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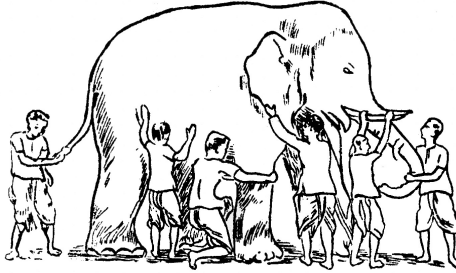
NATIVITY STORIES

Nativity stories, scenes, plays, art, and songs help us remember the birth of Jesus. During the Christmas season, families and churches put up nativity scenes, read the nativity story, and present nativity programs. Often children dress up and play the parts of Mary, Joseph, angels, shepherds, or wise men while the nativity story is read or Christmas songs are sung.



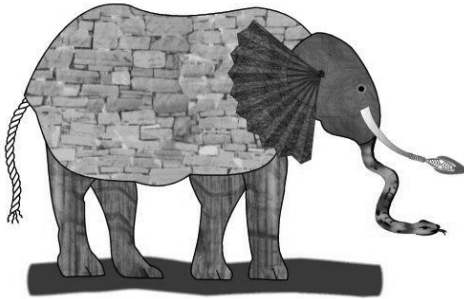
The nativity story can be more meaningful as we become aware of other versions of the story based on relevant historical and linguistic information. Writers and

artists are like the six blind men who each felt different parts of an elephant. They recorded their observations of the size, shape, and flexibility of the part they felt.



Elephant and the Blind Men © Jain World

Then they shared their elephant “stories” that explained their observations. In the six stories, an elephant was like a wall, rope, tree, fan, spear, or snake. They all argued about which story was right (Saxe).



Elephant illustration © Jason Hunt

This story is comparable to our knowledge of the birth of Jesus. The New Testament only says that in Bethlehem, Mary “brought forth her firstborn son ... and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn” (Luke 2:7). To this account, writers and artists add *other information* (e.g., Bible language, customs, and history) and *imagination* to tell us different stories that answer questions about when and where Jesus was born.

No Room in the Inn

In Luke we read, “While they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn” (Luke 2:6–7) or “inns” (JST).

Writers and artists use *other information* and their *imagination* to tell the rest of the story. For example, modern cities have more than one hotel or motel where travelers can rent rooms from an “innkeeper.” “No Vacancy” signs indicate when a motel is full. Perhaps such information along with the writer’s imagination led to the following story. Notice that the italicized phrases are not in the Bible account.

🗨️ **Stable Story:** “So many people had come to Bethlehem to pay their taxes that Mary and Joseph *couldn’t find a place to stay*. Finally, an *innkeeper* told them that *his inn was full*, but they could *stay in his stables*. Mary and Joseph *thanked the innkeeper* for his kindness. *That night Jesus was born*” (Buck; italics added).



No Room at the Inn © Northumberland

About AD 1223, St. Francis of Assisi did a live nativity scene in a stable with animals, people, hay, and a manger like those of his time. Since then, most nativity scenes show Joseph and Mary in a stable or wooden building with stalls in which domestic animals are sheltered and fed. In these scenes, baby Jesus is in a wooden manger.



For God So Loved the World © Simon Dewey

This popular and familiar story is often portrayed in Christmas art, plays and programs to help people remember the birth of Christ. In Mexico, families reenact Joseph and Mary looking for lodging (*posada*). On each of the nine nights before Christmas, families carry figurines of Joseph and Mary and request lodging at three homes or “inns.” The first two “innkeepers” turn them away. After the last “innkeeper” lets them in, the guests pray before a nativity scene, sing Christmas songs, and have a party that includes a *piñata* for the children.

Caravansary or Khan



Khan or Caravansary, photo by Babak Gholizadeh

The Good Samaritan took a wounded man to a *pandocheion*, a public inn called a *caravansary* or *khan* (Luke 10:34). Some scholars believe the “inn” in the nativity story was a caravansary “built to accommodate travelers who traversed the route between Jerusalem and Egypt” (Black, 19). A caravansary was somewhat like a fort for caravans with only one big gate for an entrance. Rooms without furniture were along the four sides. Animals were kept in the center courtyard. Travelers cared for their own animals and brought their own food and supplies. Innkeepers charged little for shelter but were paid extra for other services, as in the story of the Good Samaritan (*International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Inn”). “Prostitution was part of the system. This explains why Jesus told his disciples to seek accommodation in private homes (Matt. 10:11)” and why Christian hospitality was important (Rom. 12:13, Gower, 234).

🗨️ **Hillside Cave Story:** “If travelers reached the inn [caravansary] early in the day, they were usually welcomed by the innkeeper. If they arrived in the evening, the door was closed for protection and travelers were encouraged to move along. *Arriving in the evening and unwelcome by the innkeeper*, Joseph searched for lodging in the ... hillsides that bordered Bethlehem.” *In a hillside cave* that sheltered animals, Mary “brought forth her firstborn son” (Black, 19; italics added).



Silent Night (in a cave) © Liz Lemon Swindle

🗨️ **Caravansary Courtyard Story:** If a traveler arrived late at the caravansary “and the *leewans* [rooms] were all occupied by earlier guests, he would have no choice but to be content with such accommodation as he could find in the courtyard below, and secure for himself and his family such small amount of cleanliness and decency as are compatible with an unoccupied corner on the filthy