

Does the manger matter?

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The Bible gets four shots to tell Jesus' birth — well, four gospel writers plus Paul and the other epistle writers, so *at least* four.

But the manger only appears in Luke. For many current-day Christians, the Christmas story would be incomplete without the manger scene: little baby Jesus wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger. But does this, the crowning scene of many a church Christmas Pageant, really matter?

Well, yes and no. Does the manger matter to Matthew, Mark, or John? No, not one bit. Does the manger matter to Paul? Nope. In fact, Paul doesn't even seem to know about the whole virgin birth story, let alone the manger — at least he never mentions it. And even for Luke, is the manger an irreplaceable aspect of the birth story that, without the manger, Jesus' birth would lose all its meaning? I think not. But it matters; the manger matters to Luke at least.

Luke is the gospel in which stories of the poor and the outcast and women get a special airing. Luke seems to be all about those on the margins, and Luke tells the story of Jesus with that hue. So yeah, the manger matters, for it puts the scandal of Jesus, the craziness of the gospel, in a tidy (or smelly?) message.

Was little baby Jesus actually laid in a manger — I don't know, it seems like a very strange and dirty place to put a newborn if you ask me. I'm not a parent, but I'd say Mary and Joseph would have to be crazy-tired or plain silly to put a newborn in a feeding trough. But the story of Jesus being laid in a manger speaks to the truth of the gospel. Here's how:

For one, the manger as metaphor reminds us of Jesus as the bread of life. Jesus is both food for our spiritual journey, and food that

physically nourishes us in the bread and wine of communion. Little baby Jesus in the food trough can point to big guy Jesus feeding the 5,000 and dining after the resurrection with the disciples at Emmaus.

Second, the manger scene sets up the story of Jesus as one of scandal. The son of God lies helpless in a food trough for dirty animals — scandal! What sort of God would figure that as a good idea? Only a crazy-wild-scandalous one that upends all our expectations of justice, love, and grace. Scandalous manger.

Finally, the manger scene, for me at least, sets Jesus as his own person — a poor one, yes, but his own man aside from his parents' influence. I'm not saying Jesus' is uninfluenced by his parents or culture, no way. But I'm picturing the birth scene as a comic strip with a final panel of an up-close baby Jesus in the manger. Mary and Joseph holding Jesus aren't the point; Jesus himself, set apart, poor, lowly, weak, vulnerable, even smelly — Jesus is the focal point of the story, so he hangs out by himself in the manger.

But that's just me. What do you think? Could you do Christmas without little baby Jesus in a food trough? Sure, leaving it out would ruin the pageant, but does the manger really matter to you?

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