

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

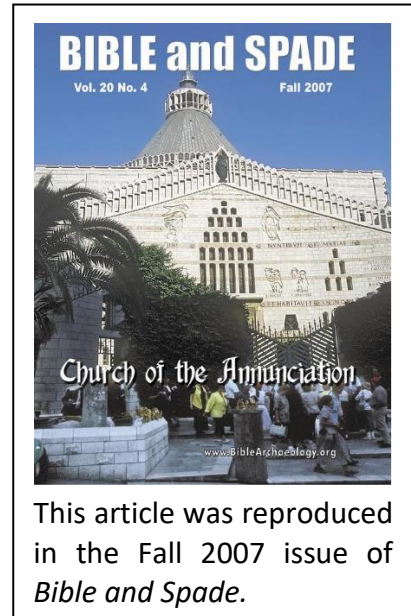
The Manger and the Inn

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Our understanding of the events surrounding the birth of Jesus are usually formed by our exposure to the traditional Christmas story. Upon further examination of the Biblical references, archaeological evidence and 1st century cultural context, the details surrounding Jesus' birth may be quite different than we have traditionally thought...

Why would Joseph, “of the lineage of David,” in the city of his family’s origin have to seek shelter in an inn and be turned out into a stable? Recently this question was put to me here in Beirut. This paper presents an answer. In this brief study I will attempt to demonstrate that Jesus was born in a private home and that the “inn” of Luke 2:7 is best understood as the guest room of the family in whose house the birth took place. Recent studies have primarily focused on Luke’s theological interests.¹ The concern here is the Palestinian cultural background of verses 6–7 which we understand to be traditional material. Indeed, a more precise analysis of that background is critical for both a clearer understanding of the original tradition as well as any interpretation of its use within the Lucan framework.

The Palestinian background of the entire text (vv. 1–7) is clear and strong. Five striking Middle Eastern details mark the passage. First, the author reflects an accurate knowledge



This article was reproduced in the Fall 2007 issue of *Bible and Spade*.

¹ M. Baily, “The Crib and Exegesis of Luke 2, 1–20,” *Irish Ecclesiastical Record*, 100 (1963), 358–376; R.E. Brown, “VI. The Birth and Naming of Jesus,” in *The Birth of the Messiah* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1977), pp. 393–434; J.D.M. Derrett, “The Manger: Ritual Law and Soteriology,” *Theology*, 74 (1971), 566–571, and “The Manger at Bethlehem: Light on St. Luke’s Technique from Contemporary Jewish Religious Law,” in *Studia Evangelica*, VI, edited by L. A. Livingston (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1973), pp. 86, 94; C.H. Giblin, “Reflections on the Sign of the Manger,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 29 (1957), 87, 101; M.D. Goulder and M.L. Sanderson, “St. Luke’s Genesis” *Journal of Theological Studies* 8 (1957), 12–30; H.L. MacNeill, “The Sitz im Leben of Luke 1:5–2:20,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 65 (1946), 123–130; R.M. Wilson, “Some Recent Studies in the Lucan Infancy Narrative,” *Studia Evangelica* I (Berlin: Akademie, 1959), 235–253; P. Winter, “Some Observations on the Language in the Birth and Infancy Stories of the Third Gospel,” *New Testament Studies* 1 (1954–55), 111–121.

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of Palestinian geography when he has the Holy Family “go up” from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Second, the custom of “swaddling” infants is a Palestinian village custom, which is observable as early as Ezekiel 16:4 and is still practiced today. Third, the extended family of David is referred to in the oriental fashion as a “house.” This is then amplified for the non-Middle Eastern reader with the fuller phrase, “house and lineage of David.” Fourth, a Davidic Christology informs the text. Finally, Bethlehem is given two names, “city of David” (which presupposes some knowledge of Old Testament history), and “Bethlehem.” Given the Palestinian nature of the material, we will attempt to examine the Middle Eastern cultural background of the story with care.

2

The cultural assumptions of this text are particularly critical because the story comes to us through a long Church tradition. Most modern versions of that story follow a familiar pattern. The Holy Family arrives late in the night. The local inn has its “no vacancy” sign clearly displayed. The tired couple seeks alternatives and finds none. With no other option, wearied from their journey and desperate for any shelter because of the imminent delivery, they spend the night in a stable where the child is born. But the cornerstone of this popular pageantry is flatly denied in the text of Luke. Popular tradition affirms that the child was born the night the family arrived. But in 2:4 we are told that Mary and Joseph “went up” to Bethlehem. The verse assumes their arrival. Then in verse six we are told, “And while they were there, the days were fulfilled for her to be delivered.” Thus the text affirms a time lapse between the arrival in Bethlehem and the birth of Jesus. Mary “fulfilled her days” in Bethlehem.² We can easily assume a few weeks have passed, perhaps even a month or more. Thus, the birth took place in shelter found by Joseph during those weeks. Was Joseph so totally incompetent that he could provide nothing by way of adequate housing after a significant number of days of searching? Was Bethlehem so hardhearted that, after days and days of intense negotiation, a man with a pregnant wife was turned out by everyone? Surely not. How then is the text to be understood? To be specific, where was the manger, and what was the inn? These questions will be discussed in turn.

