

Born in a Barn?

Luke is the most prolific writer in the Christian canon. No one else wrote as much of the New Testament as he did. Not Paul, not John. A well-educated physician and a native of Antioch, Luke wrote a two-part history of the early church, part 1 (his Gospel) and part 2 (The Acts) in polished Koine Greek. Some have suggested that he was Paul's *amanuensis*, or secretary, for the Pastoral Epistles (see 2 Tim. 4:11). Paul evidently gave him some freedom in choosing the wording, because the Greek there is rather "Luke-like." Early Christian statements also imply that he had some role in the book of Hebrews.

Luke and Acts are addressed to "most excellent Theophilus," evidently a person of status in the Roman Empire. We do not know for sure who he was, but through the centuries people have suggested several identities for Theophilus: one of two Jewish high priests, by that name; Titus Flavius Sabinus II, an older brother of the Roman emperor Vespasian; or Paul's lawyer during his Roman trial. But these are unlikely, as Theophilus was no pagan. "Luke explicitly mentions his having been 'catechized' (*katechetes*, Luke 1:4). This expression means that Theophilus had already received the normal basic instruction given within the Christian Church (1 Cor. 14:19; Gal. 6:6)."¹ In this way he was like Apollos, who also was "catechized" by Priscilla and Aquila (Acts 18:25).

In Eastern Orthodox tradition (which is as ancient as Roman Catholic tradition) Theophilus was the governor, or proconsul, of Achaia, of which the capital was Corinth; a later successor to the Gallio mentioned in Acts 18:12. But most likely he was a wealthy Christian citizen of Antioch, where Luke grew up, who provided financial support for Paul and Luke on their missionary journeys.

In Luke 1:1-4 Luke claims to be a historian. He did not base his books on visions, just good research. Yes, God can even inspire historians! And Luke

was a careful one. He did his job with an excellence worthy of his noble cause.

Sir William Mitchell Ramsay (1851-1939) was a British archaeologist who served as a professor at Oxford University and then the University of Aberdeen. As a young man he spent years preparing for an exploratory expedition into Asia Minor and Palestine with the purpose of debunking New Testament history. An adherent of the Tübingen school of scholarship, he believed Acts was second-century fiction. To prove it, he decided to retrace the journeys of Paul, using the book of Acts as a guide.

But his topographical studies in Asia Minor confirmed the full accuracy of the book of Luke's customs, geography, and official titles. Ramsay claims that Luke's references to 32 countries, 54 cities, and nine islands within the book of Acts contain no mistakes. "The narrative" of Acts, he writes, "never makes a false step amid all the many details, as the scene changes from city to city."² Again: "Luke is a historian of the first rank; not merely are his statements of fact trustworthy; he is possessed of the true historic sense; he fixes his mind on the idea and plan that rules in the evolution of history; and proportions the scale of his treatment to the importance of each incident. . . . In short, this author should be placed along with the very greatest of historians."³

"I take the view," Ramsay said, "that Luke's history is unsurpassed in regard to his trustworthiness. . . . You may press the words of Luke in a degree beyond any other historian's and they stand the keenest scrutiny and the hardest treatment."⁴

More recently, A. N. Sherwin-White said of Acts: "The historical framework is exact. In terms of time and place the details are precise and correct. . . . The feel and tone of city life is the same as in the descriptions of Strabo and Dio of Prusa. . . . The detail is so interwoven with the narrative of the mission as to be inseparable."⁵

Still more recently Colin J. Hemer provided extensive evidence of Luke's accuracy.⁶

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Luke specializes in the Christmas story. No other writer tells us so much about it as he did. One of his sources was no doubt Mary herself (see Luke 2:19). Her famous account includes a big surprise for us. Contrary to long-standing tradition, Jesus was not born in some stable attached to an inn. No, he was born in a private home. I am sorry to ruin hundreds of Christmas plays by telling you this. But I do my best to be a careful researcher too. And I have to report what I (and many other scholars) have found.

It all started this way. God sent Gabriel to the priest Zechariah to tell him his wife would have a child (Luke 1:5-17, NIV). Then, “in the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, ‘Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.’ Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be” (Luke 1:26-29, NIV).

