

If you've invested in a nativity set, I've got some bad news for you. Even if the figures are historically and ethnically accurate, which is far from guaranteed, the scene itself bears no resemblance to the setting of Jesus's actual birth. First of all, the Christians of Bethlehem have always said that Jesus was born in a particular cave, and the church built over it is the oldest major church in the world, and one of the best-preserved. The cave is "the oldest site continuously used as a place of worship in Christianity."*** Setting up caves for use as homes was common in that place and time.

Secondly, the translators did us a great disservice by using the word "inn." The Greek word St. Luke used is *katalumati*, and it means, "the spare or upper room in a private house... where travelers received hospitality and where no payment was expected."* When St. Luke does talk about a commercial lodging establishment, where the Good Samaritan took the man who'd been beaten and left for dead, he uses a different word, but interestingly, he tells us that the Last Supper took place in a *katalumati*. I suppose that could be a coincidence, and it's popular among modernist scholars to discount the Gospels' infancy narratives. But both the Nativity and Last Supper stories show God providing new forms of spiritual nourishment to small, holy "inner circles," but doing so for the benefit of the whole world. So I think St. Luke is being careful and deliberate with his language and symbolism, and that we should regard the Nativity story as essential, since he did.

Chances are, in Bethlehem Ss. Mary and Joseph simply followed well-established Middle Eastern practice and stayed with extended family, which makes perfect sense, given that St. Luke tells us Bethlehem was St. Joseph's ancestral home. And as if their journey wasn't hard enough, they couldn't even have the semi-privacy of the guest room. Perhaps other relatives had gotten there first, or perhaps someone who ranked higher in the social hierarchy took priority, or perhaps rumors about Mary's pregnancy had diminished the family's sense of hospitality. Perhaps Ss. Mary and Joseph had been offered the *katalumati* but graciously gave it up for others, and took the other room, the main room of the house, an all-purpose, no-privacy space.

So if there's no inn, there's no stable, because families would bring the livestock in at night, and part of the main room would be set up for this. That area might actually have been more pleasant than the area reserved for human beings, which must have been terribly cluttered and crowded. If you use a little imagination with your cultural and architectural knowledge, you realize that of course Mary would have laid Jesus on top of the animals' food — which, incidentally, sat not in a freestanding trough, but in pits in the floor. That was probably the only soft space, and indeed the only open space, in the home. You can imagine Mary wrapping him in whatever cloth was on hand, sighing, remembering that the livestock are all herbivores, setting him down, hoping for the best, and falling asleep exhausted.

So as soon as you explain all this to the person who sold you your crèche set, I'm sure they'll apologize and give you a full refund. Seriously though, crèches are great

and I encourage you to hold on to yours. A crèche set can reveal a spiritual reality that an attempt at historically accurate reconstruction would miss. But the gritty historical reality matters, too. I love that our Lord and Savior began his human life in a grounded, or indeed, under-grounded, setting, not just because that makes him feel more relatable, but also because it reminds us that Jesus was not an elitist who came to save the spiritual elite, he was as human as any of us, and to feed us, he meets us where we are, in all our improvisation and imperfection. The only savior who could give us hope is one who will come to us in the spiritual squalor of our sins, which are far more repulsive than any area reserved for livestock. We need as much to be reminded of who Jesus is not, as of who he is, since our misconceptions about him threaten to weaken our relationship with him and cheat us out of the love and reconciliation he came into the world to give us.

So just as Jesus was not born in a peaceful stable, removed from crowds and chaos and politics and complexity, as an adult, he did not live as a guru in some remote wilderness sanctuary, where a few dedicated students might seek him out. He came to his people, to humanity, even though we in our sin would reject him. And even though Jesus traveled around, in his essence, he was pretty much the opposite of the “Elf on the Shelf.” I had seen those things for years before I learned what the story behind them was.

This is a successful commercial product, and a theological abomination. Parents of young children buy this little elf doll with a big creepy smile. They tell the kids that the elf is keeping track of whether they’re naughty or nice and reporting back to Santa. So it’s hard to imagine celebrating the elf’s arrival, but some parents try to make it “fun” by moving the elf around the house when the children are asleep and even stage scenes where it looks like the elf has been frozen in the middle of doing something.

A friend of a friend wrote how the elf basically crystallizes all of the world’s worst misconceptions about Jesus, where we tell each other he’s “a personal entity that is always there, watching you, judging you, but with a sort of clownish rictus smile that is supposed to reassure you that this entity is, in fact, somehow your personal friend as well as your moral jailer, entering your venalities into a ledger. He has no soteriological role, just this uneasy friend/jailer dichotomy.”**

Why bother with elf on the shelf when you can welcome God in a bod, or rather, the Word made flesh, and really mean it. We can celebrate that Jesus is truly and fully God with us, celebrate that he proactively came into the world, and spent his ministry going from place to place in order to reach as many people as he could, because Jesus came to save, not to condemn. We celebrate his birth because that moment is the beginning of humanity’s hope that God, in Jesus, is taking action to save us, to reveal the depth of God’s love for us. Jesus also shows us a better way of living, one founded on love, and especially by loving those least able to repay our kindness. From God’s point of view, none of us can repay God for these gifts, but that’s the whole point. Jesus

is the savior of a world that needs divine salvation.

So we may take great comfort in knowing that Jesus came into the thick of things, into the world as it is, into a humble, busy, crowded cave-house. The circumstances were not ideal; you could even call them... un-stable. But terrible puns aside, this is a Christmas story we can relate to. In a way, the Holy Family is just like our families, for clearly they were improvising and doing the best they could with what they had. So now I've got more good news for you. Jesus and his gifts of love, mercy, grace, and everlasting life are not just for the pious few: he, and they, are God's gift to all of us, especially those who need them the most. I pray that we may accept these gifts gratefully, and like the shepherds, share the Good News of them faithfully, and in so doing, become more like the Giver of all good gifts, full of grace and truth.

*<https://www.psephizo.com/biblical-studies/once-more-jesus-was-not-born-in-a-stable/>

**Text from Jesse Tumblin to Shannon Rose McAuliffe

***https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church_of_the_Nativity, accessed December 23, 2022