For centuries, large sections of the Church have assumed that the manger was in an animal stable. Three overlapping questions arise here, which of necessity must be discussed together:

² A single Greek text from the sixth century (Bezae) gives an interesting variant to 6a. It reads, “As they arrived the days were completed,” rather than “It came to pass while they were there the days were fulfilled.” The Bezaen text has no support from any earlier Greek texts and none from the early versions. It would seem that Bezae has been accommodated to the myth of a late arrival on the night of the birth. The transcribers of the Bezae text were more consistent than we are. Our text denies a late night arrival theory and yet we manage to maintain it.

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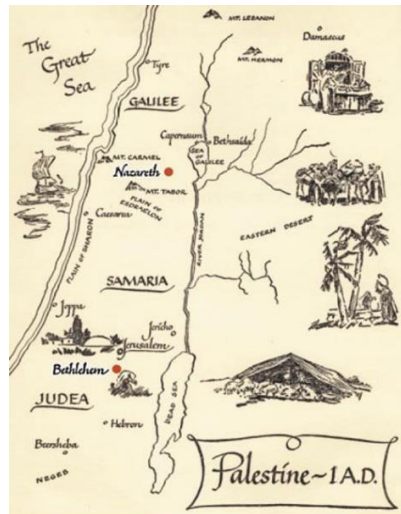
1. Was the birthplace a cave?
2. Was it a stable or a private home?
3. Was it inside or outside the village?

I will try to demonstrate that the place was likely a private home in the village, and may have been a cave.

3

In the second century, Justin tells us that Jesus was born in a cave outside the city of Bethlehem. The problem is not the cave as such, but rather Justin's placement of it "outside the village." Many Palestinian village homes are built into caves.³ Yet Justin's overall statement seems less than reliable. Due to the influence it has had, this text requires close examination. The statement reads:

But when the child was born in Bethlehem, since Joseph could not find a lodging in that village, he took up his quarters in a certain cave near the village; and while they were there Mary brought forth the Christ and placed Him in a manger, and here the Magi came from Arabia and found Him. I have repeated to you...what Isaiah foretold about the sign which foreshadowed the Cave.⁴



Map of first century Palestine. The journey of Joseph and Mary from Nazareth to Bethlehem was a significant distance for an expectant mother to have traveled in those days.

³ Dalmann has a diagram of just such a house from a village near Jerusalem. In this particular instance the entire one room house is in the cave. Cf. Gustaf Dalmann, *Arbeit und Sitte in Palästina*, Vol. VII (Gütersloh: Hermann Werner, 1940), plate n.40.

⁴ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, LXXIX. Cf. *The Writings of Justin Martyr and Athenagoras*, trans. by M. Dodds, G. Reith and B.P. Pratten (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1868), pp. 195–196.

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The Isaiah passage alluded to is Isaiah 33:16, which in its LXX version reads, “He shall dwell in a high cave of a strong rock.” One is obliged to suspect that Plummer is right when he accuses Justin of a tendency to “turn prophecy into history.”⁵ Indeed, all through his dialogue Justin tries very hard to convince his antagonist that Jesus is the Messiah by citing proof texts from the Old Testament. The above passage is no exception. We see the same methodology in his dealing with Genesis 49:11, which mentions tying a colt to a vine. In his commentary on the account of the passion in Luke 19:30–33, suddenly a vine appears. Justin writes, “For the foal of an ass stood bound to a vine at the entrance of the village.”⁶ Yet in another place Justin uses the same Old Testament verse, but applies his allegories in a different fashion and the vine disappears.⁷ Thus it would appear that tradition is created, or at least shaped, to fit “prophecy.”

