

CHRISTMAS

*May the God of hope fill you with all joy, peace,  
and \_\_\_\_\_."*

**On Rethinking Christmas**

We once promised that we would get around to writing about the sundry issues with the "traditional" telling of the Christmas story. This is that *Card Talk* in two parts.

**Part I: When is Jesus' Birthday?**

Like most scholars, and lay clergy worth their eggnog, we don't believe that the Incarnation took place on December 25th. There are already a plethora of articles, blogs, and social media posts enumerating the historical, cultural, theological, and meteorological reasons why Jesus wasn't born on this date.

WE WOULD LIKE TO ADVANCE THE ARGUMENT THAT JESUS WAS BORN DURING  
SUKKOT.

This is not an idea original to *A Game for Good Christians* by any means. However, permit us to add our voice to this conversation.

GOD WITH US

*The Gospel According to Matthew* 1:23 (quoting *Isaiah* 7:14) declares, "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him **Emmanuel (which means "God with us").**" While others fight about translating "virgin" in this passage, we will focus on the word Emmanuel, "God with us."

We recently saw a Facebook post where an atheist was mocking the Nativity narrative by pointing out that Jesus is never called Emmanuel anywhere else in the Bible ever, that His Hebrew name was actually Yeshua. So clearly this is another example of biblical contradictions, throw the whole thing out, merry X-mas, tip your waitress on your way out of the faith. This response ignores the fact that "Emmanuel" is one of multiple prophetic names in the *Book of Isaiah* that serve as title more than personal designation. And that is the purpose of *Matthew* quoting *Isaiah*: the writer is providing a description of Jesus. "God with us."

*The Gospel According to John* contains a similar idea in its opening chapter which, while slightly different, is equally instructive: "And the Word became flesh and **lived among us**, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a Father's only Son, full of grace and truth" (*John* 1:14). Other translations read "**dwelt among us.**"

However, a closer translation remembers the context of the Jewish communities recording these stories: "And the Word became flesh and **σκηνώω (skēnoō) among us.**" The Greek word **σκηνώω (skēnoō)** was used in the Septuagint to translate the Hebrew word for "**Tabernacle.**"

Thus, “*And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and **Tabernacled** among us.*” This last version is how the *Young's Literal Translation* renders the passage, as well as many Christian commentaries that make this connection.

*Sukkot*, The Feast of Booths (or the Feast of Tabernacles), commemorates the forty-year period the children of Israel lived in the desert, wandering toward the Promised Land. The name refers to the temporary dwellings they inhabited during the journey. The feast, while partially an agricultural affair, was also a reminder of the history of travail and travel, marked by God's hand in their lives: how the God of their mothers and fathers brought them through the wilderness.

But what cannot be forgotten is that **God was in their midst in His own tent of dwelling: the Tabernacle.** The place of sacrifices, dedications, devotion, and atonement. The holy place where humanity could come close to the divine in the midst of the camp.

#### THE GOSPELS RECORD JESUS LIVING AMONG US IN THE SAME WAY.

Jesus' life is one that brings salvation, physical and spiritual. He is the fullness of the Exodus journey to the Promised Land, and the Exodus from Assyrian/Babylonian Exile home, and the Exodus from secular rule to entering the Kingdom of God. This is the driving motif throughout the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament: A God who saves people while living among them. Hence Jesus' Hebrew name, Yeshua: “God is salvation/The God who saves,” because God loved the world so much He gave His Son/Himself.

#### WHAT MORE APPROPRIATE TIME FOR HIM TO ARRIVE AND MAKE HIS PLACE IN OUR MIDST THAN SUKKOT?

In the end, does it matter *when* Jesus was born? Not to us. It's *that* He was born that matters. That He came for His family and for yours. Even though, especially when, we're a mess. Which brings us to Part 2...

