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## The Story of Jesus' Birth

LUKE 2:1-20

THE TRADITIONAL EVENTS OF THE CHRISTMAS STORY are well-known to all Christians. The birth of Jesus includes three wise men bearing gifts, shepherds in the fields in mid-winter, a baby born in a stable and “no room in the inn.” These aspects of the account are firmly fixed in the popular mind. The question becomes: Is there a critical distinction to be made between the text and the traditional understanding of it? Have the centuries added meanings to our understanding of the text that are not there?<sup>1</sup>

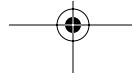
A diamond ring is admired and worn with pride, but with the passing of time, it needs to be taken to a jeweler to be cleaned to restore its original brilliance. The more the ring is worn, the greater the need for occasional cleaning. The more familiar we are with a biblical story, the more difficult it is to view it outside of the way it has always been understood. And the longer imprecision in the tradition remains unchallenged, the deeper it becomes embedded in Christian consciousness. The birth story of Jesus is such a story.

The traditional understanding of the account in Luke 2:1-18 contains a number of critical flaws. These include:

1. Joseph was returning to the village of his origin. In the Middle East, historical memories are long, and the extended family, with its connection to its village of origin, is important. In such a world a man like Joseph could have appeared in Bethlehem, and told people, “I am Joseph, son of Heli, son of Matthat, the son of Levi” and most homes in town would be open to him.
2. Joseph was a “royal.” That is, he was from the family of King David. The family of David was so famous in Bethlehem that local folk apparently called the

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<sup>1</sup>For a technical discussion of this text see Kenneth E. Bailey, “The Manger and the Inn: The Cultural Background of Luke 2:7,” *Theological Review* 2 (1979): 33-44.





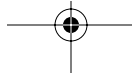
town the “City of David” (as often happens). The official name of the village was Bethlehem. Everyone knew that the Hebrew Scriptures referred to Jerusalem as the “City of David.” Yet locally, many apparently called Bethlehem the “City of David” (Lk 2:4). Being of that famous family, Joseph would have been welcome anywhere in town.

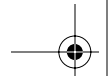
3. In every culture a woman about to give birth is given special attention. Simple rural communities the world over always assist one of their own women in childbirth regardless of the circumstances. Are we to imagine that Bethlehem was an exception? Was there no sense of honor in Bethlehem? Surely the *community* would have sensed its responsibility to help Joseph find adequate shelter for Mary and provide the care she needed. To turn away a descendent of David in the “City of David” would be an unspeakable shame on the entire village.
4. Mary had relatives in a nearby village. A few months prior to the birth of Jesus, Mary had visited her cousin Elizabeth “in the hill country of Judea” and was welcomed by her. Bethlehem was located in the center of Judea. By the time, therefore, that Mary and Joseph arrived in Bethlehem they were but a short distance from the home of Zechariah and Elizabeth. If Joseph had failed to find shelter in Bethlehem he would naturally have turned to Zechariah and Elizabeth. But did he have time for those few extra miles?
5. Joseph had time to make adequate arrangements. Luke 2:4 says that Joseph and Mary “went up from Galilee to Judea,” and verse 6 states, “*while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered*” (KJV, italics added).<sup>2</sup> The average Christian thinks that Jesus was born the same night the holy family arrived—hence Joseph’s haste and willingness to accept any shelter, even the shelter of a stable. Traditional Christmas pageants reinforce this idea year after year.

In the text, the time spent in Bethlehem before the birth is not specified. But it was surely long enough to find adequate shelter or to turn to Mary’s family. This late-night-arrival-imminent-birth myth is so deeply engrained in the popular Christian mind that it is important to inquire into its origin. Where did this idea come from?

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<sup>2</sup>Some modern translations hide the fact that a number of days passed in Bethlehem before Jesus was born. The original text (along with the King James Version) is precise.





## A CHRISTIAN NOVEL

The source of this misinterpretation stems from approximately two hundred years after the birth of Jesus, when an anonymous Christian wrote an expanded account of the birth of Jesus that has survived and is called *The Protevangelium of James*.<sup>3</sup> James had nothing to do with it. The author was not a Jew and did not understand Palestinian geography or Jewish tradition.<sup>4</sup> In that period many wrote books claiming famous people as the authors.