Whatever could Gabriel want, Mary must have thought, with little me? The last time he showed up in Scripture was to Daniel, whom Gabriel said was “highly esteemed” (Dan. 9:21-23, NIV). Now Gabriel is saying the same of Mary. And heaven does not indulge in flattery. It was all too much, terrifying in its implications.

“Do not be afraid, Mary,” the angel continued. “You have found favor with God” (Luke 1:30, NIV). “Fear not” is the most common command in the Bible. In Scripture God or His messenger tells this to various chosen people approximately 100 times! When God sends a message to human beings, it is most likely to begin with “Don’t be afraid.”

Gabriel went on: “You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end” (verses 31-33, NIV).

Well, she must have been thinking, I don’t think so! This is beyond belief! How could it be true? You must know something I don’t. “But I’m a virgin!” she said out loud (see verse 34).

Gabriel explained that the Holy Spirit would impregnate her and that her child would be the Son of God (verse 35, NIV).

“‘I am the Lord’s servant,’ Mary answered. ‘May your word to me be fulfilled’ ” (verse 38, NIV).

She had greater faith when the angel told her something impossible than Zechariah did when God said something merely improbable. Earlier in the chapter He had announced to Zechariah that he and his aged wife would have a child, which Zechariah had been praying for. Yet when his prayer was answered, he wasn’t sure whether to believe it or not. A wizened old priest who had seen all sorts of schemes, he was skeptical.

“How can I be sure?” he asked. “We’re too old, you know” (see verse 18).

“You want a sign?” the angel replied. “OK—you’ll be mute until it happens” (verses 19, 20).

Be careful what you ask for. Zechariah didn’t believe God’s answer even

though he had been praying for it. But Mary—young, naive Mary—had great faith. God said it, and that was good enough for her.

Now what do you suppose she thought after the angel left? *This is the most wonderful news in the world! I'm going to bear the Messiah. I'll be the most honored woman in Israel!* Or was it more like: *This is going to ruin my life! What will people think?* Perhaps it was a mixture of both.

Most teens are obsessed with how others view them. And according to the earliest traditions we have, Mary was only about 14 at the time.

How others regard them is what most Christians worry about much of the time. *What will others think of me if I pray in public or praise out loud or raise my hands? What if I do this or that? What will it do for my career?* Imagine if John the Baptist had worried about what effect his strange way of life would have on his career. Or what if Jesus had decided to avoid saying something so offensive as in Matthew 23:13-39 or John 6:35-66?

Well, from the standpoint of those in charge of Mary, it was a real career buster. So her people bundled her up and sent her away to visit her relative Elizabeth, wife of Zechariah, who had received a similar shock because she herself was suddenly pregnant—despite her old age. That would get Mary out of the community so that people wouldn't know about her condition.

But when the younger woman arrived, still contemplating in awe the news that her son was the promised Messiah, Elizabeth's baby leaped in her womb for joy (verses 39-45).

And then Mary recited what Christian tradition often calls the Magnificat, part of which reads as follows:

“He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
 he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.
 He has brought down rulers from their thrones
 but has lifted up the humble.
 He has filled the hungry with good things
 but has sent the rich away empty” (verses 51-53, NIV).

God blesses humility and curses arrogance. He brings the low high and the high down low. The Lord fills the hungry with good things but sends the rich away empty. To be blessed by God we have to empty our hands so that He can fill them. For most of us our cup is so full that God can't pour anything into it. Possessing comforts denied to kings in times past, we have so many things to occupy our time that we have no time for God. God wants us to empty ourselves, to make room for Him. To humble ourselves so that He can lift us up.

If you feel empty, you are right on the verge of God's greatest blessing. Just seek His face. Should you be desperate and hurting and experiencing loss, remember that the Lord lifts up the downcast and casts down the proud. He will in His own good time turn your mourning into joy.

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Mary's nine months passed quickly.

