

The Gospel According to Luke

“Away In A Manger Metaphor” Chapter 2:1-20

Introduction

A manger is the feeding trough for barn animals. Lined with fresh straw, it served as the crib into which the baby Jesus was laid on the night of His birth in Bethlehem.

Putting Jesus in a feeding trough may seem odd to us, but those humble circumstances were designed by God to communicate precious truths about the mission of Jesus on earth. The trough was also designed as a metaphor. It served metaphorically as at least two other items: A *throne* and a *temple*.

1. It served as a throne because there, lying in it, was the Son promised to King David who would rule over God's kingdom forever.
2. It served as a temple because there, lying in it, was the Savior promised to mankind who would substitute Himself for the sins of the world.

The trough was the one place perfectly suited for the events of that first Christmas. As a throne, it held the Lord; as a temple, it held the Lamb.

We'll organize our thoughts around two points: #1 The Trough Served As A Throne For The Lord Who Is Your Shepherd, and #2 The Trough Served As A Temple For The Lamb Who Is Your Savior.

#1 The Trough Served As A Throne For The Lord Who Is Your Shepherd (v1-7)

There is a background story we must keep in mind. Luke mentioned that Joseph and Mary traveled to “[the city of David](#),” and that Joseph

was “of the house and lineage of David.” David was the young shepherd boy whom God saw as the man after His own heart and anointed king over Israel. David’s years of shepherding prepared him to be the kind of king God wanted over His people – more like a shepherd who cared for them. David is sometimes called the ‘shepherd-king’ of Israel.

After David became king, he conquered Jerusalem and brought the ark of the covenant back to the Tabernacle. It was a glorious time of triumph for Israel. One day, as King David looked out the windows of his cedar palace, he saw the Tabernacle. He was struck with the fact that, while he lived in a great palace made of cedar, God’s glory still dwelt in the old tent that Moses had carried through the wilderness. He had an idea for a building project – he wanted to build a house for God.

It sounded good... Until God spoke to David about it through Nathan the prophet. I’m going to read you portions of God’s message to King David, from Second Samuel 7:5-16.

2 Samuel 7:5 ...‘Thus says the LORD: “Would you build a house for Me to dwell in?

2 Samuel 7:6 For I have not dwelt in a house since the time that I brought the children of Israel up from Egypt, even to this day, but have moved about in a tent and in a tabernacle.

2 Samuel 7:8 ... ‘Thus says the LORD of hosts: “I took you from the sheepfold, from following the sheep, to be ruler over My people, over Israel.

2 Samuel 7:11 ...Also the LORD tells you that He will make you a house.

2 Samuel 7:12 “When your days are fulfilled and you rest with your fathers, I will set up your seed after you, who will come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom.

2 Samuel 7:13 He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.”

2 Samuel 7:16 And your house and your kingdom shall be established forever before you. Your throne shall be established forever.””

King David wanted to build God a physical house. God was going to instead build King David a *spiritual house*! God promised King David

that his descendant would one day be the Shepherd-King over Israel, the Lord Who would rule “[forever](#).”

The child born to Joseph and Mary was the promised Son of David, the Shepherd-King Who was and is Lord and would rule forever. Thus His trough was really His throne; and it was a good reminder that His rule would be like that of a Shepherd caring for His sheep.

Now behold the Shepherd-King on His first throne:

[Luke 2:1](#) And it came to pass in those days *that* a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered.

[Luke 2:2](#) This census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria.

[Luke 2:3](#) So all went to be registered, everyone to his own city.

The Romans took a census every fourteen years, and would also command other special censuses when they thought it necessary. A census required you to register in the town of your birth; so off Joseph and Mary trudged.

“[Caesar Augustus](#)” was a title bestowed upon Octavian. He was the first Caesar to be called “[Augustus](#),” meaning *holy* or *revered*. Up to that time it was a title reserved for the Roman gods. It was the beginning of considering the Caesars gods and swearing oaths to them. At about the same time Luke was writing his Gospel, the Greek cities in Asia Minor adopted Caesar’s birthday, September 23rd, as the first day of the new year and they called him ‘savior.’ One inscription that has been unearthed called him ‘savior of the whole world.’