Scholars date this particular “novel” to around the year A.D. 200, and it is full of imaginative details. Jerome, the famous Latin scholar, attacked it as did many of the popes.<sup>5</sup> It was composed in Greek but translated into Latin, Syriac, Armenian, Georgian, Ethiopic, Coptic and old Slavonic. The author had clearly read the Gospel stories, but he (or she) was unfamiliar with the geography of the Holy Land. In the novel, for example, the author describes the road between Jerusalem and Bethlehem as a desert. It is not a desert but rather rich farm land.<sup>6</sup> In the novel, as they approach Bethlehem, Mary says to Joseph, “Joseph, take me down from the ass, for the child within me presses me, to come forth.”<sup>7</sup> Responding to this request, Joseph leaves Mary in a cave and rushes off to Bethlehem to find a midwife. After seeing fanciful visions on the way, Joseph returns with the midwife (the baby has already been born) to be faced with a dark cloud and then a bright light overshadowing the cave. A woman by the name of Salome appears out of nowhere and meets the midwife who tells her that a virgin has given birth and is still a virgin. Salome expresses doubt at this marvel and her hand turns leprous as a result. After an examination, Mary’s claim is vindicated. Then an angel suddenly “stands” before Salome and tells her to touch the child. She does so and the diseased hand is miraculously healed—and the novel spins on from there. Authors of popular novels usually have good imaginations. An important part of this novel’s story line is that Jesus was born even before his parents arrived in Bethlehem. This novel is the earliest known reference to the notion that Jesus was born the night Mary and Joseph arrived in or near Bethlehem. The average Christian, who has never heard of this book, is nonetheless unconsciously influenced by it.<sup>8</sup> The novel

<sup>3</sup>Oscar Cullman, “Infancy Gospels,” in *New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. Wilhelm Schneemelcher (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963), 1:370-88.

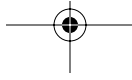
<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 372.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 373.

<sup>6</sup>I lived on that road for ten years, and at that time it ran through flourishing olive orchards.

<sup>7</sup>*The Protevangelium of James* 17:3, in *New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. Wilhelm Schneemelcher (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963).

<sup>8</sup>Curiously, Codex Bezae (5th-6th century A.D.) changes the text to read “as they arrived she brought forth . . .” This change in the Greek text affirms the idea that Jesus was born just as they arrived.





is a fanciful expansion of the Gospel account, not the Gospel story itself.

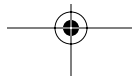
To summarize the problems in the traditional interpretation of Luke 2:1-7, Joseph was returning to his home village where he could easily find shelter. Because he was a descendent of King David nearly all doors in the village were open to him. Mary had relatives nearby and could have turned to them but did not. There was plenty of time to arrange suitable housing. How could a Jewish town fail to help a young Jewish mother about to give birth? In the light of these cultural and historical realities, how are we to understand the text? Two questions arise: Where was the manger, and What was the “inn”?

In answer to both questions, it is evident that the story of the birth of Jesus (in Luke) is authentic to the geography and history of the Holy Land. The text records that Mary and Joseph “went up” from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Bethlehem is built on a ridge which is considerably higher than Nazareth.<sup>9</sup> Second, the title “City of David” was probably a local name to which Luke adds “which is called Bethlehem” for the benefit of nonlocal readers. Third, the text informs the reader that Joseph was “of the *house* and *lineage* of David.” In the Middle East, “the house of so-and-so” means “the family of so-and-so.” Greek readers of this account could have visualized a building when they read “house of David.” Luke may have added the term *lineage* to be sure his readers understood him. He did not change the text, which was apparently already fixed in the tradition when he received it (Lk 1:2). But he was free to add a few explanatory notes. Fourth, Luke mentions that the child was wrapped with swaddling cloths. This ancient custom is referred to in Ezekiel 16:4 and is still practiced among village people in Syria and Palestine. Finally, a Davidic Christology surfaces in the account. These five points emphasize that the story was composed by a messianic Jew at a very early stage in the life of the church.

