



UNCOVERING
the Real
NATIVITY

*Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son,
and they shall call His name Immanuel,
which is translated, "God with us."*

Matthew 1:23, Isaiah 7:14 (NKJV)



CHRISTMAS TRADITION

Christmas is a favorite time of the year for many of us. It's a season full of joyful celebration and family traditions. It's a time of hustle and bustle and last-minute shopping in search of the ideal gift. The average home might be adorned inside and out with swags of evergreen garland and large wreaths tied with velvety red bows. Inside, a toasty fire crackles beneath a row of overfilled stockings, and the air is filled with the wafting scent of cinnamon and apple cider. And in some homes, somewhere under the Christmas tree, beneath twinkling lights and

billowing tinsel, nestled behind mountains of brightly wrapped boxes and bows, you might find a little Nativity set.

It's a familiar scene. The average Nativity shows Mary and Joseph positioned in the center of the rustic setting, surrounded by cattle, sheep, and donkeys—all facing the newborn king. The shepherds stand over to one side . . . all lined up in a semi-circular row. Across from them are three wisemen with their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. All this takes place in a stable. After all, the Bible says Mary laid the baby Jesus in a manger, and mangers are found in barns and stables, right? In fact, didn't we read that the innkeeper had no room for them in the inn, so he reluctantly let them stay out back in his stable?

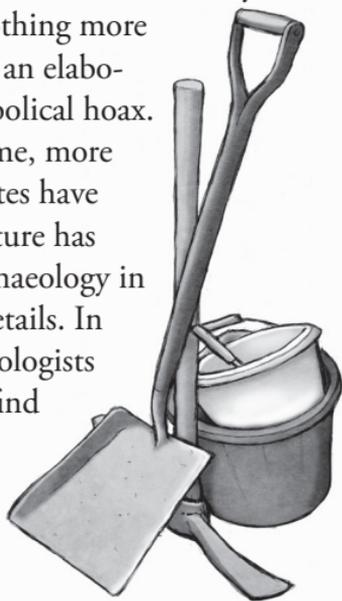
But wait . . . does the Bible really fill in all these details? Or have we added tradition upon tradition until the glittery scene before us hardly resembles the real historical event—the night of our Savior's birth.



ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE BIBLE

During His earthly ministry, Jesus said that if his followers would neglect to praise Him, the very “stones would cry out” (Luke 19:40). And that’s exactly what they’ve done.

The science of archaeology was born in the early nineteenth century, not all that long ago. Many wondered if this emerging science would support the biblical account as real history, or reveal the text to be nothing more than wishful thinking, an elaborate fairy tale, or a diabolical hoax. However, since that time, more than 25,000 biblical sites have been discovered. Scripture has been confirmed by archaeology in tens of thousands of details. In fact, even when archaeologists were sure they would find something to discredit some portion of Scripture they only ended up doing the opposite.



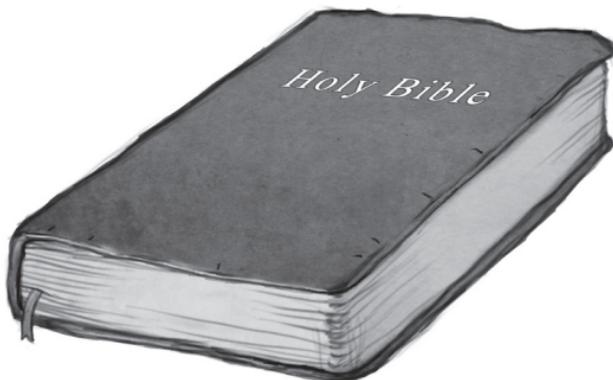
So what does archaeology have to say about the birth of Jesus? As it turns out, plenty.

Before we begin, quiz yourself to see if you can separate biblical truth from holiday tradition:

True or False?

1. Mary was in labor when she got into town, so Joseph had to take whatever lodging he could get.
2. The Bible uses the Greek word *kataluma*—translated “inn.” *Kataluma* means “small hotel.”
3. The Bible says that Mary and Joseph spent the night in a stable.
4. The innkeeper told Mary and Joseph there was no room for them in the inn.
5. The innkeeper’s wife brought water and towels to Mary and assisted in Jesus’s birth.
6. The Bible says there were three wisemen.
7. The wisemen were present the night of Christ’s birth.

Believe it or not, all of these statements are false. (See page 29 for more explanation.)



BACK TO THE BIBLE

Most people think of Answers in Genesis as a creation vs. evolution ministry, but our purpose and mission is to uphold the authority of Scripture.