On the positive side, we note the absence of the late-night arrival story. Justin has taken seriously the fact that the text clearly affirms an extended presence in the village before the birth. But the reader is left with two problems. First, the phrase “while they were there” is applied to the cave outside the village rather than to the village itself (as in Lk 2:4). Secondly, we are told that Bethlehem turned Joseph and Mary out and thus they turned to a cave outside the village. The latter is problematic on two counts. First, Mary’s relative, Elizabeth, whom she had just visited (Lk 1:39), lived somewhere nearby in the “hill country of Judea.” If Joseph was rejected in Bethlehem and had no remaining family in the area, he could have turned to Mary’s family and easily found shelter. Secondly, Luke tells us the shepherds visited the baby and were overjoyed at all they had heard and seen (Lk 2:20). As Middle Eastern peasants they surely would have noticed the accommodations offered the Holy Family. If they had been inadequate, as good villagers they would have immediately helped the family make other arrangements. The text gives no hint that anyone was displeased. Thus, despite its antiquity, Justin’s exegesis and his direct and indirect violation of the clear statements of Luke arouse grave suspicions regarding the accuracy of his account of a birth outside the village.

At the same time, the cave tradition itself may be historical. As indicated, many peasant homes in Palestine in the past were, or began as, caves. Thus, Justin’s “cave” and Matthew’s “house” (Mt 2:11) could be the same place. The manger is not a problem, as we will see. The same cave tradition (again outside the village) is repeated in the Protevangelium of James, along with the addition of the late-night-arrival myth. In the Protevangelium, the “days were fulfilled” not in the cave but along the way. Joseph and Mary have to stop because, as Mary says, “the child within me presses me, to come forth.” They are in a desert, and Joseph finds a cave (17:3–18:1) where the child is born and a

⁵ Plummer, *The Gospel According to S. Luke* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1922), p. 54.

⁶ Justin Martyr, *The First Apology of Justin* 1:32; cf. Op. cit., p. 34.

⁷ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, LIII; cf. Op. cit. p. 155.

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number of gynecological wonders take place.⁸ Here we have clearly moved from typology to exaggerated myth. Among other things, the hill country of Judea is hardly a desert (the pressure in both texts to have the birth take place outside of Bethlehem may be theological, as we will observe). Thus, having judged the outside-the-village tradition as textually inaccurate and historically unreliable, and having found no objections to the cave, we turn to an examination of the internal evidence of the text itself.

5

All of the internal cultural evidence from the story points to a birth in a private home. This data is of two kinds: the make-up of the Middle Eastern extended family, and the physical structure of the Palestinian peasant home.

In Luke 2 we are told that Joseph was returning to the village of Bethlehem from whence his family originated. The Middle Easterner is profoundly attached to his village of family origin. Indeed, though he himself may not have been born there, his home village is an integral part of his identity.⁹ Even if he has never been there before he can appear suddenly at the home of a distant cousin, recite his genealogy, and he is among friends. Joseph had only to say, “I am Joseph, son of Jacob, son of Matthan, son of Eleazar, the son of Eliud,” and the immediate response must have been, “You are welcome. What can we do for you?” If Joseph did have some member of the extended family resident in the village, he was honor-bound to seek them out. Furthermore, if he did not have family or friends in the village, as a member of the famous house of David, for the “sake of David,” he would still be welcomed into almost any village home. Yet, if we reject both of these alternatives and assume that Joseph did not have family or friends, and did not appeal to the name of David, even if he was a total stranger appearing in a strange village—still he would be able to find shelter for the birth of a child. Indeed, the birth of a child is a special occasion in any culture anywhere in the world. The idea that a woman about to give birth cannot find shelter and assistance from the village women in a Middle Eastern village, even if she is a total stranger, staggers the imagination. We are pressed to affirm on the basis of everything we know of Middle Eastern village life that Joseph most likely sought out and found adequate shelter in Bethlehem. This shelter, we assume, was an occupied private home, for it had a guest room that was full (as we will discover).

What then of the manger? The text tells us, “She gave birth to her first son, wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger.” The traditional understanding of this verse in the Western world moves along the following path. Jesus was laid in a manger.

⁸ O. Cullmann, “Infancy Gospels: the Protevangelium of James,” in *New Testament Apocrypha, Vol. I*, ed. by E. Hennecke and W. Schneemelcher (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963), pp. 383–388.

⁹ Naboth and his famous vineyard (I Kings 21:1–14) is a classical example of the peasant attachment to the inheritance of his fathers. This same attachment is why Palestinian refugees in the current Middle East cannot simply move elsewhere.

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Mangers are naturally found in animal stables. Ergo, Jesus was born in a stable. However, in the one-room peasant homes of Palestine and Lebanon, the manger is built into the floor of the house. The standard one-room village home consists of a living area for the family (Arabic *mastaba*), mangers built into the floor for feeding the animals (mostly at night), and a small area approximately four feet lower than the living area into which the family cow or donkey is brought at night (Arabic *ka'al-bayt*).

The family animals were kept in the one-room house at night, but taken out early each morning.

