

The Innkeepers' Tale

My name is Rebecca and together with Samuel my husband we run the Inn in the town of Bethlehem. I would like to tell you about a visit to our Inn that changed history. This is my story.

Knock! Knock! Knock!

“Oh no! I hope that is not another traveller looking for shelter. Rebecca, tell me that’s not someone looking for a bed. I have just Jonathan’s and our beds by the door. There is simply no room.ⁱ”

“Oh, stop fretting Samuel and answer the door,” I said.

“Jonathan! Thank the Lord it’s just you,” said Samuel as we stepped outside. We all hugged and settled at the table outside the door.

“Well, that’s quite a welcome. What’s wrong Samuel?” the merchant asked.

“It’s Caesar’s census for the new tax. Bethlehem is a very old town and many generations of the town’s families have come to register. All of the family homes are packed and hundreds are camping on the hillsides around town. Our Inn is bulging at the seams and jammed to the roof. Indeed, the roof is also full, not a space is available up there and people are sleeping shoulder to shoulder in the main room. It has been hard to turn away weary travellers and to keep beds for our regular guests like yourself. Indeed, because we knew that you were coming, we kept one bed for you and that’s it.”

“Rebecca! Samuel! That cannot be,” said Jonathan. “An hour or so ago I met a couple on the road. They were moving very slowly. She was very pregnant and found it hard to continue walking. I offered one of my donkeys and she looked at me and said, thank you! You are a miracle from God.ⁱⁱ Samuel, her face shone like an angel.ⁱⁱⁱ The men and I transferred my goods to the other animals so that she could ride. They are moving very slowly but they should be here in less than an hour.”

“Joseph and Mary!?” I cried.

“Yes, those are their names,” said Jonathan.

“This cannot be,” I exclaimed. “Mary must have a place to sleep in safety.”

“Well if it would help, I would be happy to give up my bed. It’s a beautiful evening and if Joseph and I could stay close to the door to protect my goods we could sleep outside.”

“Jonathan that is a wonderful and very kind idea,” said Samuel. “Rebecca can bring you straw ticks and extra blankets to keep you warm.”

“Then you know Joseph and Mary?” said Jonathan.

“Oh yes! Joseph is Samuel’s cousin. We have been expecting them for several days now. Joseph is an important man among the people of Bethlehem. He is quite a successful carpenter in the Galilean town of Nazareth. But this is his home and he is bringing his new wife. We hope that he will settle back here in Bethlehem. But we expected them days ago. Now the Inn and all the homes are full.”^{iv}

“What was that?” said Jonathan. “I heard a cry of great pain coming from up the road. Look, it’s Mary and Joseph.”

“Joseph! Joseph!” I cried as I ran up the road to meet the couple. “Welcome! Welcome! This must be Mary. Mary welcome to Bethlehem. What a beautiful girl you are and Jonathan was right your face does shine like an angel. Come child and sit at the table awhile. I am Rebecca your cousin, this is Samuel, and together we own the Inn. Did we hear a cry of pain a few minutes ago? Are you alright child?”

“Yes Rebecca, I am wonderful but my water broke some ways back and I am beginning to have labour pains. Not close yet but fairly strong.”

Samuel broke in, “we have a bed for you in the Inn where perhaps you would be more comfortable.”

“Men! Men can be so stupid sometimes,” I cried. “Samuel tonight Mary is going to have her baby. She can not stay in the common room with the other travellers. She needs privacy.”

“But where can they go? The Inn is full and I know that Joseph’s family home is so full it is jammed to the rafters,” said Samuel.

“It’s alright,” Joseph added. “Mary and I have camped several times on our journey. I will build a shelter with blankets. We will be fine.”

“What! You’re as bad as he is. Joseph, have you ever delivered a baby? Do you know what is involved? In Israel women deliver babies, men stay out of the way, heat water and pray.”

“But what are we to do?” Samuel pleaded.

“Let me think,” I said.

“Ahhhh,” cried Mary.

“I have an idea that I think will work,” I interrupted. “Sarah are you awake? Can you hear me?”

“Yes, mother.”