Luke was a careful historian. He dated the exact census by mentioning “[Quirinius](#).” His history, however, tells a deeper story. Octavian may have thought himself a god to be revered; the people may have hailed him a savior for the world; but God was simply using Octavian to accomplish His eternal purposes! Quirinius may have been ordering a census, but God was overseeing it in order to get Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem:

[Luke 2:4](#) 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,

Luke 2:5 to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child.

Joseph had to get to his birth city. **But so did Jesus!** The Old Testament prophet, Micah, had predicted in the eighth century before Christ that Jesus would be born in Bethlehem:

Micah 5:2 “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, *Though* you are little among the thousands of Judah, *yet* out of you shall come forth to Me the One to be Ruler in Israel, Whose goings forth *are* from of old, from everlasting.”

Mary was due to deliver; any day the baby could come. I wonder if Micah was nervous? *Not to worry!* God was overseeing it all, getting the circumstances of the birth just right and ready.

Luke 2:6 So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered.

Luke 2:7 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.

Each of us has some mental picture of this scene – probably from the figurines at the bottom of our Christmas trees each year as we were growing up, or some other such seasonal representation. There are at least three possibilities, each with variations, of what is meant by the word “inn” when Luke said, “*there was no room for them in the inn.*”

1. It can refer to an inn in the traditional sense of an overnight lodging. If so, then there was no room available for them and they spent the night in a stable adjacent to the inn or in the open courtyard with the animals.
2. They may have retired to a cave adjacent to the inn within which the animals were sheltered and fed.
3. The word “inn” can also refer to rooms within a house. It’s the same word, for instance, that describes the “upper room” where the Last Supper took place. In the ancient world, as well as in primitive modern cultures, mangers are found within the house itself. Animals are regularly kept in homes at night. Family sleeping quarters were on the second floor, in an upper room. By being inside, the animals were protected from the elements and theft. In addition, their presence provided body heat for cool nights, access to milk for the daily meal, and dung as a critical fuel

source. If this is what was meant, Mary and Joseph did not find space in the living quarters of the ancestral family home. Instead, they stayed downstairs in the domestic stable, still within the ancestral home, where a manger or two was located.

I don't want to ruin any Christmas memories, but we can't be sure of the exact surroundings. We can be sure of the "manger," the feeding trough. It was really a throne because there, lying in it, was the Lord Who would Shepherd His people as their King forever.

Jesus would eventually refer to Himself as "the Good Shepherd" (John 10:11&14). The apostle Peter called Him "the Chief Shepherd" (First Peter 5:4). This is a metaphor of the Shepherd-King. For example:

1. Because He's a Shepherd-King, the Lord leads you rather than driving you.
2. Because He's a Shepherd-King, the Lord provides your every need.

Because He's your Shepherd-King, Psalm twenty-three can fill your heart with comfort.

As we press-on, we see that the Lord Who is your Shepherd is also the Lamb!

#2 The Manger Served As A Temple
For The Lamb Who Is Your Savior
(v8-20)

Luke 2:8 Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.

There's something you need to know about these particular shepherds and their flocks. Bethlehem was about five miles from Jerusalem. **It is believed by many scholars that these flocks were the lambs used for sacrifice in the Temple at Jerusalem.** There is even a verse, also in Micah, that speaks of "the Tower of the flock" as being in the vicinity of the birth of the Lord. In ancient times this was a military tower to view into the valley near Bethlehem. Near

the time of Jesus' birth it became the tower of the flock, where the priests examined newborn lambs, which were designated for sacrifice at the temple in Jerusalem.

(By the way... This is information that lends credibility to Jesus having been born on the traditional December 25th date. The argument against the winter date is that shepherds would not be out tending their flocks. But these were special shepherds overseeing a special flock).

Jesus was born where the sacrificial lambs were born; He would be slain where the lambs were sacrificed. It helps if you remember one of His great titles, which would be given to Him by John the Baptist: "The Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world."

Luke 2:9 And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid.

Luke 2:10 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.

Luke 2:11 For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

Luke 2:12 And this *will be* the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger."

The Christmas carols start coming in bunches! *Away in a Manger* gives way to *Joy to the World*. In a moment it will be *Angels We Have Heard On High*. (And I can still hear Linus reciting these lines to Charlie Brown).

The baby born was "Savior," "Christ," and "Lord."

