



Who was really at the Nativity?

It turns out that scripture doesn't say a lot about the nativity figures we take for granted and place in our home/garden creche.

Growing up, many of us may have taken turns arranging the figures in my family's home or garden crèche. Many like to display the three Magi walking in a procession up to or toward the manger, showing them to still be on their journey following the star to Bethlehem.

Some people we find are more about cramming the three Wise Men, shepherds, angel, and various farm animals into a tight circle around the manger—all ooh-ing and aah-ing at baby Jesus.

Our impulse toward literalness might have been a little misguided, however. It turns out that scripture doesn't say a whole lot; even about the nativity figures, we take most for granted.

There are two recollections about Jesus' birth, found in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. In Matthew: Mary and Joseph already live in Bethlehem, so there's no need for them to take refuge in a stable. Some Magi (*scripture never says there are three, by the way; it has been traditionally held that there were three Magi because there was three gifts*) follow a star to Jerusalem, where they enter the house inhabited by Mary and Joseph (cf. Matthew 2:11). They warn the family about King Herod's plot to kill the infant Jesus, and the family flees to Egypt. The family later returns and sets up home in Nazareth, never returning to their home in Bethlehem (cf. Matthew 2:23).

In Luke's version, the Magi are nowhere to be seen. Instead, it is shepherds, who are the first to hear the good news of the Savior's birth. In this Lukan Gospel, Mary and Joseph already live in Nazareth, but have to return to Bethlehem for a "census"; this is what filled up the "inns" and necessitated Mary's labor and birth in an animal stable (cf. Luke 2:7). After the "census", we are left to assume the family returned peacefully to Nazareth—but, it doesn't say one way or another.

Some of the differences between the two gospels are due to their different writer's intent and purpose. With the flight to Egypt and Herod's murder of the innocents, the author of Matthew portrays Jesus as the next Moses and describes how the infant Jesus fulfills several specific prophecies from the Hebrew [Old Testament] Bible. While the author of Luke, on the other hand, portrays Jesus as a challenge to the Roman Emperor, whose honorific titles also include "Son of God" and "Savior." The message of the Angel to the shepherds, proclaims that there is a Savior who will bring salvation not through political power and domination, but instead through a radical change of the social order; one that will lift up the lowly and feed the hungry (cf. Luke 1:46–55).

While [recognizing] the differences between the two Gospels, the important takeaway is found in what they have in common. [Today, it is acknowledged amongst biblical and historical scholars that the Magi arrived "some time" after the birth, however (12 days later on the Epiphany itself).]

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