About that time Caesar Augustus decreed that "all the world" (i.e., the Roman Empire) should register for a census. We find the date for it in Luke 2:2, which mentions the registration when Quirinius (NIV) was governor of Syria. But the reference has long been a difficult problem, as the census of Quirinius took place in A.D. 7, and we have no explicit record of any previous census by him. As a result, many translations make it appear that Jesus was born during this census, when He should have been about 10 years old. At no point has Luke been more universally attacked than this passage, and many scholars claim it is in error. Here is the acid test of the claim that Luke is a careful historian.

F. M. Heichelheim first discovered a likely solution in 1938. It involves a different translation of Luke 2:2: "This census was *before* the census taken when Quirinius was governor." As the standard lexicons indicate, the Greek word *protos*, when followed by the genitive, can mean "before," as it does in John 1:15, 30; 5:36; 15:18; 1 Corinthians 1:25, and so on.

So Luke is talking about some earlier census *before* the better-known one under Quirinius, which everyone knew about, including Luke (Acts 5:37).

But why did Joseph have to return home? Liberal scholars claim we have little evidence for such a requirement for a Roman census, but absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. Rome may have reasoned that people can be counted only if they go back to their homes, not wandering around in the empire. Even today we have to return to a particular district in order to vote. But we do indeed have evidence for people in the Roman Empire coming home to register.

Early in the twentieth century scholars discovered a papyrus dating from about A.D. 104. It contained an edict by Gaius Vibius Maximus, the Roman governor of Egypt, stating: "Since the enrollment [*apographe*, census—the same word used by Luke] by households is approaching, it is necessary to command all who for any reason are out of their own district to return to their own home, in order to perform the usual business of the taxation."

Some have argued that the requirement mainly concerned migrant

workers, but highly respected scholar Raymond E. Brown (1928-1998) suggested that “one cannot rule out the possibility that, since Romans often adapted their administration to local circumstances, a census conducted in Judea would respect the strong attachment of Jews to tribal and ancestral relationships.”⁷

We know of a empire-wide census around the time Jesus was born because of “The Deeds of the Divine Augustus,” an important inscription on the his mausoleum. Point 8, in the Loeb translation, reads in part: “Three times I revised the roll of the senate. In my sixth consulship, with Marcus Agrippa as my colleague, I made a census of the people. . . . In this lustration 4,063,000 Roman citizens were entered on the census roll [28 B.C.]. A second time, in the consulship of Gaius Censorinus and Gaius Asinius, I again performed the lustrum alone, with the consular imperium. In this lustrum 4,233,000 Roman citizens were entered on the census roll [7 B.C.]. A third time, with the consular imperium, and with my son Tiberius Caesar as my colleague, I performed the lustrum in the consulship of Sextus Pompeius and Sextus Apuleius. In this lustrum 4,937,000 Roman citizens were entered on the census roll [A.D. 15].”

It is possible that this census took several years, because we know that the Senate was revised around A.D. 3. But somewhere between 7 and 3 B.C. the census reached Judea.

Roman registrations normally involved (1) taxation, (2) military service (Jews were exempt), and (3) special government “ballots.” Ernest L. Martin lists the evidence that the Romans voted such a registration in 3 B.C.:

There is a reference to such a registration of all the Roman people not long before 5 February 2 B.C. written by Caesar Augustus himself: “While I was administering my thirteenth consulship [2 B.C.] the senate and the equestrian order *and the entire Roman people* gave me the title Father of my Country” (*Res Gestae* 35, italics supplied). This award was given to Augustus on 5 February 2 B.C., therefore the registration of citizen approval must have taken place in 3 B.C. Orosius, in the fifth century, also said that Roman records of his time revealed that a census was indeed held when Augustus was made “the first of men”—an apt description of his award “Father of the Country”—at a time when all the great nations gave an oath of obedience to Augustus (6:22, 7:2). Orosius dated the census to 3 B.C. And besides that, Josephus substantiates that an oath of obedience to Augustus was required in Judea not long before the death of Herod (*Antiquities* 17:41-45).

