

THE NORMAL STORY

Caesar Augustus had a census taken about c6BC-to-4BC. Joseph and Mary travel on a donkey to Bethlehem; she is very pregnant; he is a lot older; the town is full of visitors so there's no room at the inn; the innkeeper offers them lodgings in the stable out the back (implicit here is rejection of Mary - although she is heavily pregnant); Shepherds get a message to visit the baby who has just been born (that very night); three wise men turn up on camels soon after, offering gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. They leave, and Herod sets out to kill the baby; Joseph flees to Egypt straight away, and stays there for some time before heading home to Nazareth.

SOME MODIFYING FACTORS

There is absolutely no indication Joseph is anything but another young man, with a young woman. Early Christian art portrays them as a happy, normal young couple. ¹ In **Luke 2:4-6** we see no hurry, no drama, in Mary's preparation to give birth. The angels are told, "today" Jesus has been born. There is no indication, they have just arrived in town. Furthermore, It is unlikely that Dec 25th is correct, as the shepherds would not have been with flocks at night in the fields, in the middle of a cold (possibly snowy) winter. A census would probably have taken place sometime soon after the harvests were over (perhaps in September/October).

The word translated "inn" is better translated as "guestroom" (as it is in **Luke 22:11-12**). It's located as an extension of the house (of a peasant who has prospered). It probably had other visitors in it before Joseph and Mary arrived. The normal Greek word for a public inn is found in the parable of the good Samaritan [**Luke 10:34**]. And it is unthinkable in 1stC Jewish conduct that **any** family, let alone one with a pregnant wife, would be left without being offered hospitality.

It was common for animals to be brought into the house - usually a single room dwelling, with a lower floor level at one end. The animals were kept there (including for home heating in winter!), and their feedbox(es) / mangers would be placed within reach on the ledge. Joseph and Mary would be given space at the animal's end of the raised section of the house, so it would have been quite 'normal' to place Jesus in it.

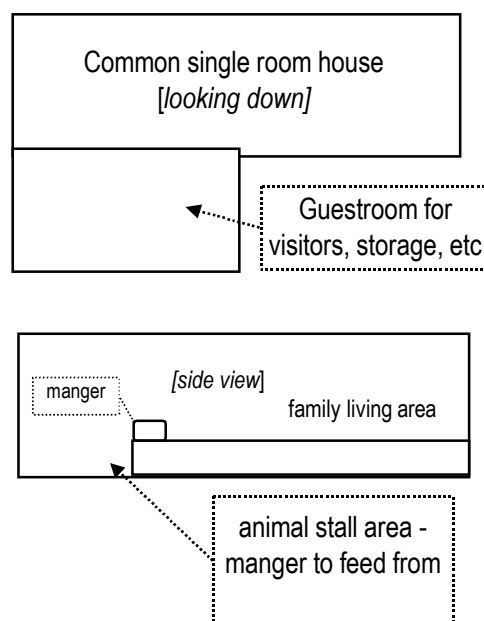
It was to [this "house"](#) (which could possibly have been a dwelling in a cave underground) spoken of **Mat 2:9-11** that the Magi came **later**. They may have arrived anything up to nearly two years later (by Herod's reckoning, as he killed all babies under 2 y/o) [**Mat 2:1-16**]. So it appears Joseph stayed on after Jesus' birth, with his relatives in Bethlehem. His occupation, carpentry, would allow that.

Luke doesn't mention the Magi's visit, nor the flight into Egypt. Matthew records they returned direct from Egypt to Nazareth [**2:19-23**], which was in Galilee (under Herod Antipas). His brother, Archelaus, ruled Judea and Samaria 4BC-6AD. He was an exceptionally cruel tyrant. Understandably, Joseph feared to take this child (now possibly 3 or 4 y/o) near him, after He had been declared coming "King of Israel".

IN SUMMARY

The wonder of the Nativity is the mystery of such a supernatural event - surrounded as it was by dreams, angelic visitations, strange signs in the sky, strange foreign visitors, etc - takes place in such **ordinary, obscure** surroundings! How often the wisdom of God is seen in this manner! (For detailed notes on the Life of Jesus, see [84 Life of Jesus](#))

More Christmas and astronomical material filed under [76 Star of Bethlehem](#)



¹ Joseph is never portrayed as an older man (this is a later invention of the Catholic Church to enhance the veneration of the perpetual virginity of Mary). The fact that Mary never remarried after his death indicates her sons were, by then, old enough to support her in her widowhood. Jesus later committed her to (his cousin) John's care on the cross [John 19:26]. Average life expectancy in the 1stC AD was much shorter than in the 21stC.

