

# EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY

VOLUME 4

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Volume 4 • Number 2 • October 1980

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## Evangelical Review of Theology

*Articles and book reviews selected from publications  
worldwide for an international readership,  
interpreting the Christian faith for contemporary  
living.*

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Published by  
THE PATERNOSTER PRESS

## CLOSER ACCURACY IN THE EPISTLES

In the Epistles and Revelation less liberty is taken and the closer rendering retains the necessary theological precision. **P. 200**

*Notes* NIV retains for the most part the accepted English theological terminology such as justification, atonement, reconciliation, wrath etc. An exception is “credited” for “imputed” in [Romans 4](#) but this seems reasonable. “Sinful nature”, is an improvement on “flesh” in [Romans 7](#) and [8](#). So is “slaves” for “servants” in [Romans 6](#). It is difficult to find any NIV rendering of the meaning of terms for which there is not some justification. Passages in the AV which can cause readers to lose the thread are rendered more clearly without loss of accuracy, e.g. [Romans 2:25–27](#); [5:12–19](#).

In the great majority of instances NIV is an improvement on AV in the matter of tenses, e.g. [Acts 2:47](#) “who were being saved” (pres. part), [Romans 6:4](#) “we were buried” (aorist), [Romans 5:12](#) “all sinned” (aorist), [Romans 9:17](#) “I raised you up” (aorist), [Romans 10:3](#) “they did not submit” (aorist), [1 Cor. 1:18](#) “are perishing, are being saved” (pres. part), [1 Cor. 2:6](#) “are coming to nothing” (pres. part), [Rev. 1:5](#) “him who loves us” (pres. part).

## DOCTRINAL PURITY

No major doctrinal issue is raised by any deviations we could discover from the original text used by the translators.

*Notes* In fact their choice of original text is not dictated by doctrinal considerations. See para. 1 above.

There are deviations from the Greek which the Committee would criticise as we have indicated. But we could find no renderings of root meanings or choice of tenses which seemed motivated by an heretical doctrinal position.

The absence of the term “propitiation” will disappoint some, but “atoning sacrifice” which replaces it retains the necessary objective reference lacking in other modern translations.

An overall study of the NIV NT would not bring the reader into heresy. Under the blessing of the Holy Spirit it could bring him to believe in Him who said, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples” [John 8:31](#). **p. 201**

# The Manger and the Inn: The Cultural Background of Luke 2:7

Kenneth E. Bailey

*Reprinted from Theological Review (November 1979) with permission*

*This significant article shows how the cultural and theological assumptions of the Church throughout the centuries have influenced the interpretation of the text of Scripture. It calls us to a more critical examination of our assumptions. We offer this article not because Dr.*

*Bailey has proved his case, but because of the value of his exegetical method and the enrichment it brings to our understanding of the amazing peasanthood of the incarnate Christ. Its implications for the crass commercialisation of Christmas are devastating.*  
(Editor)

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.<sup>1</sup> Our 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 for any interpretation of its use within the Lucan framework.

The Palestinian background of the entire text (vs. [1–7](#)) is clear and strong. Five striking Middle Eastern details mark the passage. First, the [p. 202](#) author reflects an accurate knowledge 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 practised 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.

## CULTURAL ASSUMPTIONS OF THE TRADITIONS OF THE CHURCH

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 are as follows: the Holy Family arrives late in the night. The local inn has its “no vacancy” sign clearly displayed. The tired couple seek alternatives and find none. With no other option, wearied from their journey, 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

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<sup>1</sup> 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. Griblin, “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*, 1 (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.

days” in Bethlehem.<sup>2</sup> We can easily assume a few weeks, 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 hard-hearted that, after days and days of intense negotiation, a man [P. 203](#) with a pregnant wife is turned out by everyone? Surely not. How then is the text to be understood? Two questions emerge: 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 questions here overlap and of necessity must be discussed together. These questions are:

1. Was the place 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 that it may have been a cave.

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 placing of it “outside the village”. Many Palestinian village homes are built into caves.<sup>3</sup> Yet Justin’s overall statement seems less than reliable. Due to the influence this text has had it will require 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.<sup>4</sup>

The Isaiah passage alluded to is [Is. 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 where he accuses Justin of a tendency to “turn prophecy into history”.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, all through his dialogue Justin tries very hard to convince his antagonist that Jesus is the Messiah by citing prooftexts from the Old Testament. The above passage is no exception. We see the same methodology in his dealing with [Gen. 49:11](#) which talks of tying a colt to a vine. In his commentary on Luke’s account of the passion in [19:30–33](#) suddenly a vine appears. Justin writes, “For the foal of an ass stood bound to a vine at [p. 204](#) the entrance of the

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<sup>2</sup> 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 Bezae 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.

<sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> A. Plummer, *The Gospel According to St. Luke* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1922), p.54.

village.”<sup>6</sup> Yet in another place Justin uses the same Old Testament verse but applies his allegories in a different fashion and the vine disappears.<sup>7</sup> Thus it would appear that tradition is created or at least shaped to fit “prophecy”.

On the positive side we note that the late-night-arrival story is nowhere present. 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 [Luke 2:4](#)). Secondly, we are told that Bethlehem turned them out and thus they turned to a cave outside the village. The latter is very problematic on two counts. Mary’s relative Elizabeth, whom she has just visited ([Luke 1:39](#)), lives somewhere near by in the “hill country of Judea”. If Joseph is rejected in Bethlehem, and if he has no remaining family in the area, he can turn to her family and easily find shelter. Then secondly, Luke tells us that the shepherds visited the baby and were overjoyed at all that they had heard and seen ([Luke 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 immediately have helped the family make other arrangements. The text gives no hint that anyone was displeased. Thus Justin’s exegesis and his direct and indirect violation of the clear statements of Luke lead us to have grave suspicions regarding the accuracy of his account of a birth outside the village in spite of its antiquity.

At the same time, the cave tradition itself may be historical. As we indicated, many peasant homes in Palestine in the past were or began as caves. Thus Justin’s “cave” and Matthew’s “house” ([Matt. 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 *Protoevangelium of James* along with the addition of the late-night-arrival myth. In the *Protoevangelium* 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 number of gynaecological wonders take place.<sup>8</sup> Here we have clearly moved from typology to exaggerated p. 205 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.

## EVIDENCE FOR THE BIRTH IN A PRIVATE HOME

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

In [Luke 2](#) we are told that Joseph is returning to the village of Bethlehem from which his family originated. The Middle Easterner is profoundly attached to his village of family

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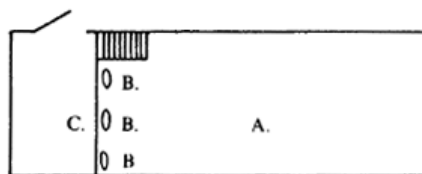
<sup>6</sup> Justin Martyr, *The First Apology of Justin* 1:32; cf. *Op. cit.*, p.34.

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

<sup>8</sup> O. Cullmann, “Infancy Gospels: the protevangelium of James,” in *New Testament Apocrypha*, Vol. 1, ed. by E. Hennecke and W. Schneemelcher (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963), pp.383–388.

origin. Indeed, his home village is an integral part of his identity.<sup>9</sup> A man need not have been born in the home village. Even if he has never been there he can appear suddenly at the home of a distant cousin, recite his genealogy and he is among friends. Joseph need only say, “I am Joseph, son of Jacob, son of Matthan, son of Eleazar, the son of Eliud,” and the immediate response must be, “You are welcome. What can we do for you?” If Joseph does have some member of the extended family resident in the village he is honour bound to seek them out. On the other hand, if he does not have family or friends in the village, *still*, as a member of the famous house of David, for the “sake of David,” he will be welcome in almost any village home. Yet, if we reject both of these alternatives and assume that Joseph did not have family or friends, and that he did not appeal to the name of David, even if he is a total stranger appearing in a strange village—still he will 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 [p. 206](#) 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. Mangers are naturally found in animal stables. Ergo, Jesus was born in a stable. However, in the one room peasant home of Palestine and Lebanon, the manger is built into the floor of the house. The standard one room village home is as follows:



- A. Living area for the family (Arabic-*mastaba*)
- B. Mangers built into the floor for feeding the animals (mostly at night)
- C. Small area about *four feet* lower than the upper living area into which the family cow or donkey is brought at night (Arabic-*ka'al-bayt*)

The text of the New Testament itself assumes the one room peasant home in [Matt 5:15](#) where we are told that a lamp is put on a lampstand so that it “gives light to *all* who are in the house”. Obviously, the house must be one room if one 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 is brought into the house at night and taken out early each morning. Thus everyone knows that every family with any animals carries out this simple domestic chore at the start of each new day. To leave the animals in the house during the day is socially and culturally unthinkable. All of this is presupposed by the text. Jesus knows the head of the synagogue has untied his animals that very morning and led them out of the house. With calm assurance Jesus can announce to his face that he *did* in