For the Western mind the word *manger* invokes the words *stable* or *barn*. But in traditional Middle Eastern villages this is not the case. In the parable of the rich fool (Lk 12:13-21) there is mention of “storehouses” but not barns. People of great wealth would naturally have had separate quarters for animals.<sup>10</sup> But simple village homes in Palestine often had but two rooms. One was exclusively for guests. That room could be attached to the end of the house or be a “prophet’s chamber” on the roof, as in the story of Elijah (1 Kings 17:19). The main room was a “family room” where the entire family cooked, ate, slept and lived. The end of the room next to the door, was either a few feet lower than the rest of the floor or blocked off with

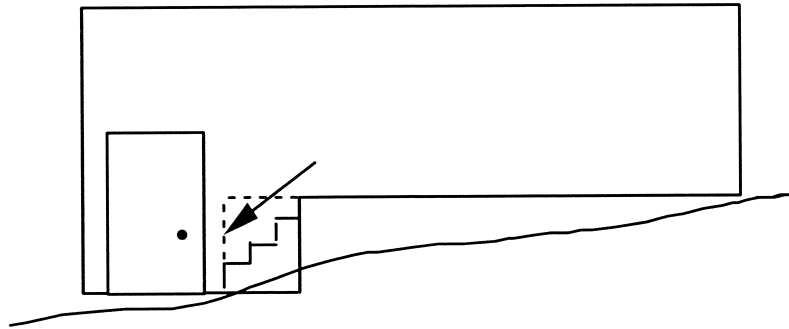
<sup>9</sup>Nazareth is 1,600 feet above sea level, while Bethlehem is built on a ridge and is 2,250 feet high.

<sup>10</sup>Yizhar Hirschfeld with M. F. Vamosh, “A Country Gentleman’s Estate: Unearthing the Splendors of Ramat Hanadiv,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 31, no 2 (2005): 18-31.





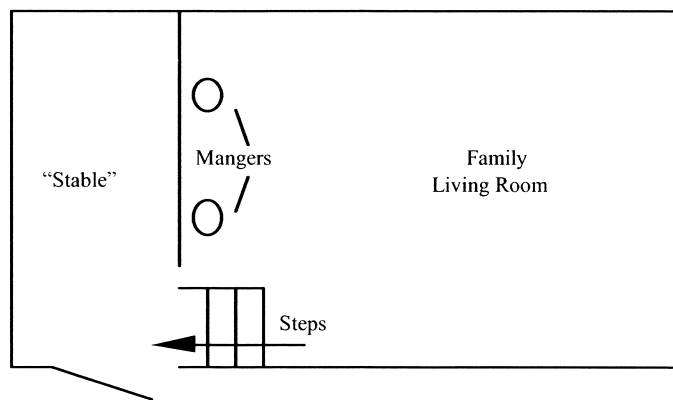
heavy timbers. Each night into that designated area, the family cow, donkey and a few sheep would be driven. And every morning those same animals were taken out and tied up in the courtyard of the house. The animal stall would then be cleaned for the day. Such simple homes can be traced from the time of David up to the middle of the twentieth century. I have seen them both in Upper Galilee and in Bethlehem. Figure 1.1 illustrates such a house from the side.



**Figure 1.1. Typical village home in Palestine viewed from the side**

The roof is flat and can have a guest room built on it, or a guest room can be attached to the end of the house. The door on the lower level serves as an entrance for people and animals. The farmer *wants* the animals in the house each night because they provide heat in winter and are safe from theft.

The same house viewed from above is illustrated in figure 1.2.



**Figure 1.2. Typical village home in Palestine viewed from above**





The elongated circles represent mangers dug out of the lower end of the living room. The “family living room” has a slight slope in the direction of the animal stall, which aids in sweeping and washing. Dirt and water naturally move downhill into the space for the animals and can be swept out the door. If the family cow is hungry during the night, she can stand up and eat from mangers cut out of the floor of the living room. Mangers for sheep can be of wood and placed on the floor of the lower level.