A VISIT FROM ST. NICHOLAS BY TERRY MATTINGLY

Just before dawn, on the morning of Dec. 6th every year, my wife and I tiptoe through the house as we happily act the part of cultural revolutionaries. We know what we will find, when we enter the bedroom of each child - - a pair of socks and shoes ready to be filled with candy, fruit and a few simple gifts. To add our own silly wrinkle to centuries of tradition, we allow the children to put their shoes inside laundry baskets, which gives us room for a few extra goodies.

Nearby, there is an image of an ancient bishop in red robes, with a white stole over his shoulders containing a trinity of crosses. His hair and beard are white and his face is thin, which is natural for a monk. His right hand is raised in blessing and, in his left, he holds a golden Gospel book. His name is St. Nicholas and Dec. 6th is his feast day. Back in the 4th Century, he served as bishop of the city of Myra in Asia Minor. For centuries, he was one of Christendom's most beloved saints and, today, he continues to be honoured by Eastern Orthodox and Eastern-Rite Catholic Christians.

Yes, there is a St. Nicholas. Obviously, this is not the secular superman in the parades. This is the patron saint of orphans, sailors and all who are in distress. In a somewhat ironic touch, he also is the patron of merchants and pawnbrokers. St. Nicholas is supposed to be the very image of charity and concern for others, especially the poor, explained Father Constantine White, dean of St. Nicholas Orthodox Cathedral in Washington, D.C. "There is some link there to gift-giving, but nothing that resembles what has happened with Santa Claus."

Children in this parish, and many others with the same name, often do not connect their patron saint with the commercialized character in the TV ads. But this may change. The cultural steamroller called "The Holidays" is getting old. Many churches may be ready to consider alternative ways of celebrating the quiet season of Advent, or Nativity Lent, and then the 12 days of Christmas. Some people may even be ready to give St. Nicholas his day, as a way of gracefully turning the spotlight away from that Santa guy.

Church history indicates that Nicholas was born into wealth and apparently gave his inheritance to the poor. He was elected bishop at age 30 and was listed as a participant in the pivotal Council of Nicea. When theological debate was not enough, Nicholas reportedly punched out the heretic Arius, who argued that Jesus was not fully divine. Later, the bishop was imprisoned under the Emperor Diocletian and released under Constantine. He died on 6 Dec 343AD.

The most famous tradition linked to St. Nicholas is captured in an icon called the Charity of St. Nicholas. It shows him visiting a poor family at night, carrying a bag of gold. The father could not provide dowries for his daughters, which meant they could not marry. Nicholas rescued them from slavery or prostitution by dropping gold coins through a window. The gifts fell into their stockings, which had been hung up to dry.

The rest, as they say, is history. But for centuries, St. Nicholas remained an explicitly Christian figure and a crucial element in these traditions was a concern for the poor. Most churches that celebrate his feast today link the rites with efforts to help the weak and vulnerable, especially unborn children and their mothers. One hymn proclaims: "Thou, O Righteous Nicholas, ... truly wast shown forth as a sacred minister fulfilling Christ's holy Gospel; for thou didst lay down they life for they flock ... and, Saint, didst save the innocent from unjust death."

So what happened to St. Nicholas? Sailors spread the saint's fame along the European coast and, over time, his lore blended with other legends—especially after the birth of Protestantism. The result: Father Christmas, Kriss Kringle, Pere Noel and many others, including Sinter Klaas, who came with the Dutch to the settlement that became the media and advertising capital called New York City.

Today, it's hard to see the face of the gentle bishop in the fat, sassy and omnipresent images of Santa Claus. It's hard to remember that his life is linked to the words of Jesus that are always read at the saint's feast: "Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God; Blessed are you that hunger, for you shall be satisfied; Blessed are you that weep now, for you shall laugh. ..."

Christmas is a long way off, on Dec. 6th. There are many prayers to be said and hymns to be sung. But, for those who know the truth about St. Nicholas, it's nice to have him joining in the pilgrimage to Bethlehem, instead of leading a stampede to the shopping mall.