

Luke 2:1-20

Read the passage: [The Message](#) or [The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#).

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Luke's historical details for the birth of Jesus are problematic.

Luke 1:5, "In the days of King Herod," who died in 4 BC.

Luke 2:1, "In those days a decree went out from Emperor (or Caesar) Augustus that all the world should be registered," places the birth anytime between 27 BC to 14 AD, the length of the very long reign of Augustus.

Luke 2:2, "This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria," places the date at 6 or 7 AD.

Most scholars agree that Luke and Matthew's reference to "In the days of King Herod," is the most reliable reference and that Jesus was born sometime before Herod's death in 4 BC.

Note that Matthew 1:18-25 and 2:1-12, make no mention of Nazareth or a census.

Note that in Luke there is no mention of how Joseph and Mary traveled from Nazareth to Bethlehem. The distance between these two villages is approximately 70 miles or 130 kilometers; a journey of at least 3 or 4 days by foot. It is likely that neither place was a "city" or even a "town," as each would have about 100 adult residents.

Luke 2:7, "and wrapped him in bands of cloth (swaddling clothes)" was an ancient custom practiced up to modern times of tightly wrapping a new born so that their arms and legs were bound and the torso held rigidly.

Luke 2:7 "and laid him in a manger." A manger is a feeding trough not a barn or stable. Peasants who had domestic animals kept them in one half of their one-room houses, with the manger in the middle to provide a divider. (The animals provided much needed heat in the cold of winter.)

Luke 2:7 "because there was no room in the inn." The word that is translated here as "inn," appears only 2 other times in the Bible and refers to the guest room where Jesus and his disciples last ate together. See Mark 14:14 and Luke 22:11. Likely there would not be an "inn" as we think of it today in Bethlehem at the time of Jesus. It is more likely that Mary and Joseph were staying in the peasant house of distant relatives who took them in as hospitality required them to do.

Luke 2:8-20. Bruce Malina comments about shepherds:

While shepherds could be romanticized (as was King David), they were usually ranked with ass drivers, tanners, sailors, butchers, camel drivers, and other despised occupations. Being away from home at night they were unable to protect their women, hence considered dishonorable. In addition, they often were considered thieves because they grazed their flocks on other people's property.

Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels, Page 232.

Nonetheless, it is to these unlikely and unworthy characters that the first news of the birth of Jesus is given. But then again, perhaps it is precisely the despised and the disreputable who are most in need of - and receptive to - the Good News of peace on earth and God's good will to all.

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