



# Minutes With Messiah

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## IN LYSTRA

First let me introduce myself. My Greek name, which I mostly use, is Timotheus. My father, after all, is Greek. My mother is Jewish. It makes for an interesting family life sometimes. He can tolerate her holidays and customs, but she has a hard time participating in his. He considers me Greek; she considers me Jewish. For a long time I wasn't sure which I was. Then some things happened that made me realize I don't have to be one or the other. I can choose a broader citizenship.

It all started when two guys and their entourage came to town. They came wandering in from Iconium, up north, and began teaching about some Jewish man named Jesus. They said the Jewish leaders had executed him, but he rose from the grave three days later. They talked about sin and salvation. Now these were things my mother might be interested in, but my father was a pragmatist. You live, you die, you don't come back to life. It was all interesting, but was I supposed to believe it or not.

I happened to be listening to them when he interrupted his speech. There was a beggar in the crowd whom we all knew. He couldn't walk, having been born a cripple. He may have come hoping that a crowd would mean a larger income that day. Or he may have wanted to hear what this man, Paul, had to say. Paul was pretty much one of us, you see. He came from Tarsus, which is just down the road a ways. Well, a couple of days away, but in our world that makes you practically a neighbor.

As I said, Paul interrupted his speech. He was staring at this man. I thought maybe he was going to give him some money and ask him to leave. Instead, he told the man to stand up. A few people near me started to laugh, until the man stood up and started jumping around. Everyone stopped laughing.

There were a lot of Greeks in the audience, and a few Jews. The Greeks started calling Paul Hermes and his companion, who went by the name of Barnabas, Zeus. After all, Paul was a gifted speaker, and why would Hermes be traveling without Zeus? My father was in a group of men who ran to put garlands on an ox and accompany the priest of Zeus to make sacrifice to these gods. Paul and Barnabas and their companions insisted, however, that they were just men. In fact, they said, they represented a greater god than Zeus. This was a new thing.

This God made everything, and gives all good things. They were not gods, but represented this God. He was, coincidentally, the God that my mother believed in. And this Jesus that he talked about was the Son of God. Now this piqued my interest.

It seemed, however, that my mother's people were not as impressed as my father's. Some Jews from Antioch and Iconium heard that Paul was teaching here, and they came to town to accuse him. They were able to find a couple of witnesses to convict him of blasphemy, and stoned him. His companions barely avoided the same fate.

I was sitting in the city gate when his companions made their way back to town. I marveled that they should be rejoicing because everybody had seen Paul die (or at least so we thought) under a pile of large rocks. I had watched as they dragged his apparently lifeless body out of town. But here came Paul's friends, laughing and singing; and Paul walked at their head as if nothing had happened. He went to his lodging place and spent the night, then left the next day for Derbe, down the road. By the time he came back through town some time later, there were quite a few of us who believed his message. After all, if he could get up from that, why couldn't this Jesus walk out of his grave?

Paul did come back to Lystra once after that. It was several years later, and I had grown into a young man. I had studied more about what my mother believed, and the more I studied, the more I was convinced about what Paul had preached. I became a believer in the Way. Apparently I had become a fairly knowledgeable believer, because Paul asked me to accompany him on his travels. And so I have done, through many joys and hardships.

*(Based on Acts 14 and Acts 16:1)*

### CONTENTS

In Lystra	1
The Guest Room	2
In Need of Therapy	4

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# THE GUEST ROOM

Sometimes a translation of the Bible is unfortunate. When you have several words to use in translation, picking the right one can be hard. Sometimes an understanding of history or culture might help inform the translation. Unfortunately, generations may intervene between the unfortunate word and the better understanding. This may even be the case with such familiar passages as the Christmas story.

For a number of years there have been Bible purists who object to nativity scenes that have the wise men present. Matthew says the Magi found Jesus in a house (Matt 2:11), while Luke has him lying in a manger at his birth (Lk 2:7). While the Magi may have showed up almost two years after the birth, the house argument is not as strong as some think.

Here is the usual story. Joseph and Miriam (Mary) travel from Galilee to Bethlehem to be registered for the tax. They try to find a place at the local inn, but it has a no vacancy sign. Instead, they find shelter in a separate barn or stable, where she (seemingly immediately upon arrival) gives birth to Jesus. The angels announce it to the

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There was no shortage of houses in which Joseph and Mary could have stayed.

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shepherds, and they come the same night. On the eighth day after the birth, Jesus was circumcised. After forty days (Lk 2:22), Mary presents him at the Temple when she comes to offer the sacrifices for her purification. Some time later the Wise Men show up bringing gifts. The angel warns Joseph and the family flees to Egypt.

