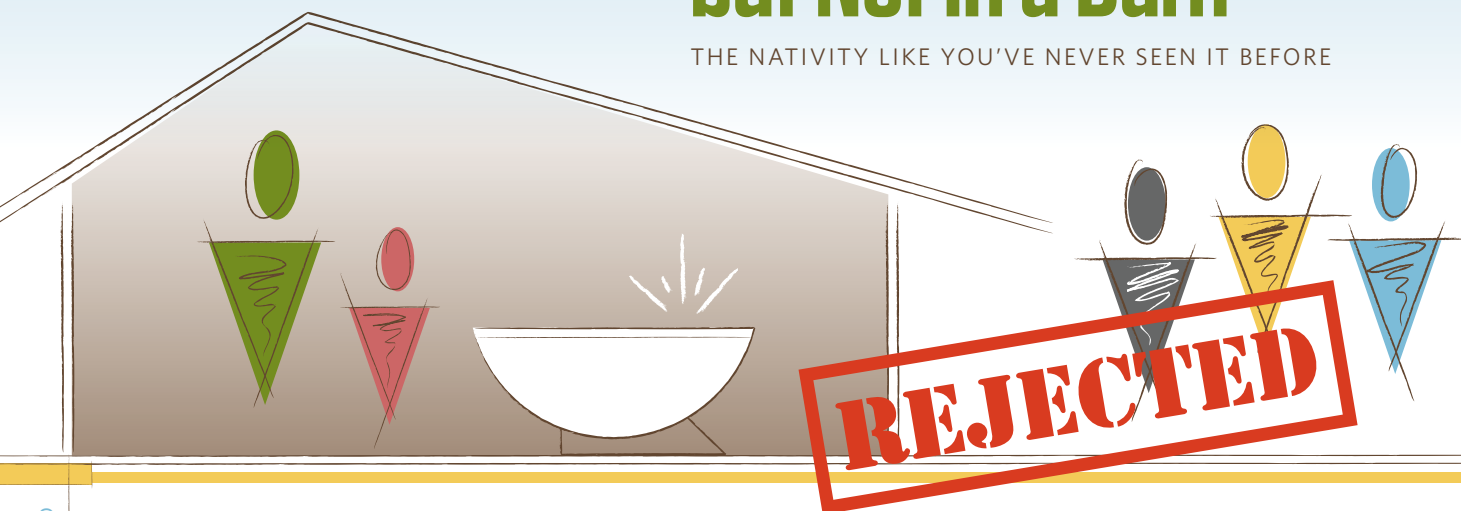


GARY A. BYERS

Away in a Manger, but Not in a Barn

THE NATIVITY LIKE YOU'VE NEVER SEEN IT BEFORE



The Nativity Scene

We all know how a nativity scene should look. Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus in a stable surrounded by assorted barnyard animals, shepherds and three wise men. The story is performed annually in many children's Christmas pageants. The night Mary and Joseph arrived in Bethlehem, Joseph took his wife to the village inn, only to hear there was no room—except for a stable.

We've become quite familiar with this scene, but is it accurate? A close reading of the biblical text informed by the archaeological evidence suggests some adjustments are needed.

The story of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem is found in Luke 2:1–7 (NIV):

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. ²(This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) ³And everyone went to his own town to register. ⁴So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. ⁵He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, ⁷and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

There is no mention of a barn or a statement by the innkeeper—or even an innkeeper at all! What really happened?





The Royal Family of David

Luke 2:3 tells us that Joseph, a descendant of King David, journeyed to his ancestral home with Mary to take part in a mandatory census. In the ancient Near East, historical memories were long and the extended family's connection to its hometown was always important. When Joseph appeared in Bethlehem and said, "I am Joseph, son of Heli, son of Matthat, the son of Levi," the odds are that someone in the town would have made space for him and his family. And Joseph was not just from a town family, his lineage was "royal" since he was from the line of David. In fact, this Davidic connection was evidently so strong in Bethlehem that it was still called "the city of David" (Luke 2:4, 11). While the Hebrew scriptures refer to Jerusalem as "the city of David" 43 times, it appears that even into New Testament times, at least locally, Bethlehem continued to be known as "the city of David."

Mary's circumstance is also of importance in this regard. In the ancient Near East, childbirth was an important community event. It seems unthinkable that the people of Bethlehem would have failed to help pregnant Mary, let alone hometown boy Joseph of the royal family of David. And even if that was the case, Luke recorded that only six months earlier Mary had visited relatives nearby in the "hill country of Judea" (Luke 1:39). If Bethlehem had been inhospitable, Joseph could have taken Mary to stay with them. It appears from the text that there may have been time to make such arrangements before the baby was born, because Jesus was born "while they were there" (Luke 2:6), suggesting they had been in town a 'while' when Mary gave birth.

Taken collectively, these circumstances suggest that it is highly unlikely Joseph and Mary could only find a barn in which to lodge, something the narrative never actually mentions.

Away in a Manger

So why do we always think of a barn in the story of Jesus' birth? Because of the prominence of the "manger" in the story (Luke 2:7, 12, 16). In our modern context, a "manger" is an item that would be located in a barn. Yet, for thousands of years and even in much of the world still today, mangers are within the confines of domestic structures.

