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The Columns



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The manger and the inn:

A Middle Eastern view of the birth story of Jesus

Originally published December 21, 2006. In the West, the traditional telling of the birth story of Jesus is overlaid with mythology. I am not referring to Santa Claus, snow, bells or Rudolph, but rather to our understanding of the biblical text itself. Across the centuries we have introduced into the Scripture itself a remarkable number of mythological elements. Some of these are so old and so pervasive that they are unconsciously affirmed. For example, we assume that Jesus was born the night the Holy Family arrived. What Luke 2:3 actually says is that the Holy Family “went up” to Bethlehem. Then, verse 6 reads, “While they were there, her days were fulfilled....”



The late Kenneth Bailey.

This naturally means that the last stages of Mary’s pregnancy took place in Bethlehem (two weeks? a month?). At Christmas time in the average Western church, Luke 2:1-7 is read; but, clearly, it tells of the birth some days after the Holy Family arrives in Bethlehem. The children of the congregation then enact a play that has the Christ-child born on the night of Mary and Joseph’s arrival. Amazingly, this glaring discrepancy is seldom noticed. *continued*

The manger and the inn *continued*



Furthermore, was it in the winter? During the winter in Bethlehem, shepherds return to their villages at night. Only in summer do they occasionally spend the night in the fields.

How do we know there were three wise men? The text affirms three kinds of gifts. There could have been 10 of them. The magi came from “the East.” If the original teller of the story was in Palestine, then “the East” means

the other side of the Jordon River. Writing in the second century, Justin Martyr (*Dialogue with Trypho*) asserts that the “Magi came from Arabia.” So we could go on. The popular understanding of the Christmas story is a good illustration of the problem of text and tradition. In this brief article we intend to look at two questions: “What was the inn?” and “Where was the manger?” Surprises await us in our answers to both questions. A more precise cultural awareness, we are convinced, can restore important theological content to the story of the birth of Jesus.

The late-night arrival. To begin with, the account is clearly Palestinian in character. All the hymns of David are steeped in the Old Testament and use Hebrew parallelism in their construction. The Palestinian custom of wrapping a newborn child (2:7) is as old as Ezekiel 16:4. Thus, Middle Eastern culture must be assumed for the story. In light of this fact, the popular Western assumption of rejection at Bethlehem is culturally extremely problematic in a Middle Eastern world.

To begin with, Mary has relatives “in the hill country” of Judea, whom she has just visited (cf. Luke 1:36, 39). Luke reports that Mary and Elizabeth are related. The reader is informed of this fact a few verses before the account of the birth in Bethlehem. Thus, if the Holy Family arrives in Bethlehem and finds no shelter, never mind, Mary’s relatives are nearby. They are welcome there. There is time to seek shelter with Zachariah and Elizabeth.

Furthermore, Joseph is of the “house and lineage of David.” A recitation of his recent genealogy will open almost any home in Bethlehem. When a self-respecting “son of the village” returns to the town of his origins in the Middle East, a royal welcome always awaits him.

Finally, as noted, the text affirms that they were in Bethlehem until “her days were fulfilled.” Is Joseph so totally inept that after an extended search (a week? two weeks? a month?) he cannot arrange anything except a stable? The traditional understanding of the story is a slur on the ability and integrity of Joseph. Is the entire village of Bethlehem so hardhearted that no home is open to a woman about to give birth? Indeed, the “late-night arrival myth” slurs all the inhabitants of Bethlehem, not just the mythological innkeeper! In short, our Western tradition has, over the years, invented details that do not fit our Middle Eastern world as a real story about real people in a real village. *continued*

The manger and the inn *continued*

Some interpreters in the modern period consider the entire collection of birth stories as a free intervention by Luke or his sources with little if any history at its core. But, as noted, the material is Palestinian in character. Therefore, Middle Eastern culture must be the starting point of the interpreter, history or no history. Would it not be unacceptable in any culture for a man with a pregnant wife to reject the hospitality of his wife's family and opt for a stable as a delivery room? So how are the particularities of the text to be understood? *continued*



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The manger and the inn *continued*

What about the inn? In the West, we have assumed that there was an “inn” in the story. Thus, no room in the inn. The word translated in the Western versions as “inn” in Luke 2:7 is the Greek word *kataluma*. But when Luke uses this word, what does he really mean?



First century Palestinian house.

In the story of the good Samaritan, the wounded man is clearly taken to a commercial establishment that provides shelter for strangers. However, Luke has the men arrive at a *pandokheion* (Luke 10:34), not a *kataluma*. *Pandokheion* is the common Greek word for an inn. Luke knows this word and uses it. So, if for Luke *pandokheion* means a commercial inn, what does he intend by the word *kataluma*? A clear answer is available. The only other case of the use of *kataluma* in Luke’s Gospel is in 22:11, where the disciples are told to follow a man carrying a jar of water and on arrival at his house to ask: “‘Where is the *kataluma* [RSV: guest room], where I am to eat the Passover with my disciples?’ And he will show you a large upper room [anagaion] furnished.” Here, *kataluma* is unambiguously defined — it means a guest room attached to a private home. So Luke indicates a commercial inn with the word *pandokheion* and a private guest room as a *kataluma*.