This style of traditional home fits naturally into the birth story of Jesus. But such homes are also implicit in Old Testament stories. In 1 Samuel 28, Saul was a guest in the house of the medium of Endor when the king refused to eat. The medium then took a fatted calf that was “in the house” (v. 24), killed it, and prepared a meal for the king and his servants. She did not fetch a calf from the field or the barn, but *from within the house*.

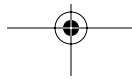
The story of Jephthah in Judges 11:29-40 assumes the same kind of one-room home. On his way to war, Jephthah makes a vow that if God will grant him victory on his return home he will sacrifice the first thing that comes out of his house. Jephthah wins his battle but as he returns home, tragically, and to his horror, his daughter is the first to step out of the house. Most likely he returned early in the morning and fully expected one of the animals to come bounding out of the room in which they had been cramped together all night. The text is not relating the story of a brutal butcher. The reader is obliged to assume that it never crossed his mind that a member of his family would step out first. Only with this assumption does the story make any sense. Had his home housed only human beings, he would never have made such a vow. If only people lived in the house, who was he planning to murder and why? The story is a *tragedy* because he expected *an animal*.

These same simple homes also appear in the New Testament. In Matthew 5:14-15, Jesus says,

“No one after lighting a lamp puts it under a bushel, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house.”

Obviously, Jesus is assuming a typical village home with one room. If a single lamp sheds light on *everybody in the house*, that house can only have one room.

Another example of the same assumption appears in Luke 13:10-17 where on the sabbath Jesus healed a woman who “was bent over and could not fully straighten herself.” Jesus called to her and said, “Woman, you are *freed* [lit. untied] from your infirmity.” The head of the synagogue was angry because Jesus had “worked” on the sabbath. Jesus responded, “You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his ass from the manger, and lead it away to water





it?" (v. 15). His point being: Today, on the sabbath you untied an *animal*. I "untied" a *woman*. How can you blame me? The text reports that "all his adversaries were put to shame" (v. 17).

Clearly, Jesus knew that every night his opponents had at least an ox or an ass *in their houses*. That morning everyone in the room had taken animals out of houses and tied them up outside. The ruler of the synagogue did not reply, "Oh, I never touch the animals on the sabbath." It is unthinkable to leave animals in the house during the day, and there were no stables. One of the earliest and most carefully translated Arabic versions of the New Testament was made, probably in Palestine, in the ninth century. Only eight copies have survived. This great version (translated from the Greek) records this verse as: "does not every one of you untie his ox or his donkey from the manger *in the house* and take it outside and water it?"<sup>11</sup> No Greek manuscript has the words "in the house" in this text. But this ninth-century Arabic-speaking Christian translator understood the text correctly. Doesn't everybody have a manger in the house? In his world, simple Middle Eastern villagers always did!

The one-room village home with mangers has been noted by modern scholars as well. William Thompson, an Arabic-speaking Presbyterian missionary scholar of the mid-nineteenth century observed village homes in Bethlehem and wrote, "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."<sup>12</sup>

The Anglican scholar E. F. F. Bishop, who lived in Jerusalem from 1922 to 1950, wrote:

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.<sup>13</sup>

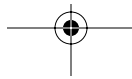
For more than a hundred years scholars resident in the Middle East have understood Luke 2:7 as referring to a family room with mangers cut into the floor at one end. If this interpretation is pursued, there remains the question of the identity of "the inn." What precisely was it that was full?

If Joseph and Mary were taken into a private home and at birth Jesus was placed in a manger in that home, how is the word *inn* in Luke 2:7 to be under-

<sup>11</sup>Vatican Arabic MSS 95, Folio 71, italics added.

<sup>12</sup>William Thompson, *The Land and the Book* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1871): 2:503.

<sup>13</sup>E. F. F. Bishop, *Jesus of Palestine* (London: Lutterworth, 1955), p. 42.





stood? Most English translations state that after the child was born, he was laid in a manger “because there was no room for them in the *inn*.” This sounds as if they were rejected by the people of Bethlehem. Was that really the case?

There is a trap in traditional language. “No room in the inn” has taken on the meaning of “the inn had a number of rooms and all were occupied.” The “no vacancy sign” was already “switched on” when Joseph and Mary arrived in Bethlehem. But the Greek word does not refer to “a room in an inn” but rather to “space” (*topos*) as in “There is no *space* on my desk for my new computer.” It is important to keep this correction in mind as we turn to the word we have been told was an “inn.”