It may seem strange to us, but animals are described in the Bible as being kept in the house. For example, in 1 Sam 28:24 we read that a woman had a fattened calf "in the house." Jephthah's vow to sacrifice the first to come "out of the doors of [his] house" (Judges 11:31) also points to this ancient near eastern conception, since it is likely that Jephthah had a domesticated animal in mind when he made his vow.

Archaeologists have uncovered stone-carved and plastered mangers on the ground floor of numerous domestic structures from biblical times. Historians and anthropologists have noted the practice of keeping animals in the house down through history. While flocks were kept in sheepfolds out in the fields (see Luke 2:8), at night very valuable or vulnerable animals (an ox, donkey, or pregnant sheep and goats) would be brought into a room on the ground floor of the house. This kept a weak animal safe from harm and prevented theft. Animals also provided additional body heat on cold Palestinian nights and convenient access to them for special purposes like milking. In the morning the animals would be led out of the house.

It is very possible that when Mary gave birth to Jesus and laid Him in a manger, she did so in a house. But what about the "inn" which was full—the very reason for using the manger?

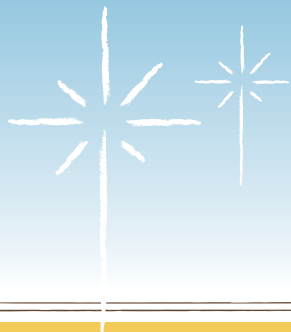


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No Room in the Inn


Luke 2:7 said “there was no room for them in the inn.” The text does not say there was not “a room” available, but no available space (*topos*, τόπος) in the inn. The Greek word translated “inn” in that verse (*kataluma*, κατάλυμα) is used in only one other story in the New Testament. In Luke 22:11 (and it’s parallel in Mark 14:14), the word describes the upper chamber of a house where the Last Supper was held. As such, the word may be translated “guest room,” as in the ESV’s rendering of Luke 22:11. When Luke says that there was no room “at the inn,” his point is that at the particular house Joseph and Mary approached, the guest room was already occupied. Mary had no choice but to give birth in the room occupied by animals on the ground floor. But she still would have been in a house.

If Luke wanted us to understand the “inn” of the Christmas story as a hotel, he knew the correct term to use. He uses the correct term when describing how the Good Samaritan took the half dead man to an “inn” (*pandocheion*, πανδοχεῖον; 10:34) with an “innkeeper” (*pandocheus*, πανδοχεύς; 10:35). These are different terms than those that appear in Luke’s narrative of the birth of Jesus—in Luke 2:7 *kataluma* (κατάλυμα) is used. Jesus, then, was born in a house, among family and animals that needed protection—not in the barn of a hotel.

The Importance of Family to God

If this is an accurate reconstruction of the facts, we can say that the Christmas story is not about rejection and being alone. Rather, the focus appears to be just the opposite. It tells us that God the Father made sure His Son was born into this world surrounded by family. The Christmas story is about inclusion and a reminder that family is important to God and should be important to us. God doesn’t want us to be alone or try to walk spiritually by ourselves. Family is critical and essential for our own well-being.

Beyond biological family, there is spiritual family. Some of us do not have biological family close by on Christmas, or have unhealthy family relationships that strain our celebration. Jesus added some important insights about family that help to bridge these relationship gaps. When His own mother and brothers came to speak to Him one day, He told the crowd that His mother, brothers and sisters are those who do the will of His Father in heaven (Matt 12:50).

One of the great lessons from the first Christmas is the wonderful truth that God wants us all to have family and to be connected. Especially during the holiday season, when many who have suffered loss feel all alone, the Christmas story reminds us how important biological and spiritual family is. Each one of us needs to be connected and help others get connected, too. 

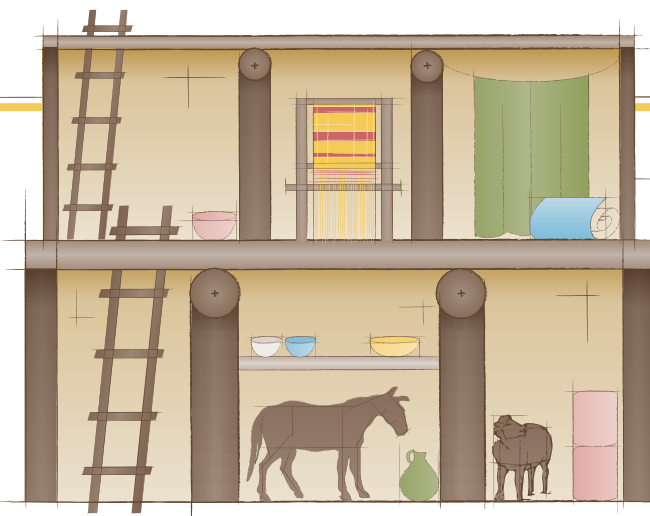
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Typical 1st Century AD Jewish Home

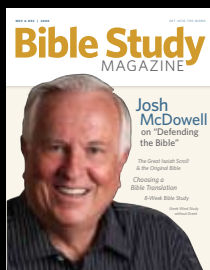
Living and Sleeping Quarters

Daytime Living Quarters
where vulnerable or especially valuable animals were stored at night

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