The text of the New Testament itself alludes to the one-room peasant home in Matthew 5:15 where it states that a lamp is put on a lampstand so that it “gives light to all who are in the house.” Obviously, the house must have one room if a single lamp shines on everyone in it. Furthermore, the one-room house with a lower end for the animals is presupposed in Luke 13:10–17. The family ox and/or donkey was brought into the house at night and taken out early each morning. Thus, everyone



knew that every family with any animals carried out this simple domestic chore at the start of each new day. To leave the animals in the house during the day was socially and culturally unthinkable. All of this is presupposed by the text. Jesus knew the head of the synagogue had untied his animals that very morning and led them out of the house. With calm assurance Jesus could announce to his face that he did, in fact, lead his animals out that very morning, confident there would be no reply. Were animals kept in a separate stable, the head of the synagogue could have saved face by asserting firmly, “I never touch the animals on the Sabbath.” But if he tried to claim that he leaves the animals in the house all day, the people in the synagogue would ridicule him with laughter! In short, no one would believe him. Thus the debate ends simply, “As he said this, all his adversaries were put to shame” (v.17). Thus, in the case of Luke 2:7, any Palestinian reading the phrase, “She laid him in a manger,” would immediately assume that the birth took place in a private home, because he knows that mangers are built into the floor of the raised terrace of the peasant home.

This assumption is an important part of the story. The shepherds were told that the presence of the baby in a manger was a sign for them. Shepherds were near the bottom of the social ladder and indeed, their profession was declared unclean by some of their

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rabbis.¹⁰ Many places would not welcome them. In many homes they would feel their poverty and be ashamed of their low estate. But no—they faced no humiliation as they visited that child, for he was laid in a manger. That is, he was born in a simple peasant home with the mangers in the family room. He was one of them. With that assurance they left with haste.

The details of the one-room peasant home with its manger in the floor have not gone unnoticed. William Thomson, long-term Presbyterian missionary in Lebanon, Syria and Palestine, wrote in 1857:

It is my impression that the birth actually took place in an ordinary house of some common peasant, and that the baby was laid in one of the mangers, such as are still found in the dwellings of farmers in this region.¹¹

The two leading 20th century authorities on Palestinian life and the New Testament are Gustaf Dalmann and E.F.F. Bishop. Bishop comments on Luke 2:7 and writes:

Perhaps...recourse was had to one of the Bethlehem houses with the lower section provided for the animals, with mangers "hollowed in stone," the dais being reserved for the family. Such a manger being immovable, filled with crushed straw, would do duty for a cradle. An infant might even be left in safety, especially if swaddled, when the mother was absent on temporary business.¹²

Dalman, in his study of the same verse, records:

In the East today the dwelling place of man and beast is often in one and the same room. It is quite the usual thing among the peasants for the family to live, eat, and sleep on a kind of raised terrace (Arab. *mastaba*) in the one room of the house, while the cattle, particularly the donkeys and oxen, have their place below on the actual floor (*ka' al-bet*) near the door. ... On this floor the mangers are fixed either to the floor or to the wall, or at the edge of the terrace.¹³

¹⁰ K.E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant* (Grand Rapids: Wm. Eerdmans, 1976), 147.

¹¹ William Thomson, *The Land and the Book, Vol. II* (New York: Harper and Brothers, © 1858, 1871), p. 503.

¹² E.F.F. Bishop, *Jesus of Palestine* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1955), p. 42. In spite of the passage here quoted, in his volume Bishop offers another alternative, that of a shed attached to a village guest house. This ignores the fact that mangers are in homes and the fact that the Holy Family has been in Bethlehem for some time. In a public lecture in Jerusalem in 1958 Bishop reaffirmed his earlier view that the birth was in a private home.

¹³ Gustaf Dalman, *Sacred Sites and Ways*, trans. from the German by Paul P. Levertoff (London: SPCK, 1935), p. 41.

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Dalman himself has nearly 100 pages of photographs and scale drawings of a wide variety of such peasant homes, all of which fit his two-level description given above.¹⁴ Thus a peasant home is the natural place for the Holy Family to have found shelter and the expected place to find a manger. In the case of Luke 2:7 the home which entertained the Holy Family presumably was not expecting a baby and did not have a cradle, but with a manger built into the floor there was little need for one.¹⁵ So why has this rather obvious alternative remained obscured? In some cases it would seem that the cultural assumptions of the exegetes have set it aside.

