

Theology MythBusters: Advent and Christmastide

Part I: History

Introduction

The “Theology MythBusters” series of Bible classes exists to examine common claims, assertions, and misconceptions in the realms of history, theology, and tradition. From Scripture—in conjunction with history, theology, and tradition—the MythBusters studies seek to separate the truth from the tales. The emphasis of Part I is on the historic events of the Nativity as they are presented in Scripture.

Myth 1: *Mary and Elizabeth were definite cousins.*

Truth: In speaking to Mary, the archangel Gabriel refers to Elizabeth simply as “relative” (συγγενής [sungeneis]) (Luke 1:36), even as the King James Translation renders it “cousin.” It is very possible that Mary and Elizabeth were cousins, however, this word typically refers generally to any relative of an extended family or clan.¹ Elizabeth may have been an older cousin of Mary, but she could also have been an aunt. The KJK renders συγγενής in other instances as “kinsfolk,” which would indicate a tradition surrounding the relationship between Mary and Elizabeth, even if it is not as clearly indicated in Scripture.

(See also: Mark 6:4; Luke 1:58; 2:44; 14:12; 21:16; John 18:26; Acts 10:24; Rom 9:3; 16:7, 11, 21.)

Myth 2: *Joseph and Mary could find no room in any inn of Bethlehem.*

Truth: The common picture of the nativity places Mary, Joseph, and infant Jesus outside in a barn or stable, “because there was no room for them in the inn” (Luke 2:7). Traditions throughout the world surround an understanding that, upon entering Bethlehem, Joseph and his pregnant betrothed were turned away by multiple inns before one innkeeper had pity on the couple and sent them to the stable. However, many facets of this understanding do not agree with the biblical details.

- ***The “inn”***

The Greek word rendered “inn” is κατάλυμα (kataluma). However, this word does not refer to a generic “inn.”² Luke, in particular, differentiates between κατάλυμα in the nativity narratives and πανδοχείον (pandocheion, “inn”) (Luke 10:34). The κατάλυμα of Luke 2 is better understood as a specific “upper room”

¹ Frederick William Danker, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, Third (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 950. Hereafter referred to as BDAG.

² BDAG, 521: “The sense *inn* is possible in **Lk 2:7**, but . . . κατάλυμα is . . . best understood here as *lodging* or *guest-room*. . . contexts also permit the sense *dining-room*.” Italic and bold text original.

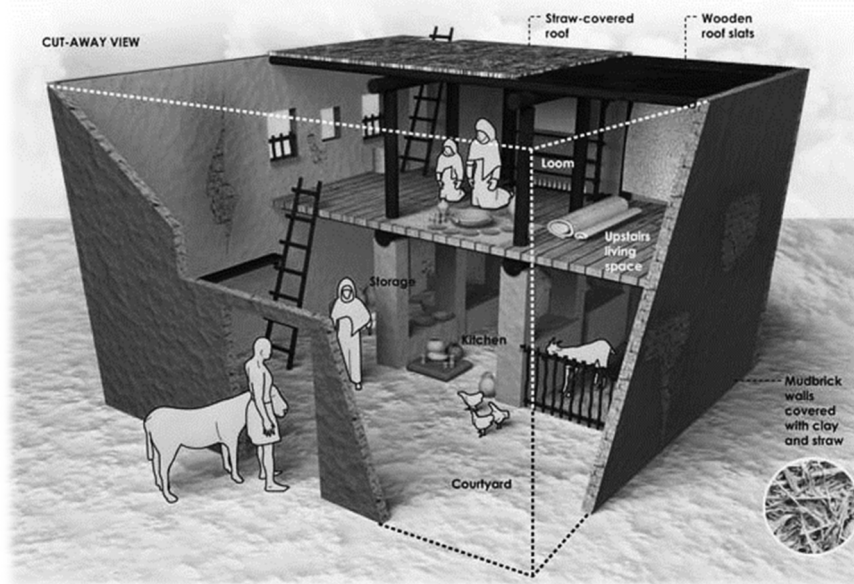
within a family house of Joseph.³ Luke 2:7 is thus better rendered: “because there was for them no [suitable] place [to give birth] in the guest room (or, “in the upper room”).”⁴

(See also: *The unbroken connection between 1 Km⁵ 1:18; 9:22; Luke 2:6–7; 19:1–7; Mark 14:14; Luke 22:11; Sir 14:25.*)

- **The “struggle” to find a room**

As Carlson highlights,⁶ and as the sixteenth-century theologian Francisco Sánchez de las Brozas (“El Brocense”) firmly argued, Luke 2:6 implies Joseph and Mary were already in their place of lodging, not searching for one. Moreover, even if Joseph and Mary had just entered Bethlehem, they would not have had a struggle to find a room, since Bethlehem was Joseph’s home town. Therefore, at the least, he would have had relatives with which they could find lodging, if not returning to a home he himself owned. Finally, while many were journeying to their home towns (Bethlehem included) to register for the census, there was no one day upon which all needed to register, therefore implying a slow, steady influx and departure of travelers instead of a mass exodus.