It's a nice story, and is, for the most part, biblical. One problem with translation and culture, though, may make a whole Renaissance industry in painting nativity scenes inaccurate.

## The Inn

There was a decree for taxation, and everyone had to go to their ancestral home to register. Today that might create a real problem, because many people no longer live where they were born, much less where their family "originated." In Israel at the time, it probably wasn't as big a deal. Joseph and Mary may have been two among a small number traveling to Bethlehem. Since the Law of Moses demanded that ancestral lands stay in the family, most descendants of David probably still lived in or

around Bethlehem. A few, like Joseph, may have been brave enough to travel elsewhere to try to make a living. It probably wasn't like there was this sudden influx of thousands of visitors to town.

Bethlehem was, by the standards of the day, probably not a "little town." It wasn't as big as Jerusalem, obviously, but it wasn't some backwater, either. It was, after all, the birthplace of David, the great king. On one street there might have been a historical marker purporting to show the very spot David was born. Somewhere else could have had a plaque honoring the place where Samuel anointed him. Bethlehem may have been quite the tourist destination. Nevertheless, according to the traditional view, there was only one inn. Hardly likely.

There were inns. This is obvious from the story of the good Samaritan. The man who was beaten and left for dead was taken to an inn (Greek *pandocheion*). People often did not like to stay in these inns, because robbery and other crimes were common there. If they had relatives in or near the town, they would prefer to stay there. In the New Testament there is only one mention of this type of inn or public house, and it is that one in the story of the Samaritan. This is not the word used by Luke when he said "there was no room for them in the inn." (Lk 2:7)

It may be that some people had to stay in an inn during the taxation registration. It is likely that Joseph did not. Many people who had to go to Bethlehem may have stayed in Jerusalem, as it was not that far away, only about 5.5 miles. They could find a place in the big city, and take a day trip (a two or three hour walk) to Bethlehem to do the business of registration. Others probably stayed with friends or relatives. Joseph probably had relatives in Bethlehem, since that is where he had to go to register. Mary had relatives in the area. She had already visited Elizabeth in the hill country of Judah (Lk 1:39) Of course, that description covers a large area on all sides of Jerusalem, but primarily toward Bethlehem. Jesus later had friends (Mary, Martha, and Lazarus) in Bethany, four miles from Bethlehem, who may also have been relatives. There was no shortage of houses in which Joseph and Mary could have stayed.

## No Room

If Joseph and Mary did not stay in an inn (*pandocheion*), what about what Luke said about there being no room? If they stayed in a house, is this not a contradiction?

First one should look at how houses were constructed. We think in terms of the American style, with a farmhouse and a separate barn and/or stable. This was rarely the case in Israel. Wealthy people with large herds

or flocks did not necessarily live with them. They hired herders who kept them, “abiding in the field.” (Lk 2:8) Those who kept livestock in or near town usually kept them inside the house. Either the house was constructed with the place for the livestock completely on the ground floor and the family on subsequent floors, or there was an area for the livestock and a raised area for the family or guests. This had the advantage of helping keep the house warm in winter, and the disadvantage of odors worsening in the summer heat. This explains the incident with Jephthah’s daughter.

And Jephthah vowed a vow unto the LORD, and said, If thou shalt without fail deliver the children of Ammon into mine hands, Then it shall be, that whatsoever cometh forth of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the children of Ammon, shall surely be the LORD'S, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering. (Judg 11:30-31)

Jephthah did not expect his daughter, or even his dog if he had one, to come out of the house. He expected livestock that could be sacrificed. That was because the livestock were kept in the house.

But how does this relate to there being no room in the inn? The word mistranslated as inn in Luke 2 is used elsewhere. In Mark 14:14 and Luke 22:11 the word *katalyma* is translated “guest chamber,” and the disciples were directed to an “upper room” where they could celebrate the Passover. This upper room used as a guest chamber was not necessarily a second or third floor of the house. More likely it was “upper” compared to the stables, and separate from the family rooms.

Now, perhaps, we have a picture of Joseph and Mary, along with several other relatives, staying in the guest room next to the livestock. When Mary had her baby, the room was too crowded to safely keep a child, but there was a ready solution. Within reach of the floor was a manger (feeding trough) that could serve as a crib. There was no room in the guest room, but the family wasn’t put out into a separate stable or cave; they stayed where they had been lodging, and put the baby in a safe place nearby.

## How Long?

The assumption has always been that Mary had Jesus within hours of arriving in Bethlehem. That, too, was probably not the case. If she were that close to delivering the child there would have been every reason to leave her in Nazareth. It was not absolutely necessary that she be present in Bethlehem for the registration. They could have been weeks in town before she had the child.