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<sup>9</sup> Naboth and his famous vineyard ([1 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.



fact lead his animals out that very morning, confident that there will be no reply. Were animals kept in a separate stable the p. 207 head of the synagogue could have saved face by asserting firmly, "I never touch the animals on the Sabbath." But if he tries to claim that he leaves the animals *in the house* all day the people in the synagogue will respond with loud ridiculing laughter! In short, no one will 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 are told that the presence of the baby in a manger is a sign for them. Shepherds were near the bottom of the social ladder and indeed, their profession was declared unclean by some of their rabbis.<sup>10</sup> Many places will not welcome them. In many homes they will feel their poverty and be ashamed of their low estate. But no—they will face no humiliation as they visit *this* child for *he* is laid in a manger. That is, he is born in a simple peasant home with the mangers in the family room. He is one of them. With this assurance they go with haste.

The fact of the one room peasant home with its manger in the floor has 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.<sup>11</sup>

The two leading twentieth century authorities on Palestinian life and the New Testament are Gustaf Dalmann and E. F. F. Bishop. Bishop comments on v. 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 p. 208 infant might even be left in safety, especially if swaddled, when the mother was absent on temporary business.<sup>12</sup>

Dalmann, 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-ber*) 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.<sup>13</sup>

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

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

<sup>12</sup> 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.

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

Dalmann himself has nearly a hundred pages of photographs and scale drawings of a wide variety of such peasant homes, all of which fit his two level description given above.<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> 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 Dalmann defends the traditional “lonely birth in a stable” for culturally revealing reasons. Dalmann feels that Joseph could have had space in the inn, but that “no room for them” means “no *suitable* room for the birth” (italics mine).<sup>16</sup> Dalmann 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 Dalmann writes,

Anyone who has lodged with Palestinian peasants knows that notwithstanding p. 209 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.<sup>17</sup>

The amazing part of Dalmann’s remarkable discussion is the assumption that the Holy Family *wants* 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 with the neighbours. But the room will be full of women assisting the midwife.<sup>18</sup> A private home 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 a sense of 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

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<sup>14</sup> G. Dalmann, *Arbeit und Sitte in Palästina*, plates 1–91.

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

<sup>16</sup> G. Dalmann, *Sacred Sites and Ways*, p.41.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> 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 labour 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.



comfortable according to medieval or modern standards.”<sup>19</sup> 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, to the dynamics of the extended p. 210 family, to the sociology of the peasant village point to a birth in a private home.

## CASE FOR THE INN AS A GUEST ROOM

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*” (inn?), 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 inadequate, from both a cultural and a 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 “inn,” has at least five meanings. Three of these are worth considering in connection with [Luke 2:7](#). These are:

1. inn
2. house
3. guest room

Each of these options 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 NT 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.<sup>20</sup>

His only evidence for this remarkable statement is the fact that Romans built stopping places for merchants and that synagogues sometimes provided hospitality. However, the present author’s thirty year experience with villagers in the Middle East is that the intensity of the honor shown to the passing guest is still very much in force, especially when it is a returning son of the village that 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 oblige Roman imperialists to make their own arrangements. We grant p. 211 that occasionally overflow Jewish guests must sleep in the synagogue. But this 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 demonstrates a significant decline of the Middle Eastern traditional hospitality, especially if the guest claims the village as his ancestral home.

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<sup>19</sup> R. E. Brown, p.400.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

But more than this, the very idea of the inn is problematic on many grounds. First, Luke uses *pandokheion* for a commercial inn (cf. [Luke 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. Then 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 or not Bethlehem would have had a commercial inn. Jeremiah tells of a company of people who stayed at “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 and 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, are found on major roads. No major Roman road passed through Bethlehem. Small villages on minor roads have no inns. Brown’s phrase, “the well-known traveller’s inn at or near Bethlehem” is hardly justified.<sup>21</sup> Fifth, any type of inn is culturally unacceptable as a place for the birth of a child. It is not a matter of privacy (against 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 is not such a place. Finally, the Arabic and Syriac versions for 1900 years have never translated *kataluma* with the word inn. This translation is 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 [p. 212](#) 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 unsurmountable problems. First, the manger is *in* the house so why should we be told that Mary is driven out of the place where mangers are located and then be told that she placed her child in a manger? Then second, if they are welcomed into a home, the master of the home will *never* turn an expectant mother out into a stable. These considerations effectively illuminate this option. 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](#). With external linguistic evidence uncertain, it would seem appropriate to give greater weight to internal evidence. Bishop writes, “If *kataluma* means *guest room* in Mk. and Lk. at the end of the Lord’s life why not at the start in Bethlehem?”<sup>22</sup> This suggestion has recently been defended by Miguens.<sup>23</sup> Brown rejects Miguens’ proposal and leaves the problem unsolved. Brown argues first against *kataluma* being a “private home” of some relative because of lack of “some explanation for the lack of hospitality to an in-law about to bear a child.”<sup>24</sup> 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

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> E. F. F. Bishop, p.42.

