri and corresponds to a date in late September or

October depending on the relationships of the two calendars.

For traditional Jewish people, it is primarily centered on atonement and repentance. The day's main observances consist of complete fasting and self-discipline, both accompanied by extended prayer and confessions of sin. The ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are called the Days of Awe.

Days of Awe (aka Ten Days of Repentance). According to Jewish tradition, on Rosh Hashanah God inscribes each person's fate for the coming year into the Book of Life and waits until Yom Kippur to "seal" His verdict. During this time observant Jews focus on taking stock of their lives, making amends with people and asking for their forgiveness, repenting for their sins and seeking out closeness with God.

Sukkot (aka Festival of Booths or the Festival of Tabernacles). It refers to the temporary dwellings that Jewish people construct and dwell in during the week-long holiday of Sukkot. The holiday commemorates the Israelites' 40-year journey through the desert after the Exodus from Egypt, where they lived in temporary shelters.

These are the primary festival days that most Jews celebrate during this time. There are however some minor holy days that some celebrate in addition to these major festivals.

From the above days we can see how it was important for Joseph and Mary to journey to Jerusalem and Bethlehem for these holy days. Even though the emperor Augustus had declared a census at this time, I believe that it was more important in the minds of Joseph and Mary to be at the fall holidays.

The Journey

The trip from Nazareth to Jerusalem was about 75 miles. The usual route was to travel along the Plain of Jezreel and down the western side of the Jordan Valley. It was a dangerous journey of about four days. Therefore, they probably traveled with other families in a caravan style for safety and companionship.

To arrive before Rosh Hashanah, they would have to leave early in the week from Nazareth to arrive in Bethlehem in 4-5 days. Not to do so would mean that they would need to rest on Sabbath day in the middle of the journey.

As they arrive in Bethlehem, just a few miles from Jerusalem. Joseph is returning to the village of his origin. In the Middle East historical memories are long, and the extended family with its connection to its village of origin is important. In this world a man like Joseph could have appeared in Bethlehem and told people "I am Joseph the

son of Heli, son of Matthat, the son of Levi” and most of the homes in the town would be open to him.

In every culture, a woman about to give birth, is given special attention. Simple rural communities the world over always assist one of their own women in childbirth regardless of the circumstances. Surely this community would have sensed its responsibility to help Joseph find adequate shelter for Mary and to provide the care Mary needed. To turn away a descendant of David would be an unspeakable shame on the entire village.

Therefore, Joseph had time to make arrangements. Luke 2:6 says that “**while they were there the time came for her to give birth**”. The average Christian thinks that Jesus was born the same night that they arrived, hence Joseph’s haste and willingness to accept any shelter, even a shelter of a cave or stable.

The Inn or a home:

Traditional Middle Eastern villages had simple homes. In Palestine they often had only two rooms. One was exclusively for the guests. That room could be attached to the end of the house or on the roof. The main room was the family room where the entire family cooked, ate, slept, and lived. At the end of the room next to the door it was either a few feet lower than the rest of the floor or blocked off with a heavy timber. Each night into that designated area the family cow, donkey, and a few sheep would be driven. Every morning those same animals were taken out and tied up in the courtyard of the house. The animal stall would then be cleaned for the day. This type of home can be traced from the time of David up to the middle of the 20th century.

No room in the inn. The Greek word in Luke 2:7 that is commonly translated as inn, is *katalyma*. This is not the

ordinary word for a communal inn. Literally *katalyma* is simply a place to stay. It can refer to many types of shelters. The options for “inn” are in English translation “house” in Arabic “guest room”. Most archeologists believe that Bethlehem did not have a population large enough to have an inn.

Since there were hundreds of people coming to the feast at this time of year, the guest room may have already been occupied in most homes. However, they would not turn away anyone so the area in the house where the family live and the animals kept was the next best place.

The women in the house were probably all involved in the birth in some way. The birth of a baby was considered a gift from God, and everyone would have been overjoyed to have it happening. The fact that the baby turned out to be a male made it even more of a gift. Added to that, this was their first-born male. Even if some didn’t know that He was to be the Messiah this would have been an event not to miss.

So now we have the reason and probably the time when Joseph and Mary took the long trip to Jerusalem and Bethlehem. We have what those holy days meant to a practicing Jew. And we have a place for Mary to give birth that is not in a cave or stable but surrounded by family and friends in a home of an ancestor.

In the Next Study we will look at some additional facts that seem to indicate not only a month but maybe even a day when Jesus was born. But remember we are walking out on a thin limb and new information may alter some of our assumptions.

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