God's Word is the final authority on all matters about which it speaks—not just the moral and spiritual matters, but also its teachings that bear on history and archaeology, indeed all sciences. Therefore, the Bible informs and guides our interpretation of archaeology, and at the same time, archaeology bolsters our faith in the accuracy and infallibility of God's Word.

For centuries, the traditional “Christmas Story” has been told and retold many times in books, sermons, plays, and movies. So much so, that the line between tradition and biblical reality is often blurred to the point that our minds tend to fill in details that aren’t really in the biblical text.

For example, this may surprise you, but the Bible actually makes no mention of an inn-keeper in Bethlehem. There probably wasn’t really an inn the way we think of an inn—like a little hotel, of sorts. Mary and Joseph might not have stayed in a stable—at least not the way we think of a stable. And not only do we suspect that there were not three wisemen, they probably weren’t present the night Jesus was born.

In 1 Thessalonians 5:21, we are instructed to “test all things, hold fast that which is good.” For this reason, then, we are investigating and rethinking some of the holiday traditions that have been assigned to the biblical text. We want to be like the Berean Christians who

“received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so” (Acts 17:11). Our goal is not to attack long-held traditions, but to gently set them aside for the sake of the truth and get back to what the Bible really says.

NO ROOM IN THE INN

Let’s take a look at the account of Christ’s birth as written in the Gospel of Luke:

¹ And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. ³ So all went to be registered, everyone to his own city. ⁴ Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, ⁵ to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child. ⁶ So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. ⁷ And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. —Luke 2:1,3–6 (NKJV)



Already we have an image in our minds based on traditions that we grew up with. It might go something like this: Joseph gets into town late and there's a "no vacancy" sign hanging outside the little inn. He desperately pounds on the door and pleads with the innkeeper, who eventually takes pity on the weary couple and sends them around back to the stable. The innkeeper's compassionate wife quickly scrounges around for some clean water and blankets... and just in time, too, because Mary is already in labor.

But wait. Does the Bible actually say that? Lets take a closer look at the text.

In verses 3 and 4 we see that Joseph is traveling to the home of his family.

³ So all went to be registered, everyone to his own city. ⁴ Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David.

In the Hebrew culture, it would have been customary for Joseph to stay in the home of his relatives, in the guest room, not in a local inn. Some might argue that Joseph probably headed to an inn rather than to his family because he was afraid he might be shunned considering Mary's condition outside of wedlock. But there is more to this picture than meets the eye.

Did Mary give birth the night they arrived in Bethlehem? Well, verse 6 says:

⁶ So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered.

This text seems to indicate that they were there for a while before Mary gave birth. If Joseph could find nothing more than a stable that first night, it seems he could have found

something better before Mary had her baby.
Verse 7 says:

*7 And she
brought forth
her firstborn
Son, and
wrapped Him
in swaddling
cloths, and
laid Him in
a manger,
because there
was no room
for them in the
inn.*



“Inn.” Doesn’t that refer to a hotel, or something like one? Actually, the Greek word translated here as “inn” is the word *kataluma* which usually refers to a “guest room.” The word *kataluma* only occurs two other times in Scripture—both of those are translated “guest room,” and they refer to the upper room where Jesus gave instructions to His disciples regarding the Last Supper:

¹⁴ “Where is the guest room [the *kataluma*] in which I may eat the Passover with My disciples?” – Mark 14:14 (see also Luke 22:11) NKJV

You may recall that Luke does refer to an “inn” and an “innkeeper” in the parable of the Good Samaritan, but there, instead of the word *kataluma*, Luke uses the word *pandocheion* which means “an inn, a public house for the reception of strangers.”

So when you read “inn,” think “guest room.” Now that certainly paints a different picture, doesn’t it? She laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the *guest room*.

THE GUEST ROOM (KATALUMA)

We'll probably never be able to dig up first-century Bethlehem. It's been built over many times and is considered a holy site by some groups since it is the town of King David and the birthplace of our Lord. But archaeologists have recently uncovered and reconstructed other first-century towns that are probably very similar to the Bethlehem of Jesus's day.





These reconstructions give us a better picture of the homes that occupied the hillsides of Judea at the time of Jesus's birth. Some of these homes were multiple stories tall, and some were only one. A multiple story home was often built into the side of a hill. The lower portion of the house was sometimes built around a cave or carved out by hand. The lower portion of a peasant home is most likely where the family lived. There was usually a raised platform at



This model was based on a multiple story version of a first-century Hebrew home.

the back of the room that many archaeologists believe is the place where the family prepared and ate their meals, visited together, and then rolled out their mats to sleep. The upper portion of the house is often where the guest room—the *kataluma*—was located. In the case of a single-story home, the *kataluma* may have been as simple as a corner of the main living area that was set aside for guests.