This agrees nicely in a chronological sense with what Luke records. But more than that, an inscription found in Paphlagonia (eastern Turkey), also dated to 3 B.C., mentions an “oath sworn by all the people in the land at the altars of Augustus in the temples of Augustus in the various districts.” And dovetailing precisely with this inscription, the early (fifth century) Armenian historian, Moses of Khoren, said the census that brought Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem was conducted by Roman agents in Armenia where they set up “the image of Augustus Caesar in every temple.” The similarity of this language is strikingly akin to the wording on the Paphlagonian inscription describing the oath taken in 3 B.C. These indications can allow us to reasonably conclude that the oath (of Josephus, the Paphlagonian inscription, and Orosius) and the census (mentioned by Luke, Orosius, and Moses of Khoren) were one and the same. All of these things happened in 3 B.C.⁸

Here is my own contribution about the historical situation: Joseph would have had to adopt Jesus as his own child. Even apart from any consideration of forced return, Joseph, believing that Mary’s son was to be the promised Messiah, the son of David, may have wanted his son to be born—and adopted—in Bethlehem, the ancestral home of the lineage of David, to fulfill the well-known prophecy (see Matt. 2:4-6) and to protect His right to the throne. Indeed, he may have wanted witnesses to the adoption from his Davidic clan.

So Joseph took Mary to Bethlehem.

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“While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them” (Luke 2:6, 7, NIV).

Before we talk about the guest room, let’s consider the manger. For us the word “manger” invokes a stable or barn. But at Bethlehem, in Jesus’ day, the manger was inside every home. Almost everyone in Palestine had a manger in their house unless they were quite wealthy.

Simple village homes in Palestine often had only two rooms, one reserved exclusively for guests. The roof is flat and can have a guest room built on it, or a guest room can be attached to the end of the house. Someone who stayed in a guest room on the roof was Elijah in 1 Kings 17:19.

The main room of the house was one where the entire family cooked,

ate, slept, and lived. Jesus assumes such simple homes when He comments: “Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house” (Matt. 5:15, NIV). How can one light shed light on everyone in the house? Because the house in effect has only one room.

The end of the room closest to the door was usually a few feet lower than the rest of the floor, or else it was blocked off with heavy timbers. That area was where the family cow, donkey, and sheep would spend the night. And every morning members of the family would take the animals out, tie them up in the courtyard of the house, and clean the animal stall for the day. They could wash it out now and then because it was lower than the floor of the regular living area.

The farmer wanted his animals inside the house each night because it kept them safe from theft and because they provided heat in the winter.

Luke 13:15 refers to just such an in-home menagerie. Jesus heals a woman with a long infirmity, and the Pharisees get after Him for healing on the Sabbath. So He turns the argument back on them: “You hypocrites! Doesn’t each of you on the Sabbath untie your ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water?” (NIV). “You work on the Sabbath too,” He said. “You have mercy on your animals, you lead them out of your house into the yard and provide water for them. You untied an animal this morning, but I untied a daughter of God.” And that ended the discussion.

Many Old Testament stories assume such a style of home. For example, in 1 Samuel 28:24 Saul was a guest in the house of the medium of Endor when the king refused to eat. The medium took a fatted calf that was “in the house,” killed it, and prepared a meal for the king and his servants. She did not fetch a calf from the field or the barn, but from within the house.

Then there is the story of Jephthah in Judges 11. He made a vow that if God would grant him victory, then he would sacrifice the first thing that came out of his house. When he returned home, to his horror, it was his daughter that stepped first out of the house. Most likely he arrived early in the morning and fully expected one of the animals to come bounding out when released.

Now if we were to draw the outline of a floor plan of such a house, looking down from above, we would see two puzzling circles on the floor. What do they represent? Those are the mangers dug out of the floor. That’s where they placed the straw for the animals. The floor in the family living room slopes down slightly toward the animal stall to aid in sweeping and washing. If Bessie the cow gets hungry in the night, she can stand up and eat out of the

manger. The sheep may have their own mangers made of wood and placed on the floor of the lower level.

So where was Jesus born? In a private home, which had a manger. But if Jesus was born in a private home and not in a public inn, then why does the King James Version and even some modern versions read, “There was no room for them in the inn” (Luke 2:7), as if the no vacancy sign was on and Jesus had to sleep with the animals?

