

**Danville News Column**  
**Friday, December 25, 2009**  
**"An Authentic Christmas"**  
**Robert John Andrews**  
**Word Count: 750**

Why do Christmas nativity scenes include livestock, shepherds, and Magi bearing gifts, all to adore Mary's first-born child (which to us Protestants hints there's going to be several more conceived the good old-fashioned way)? Despite Luke saying nothing about these Magi and Matthew saying nothing about shepherds, we can conclude that Magi and shepherd never were there together anyway. It may be a nice image, despite being unbiblical. The Magi arrived later, likely two years later.

Our popular Hallmark Card images also depict Mary and Joseph unable to find lodging. No vacancy. They get rebuffed at every inn until some innkeeper (or his wife) pities this desperate couple and escorts them to the rude stable out back.

Did they really arrive in the wee hour of her contractions? The text says, "While they were there the time came for her to be delivered..." They already had settled in. Bags unpacked. They were probably in Bethlehem for weeks, perhaps months.

We puzzle Palestinian Christians with our sentimental depictions. There's no way Mary and Joseph would have been refused lodging. Why? First, devout Jews would avoid sleeping in public inns where unclean Samaritans and Gentiles also stayed. Second, Jews stayed with family. Even if it meant that the homeowners slept with neighbors, they would have made sure this couple was welcomed. Hospitality is the king virtue. Besides, Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary's cousin, lived eight miles away. If Joseph and Mary couldn't find a place with family in Bethlehem, they could have moved in with them, as Mary had done months before. I think Joseph whisked a young and pregnant Mary out of Nazareth so she wouldn't be scorned, abused by the neighbors. He sent her to hide with cousin Elizabeth. Cuckolded Joseph faced the brunt of the scandal until he came and got her, then they slipped over to the next town to stay with family.

Which bring us to the line: "and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn." What's a manger? Often we mistake mangers for stables; it means a feeding trough.

Mangers were found inside their homes. Still are today. The first floor of your average Bethlehem home, nestled snug against each other like apartments, consisted of one large room divided into a lower and a higher section. The lower section was at ground level, entrance level, where the family's few animals would find shelter at night and feed. The other half of the room was raised about 18 inches above the lower level. On this level the family worked, slept, cooked, and ate their meals. This was the common room, the kitchen. In such homes, the manger often would be carved near the edge of the raised platform, convenient for the sheep. Being a trough, it forms an ideal basinet.

What's the connection then between the manger and the inn? The difference between fancy and fact comes clear when we note Luke uses two different words when talking about inns. Eight chapters later he tells the parable of the Good Samaritan and how the Samaritan takes the mugged man to the inn (*pandoxeion*). Here is your rooms for rent. But that isn't the word Luke uses in the birth story (*katalumati*). Why? Because *katalumati* implies a guest room.

A guest room? Of course. Families in Bethlehem would build rooms as the family expanded. During warm weather, mom, dad, and kids, would sleep on the flat roof. Visiting family would sleep in guest rooms. We know Jesus really was born in the warm spring, otherwise those shepherds and sheep wouldn't have been out in the fields at night. Let's paraphrase this key verse: "And Mary laid him in the feeding trough near the kitchen because other family members already were occupying the guest room."

Now we know to whom the shepherds made known the angelic message. Luke tells us, "They made know what had been told them, and all who heard it were amazed..." There's a bunch more people involved in this birth than just mom, dad, animals. Who were they? Uncles, aunts, cousins, maybe a grandma or two.

So what would our authentic nativity scene look like? Forget the symbolic one invented by Francis of Assisi.

Forget stables, homelessness, rejection. We put baby Jesus where he and all babies deserve to be: in a crib in the very center of a happy kitchen, at the center of warm, bustling, and common lives, surrounded and welcomed by loving family and neighbors.