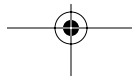
The Greek word in Luke 2:7 that is commonly translated “inn” is *katalyma*. This is not the ordinary word for a commercial inn. In the parable of the good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37) the Samaritan takes the wounded man to an inn. The Greek word in that text is *pandocheion*. The first part of this word means “all.” The second part, as a verb, means “to receive.” The *pandocheion* is the place that receives all, namely a commercial inn. This common Greek term for an inn was so widely known across the Middle East that over the centuries it was absorbed as a Greek loan word into Armenian, Coptic, Arabic and Turkish with the same meaning—a commercial inn.

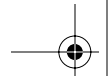
If Luke expected his readers to think Joseph was turned away from an “inn” he would have used the word *pandocheion*, which clearly meant a commercial inn. But in Luke 2:7 it is a *katalyma* that is crowded. What then does this word mean?

Literally, a *katalyma* is simply “a place to stay” and can refer to many types of shelters. The three that are options for this story are *inn* (the English translation tradition), *house* (the Arabic biblical tradition of more than one thousand years), and *guest room* (Luke’s choice). Indeed, Luke used this key term on one other occasion in his Gospel, where it is defined in the text itself. In Luke 22 Jesus tells his disciples:

Behold, when you have entered the city, a man carrying a jar of water will meet you; follow him into the house which he enters, and tell the householder, ‘The Teacher says to you, Where is the guest room [*katalyma*] where I am to eat the passover with my disciples?’ And he will show you a large upper room furnished; there make ready. (Lk 22:10-12)

Here, the key word, *katalyma*, is defined; it is “an upper room,” which is clearly a *guest room in a private home*. This precise meaning makes perfect sense when applied to the birth story. In Luke 2:7 Luke tells his readers that Jesus was placed in a *manger* (in the family room) because in that home *the guest room* was already full.





If at the end of Luke's Gospel, the word *katalyma* means a guest room attached to a private home (22:11), why would it not have the same meaning near the beginning of his Gospel? The family room, with an attached guest room, would have looked something like the diagram below:

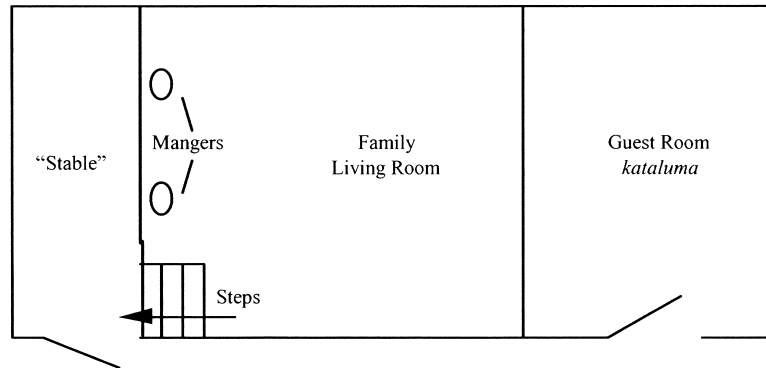


Figure 1.3. Typical village home in Palestine with attached guest room

This option for *katalyma* was chosen by Alfred Plummer in his influential commentary published in the late nineteenth century. Plummer writes, "It is a little doubtful whether the familiar translation 'in the inn' is correct. . . . It is possible that Joseph had relied upon the hospitality of some friend in Bethlehem, whose 'guest-chamber,' however, was already full when he and Mary arrived."<sup>14</sup>

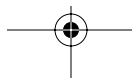
I. Howard Marshall makes the same observation but does not expand on its significance.<sup>15</sup> Fitzmyer calls the *katalyma* a "lodge," which for him is a "public caravansary or khan."<sup>16</sup> I am convinced that Plummer was right. If so, why was this understanding not adopted by the church, either in the East or the West?