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

<sup>24</sup> R. E. Brown, p.400.

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 option 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”. Of what? Of the home, naturally. [p. 213](#) This option fulfills admirably both the linguistic requirements of the text, and the cultural requirements of the village scene. This translation allows us to understand the following: Joseph and Mary arrive in Bethlehem; Joseph finds shelter with a family; the family has a separate guest room but it is full. The couple is 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 we long for some additional information. Yet, if we assume a Palestinian reader, the present form of the verse makes good sense. This can be seen as follows:

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 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 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.

## COULD SIMPLICITY SUPPORT A GUEST ROOM?

This brings us to a further question. Namely, do simple one-room homes have guest rooms? The objection could be raised that a one-room home is surely too simple to have a guest room. The assumption behind such a question is that of course no one *wants* the animals in the house, and anyone who could build a guest room would surely first build a stable and get the animals out of the house. But such is not the case. The traditional Middle Eastern farmer lives close to nature and in fact does want the animals in his house for at least two reasons he can verbalize. First, the animals help heat the house in winter.<sup>25</sup> Second, when they are in the same room the villager sleeps assured that they will not be stolen. Surely the head of a synagogue in [Luke 13:15](#) could be classed socially a bit above the [P. 214](#) average farmer. Yet as we observed, the text assumed 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 eats, sleeps and lives is unsoiled by the animals. These animals are taken out each day and the lower level cleaned. Their presence is in no way an offence. Furthermore, Dalmann gives a number of detailed drawings of village homes which precisely document our point. In his plate n.31 the family

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

room is a great long room requiring three sets of pillars to support the roof. Still, the home is one room with the family living-room terrace (*Wohnterrasse*) and a lower level (*Hausboden*) with mangers (*Futtertröge*) built into the floor of the former. This same house has an adjoining special guest room (*Gästehaus*). Such a home precisely fits the requirements of [Luke 2:7](#).<sup>26</sup>

This leads us to ask whether or not this option has been considered by modern scholars other than Bishop, Dalmann, Thompson and Miguens.

Scholarship for a long time has 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’.”<sup>27</sup> Plummer long ago questioned the translation “inn” for *kataluma*. He writes, “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.”<sup>28</sup> Leaney translated with “lodging house” but does not discuss the question.<sup>29</sup> Marshall and Danker reject “inn” in preference to “room in a house,” but then affirm the birthplace to be some place for animals.<sup>30</sup> Brown leaves the question unsolved and translates “lodgings” for [p. 215](#) *kataluma*.<sup>31</sup> 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.

## INFLUENCE OF THEOLOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS

This brings us to an important final question which is, how has the text been understood in the Middle East itself? Presumably the culture surrounding 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 *Protoevangelium 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 on the question, one has the distinct feeling that there is an unspoken subjective pressure to understand the birth as having taken place without witness, 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,

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<sup>26</sup> 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.

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

<sup>28</sup> Alfred Plummer, p.54.

<sup>29</sup> 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.

<sup>30</sup> Frederick W. Danker, *Jesus and the New Age* (St. Louis: Clayton Publishing House, 1972), p.25:1. H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1978), p.107.

<sup>31</sup> R. E. Brown, p.400.

that the eyes even of 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 take place where no eye beholds 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 great twelfth century commentator of the Syriac church, ibn Salibi. 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 [p. 216](#) 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.

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<sup>32</sup> (my translation).

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, film strips, 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 is rejected at His birth by Herod. But the Bethlehem shepherds welcomed Him with great joy, as do 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 all been born on the raised terraces of the one room family homes. The birth of Jesus was no different. His incarnation was authentic. His birth most likely took place in the natural place where every peasant is 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 [p. 217](#) story of His birth forces us to not lose

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<sup>32</sup> Dīyunisiyūs Ya'qūb ibn al-Salībī, *Kitāb al Durr al-Farīd fī Tafṣīr al-'Ahd al-Jadīd* (Cairo: n.p., 1914), Vol. II, p.44.