In spite of the above quotation, Dalman defends the traditional “lonely birth in a stable” for culturally revealing reasons. Dalman feels Joseph could have had space in the inn, but “no room for them” means “no suitable room for the birth” (italics mine).¹⁶ Dalman argues that neither “inn,” nor “guest house,” nor “private home” would have provided the necessary privacy, and thus Joseph must have sought out and found an empty stable. In defense of his views Dalman writes:

Anyone who has lodged with Palestinian peasants knows that notwithstanding their hospitality the lack of privacy is unspeakably painful. One cannot have a room to oneself, and one is never alone by day or by night. I myself often fled into the open country simply in order to be able to think.¹⁷

The amazing part of Dalman’s remarkable discussion is the assumption that the Holy Family wanted to be alone. Rather, it is the German professor who finds the lack of privacy “unspeakably painful,” not the Palestinian peasant. For the Middle Eastern peasant the exact opposite is true. To be alone is unspeakably painful. He does his thinking in a crowd. Naturally, in the case of a birth, the men will sit apart with the neighbors, but the room will be full of women assisting the midwife.¹⁸ A private home

¹⁴ G. Dalman. *Arbeit und Sitte in Palästina*, plates 1–91.

¹⁵ Everyone sleeps on mattresses on the raised terrace floor in the village home, so placing a baby there is perfectly natural.

¹⁶ G. Dalman, *Sacred Sites and Ways*, p. 41.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Miller suggests that the birth “was probably unattended” because Mary wraps her own child. Cf. D.G. Miller, *Saint Luke* (London: SCM, 1959), p. 35. The assumption of Miller’s remark is that the mother in her supposed weakened condition after childbirth would not choose to wrap her own child if she had had assistance. The difficulty with this assumption is that Palestinian peasant women are not physically incapacitated by childbirth. The present writer has heard first-hand accounts of Palestinian peasant women caught in the fields with labor pains who gave birth in the fields and then picked up the newborn child and returned to the village with no unusual effort required. The peasant woman is physically quite able to wrap her own child after a birth and it is only natural that Mary would choose to do so. After all, if she were alone, could not Joseph have wrapped the child for her? In short, when Mary wraps Jesus herself, this does not mean she is alone.

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would have bedding, facilities for heating water and all that is required for any peasant birth. Dalmann's Western sense of the need for privacy has led him to misread his own meticulously gathered data. His conclusion, that the need for privacy would have forced Mary and Joseph to reject the option of either inn or home in preference for an empty stable, is truly incredible when seen from a Middle Eastern point of view.

Brown observes that in inns people slept on a raised terrace with the animals in the same room. He remarks, "The public inns of the time should not be pictured as snug or comfortable according to medieval or modern standards.¹⁹ This we grant. But our point is that a room full of people sleeping together with the animals on a lower level in the same room is snug and comfortable in the eyes of the traditional Middle Eastern gregarious peasant, even in modern times. These reservations can be set aside; and we can say in summary that all aspects of the story, from the precise requirements of the text, to the structure of the peasant home, the dynamics of the extended family, and the sociology of the peasant village, point to a birth in a private home.



1800 view of Bethlehem as it looked and was drawn by the writer J. Leslie Porter who spent years living in Palestine.

This brings us to the second half of our inquiry. What, then, was the "inn"? The traditional understanding of Luke 2:7b, "For there was no place for them in the *kataluma*," is that Joseph went to the local commercial inn and was turned away, and then sought shelter in a stable, perhaps the stable of the inn itself. This understanding is seen here as

¹⁹ R.E. Brown, p. 400.

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inadequate, from both a cultural and linguistic point of view. In this section we will try to demonstrate that the crowded *kataluma* was most probably the “guest room” of the home in which the Holy Family found lodging.

This key word, *kataluma*, which in the West is traditionally translated as “inn,” has at least five meanings. Three of these—“inn,” “house,” and “guest room”—are worth considering in connection with Luke 2:7, and must be examined in turn.

First is the traditional “inn.” An inn by definition is a commercial establishment for strangers and travelers. Brown feels that some kind of a commercial inn is likely because

In New Testament times the religious feeling about hospitality to strangers (characteristic of tribal and nomadic cultures) had declined, so that if the traveler did not have friends or relatives in an area, he had to seek more impersonal shelter.²⁰

His only evidences for this remarkable statement are the facts that the Romans built stopping places for merchants and synagogues sometimes provided hospitality. However, the present author’s thirty-year experience with villagers in the Middle East is that the intensity of honor shown to the passing guest is still very much in force, especially when it is a returning son of the village who is seeking shelter. We have observed cases where a complete village has turned out in a great celebration to greet a young man who has suddenly arrived unannounced in the village, which his grandfather had left many years before. Naturally, differences of language, custom and politics obliged Roman imperialists to make their own arrangements. We grant that, occasionally, overflow Jewish guests were obliged to sleep in the synagogue. But that does not detract from the special hospitality that the Middle Eastern villager in past and present extends to guests in general, and to one of his own in particular. Thus, we can affirm that the presence of Roman mansions and the opening of synagogues for Jewish guests in no way demonstrated a significant decline of the traditional Middle Eastern hospitality, especially if the guest claimed the village as his ancestral home.