THE MANGER

Mary laid the baby Jesus in a manger. Doesn't that automatically mean they were in a stable? Over the last several centuries, that is the only explanation that seemed to make any sense, but first-century Bethlehem was not like the farm communities that have been developed since that time. When we read "manger," we tend to project our current understanding of where a manger should be located onto the biblical text.

Now many archaeologists believe that the lowest level of the common peasant home was where animals were brought in at night. This would have protected the animals from thieves and may have provided extra warmth to the family on cold desert nights. There was often a manger, a feeding trough for animals, which was carved into the floor or built into the wall of the main living area. This is not surprising because even as recently as modern times, many Middle Eastern homes have lower levels with mangers built into them.

With this biblical, historical, and archaeological understanding in mind, let's re-evaluate the arrival of Mary and Joseph. Joseph and Mary were probably welcomed into the home of relatives. But due to the census, many people were returning to Bethlehem, including Joseph's other out-of-town relatives. Because the traditional guest room, the *kataluma*, was already taken, Mary laid the baby Jesus in a manger. Under the circumstances, a built-in stone manger would be unusual and humble, but a perfectly suitable place to serve as a temporary crib to lay the newborn Son of God.





WHAT ABOUT THE WISEMEN?

So, where were the wisemen the night of Christ's birth? And where did we get the idea that there were three of them?

From a far away land, the wisemen followed an unusual star from the East, in search of the newborn king that they might worship him (Numbers 24:17). Naturally, they went to the palace of King Herod in Judea. Surely he would know the whereabouts of his successor. But the king knew nothing about the matter! Herod called together the chief priests and teachers of the law who told him of an ancient prophecy

that revealed the birthplace of the child who would be king (Micah 5:2). So this scheming, paranoid ruler sent the wisemen to Bethlehem, and urged them to return with news of the Christ child's specific location.

The wisemen did not return to Herod because they were warned in a dream that he was determined to kill the child king.

⁷ Then Herod, when he had secretly called the wise men, determined from them what time the star appeared. ⁸ And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, Go and search carefully for the young Child, and when you have found Him, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also. ⁹ When they heard the king, they departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was....¹¹ And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹² Then, being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way. —Matthew 2:7–9,11: (NKJV)

So did the wisemen find baby Jesus on the night of His birth? Or did they come later?

Let's examine the biblical text:

In verse 9, the account of the wisemen refers to Jesus as a *paidion*—a Greek word that can mean “young child.” This may indicate that Jesus was



no longer an infant when the wisemen visited—which could be why when the wisemen did not return to Herod, he eventually ordered the killing of all male children ages two and under in Bethlehem and the surrounding regions—providing yet another clue to the timeline of the wisemen's visit.

And why do we typically see depictions of three wisemen? Well, the biblical text does not say how many there were, but tradition has numbered the wisemen by their three gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

As we consider all this information, we are compelled to paint a more complete and biblically accurate picture of the circumstances that surrounded the birth of Jesus. Joseph and Mary sought shelter, probably among relatives, but the guest room was full because of the census. So they may have slept in the lower level, which was perfectly natural in that culture. In fact, many homes had only one room where everyone slept. Luke 2:6 says that “days” passed by while “they were there” before the birth occurred. So, at some time during their stay (but not on the night of their arrival in Bethlehem), Jesus was born, probably in a humble peasant home, and laid in a manger that may have been located in the lower level of the house.

Now the picture is getting clearer. But why did Jesus come? Why all of the fuss about the birth of this baby anyway?

THE PROBLEM

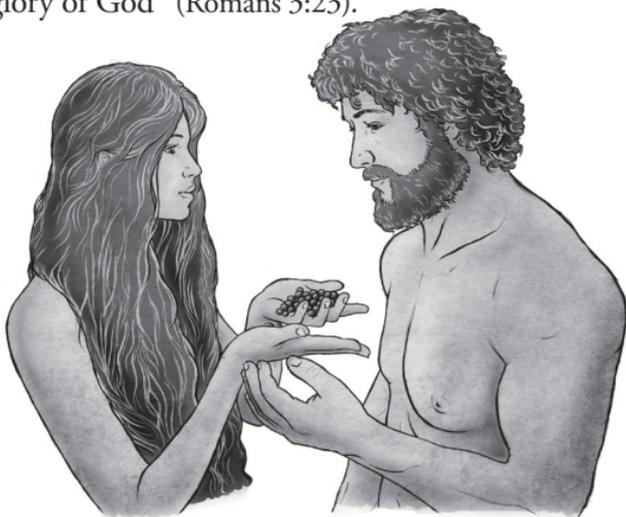
In order to really understand the birth of Jesus, and the true meaning of it, we must first understand why Jesus came to earth.