### Part II: Christmas Has Always Been a Disaster for Families

Most people's understanding of the Christmas story is replete with Hallmark-esque, Sunday School flannel-graph bullshit. **For example, three wise men did not appear at the Nativity.** Read through *Matthew* Chapter 2 carefully. First, the passage never gives a number of magi, only that they were bearing three gifts. Second, placing the magi at the birth requires the same level of mental gymnastics and Christmas magic needed to get 27 elementary-aged kids to accurately recite their lines during a Christmas pageant without any stage-fright, meltdowns, or potty accidents. The narrative events show that the magi couldn't have shown up on the same night as the birth. This is more apparent when it's noticed that the passage is suggesting Jesus is a toddler when they appear, not a newborn. He is consistently referred to as a "child" in the passage, and the magi do not find him "laying in a manger" like the shepherds do in *Luke* Chapter 2 (more on that below). Jesus was probably running around the house, now wondering what he's supposed to do with gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And keep in mind that after their departure, Herod began to murder all males under the age of two. If Jesus had *just* been born, why isn't the slaughter of innocents only for newborns? Why the wide range? This is just one example of "the greatest story ever told" being mangled. **The biggest offender is the myth of "the inn."**

NO ROOM AT THE INN BECAUSE THERE WAS NO INN

*Luke 2:1-7* is the passage of note for the famed manger scene:

*In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered.*

*Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child.*

*While they were there, the time came for her to **deliver her child**. And she **gave birth to her firstborn son** and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and **laid him in a manger**, because **there was no place for them in the inn** (κατάλυμα *kataluma*).*

So there it is. "There was no place for them in the inn." Except there's a problem: the Greek word *kataluma* is properly translated as "upper room" or "guest room," not "inn." (c.f. *Luke 22:11* where *kataluma* is used by Jesus asking a homeowner about commandeering his "guest room" for the Last Supper, and *Luke 10:34* where a completely different word is used when talking about an actual "inn.")

Remember the context of the story: Jo and Mary are travelling to Bethlehem because that's where Joseph's relatives are. You know this. Some of you have heard this story for decades. Didn't you ever ask the question *why are they looking for space at a hotel instead of staying with their family?*

They did stay with family; that's exactly where this story takes place. **Jo and Mary are in the home of one of his relatives**, but there is **no space in the guest room** (*kataluma*) because it was filled up for the Roman census.

**But what about the manger?** Archaeologists and biblical scholars have long known that most of the small, humble dwellings in Bethlehem at the time did not have adjacent barns or stables as we think of them. Rather, the people would have **brought their livestock indoors at night. Thus, the manger was inside the house.**

This all brings us to the point of this *Card Talk*: After years of Christmas pageants vilifying hotel management for not finding a spare bed for the pregnant Mary, the question we should really be asking is who the hell wouldn't make room for their own relatives?

MARY WASN'T REJECTED BY STRANGERS,

SHE WAS REJECTED BY FAMILY.

There *was* room in the house. There was a guest room, but its occupants decided that they would not relocate for a pregnant woman. A pregnant relative.

Were they silently questioning who was the "real father" of this baby? Did they feel that Joseph was too kind, or too stupid to see he was being made to look like a fool by this loose woman? Did they think, "we'll let her stay in the house, but our hospitality only extends so far. A woman like that can

sleep with the animals"? Did any of them rise and help usher young Yeshua into the world? How awkward was breakfast the next morning? Did they ignore Mary's labor pangs and cries well into the night, but give her dirty looks for their lack of sleep the next morning? Did anyone make snarky comments about the appearance of shepherds in the middle of the night? Did anyone even ask to hold Him?

At this time of year, people often pray that the God of hope will fill us with all joy, peace, and [a-fill-in-the-blank goodness]. But Christmas, like all holidays, has never been an event that unites all families in cheer. Conflict, recrimination, and chaos have always existed right alongside hospitality, hope, and joy.

Sometimes which we find is within our control. Sometimes it is not.

Sometimes we are the shepherds discovering an amazing event.

Sometimes we are Mary and Joseph, just trying to survive the holidays.

Sometimes we are the asshat relatives making life unnecessarily difficult for others.

[Don't be that asshat]

We choose what we impart and what we embrace, in light of and despite those around us.

We choose who we welcome into our homes and to our table. Who we allow within the boundaries of our lives, as well as our churches, our schools, our cities, our countries.

**Perhaps this is the perfect time of year to consider who we let in and who we shut out: Who we allow to "tabernacle among us," and who we treat like animals.**

Merry Christmas