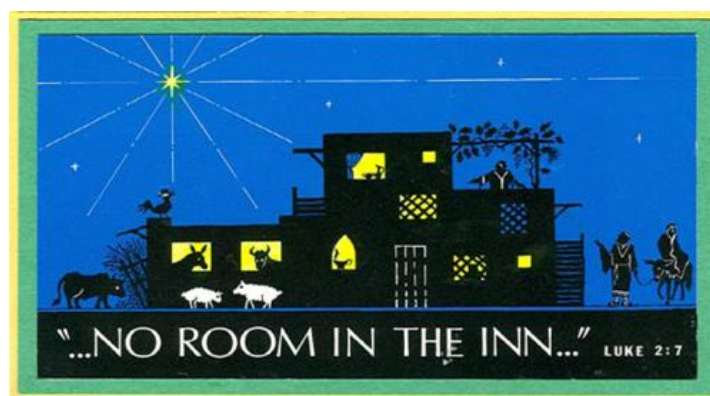
But more than this, the very idea of the inn is problematic on many grounds. First, Luke uses *pandokheion* to designate a commercial inn (cf. Lk 10:36). This common word for an inn is not found in our text. Second, the only other use of the noun *kataluma* in the Gospels is in Luke 22:11 (and its parallel passage in Mark 14:14) where it clearly does not mean an inn. Third, as we have observed, a man returning to his home village insults his family or friends by going to an inn. Fourth, it remains quite uncertain as to whether Bethlehem would have had a commercial inn. Jeremiah tells of a company of people who stayed at

²⁰ Ibid.

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“Geruth Chimham near Bethlehem” (Jer 41:17). The word “Geruth” may well mean a lodging place, but even so, this hardly demonstrates that such a place was still in business in Bethlehem 500 years later, after the area had been overrun by Babylonians, Greeks, Ptolemies, Seleucids and Romans. We are not aware of any evidence for a commercial inn near or in the village after the exile. Inns, then as now, were found on major roads. No major Roman road passed through Bethlehem, and small villages on minor roads had no inns. Brown’s phrase, “the well-known traveler’s inn at or near Bethlehem,” is hardly justified.²¹ Fifth, any type of inn is culturally unacceptable as a place for the birth of a child. It is not a matter of privacy (as suggested by Dalmann), but rather the deeply felt sense that a birth should take place in a home. The text does not say that the *kataluma* was not fit, but rather that it was full. Thus the *kataluma* was a place where the birth could appropriately have taken place, and an inn was not such a place. Finally, the Arabic and Syriac versions have never, in 1900 years, translated *kataluma* with the word “inn.” This translation is a product of our Western heritage. Thus, from many points of view, “inn” is inadequate as a translation of *kataluma*.

What, then, of “house”? The New English Bible translates *kataluma* as “house.” This understanding is an encouraging move in the right direction. With it the culturally unacceptable translation of “inn” is abandoned and the Holy Family is assumed to be under the protection and shelter of a private home. Yet the translation “house” creates two insurmountable problems. First, the manger is in the house, so why should we be told that Mary was driven out of the place where mangers are located, yet then be told she placed her child in a manger? Second, if Joseph and Mary were welcomed into a home, the master of the home would never have turned an expectant mother out into a stable. These considerations effectively eliminate this option.



“No room in the inn”? It appears that it would be more accurate to translate Luke 2:7 as, “No room in the guest room.” Gene Fackler

²¹ Ibid.

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What, then, of our third alternative? In Luke 2:7 *kataluma* is best understood as “guest room.” This is clearly what the word means in Luke 22:11 and Mark 14:14. As external linguistic evidence is uncertain, it would seem appropriate to give greater weight to internal evidence. Bishop writes, “If *kataluma* means guest room in Mark and Luke at the end of the Lord’s life why not at the start in Bethlehem?”²² This suggestion has recently been defended by Miguens.²³ Brown rejects Miguens’ proposal and leaves the problem unsolved. Brown argues first against *kataluma* being a “private home” of some relative because of the absence of “some explanation for the lack of hospitality to an in-law about to bear a child.”²⁴ He rejects a “room in a house” because that argument has been attached by some scholars to an unconvincing additional argument about a cradle slung from the ceiling, and because the *kataluma* has the definite article. In regard to Brown’s reasoning, we can reply that the private home he suggests may or may not be that of a relative. No unkindness or lack of hospitality is implied when the Holy Family is taken into the main family room of the home in which they are entertained. The guest room is full. The host is not expected to ask prior guests (or a recently married son) to leave. Such would be quite unthinkable and, in any case, unnecessary. The large family room is more appropriate in any case. We grant that the suggestion of a cradle slung from the ceiling is linguistically and culturally unconvincing, but the translation of “guest room” for *kataluma* should be separated from it in any case. In regard to the definite article, the “guest room” of Luke 22:11 also has the definite article, and there the meaning “guest room” is unmistakable. We would counter that the presence of the definite article reinforces our contention. It is not “a room” but rather “the guest room,” more specifically, “the guest room” of a home, naturally. This option admirably fulfills both the linguistic requirements of the text and the cultural requirements of the village scene. This translation gives new understanding to the story of Jesus’ birth. Joseph and Mary arrive in Bethlehem. They find shelter with a family whose separate guest room is full, and are accommodated among the family in acceptable village style. The birth takes place there on the raised terrace of the family home, and the baby is laid in a manger.