“Go and fetch Marion, Joseph’s sister. Tell her that Joseph and Mary are here and that Mary is about to give birth. She will know what to do and what to bring. Go, child! Samuel, what is the warmest and most private part of the Inn?”

“Why the stable under the Inn of course. The warmth of the animals rises and helps to heat the floor of the great room. But Mary can’t stay with the animals.”

“Oh yes, she can. Even though we are full tonight, most of the travellers are in town to register so they don’t have many pack mules and there is room in the stable.”

“But only poor caravan workers and shepherds sleep with the animals,” cried Samuel.

“Well, tonight a beautiful bride will give birth in our stable.” v

“Jonathan, unload your donkeys and house them in the stalls to the right of the door. Samuel, you will clear out everything from the big stall on the left. All the old straw, animal dung and anything else you find. Then fill the stall with clean hay, plenty of hay including the manger. Perhaps it will make a good cradle for the child. Now get moving. Joseph can you help Samuel and Jonathan? I will stay here with Mary until all is ready.”

You bet!” said Joseph. “Let’s go men.”

I said to Mary, “let me make you as comfortable as possible while we wait. Would you like anything to drink?”

“Rebecca!”

“Good! Here comes Marion with Sarah. Marion, I would like you to meet Mary, Joseph’s wife and the soon to be mother of his child.”

“Mary, Mary, let me hug and kiss you. What a beautiful woman you are, you have the face of an angel.”

“Samuel, Joseph, and Jonathan the merchant are preparing a place in the stable for us to deliver Mary’s baby. It will be clean, warm and private.”

“Rebecca, that is a wonderfully clever idea.”

“I hope they hurry. The time between Mary’s labour pains is growing shorter and shorter.

“I wonder how the men are doing? An hour has passed since they went to prepare the stable. Oh, I hear the men now. Joseph is everything ready?”

“Clean as a whistle,” replied Joseph. “We scraped and then washed the floor; laid in only the cleanest hay with a couple of stools and prepared the manger as a comfortable crib. The stall will be a wonderful place for us tonight. We also unpacked Jonathan’s donkeys and laid the supplies safely inside the stable. Oh! Shalom Marion! It is wonderful to see you. Let me hug you.”

“If you need anything from my inventory just take it as my gift to the child,” added Jonathan.

“Thank you so much,” replied Mary.

“Alright then, men stay here at the table ready if we need you. Mary, Marion and I will help you to deliver your baby. Let’s go and get settled in your bed. Sarah, you come along to help too.”

“The stall looks wonderful,” exclaimed Mary.

“Yes, it does, doesn’t it,” I replied. Let me turn up the lamp. There that’s better. Now Mary do you have a clean shirt that you can wear?”

“In my pack. Here, I brought it with me.”

“Then let’s get you ready. Take off your clothes and put on the nightshirt. Good, now make yourself as comfortable as possible in the hay and I will check you to see if everything is in decent shape.”

“This cannot be! Marion, come and look. The hymen is still in place and she is beginning to dilate. Mary is a virgin!”^{vi}

That’s not possible but I see it with my own eyes.” exclaimed Marion.

“Mary, how can this be?” I cried.

“I’m busy,” cried Mary. “I’ll explain later.”

“Marion go and talk to Joseph! He must know what is going on! May the Lord protect us!”

“Joseph! Joseph!” Marion cried as she approached the table where the men were sitting.

“Is Mary alright?” shouted Joseph as he jumped up from the table. “Do I need to go to her?”

“Everything is under control but Joseph, Mary is a virgin! How can that be? She is your wife. Have you not taking her to your bed and if you haven’t how can she be pregnant?”

“I’m still not sure that I even understand,” said Joseph quietly to the others. “This is what I know.”^{vii} I loved Mary from the first time that I saw her. She was beautiful and loved the Lord with all of her heart. Soon I asked her father if she could come into my house and be my wife. The whole town came to the celebration and I was the envy of all the single men far and wide. When we retired to my house to consummate our marriage Mary stopped me saying that there was something I must know. She said that she was certain that she was pregnant. That can’t be I said. The Priest and mothers have performed the proper inspections and you are a virgin.^{viii}

She then told me this story. Last night as I was praying an angel appeared to me. I was afraid but the angel said don’t be afraid. I am Gabriel and God has sent me to tell you that you are favoured among women and that even though you are a virgin, the Spirit of God will overshadow you and you will become pregnant. Your son will become great and will be called the Son of the Most High, the Messiah, the anointed of God. She said that she then fell asleep and in the morning, she knew that she was pregnant.