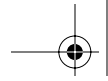
In the West the church has not noticed the problems I have already listed. When the traditional understanding of the story, therefore, is "not broken," it would seem that the best course to follow is "don't fix it." But once the problems with the traditional view of the text are clarified, they cry out for solutions. On the other side, in the East, the dominant Christian presence is the venerated Orthodox Church in its various branches. What of its traditions?

<sup>14</sup>Alfred Plummer, *Gospel According to S. Luke*, 5th ed., International Critical Commentary (1922; reprint, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1960), p. 54.

<sup>15</sup>Marshall, *Gospel of Luke*, p. 107.

<sup>16</sup>Fitzmyer, *Gospel According to Luke (I-LX)*, p. 408.





Christianity in the Middle East has traditionally focused on the birth having taken place in a cave. Many simple homes in traditional villages in the Holy Land begin in caves and are then expanded. The tradition of the cave can be traced to Justin Martyr, writing in the middle of the second century. What I have already suggested is in harmony with this tradition. The Eastern tradition has always maintained that Mary was alone when the child was born. In worship even the altar is hidden from the eyes of the faithful, and the event of the elements becoming the body and blood of Jesus (in the Eucharist) takes place out of sight. How much more should the “Word that became flesh” take place without witnesses? Father Matta al-Miskin, a twentieth-century Coptic Orthodox scholar and monk who wrote six weighty commentaries in Arabic on the four Gospels, reflects with wonder on Saint Mary alone in the cave. He writes:

My heart goes out to this solitary mother.  
How did she endure labor pains alone?  
How did she receive her child with her own hands?  
How did she wrap him while her strength was totally exhausted?  
What did she have to eat or drink?  
O women of the world, witness this mother of the Savior.  
How much did she suffer and how much does she deserve honor,  
... along with our tenderness and love?<sup>17</sup>

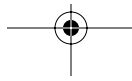
This genuine and touching piety is naturally not interested in considering birth in a private home with all the care and support that other women would have given. Therefore, among Christians, East and West, there have been understandable reasons why a new understanding of this text has been neglected.

To summarize, a part of what Luke tells us about the birth of Jesus is that the holy family traveled to Bethlehem, where they were received into a private home. The child was born, wrapped and (literally) “put to bed” (*anaklinō*) in the living room in the manger that was either built into the floor or made of wood and moved into the family living space. Why weren’t they invited into the family guest room, the reader might naturally ask? The answer is that the guest room was already occupied by other guests. The host family graciously accepted Mary and Joseph into the family room of their house.

The family room would, naturally, be cleared of men for the birth of the child, and the village midwife and other women would have assisted at the birth. After the child was born and wrapped, Mary put her newborn to bed in a manger filled

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<sup>17</sup>Matta al-Miskin, *al-Injil, bi-Hasab Bisharat al-Qiddis Luqa* (Cairo: Dayr al-Qiddis Anba Maqar, 1998), p. 128 (my translation).





with fresh straw and covered him with a blanket. When Jesus engaged in ministry as an adult “The common people heard him gladly” (Mk 12:37 KJV). That same acceptance was evident at his birth. What then of the shepherds?

The story of the shepherds reinforces the picture I have presented. Shepherds in first century Palestine were poor, and rabbinic traditions label them as unclean.<sup>18</sup> This may seem peculiar because Psalm 23 opens with “The LORD is my shepherd.” It is not clear how such a lofty metaphor evolved into an unclean profession. The main point seems to be that flocks ate private property.<sup>19</sup> Five lists of “proscribed trades” are recorded in rabbinic literature and shepherds appear in three out of the five.<sup>20</sup> These lists hail from post-New Testament times but could reflect developing ideas alive at the time of Jesus. In any case, they were lowly, uneducated types.

In Luke 2:8-14 the first people to hear the message of the birth of Jesus were a group of shepherds who were close to the bottom of the social scale in their society. The shepherds heard and were afraid. Initially, they were probably frightened by the sight of the angels, but later they were asked to *visit* the child! From their point of view, if the child was truly the Messiah, the parents would reject the shepherds if they tried to visit him! How could shepherds be convinced to expect a welcome?