At the time of the visit to Bethlehem, Mary could have been anywhere from four to nine months pregnant. She had spent three months in the area with Elizabeth before John was born. (Lk 1:57) The scriptures don’t say how long after she returned home that they traveled to Bethlehem. Nor do they say how long they were in

Bethlehem before Jesus was born. In spite of Roman efficiency, it may have taken weeks to complete the registration for taxation. New families may have been coming to stay with their hosts daily, thus filling the guest room (and leaving no room for the baby). After Jesus was born, they stayed at least two months. He had to be circumcised on the eighth day, and they remained for her purification until the fortieth day. Most likely they remained with the same host for that period of time.

If they were staying with some relative for that period of time, in a house, that sets the minimum time after Jesus was born before the arrival of the Magi. Because Joseph left for Egypt with his family immediately after the visit by those men of the East (Matt 2:14), they could not have arrived any earlier than forty days after the birth. If they arrived that early, this would explain why Joseph and Mary were still in Bethlehem. There was no

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Jephthah did not expect his daughter, or even his dog if he had one, to come out of the house.

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logical reason for him to pull up stakes for almost two years and stay in Bethlehem. While a carpenter could make a living just about anywhere, Nazareth was home. He had probably left a house, a shop, and most of his belongings there. Why would he stay in Bethlehem any longer than necessary?

But what about Herod’s decree to kill all babies under two years of age? Matthew 2:7 says Herod diligently inquired what time the star appeared. Verse 16 says his decree was based on that diligent inquiry. But who is to say that the star appeared upon the birth of Jesus. If, as many picture the nativity, the wise men arrived at the birth (which is not possible), then they had seen the star several months earlier. They had to have had time to travel from the east, probably Babylon. They had to have had time to interpret the star. If Herod made the mistaken assumption that the star appeared upon the birth of the Messiah, then his decree of “two years old and under” makes sense.

Those who object to the wise men being depicted as coming to a stable with the shepherds have a valid point. There were at least two months between the events. But those who picture the family in a separate stable are probably wrong on that point as well. There was no heartless innkeeper who turned them away. There probably wasn’t even an inn from which they were turned away. Chances are Jesus was born where he was cared for by lots of relatives. If there were a lot of women visiting in the house, Mary might barely have spent time with her own baby.

# *IN NEED OF THERAPY*

I recently had the opportunity to visit an old friend whom I hadn't seen for a while. She had been in an accident and, naturally, the conversation centered on her loss of an arm. In addition to the original trauma, she had an infection that required additional surgeries. And, of course, there was the matter of rehabilitation. Since she lost her dominant arm, she had to learn to write again. This was something I understood, since when I played Captain Hook in *Peter Pan* I had insisted the hook be on my dominant hand; therefore, I had to learn to write with my other hand. Beyond writing, though, she had to relearn a lot of other things. Try, for instance, using a manual can opener with one hand, or cutting left-handed when all you have are right-handed scissors. The loss of an arm, or any external body part, requires extensive therapy, both physical and mental.

Sometimes we forget this when a church loses a body part. When a preacher moves on or is fired. When an elder or deacon dies. Those are times that we notice the loss of a body part. But what about when any member of the congregation dies? Or when someone leaves the fold for any reason? John Donne wrote, "No man is an island, /entire of itself." Paul said it less poetically, but just as strongly.

For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ. For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit. For the body is not one member, but many. (1 Cor 12:12-14)

I have been in congregations that were significantly made up of military members. When the

congregation was small, a transfer could mean the loss of several active members. It could mean that children lost friends. The congregation suffers from one set of orders.

When a congregation loses a body part, the body needs therapy. Sometimes the need is obvious. If a preacher leaves, everybody feels the loss. Some may be pleased, others sad, but everyone feels it. The same should be true when an elder or deacon resigns or dies. Too often churches try to move on as if nothing has changed. But it has. The body needs to adapt to the changes, and that may require some physical therapy (someone taking their duties). It also requires emotional support. When a "significant pastor" goes, 20% of the church goes, too. It is less among Churches of Christ, but it still happens. This is because those people don't immediately get the support they need to deal with the loss.

What is true on a grander scale when the loss is one of the more visible members of the congregation is also true when the loss is one that strongly affects only a few. If there is a death, we usually rally around the family, offering support in various ways. If a family moves away, do we think to help the friends of the children, who have just suffered a traumatic loss? What about the friends of the adults? Do we just figure they can cope, and not take any action?

If someone silently slips out the back door, the congregation has suffered a loss. That person was significant to someone in the congregation. Even then, some therapy is needed.

Are we allowing the body to suffer because we don't get the therapy we need? Whatever the reason for the loss, we have lost a part of the body. "Never send to know for whom the bell tolls; /It tolls for thee."

Timothy J. O'Hearn  
737 Monell Dr NE  
Albuquerque NM 87123