The text is cryptic and begs for some additional information. Yet, if we assume the perspective of a Palestinian reader, the present form of the verse makes good sense. The author records, “And she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger.” The (Palestinian) reader instinctively thinks, “Manger—oh—they are in the main family room. Why not the guest room?” The author instinctively replies, “Because there was no place for them in the guest room.” The reader

²² E.F.F. Bishop, p. 42.

²³ M. Miguens, “In una mangatoia, perche non c’era posto...,” *Bibbia e Oriente*, Vol. 2 (1960) p.193–198. This work, not available to me, is quoted by R. Brown, p. 400.

²⁴ R.E. Brown, p. 400.

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concludes, “Ah, yes—well, the family room is more appropriate anyway.” Thus, with the translation “guest room,” all of the cultural, historical and linguistic pieces fall into place.

This brings us to a further question, namely, did simple one-room homes have guest rooms? The objection could be raised that a one-room home was surely too simple to have a guest room. The assumption here is that no one wanted animals in the house, and anyone with the resources to build a guest room would surely have first built a stable, but such was not the case. The traditional Middle Eastern farmer lived close to nature and in fact did want the animals in his house for at least two reasons he could verbalize. First, the animals helped heat the house in winter.²⁵ Second, keeping them in the same room the villager slept in assured that they would not be stolen. Surely the head of the synagogue in Luke 13:15 could be classed socially a bit above the average farmer. Yet, as we observed, the text assumes that he has animals in the house. It is we in the West who have decided that life with these great gentle beasts is culturally unacceptable. The raised terrace on which the family ate, slept and lived was unsoiled by the animals, which were taken out each day and during which time the lower level was cleaned. Their presence was in no way offensive. Furthermore, Dalmann gives a number of detailed drawings of village homes which precisely document our point. In his plate n.31, the family room is a great long room requiring three sets of pillars to support the roof. Still, the home is one room, consisting of the family living room terrace (*Wohnterrasse*) and a lower level (*Hausboden*) with mangers (*Futtertroger*) built into the floor of the former. This same house has an adjoining special guest room (*Gastehaus*). Such a home precisely fits the requirements of Luke 2:7.²⁶

This leads us to ask whether this option has been considered by modern scholars other than Bishop, Dalmann, Thompson and Miguens. Scholarship has long noted “guest room” as a primary meaning for *kataluma*. Moulton and Milligan suggest “lodging place” for Luke 2:7 and observe, “Elsewhere in Biblical Greek, e.g. I Kings 1:13 (sic. 1:18), Mk 14:14, it has rather the sense of ‘guest room’.”²⁷ Plummer long ago questioned the translation “inn” for *kataluma*. He writes:

²⁵ This is a possible partial solution to the energy crises in the Western world that perhaps should be given some consideration!

²⁶ Dalmann, *Arbeit und Sitte*, plate n. 31. His plate n. 60 is a second example of the identical type of arrangement, only in this case the family room and the guest room are identical in size, indicating the importance of the guest in the village mind. Certainly every village home did not have a guest room. The home where the Holy Family stayed did, but it was full.

²⁷ J.H. Moulton and George Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. Eerdmans, c. 1930, 1963), p. 329.

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It is possible that Joseph had relied upon the hospitality of some friends in Bethlehem, whose “guest chamber” however was already full when he and Mary arrived. See on xxii.11.²⁸

Leaney used the translation “lodging house,” but does not discuss the question.²⁹ Marshall and Danker reject “inn,” preferring “room in a house,” but then affirm the birthplace to be some place for animals.³⁰ Brown leaves the question unanswered and translates “lodgings” for *kataluma*.³¹ In short, Luke’s own meaning of “guest room” has long been recognized but not used in translations due to an inadequate understanding of the wider cultural background of the Palestinian village home with its mangers in the family room.