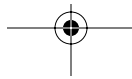
The angels anticipated this anxiety and told the shepherds they would find the baby wrapped (which was what peasants, like shepherds, did with their newly born children). Furthermore, they were told that he was lying in a *manger!* That is, they would find the Christ child in an ordinary peasant home such as theirs. He was not in a governor’s mansion or a wealthy merchant’s guest room but in a simple two-room home like theirs. This was *really* good news. Perhaps they would not be told, “Unclean shepherds—be gone!” This was *their sign*, a sign for lowly shepherds.

With this special sign of encouragement, the shepherds proceeded to Bethlehem in spite of their “low degree” (Lk 1:52). On arrival they reported their story and everyone was amazed. Then they left “praising God for all that they had heard and seen.” The word *all* obviously included *the quality of the hospitality* that they witnessed on arrival. Clearly, they found the holy family in perfectly adequate accommodations, not in a dirty stable. If, on arrival, they had found a smelly stable, a frightened young mother and a desperate Joseph, they would have said, “This is outrageous! Come home with us! Our women will take care of you!” Within five

<sup>18</sup>Joachim Jeremias, “Despised Trades and Jewish Slaves,” in *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), pp. 303-4.

<sup>19</sup>J. D. M. Derrett, “Law in the New Testament: The Parable of the Prodigal Son,” *New Testament Studies* 14 (1967): 66, n. 1.

<sup>20</sup>Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, pp. 303-12.





minutes the shepherds would have moved the little family to their own homes. The honor of the entire village would rest on their shoulders and they would have sensed their responsibility to do their duty. The fact that they walked out, without moving the young family, means that the shepherds felt they could not offer better hospitality than what had already been extended to them.

Middle Eastern people have a tremendous capacity for showing honor to guests. This appears as early as the story of Abraham and his guests (Gen 18:1-8) and continues to the present. The shepherds left the holy family while praising God for the birth of the Messiah and for the quality of the hospitality in the home in which he was born. This is the capstone to the story of the shepherds. The child was born for the likes of the shepherds—the poor, the lowly, the rejected. He also came for the rich and the wise who later appear with gold, frankincense and myrrh.

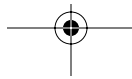
Matthew informs his readers that the wise men entered *the house* where they saw Mary and the child (Mt 2:1-12). The story in Matthew confirms the suggestion that Luke's account describes a birth in a private home.

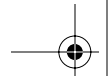
With this understanding in mind, all the cultural problems I have noted are solved. Joseph was not obliged to seek a commercial inn. He does not appear as an inept and inadequate husband who cannot arrange for Mary's needs. Likewise, Joseph did not anger his wife's relatives by failing to turn to them in a crisis. The child was born in the normal surroundings of a peasant home sometime after they arrived in Bethlehem, and there was no heartless innkeeper with whom to deal. A member of the house of David was not humiliated by rejection as he returned to the village of his family's origins. The people of Bethlehem offered the best they had and preserved their honor as a community. The shepherds were not hardhearted oafs without the presence of mind to help a needy family of strangers.

Our Christmas crèche sets remain as they are because "ox and ass before him bow, / for he is in the manger now." But that manger was in a warm and friendly home, not in a cold and lonely stable. Looking at the story in this light strips away layers of interpretive mythology that have built up around it. Jesus was born in a simple two-room village home such as the Middle East has known for at least three thousand years. Yes, we must rewrite our Christmas plays, but in rewriting them, the story is enriched, not cheapened.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Cf. Kenneth E. Bailey, *Open Hearts in Bethlehem* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2005). This is a Christmas musical constructed around the ideas presented here.





**SUMMARY: THE STORY OF JESUS' BIRTH**

1. Jesus' incarnation was complete. At his birth the holy family was welcomed into a peasant home. These people did their best and it was enough. At his birth the common people sheltered him. The wise men came to the *house*. When Jesus was an adult, the common people heard him gladly.
2. The shepherds were welcome at the manger. The unclean were judged to be clean. The outcasts became honored guests. The song of angels was sung to the simplest of all.

I know that in an increasingly secular world "Merry Christmas" competes with "Happy Holidays." I long to turn the traditional "Merry Christmas" the other direction and introduce a new greeting for Christmas morning.

Greeting: The Savior is born.

Response: He is born in a manger.

O that we might greet each other in this manner.