At first, I was very angry not sure what to believe or what to do. Should I shame her? But I loved her so perhaps she could go away quietly and not be punished as an adulterer. We did not make love and after I prayed in great sorrow I fell fitfully asleep. During the night, however, an angel of God appeared to me in a dream. The angel said, “Joseph do not be afraid to take Mary into your home as your wife because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son and you are to give him the name Jesus. I awoke very happy and much relieved as I told Mary about the dream. I took Mary into my house as my bride but Mary and I agreed that until Jesus was born we would not have sexual relations. That was very hard but made easier when Mary went off to visit her aunt Elizabeth for about three months and then of course the journey here.” ix

Ahhh! Ahhh!

“Marion come quickly and bring Joseph,” cried Sarah as she ran up the group. The baby is ready to come. Father, mother says to bring warm clean water from the hearth.”

“Is everything alright?” cried Joseph as he arrived at the stable door.

“Everything is perfect,” I said. “But the baby is about to arrive. The hymen has stretched, the cervix has dilated and the baby’s head has crowned. I have never seen a birth as painless as this. One more push Mary. Great, here he comes,” I laughed. “Oh, what a beautiful child! Look his face shines just like yours Mary. Here let me cut and tie the cord.”

“Here is the water,” called Samuel as he arrived at the door.

“Give him to me,” said Marion. “I will clean him off and swaddle him for you, Mary. Joseph, what is his name?”

“Jesus as the angel commanded.”

“Show him to the men Marion and then lay him with Mary, while we clean up Mary and take care of the afterbirth,” I instructed. “Then we will all get out of here and let Mary rest and Joseph watch over her and Jesus. When we get up to the Inn door, we will have a jug of wine to celebrate Jesus’ birth and you can bring me up to date on the story behind this miracle of a virgin birth.”

After everything was cleaned up and Mary and Joseph were comfortable our little group sat by the door of the Inn.

“That’s quite a story Marion,” I said. “Do you know what I think? Perhaps Jesus is the one we have been waiting for! The one to be anointed as King!”

“But if Jesus is not the physical son of Joseph how can he be the one?” exclaimed Samuel. “The King must come from the house and lineage of King David.”

“Just like a man! We know that sometimes God has acted through the women in lineage. Mary is also a child of David from a different line. Two birds with one stone. I wonder????” x

“Sarah, you have been a great help. Could you bed down now in the stable near Joseph and Mary and bring me word if they need anything.”

“I would love to mother.”

As we sat wondering at the miracle we had observed, Jonathan heard excited voices coming down the road.

“I hope it’s not robbers,” said Jonathan. “Should I go to the stable to protect my goods?”

“It’s not robbers Jonathan but it is riff-raff,” cried Samuel. “It’s a bunch of Shepherds from the hills south of town. Away you, fools. People are trying to sleep! Go back to your sheep.”

“Samuel, Samuel something amazing has happened!” said Simon, one of the shepherds. “We had settled our sheep in the folds for the night and built a campfire to warm us as we sat around talking by the fire. Suddenly an angel was standing before us and all-around light shone like it was day. Wow, were we terrified and thought to run. But the angel said, “Fear not for I bring you good news of great joy for everyone. A savior is born to you, and he is Christ the Lord. You will find him in Bethlehem, in a stable, wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. Suddenly the sky lit up and a host of angels were praising God and singing glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to everyone he favours. When they had left we all said, let’s go and find the baby. So here we are! Do you know where we may find the baby?”

“As a matter of fact, I do know. They are in my stable,” Samuel proclaimed proudly. Come, I will show you.”

“Don’t you dare disturb the baby Jesus and Mary!” I warned.

“Now be very quiet and look in through the door,” said Samuel to the shepherds. “Look Mary is still awake. Can you see the child in the manger?”