1. "Savior" means *deliverer*. It refers to the deliverance from the guilt and power of sin and from the consequences of sin, death and eternal punishment.
2. "Christ" means anointed one. It is the Greek word for the Hebrew word "Messiah" and refers to the Son of King David Who would rule forever.
3. "Lord" is the name of God Himself. This little baby was God come in human flesh.

God had come in human flesh to save His people and rule over them forever.

All babies would be “[wrapped in swaddling cloths.](#)” “Swaddling” means *swathing* and refers more to the process of wrapping than to a special type of cloth. These were linen strips that kept the baby warm. There may have been other births that night... But only one would be “[lying in a manger.](#)”

[Luke 2:13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying:](#)

[Luke 2:14 “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!”](#)

This may have been all of heaven’s angels! Angels are powerful. One in the Old Testament, by himself, killed 185,000 Assyrians overnight. *But they sing!* Singing and praising God are robust, I want to say manly, activities. The knowledge of God must fill your heart with singing.

“[Glory to God in the highest](#)” is a reference point. It means that God is praised in heaven. There is no time He is not being praised there; there is no doubt as to His attributes, His character, His conduct.

What we should realize who are still earthbound is that we can know “[peace](#)” with God despite turmoil around us because of His “[goodwill toward men.](#)” I would interpret God’s goodwill toward men to be similar to what you read in Romans 8:28, that all things [on earth] work together for good to them that love God and are the called according to His purpose.

The worship service ended. The shepherds were pumped!

[Luke 2:15 So it was, when the angels had gone away from them into heaven, that the shepherds said to one another, “Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us.”](#)

[Luke 2:16 And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger.](#)

The shepherds had not asked for a sign. The angel assumed they would go looking for the baby and he gave them a sign. They left “with haste” to find Jesus.

Shepherds don’t usually just leave their sheep! These guys may have made some arrangements, left one guy back; but I don’t think so. *They split!*

We talk a lot about priorities, and with good reason. There are times, however, when your only priority is to find or follow Jesus. There will always be things you must leave and abandon for the greater joy of seeing the Lord magnified in your life. Your time... Your talents... Your treasures and things... These all are the Lord’s and you may need to leave them.

Whether they knew it or not, leaving the sacrificial lambs was symbolic. What need would there be for sacrificial lambs when the Lamb of God was on the scene?

Luke 2:17 Now when they had seen *Him*, they made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this Child.

Luke 2:18 And all those who heard *it* marveled at those things which were told them by the shepherds.

They could not stop talking about Jesus! They told Joseph and Mary; they told everyone else in the house or inn; they told everyone in Bethlehem; they told any and all the travelers along the road to Jerusalem.

People who heard it “**marveled.**” Do people marvel when we tell them things about Jesus? **They will when we know He is marvelous!**

The final two verses of this account reveal two responses to the birth of Jesus:

Luke 2:19 But Mary kept all these things and pondered *them* in her heart.

Luke 2:20 Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told them.

Those who know Jesus have a *personal response*, and a *public responsibility*.

The personal response is illustrated by Mary who “kept” and “pondered.” Your heart is to become a treasure chest in which you accumulate spiritual riches. Like any treasured collection, you care for them and you consider them.

The public responsibility is illustrated by the shepherds. They “returned” to everyday living, but were changed forever. They went about their occupation “glorifying and praising God.” In other words, their encounter with God and with Jesus altered their perception and perspective on all of life.

Something further to note about their public responsibility: They were guided by what “was told them.” They put a high priority on the words, which are the Word of God. What they had experienced, and what they expressed, was within the scope of God’s Word.

The Lord born that night was the Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world. The trough in which He lay served as a Temple for those who had eyes to see ahead to His sacrifice of Himself on the Cross.

Conclusion

We’ve seen the trough as a throne and as a Temple. There is a final metaphor we might suggest: It also served as a **Tomb**.

Jesus was wrapped in linen swaddling cloths. It pictures Him leaving behind His glory when He came into the world and taking upon Himself the garments of humanity.

After His crucifixion, when He was laid in the Tomb, **He was again tightly wrapped in linen strips of cloth!** (John 19:40). When He rose from the dead, He left these behind – returning to heaven and resuming His glory.

There’s an awesome lot going on in that trough!