The birth of Jesus addressed humankind's greatest need—the need of a Savior. But that need didn't start in Bethlehem. It was established long ago, when Adam sinned in the Garden of Eden, when he rebelled against his Creator (Genesis 3:17). Because of Adam's sin, all of his descendants, including each of us, are born in rebellion and separated from a Holy God (Romans 5:12).

Humans have a universal problem. It's not lack of education or government. It is not overpopulation or even hunger. The universal problem that we all face, and cannot solve on our own, is sin.

All people are descendants of the first man, Adam, and rebel against the Creator God. This rebellion is called sin. In the beginning, before sin, God gave Adam and Eve everything they needed in the Garden of Eden and it was very

good (Genesis 1:31). He permitted them to eat from any tree in the garden except for one, the *Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil* (Genesis 2:17). He told Adam that if he ate from that tree, he would surely die (Genesis 2:17). The Bible says that Adam and Eve rebelled against God's command and ate from that tree (Genesis 3:6). As a result, death entered into the world (Genesis 3:19 and 1 Corinthians 15:22). Because we are all descendants of Adam, we are therefore sinful from conception (Psalm 51:5). The Bible says that "all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).



In this sinful condition we cannot live with a holy God, but are condemned to separation from God. We are therefore subject to “everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power” (2 Thessalonians 1:9).

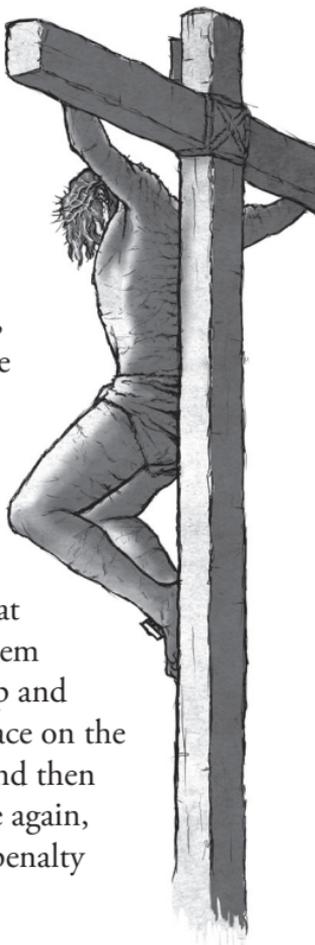
We live in a world that is filled with sin, death, disease, and suffering and everyone can see the problem, whether they believe the Bible or not. One cannot live on this earth without witnessing and partaking in the suffering that human rebellion has brought to God’s creation. But the Bible tells us God’s solution!

GOD'S SOLUTION

God was not surprised when Adam and Eve chose to disobey. God, in His wisdom, knew exactly what they (and we) would choose. Sadly, as a consequence of their sin, God had to kill animals to make clothing as a covering for Adam and Eve. This was the first sacrifice (Genesis 3:21). From that point on, throughout the rest of the Old Testament, God required animal sacrifices as a temporary sin covering—

a picture of the perfect sacrifice that was yet to come to provide the answer to the universal sin problem.

The Israelites sacrificed spotless lambs for generations as temporary payment for sin, but only a son of Adam, one who was perfect and without sin, could pay the price once and for all. In order to save us from sin and its penalty (death), Jesus Christ, the sinless, spotless Lamb of God became one of us on that special night in Bethlehem (John 1:29). He grew up and willingly died in our place on the cross (Phillipians 2:8). And then three days later, He rose again, conquering sin's death penalty (Acts 10:40).



Jesus shattered the separation between God and us, and now offers the marvelous gift of eternal life to all who repent of their sins and believe in Him (John 3:16–18). He is “the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world” (Revelation 13:8).

THE SHEPHERDS

When we understand the reason for the birth of Jesus, we can better appreciate the shepherds’ role on the special night when Jesus was born.

⁸ Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid.

¹⁰ Then the angel said to them, Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. ¹¹ For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹² And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger. ¹⁶ And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger. —Luke 2:8–12, 16 (NKJV)

We don't know for sure, but it is at least possible that the lowly shepherds, to whom the angels appeared that starry night, were guarding the sacrificial lambs. What we do know is that God chose these humble hired hands to be the first witnesses of the Good Shepherd, Jesus, the Lamb of God who would sacrifice His life to atone for the sins of all—a one-time perfect sacrifice, offered by the Father God Himself (1 John 2:2).