“Come in, come look,” said Mary as she signalled to the shepherds. Jesus is sleeping in the manger.”

“Simon,” said Saul, another of the shepherds. The baby’s face and indeed Mary’s face shine just like the angel who came to us. It is a miracle! Let’s go tell everyone.”

“They are going to tell everyone about the angel and the child,” worried Samuel as he returned to where Marion, Jonathan and I were sitting.

“It’s okay. Don’t worry,” I replied quietly. They are just shepherds. Their story will die down in a few days. But we know the truth, we must protect that truth or Herod will find him and kill him. Now let’s all go to bed.”^{xi}

Endnotes

ⁱ Room

KJV, NIV: There was no room for them in the Inn

RSV: There was no place for them in the Inn

From the Greek “topos” meaning place. In the context of Luke 2: 7 it could imply a full house or that there was no suitable place for Mary to be with child or even to birth her child.

ⁱⁱ There is no mention in the biblical text of Mary riding a donkey. It would be unlikely that a carpenter would own a donkey but a woman late in her pregnancy could surely benefit from such a ride.

ⁱⁱⁱ Although not in the biblical text; tradition has clothed both Mary and the baby Jesus in light.

^{iv} The tradition that the innkeeper was somehow uncooperative to Mary and Joseph is just not implied in the Biblical text. Indeed, since Joseph is from Bethlehem and Matthew’s story implies that they would live in Bethlehem, it would be much more plausible that the innkeeper would be a friend or relative of Joseph.

^v It would be reasonable to assume that the stable would be attached to or more likely beneath the Inn. Also it would be normal for porters, caravan workers, etc. to sleep with the animals.

^{vi} The Virgin Birth

“Parthenos:” (Greek) an epithet meaning “virgin” is used in most Greek scrolls and cortices of the Bible. The Hebrew word “Almah” is also used in the biblical text and refers to a virgin not yet of child bearing age or who has not had a child or sexual relations. That is a virgin. The Hebrew word “Bethulah” is also used as virgin. Almah and bethulah are both most often translated to parthenos and then to virgin. Luke identifies Mary as a virgin (parthenos) in Luke:2: 27-28 and 34. Matthew never directly calls Mary a virgin but he implies it in Matt: 1:23 through the fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14: “The virgin shall be with child and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel.” Here the Hebrew uses almah translated to parthenos. This where the debate about Mary as a virgin or was only a young woman originated. My position is that in Isaiah God gave the people a sign. A young woman having a child would not be much of a sign but a virgin having a child would indeed be a great sign. My position therefore is that Mary was indeed a virgin.

^{vii} Joseph’s story is a compilation from Matthew, Luke and my own thoughts as to what might have happened between Mary and Joseph on the fateful night of their wedding. It explains the discrepancy of the marital status in the two gospels: NIV- pledged to be married, KJV- espoused, RSV- betrothed and NRSV- engaged. All imply not married. Why? Because the union had not been consummated. But they were together as man and wife otherwise Joseph would not register them as married and they could not live and travel together. This could mean that no one but Mary and Joseph knew that the marriage was not consummated but then Jesus was considered Joseph’s son.

^{viii} This inspection, especially if there was a substantial dowry, was typical of Hebrew society at that time and again implied to all that Jesus was Joseph’s son since Mary was a virgin just before Joseph took her into his house.

^{ix} Luke tells us that soon after the child is conceived Mary left Nazareth to visit her Aunt Elizabeth who lived in the Judean hill country. Elizabeth was the wife of Zechariah a priest who took his turn at the Temple in Jerusalem. Elizabeth was pregnant in her old age. Her son would become John the Baptist.

^x Although there is no reference as to the family of Mary in the biblical texts, it is not unreasonable to surmise that Mary could be part of the greater family of David’s line. Supporting ideas could include: Jesus has always been considered to be from the house of David and Mary could logically be chosen by Joseph from a related family. For example, a second or third cousin. And if Matthew is correct that they are both from Bethlehem the argument is even stronger.

^{xi} Word that a child is born of a virgin and to the house of David would certainly be of great concern to King Herod and would endanger the child. This turned out to be true with the visit of the Magi.