Well, that is probably not the best translation. What the Greek text says is that there was no *topos* in the *katalyma*. That is, there was no space or room in the *guest quarters*. The NIV translates: “because there was no guest room available for them.” How do we know this is correct? By letting Luke define his own words. And the word he uses here is not the one he employs for an inn.

In the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10) the Samaritan picks up the wounded man from the side of the road and takes him to an inn. The Greek word in that text is *pandocheion*. Let’s break that down. The first part, “pan,” means “all,” as in Pan-American. The second part means “to receive.” The *pandocheion* is the place that “receives all,” that is, a commercial inn, a hotel.

If Luke wanted to say that Joseph was turned away from an “inn,” he would have used *pandocheion*. But in Luke 2:7 it is the *katalyma* that is crowded. *Katalyma* simply means “a place to stay.” It could indicate an inn, or a house, or a guest room. But Luke uses this term only one other place in his Gospel, which gives us a strong hint that he employs it to mean the guest room in a private home.

“He replied, ‘As you enter the city, a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him to the house that he enters, and say to the owner of the house, “The Teacher asks: Where is the guest room [*katalyma*] where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?’ He will show you a large room upstairs, all furnished. Make preparations there’ ” (Luke 22:10-12, NIV).

Now let’s take what we have learned and apply it to the Christmas story. Mary and Joseph stop at a private home. The owners can’t give them the guest room, but they take them in anyway. And when baby Jesus is born, He was laid in a manger full of soft straw.

Luke’s story matches Matthew 2:11, which says Jesus was in a “house” when the magi visited, so evidently the couple stayed for a while.

Joseph had a well-known lineage in Bethlehem, and all he would have had to do is mention his famous forefathers—the ones listed in Luke 3:23-38—and any family in town would have been honored to receive him. He belonged to the kingly clan of Judah. Luke 2:4 says that Joseph went “to Bethlehem the

town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David” (NIV). He was special—he was royalty.

Did he already have reservations with this family? Evidently not, or they would have kept the guest room for them. That’s not certain, however, because ancient custom might have required the homeowner to extend hospitality to the first person who asked, and someone else might have come along first. In the biblical world people were obligated to extend hospitality to visiting strangers (see Heb. 13:2).

Did Joseph have to make an emergency stop because Mary was about to give birth? Perhaps. At any rate, some anonymous resident of Bethlehem, possibly a relative, brought Joseph and Mary into their own home in her hour of need and laid their new little Baby in the straw right in the living room, either down in the hole carved out of the rock for the animals, or else they moved a manger full of straw into the living space. They just couldn’t put them in the guest room because it was already full. So they gave them what they had.

Is your life already so full that you have no place for Jesus? Have you given Him your best? Have you put Him not just in the periphery of your life, but brought Him right into the center of your existence? Is Jesus your butler in the sky—someone to call on only when you need something—or is He Lord of all?

Have you opened to Him every room of your heart?

Christ, He requires still, wheresoe’er He comes
To feed or lodge, to have the best of rooms:
Give Him the choice; grant Him the nobler part
Of all the house: the best of all’s the heart.

—Robert Herrick

1. Patrick Henry Reardon, “Most Excellent Theophilus,” *Touchstone*, December 2002, accessed December 2, 2014, www.touchstonemag.com/archives/article.php?id=15-10-026-c.

2. W. M. Ramsay, *St. Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1897), p. 238.

3. W. M. Ramsay, *The Bearing of Recent Discovery on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953).

4. W. M. Ramsay, *Luke the Physician* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1908), p. 222.

5. A. N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978), pp. 120-122.

6. Colin J. Homer, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1990).

7. Raymond E. Brown, *The Sixth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), p. 549.

8. Ernest L. Martin, "The Nativity and Herod's Death," in Jerry Vardaman and Edwin M. Yamauchi, eds., *Chronos, Kairos, Christos: Nativity and Chronological Studies Presented to Jack Finegan* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1989), pp. 89, 90.