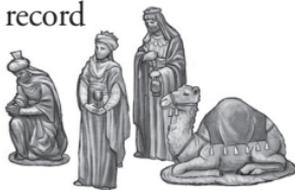




A NEW TRADITION

The Christmas account is one of the most beautiful, powerful, and meaningful events in all of history because the birth of Jesus addresses man's greatest need—the need of a Savior.

This Christmas, may we suggest that you start a new tradition: remove the Nativity out from its hiding place under the tree and set it in a featured place in your home. Take the wisemen and place them across the room. After all, they're probably still on their way! Then set aside a special time to gather together, open the Bible, and read the amazing historical record of Mary and Joseph, to whom God entrusted His precious Son.



Answers to the quiz at the beginning of this booklet:

Q1. Mary was in labor when they got into town, so Joseph had to take whatever lodging he could get. False—“And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered.” Luke 2:6

Q2. The Bible uses the Greek word kataluma—translated “inn.” Kataluma means “small hotel.” False—Kataluma is best translated “guest room.”

Q3. The Bible says that Mary and Joseph spent the night in a stable. False—There is no mention of a stable, only a manger, but we now know through archaeology that there was a manger in the lower level of the average house of the area.

Q4. The innkeeper told Mary and Joseph there was no room for them in the inn. False—There is no mention of an innkeeper in the biblical account of Christ’s birth.

Q5. The innkeeper’s wife brought water and towels to Mary and assisted in Jesus’s birth. False—There is no mention of an innkeeper’s wife in the biblical account of Christ’s birth.

Q6. The Bible says there were three wisemen. False—The Bible tells us there were three gifts, but it does not tell us how many wisemen were there.

Q7. The wisemen were present the night of Christ’s birth. Probably false—The text doesn’t really say, but if you carefully read Matthew 1 and 2, you can see that Jesus could have been as much as two years old when the wisemen visited Him.

For more detailed information about the kataluma, see: “The Manger and the Inn,” by Kenneth Bailey, PhD, at <http://www.biblearchaeology.org/post/2008/11/08/The-Manger-and-the-Inn.aspx>

THE GOOD NEWS

Answers in Genesis and its Creation Museum seek to give glory and honor to God as Creator, and to affirm the truth of the biblical record of the real origin and history of the world and mankind.

Part of this real history is the bad news that the rebellion of the first man, Adam, against God's command brought death, suffering, and separation from God into this world. We see the results all around us. All of Adam's descendants are sinful from conception (Psalm 51:5) and have themselves entered into this rebellion (sin). They therefore cannot live with a holy God, but are condemned to separation from God. The Bible says that "all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23) and that all are therefore subject to "everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power" (2 Thessalonians 1:9).

But the good news is that God has done something about it. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16).

Jesus Christ the Creator, though totally sinless, suffered, on behalf of mankind, the penalty of mankind's sin, which is death and separation from God. He did this to satisfy the righteous demands of the holiness and justice of God, His Father. Jesus was the perfect sacrifice; He died on a cross, but on the third day, He rose again, conquering death, so that all who truly believe in Him, repent of their sin, and trust in Him (rather than their own merit), are able to come back to God and live for eternity with their Creator.

Therefore: "He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God" (John 3:18).

Jesus Christ, the baby in Bethlehem . . . what a wonderful Savior . . . and what a wonderful salvation in Christ our Creator!

You can reach us at Answers in Genesis, PO Box 510, Hebron, KY 41048, or contact a Bible-believing church in your area, where the pastor accepts the accuracy and authority of the Bible from its very first verse in Genesis (including the Genesis accounts of a recent creation and a global Noah's Flood).



CREATION MUSEUM

Prepare to believe.

The Creation Museum presents a “walk through history.”

Designed by a former Universal Studios exhibit director, this state-of-the-art 70,000 square foot museum brings the pages of the Bible to life while providing a fully engaging, sensory experience for guests.

Murals and realistic scenery, computer-generated visual effects,

dozens of exotic animals, life-sized people and dinosaur animatronics, and a special-effects theater complete with misty sea breezes and rumbling seats are just some of the impressive exhibits that everyone in your family will enjoy.

For ticket and exhibit information, visit creationmuseum.org.

IN PETERSBURG, KENTUCKY, NEAR CINCINNATI, OHIO