This brings us to an important final question: how has the text been understood in the Middle East itself? Presumably, the cultural origins of the text would be understood here in the Middle East and reflected in translation and commentary. What then do we find?

We have observed that Justin allows for time spent in the village and then insists that Joseph found nothing and resorted to a cave outside the village. The cave tradition we have accepted. But why the insistence by Justin and the Protevangelium of James that the birth took place outside the village rather than in it as Luke simply states? After reading a number of Arabic and Syriac fathers’ writings on the question, one has the distinct feeling there is an unspoken subjective pressure to understand the birth as having taken place without witnesses because of the sacred nature of the “mother of God” giving birth to the “Son of God.” Even as the sacraments are consecrated in utter seclusion behind an altar screen, so the eyes of even the faithful might not look on the holy event, even so Middle Eastern Christology, Mariology and piety seem to combine to insist that the birth took place where no eye beheld the divine mystery. For this to be possible the story must take place outside the village in some secluded spot. Is it not possible to assume Justin’s outside-the-village account coming from this kind of theological pressure? We can add to this the early allegorization of the text of the New Testament, where attention is focused on the mystical and allegorical meanings behind words, and the exegete is not interested in the humanness of the incarnation in its Palestinian setting. A revealing retelling of Justin’s account, combined with elaborate allegory, can be seen in the work of

²⁸ Alfred Plummer, p. 54.

²⁹ A.R.C. Leaney, *A Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Luke* in Black’s New Testament Commentaries (Second Edition; London: Adam and Charles Black, 1966), p. 93.

³⁰ Frederick W. Danker, *Jesus and the New Age* (St. Louis: Clayton Publishing House, 1972), p.25. I.H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke* (Exeter: Paternoster. 1978), p. 107.

³¹ R.E. Brown, p.400.

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the great 12th century commentator of the Syriac church, ibn Salībî. He interprets Luke 2:7b by saying:

Spiritually interpreted, the wrapping with cloths and wraps signifies that the Christ bore our sins and that He was nailed to the Cross in order to cleanse the old man by His blood. Also the cloths and wraps are a sign of poverty and freedom from this world and its goods. He allowed Himself to be put down in a manger so that He could arise on behalf of the human race which is like beasts and animals in that it committed the crime of base rebellion. Thus Christ endured all of this to return us to Himself and to give us the power of life and the drink of the wine of joy.

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It is said that the manger refers to the tomb because the master will die and be buried in a tomb that looks like a manger. Luke explains the placing of the Christ in a manger by saying that there was no place for Mary and Joseph in any of the lodging places or houses because of the many travelers from the house of David coming for the registration. So the two of them were obliged to go to a cave near Bethlehem which was a shelter for animals (my translation).³²

Here we enter an entirely different exegetical world. This venerable father's account is rich in the spirituality of his age and his tradition is well worth reading. It is of little help, however, in our attempt at recovering the original Palestinian intent of the material. The Arabic and Syriac versions, like Brown, have opted for neutral words, such as "lodgings," as their traditions focus on the allegories of the medieval period. What, then, does all of this mean for the faithful as we look forward to the recollection of the miracle of the incarnation?

We all face the enormous weight of church tradition which surrounds us with the "no room at the inn" mythology. If our conclusions are valid, thousands of good Christmas sermons, plays, filmstrips, films, poems, songs and books will have to be discarded. But is the traditional myth of a lonely birth in a stable a help or a hindrance to the reality the text proclaims? Surely a more authentic cultural understanding enhances the meaning of the story, rather than diminishing it. Jesus was rejected at His birth by Herod, but the Bethlehem shepherds welcomed Him with great joy, as did the common people in later years. The city of David was true to its own, and the village community provided for Him. He was born among them, in the natural setting of the birth of any village boy, surrounded by helping hands and encouraging women's voices. For centuries Palestinian peasants have been born on the raised terraces of the one-room family homes. The birth

³² Dīyunīsiyūs Ya'qūb ibn al-Salībî. Kitāb al Durr al-Farīd fī Tafsīr al-'Ahd al-Jadīd (Cairo: n.p., 1914), Vol. II. p. 44.

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of Jesus was no different. His incarnation was authentic. His birth most likely took place in the natural place for a peasant to be born—in a peasant home.

We can and should theologize on the glorious resurrected Christ who meets us in the Eucharist. But a proper understanding of the story of His birth forces us to not lose sight of the One who “took upon himself the form of a servant and was found in the likeness of man.” And, after all, it is still possible for us to sing:

Ox and ass before Him bow,
For He is in the manger now,
Christ is born to save,
Christ is born to save.

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