(See also: *Luke 2:1–5, 6.*)



- **The “stable”**

Because there was not a suitable place for childbirth in the room wherein Joseph and Mary were staying, Mary was moved to a different part of the house to give birth. Jewish houses in first-century Judea typically had living quarters on a second level, and space for animals on the ground floor. Animals were brought in at night and kept in the lower level. Thus, the fact that Mary places Jesus in a φάτνη (“manger, crib”) do not indicate, historically, a

³ For a more detailed examination of κατάλυμα in Luke 7, see Stephen C. Carlson, “The Accommodations of Joseph and Mary in Bethlehem: Κατάλυμα in Luke 2.7,” *New Testament Studies* 56 (2010): 326–42.

⁴ Carlson, 334–35, would agree with this translation, having stated, “The problem facing Joseph and Mary in the story was not that they were denied a particular or well-known place to stay when they first arrived, but that their place to stay was not such that it could accommodate the birth and neonatal care of the baby Jesus.”

⁵ 1 Kingdoms, the LXX version of 1 Samuel.

⁶ Carlson, “The Accommodations of Joseph and Mary in Bethlehem: Κατάλυμα in Luke 2.7,” 327–28.

separate stable, but a built-in feeding area for animals penned into the lower level of a common house at night (See diagram below).

(See also: Luke 13:15.)

Myth 3: *Three foreign kings came to visit Jesus the night he was born.*

Truth: As with the previous myth, though popular, the picture of three kings visiting Jesus along with the shepherds on the night he was born is simply not supported as a historic fact by the biblical birth narratives. As before, this myth incorporates many facets of detail.

- ***“Three” visitors***

The gospels do not record the number of visitors from the East. The idea of three visitors has been a longstanding piece of Western church tradition, though it is not substantiated by Scripture. Eastern churches, particularly the Syriac churches, hold that there were, in fact, twelve visitors to Bethlehem. The Western number of three is derived from the number of gifts presented to Jesus: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. The traditional names of the visitors are Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar, though Scripture does not record these names either. All that Scripture records is that there were more than one visitor. How many more is a question left unanswered.

(See also: Matt 2:1.)

- ***The “kings”***

The word used to describe the eastern visitors is μάγος (magos). This word typically refers to a “Persian . . . then also Babylonian wise man and priest who was expert in astrology, interpretation of dreams, and various other occult arts.”⁷ This word lends itself well to the translation “magi,” but less so to the translation “kings.” The understanding that these visitors were royalty is informed by the expensive gifts they bring, as well as by various Old Testament passages predicting the worship of kings. While it is possible these men were not true royalty, the use of μάγος does indicate at least a relationship with royalty, on whose behalf these men may have been sent.

(See also: Num 24:17; Ps 72: 11; Isa 60:1–6; Dan 2; Acts 13:1–12.)

- ***The timing of the visit***

While depicted in art, it is unlikely that the eastern magi were present in Bethlehem the night Jesus was born. Firstly, Matthew and Luke use different words to describe Jesus. Luke, in the birth narrative, uses βρέφος (brephos), which, fittingly, is a word reserved for infants, even while in-utero. Matthew, however, uses παιδίον (paidion) to describe Jesus, a word meaning, “small child” or “baby,” but not “infant.” The difference in vocabulary indicates that while Jesus was still a young child, he was no longer an infant, and certainly not a newborn. Furthermore, Matthew records that the magi visited the οἶκος (oikos,

⁷ BDAG, 608.

“house”), which would refer to the main living space of the house and not the lower level. Secondly, the events immediately following Jesus’ birth, particularly the purification of Mary, indicate that the Holy Family was still quite poor. It does not follow that after having received expensive gifts, they were still unable to afford the sacrificial lamb for Mary’s purification rite. Thus, the magi most likely did not visit until at least forty-one days after Jesus’ birth. Finally, when Herod orders the Slaughter of the Holy Innocents, it is shortly after the magi visited him. From Herod, the magi traveled six miles to Bethlehem, a journey easily made within one day. Herod more than likely attempted to hedge his bets with the age range of children he sought to kill. However, the age range was nevertheless determined because of information provided by the magi, which indicates Jesus could have been as old as two years by the time the magi arrived.

(See also: Matt 1:24–2; 2:7, 16; Luke 2:10–12, 16; Acts 7:19; 2 Tim 3:15; 1 Pet 2:2.)

Myth 4: *The chronology of Luke’s Gospel is historically inaccurate.*

Truth: Opponents of the accuracy of Scripture argue that the Gospel of Luke is inaccurate in its record of the census information. The rejection of Luke’s accuracy stems from the names of Quirinius and Herod the Great. Records do exist of a census by Quirinius in AD 6, but Herod the Great died in 4 BC. Since there has not been discovered any record of a census while Quirinius and Herod were both in authority, opponents conclude that Luke records false information. However, a better translation of Luke 2:2 solves this discrepancy simply: “This registration happened *before* Quirinius governed Syria.” This translation is accurate both grammatically and historically, placing the census in Palestine at roughly 5–4 BC, and differentiating it from the census of Quirinius recorded later by Luke (Acts 5:37).