The manger. If, then, “no room for them in the inn” should really be translated “no room for them in the guest room, what then of the manger? To answer this question, it is necessary to observe the construction of Palestinian traditional one-room homes. Such buildings are “split-level” homes. There is a small, lower level for the animals at one end. About 80 percent of the one room is a raised terrace on which the family cooks, eats and lives. The two levels are connected by a short set of stairs. Into the lower level the family cow, donkey and a few sheep are brought each night. In the morning, these animals are taken out into a courtyard, the area is cleaned and the house is ready for the day. A one-room home is also presupposed in Matthew 5:15, where the light of a single lamp shines on all in the house. (In passing, we can note that the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem is built over the ancient traditional site of the birth of Jesus. The location itself is a precise example of what we have described above, namely a single room with a small lower level.) The reader needs to know that the animals move daily in and out of the house. Such one-room homes often had/have guest rooms attached to the end or built on the roof for guests. What, then, can be said about the manger? In such traditional homes, mangers are built into the floor of the raised terrace on which the family lives. If the cow or donkey is hungry at night, it can stand and reach the feed on the floor of the upper family living space (often about four feet higher than the level for the animals). This is the critical piece of evidence that unlocks Luke 2:7. What is unknown to the Western reader is the fact that in a traditional Palestinian home, the mangers are in the living room.

Now all the parts of the story fall into place. The text Luke found in the tradition was originally written for a Palestinian reader who starts with the assumptions that mangers are in the living room and guest rooms are attached to one-room homes and are used only for guests. *continued*

The manger and the inn *continued*

With this in mind, the text says, “And she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger.” The reader instinctively asks, “Manger? Oh. They are in the main family room! Why not the guest room?” The author instinctively senses the above question and replies, “Because there was no place for them in the guest room [*kataluma*].”

The reader concludes “Ah, I see. So the guest room was full. Never mind; the family room is more appropriate, anyway.”

Why it matters. With these clarifications, all the cultural pieces of the Gospel story fall into place and a special theological thrust emerges from the story. Joseph finds shelter in a simple, peasant home. This home has a guest room, but it is full. In the honored tradition of Middle Eastern hospitality, the host provides for his guests. He clears the one-room family living space for the holy family to use. The child is born and placed in a depression in the floor (manger) to keep it from harm. The shepherds are given a double sign. They will find the babe wrapped (an ancient village custom) and placed in a manger. That is, he is in a simple home like theirs; no one will say to them, “Tradesmen to the back door, please!”

In his ministry, we know of Jesus that “the common people heard him gladly.” That same simple welcome is reflected in Bethlehem in the story of his birth.

If the story is seen in this light, the “mean old innkeeper” evaporates, along with his non-existent inn. “No room at the inn” will no longer be adequate for the Christmas sermon. The cold, drafty stable becomes a warm, cozy peasant home which the shepherds find fully adequate, for they go home praising God for all that they had heard and seen (2:20). If they had found the family in a stable, they would have taken them at once to their own homes! So the inn and the innkeeper evaporate. Yet much is gained. The Incarnation itself becomes more authentic — Jesus was born in and into a simple peasant home as any other village boy. The shepherds, outcasts from their society, were given a sign indicating this simplicity. They thereby discover that this Messiah comes welcoming the poor and the marginalized.

Joseph emerges as a man fully able to arrange for his family. No estrangement is subtly affirmed between his family and the family of Zachariah. No hardheartedness is attributed to Bethlehem.

The wise men came “to the house” (Matthew 2:11) and no special pleading is necessary to explain the appearance of these “new” quarters.

The word became flesh indeed. The birth of Jesus most likely took place in the same kind of natural setting into which every peasant is born — in a peasant home. And, after all, it is still possible 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.*

Kenneth E. Bailey was a renowned New Testament scholar, seminary professor, author, Presbyterian missionary and international lecturer.

This Week in History.



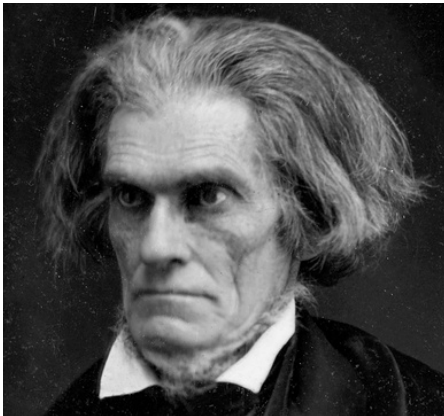
William the Conqueror is crowned King of England following his invasion from Normandy and defeat of King Harold, who died at the Battle of Hastings.
December 25, 1066



Mao Zedong is born in Hunan Province, China. Originally a librarian and teacher, he became a communist revolutionary - the "founding father" of the People's Republic of China.
December 26, 1893



Louis Pasteur is born in Dole, France. A chemist-bacteriologist, he would develop a process to kill harmful bacteria with heat - now called *pasteurization*.
December 27, 1822



John C. Calhoun resigns the office of vice president. He served under Presidents John Quincy Adams and Andrew Jackson until a series of political disagreements with Jackson. He would later serve as a U.S. Senator from South Carolina.
December 28, 1832



Members of the U.S. 7th Cavalry massacre more than 200 Sioux men, women and children at Wounded Knee Creek, South Dakota.
December 29, 1890



The Union ironclad ship *USS Monitor* sinks in a storm off Cape Hatteras, NC, resulting in the loss of sixteen crewmen.
December 30, 1862



December 31, 1879 - Thomas Edison holds the first public demonstration of his electric incandescent lamp.
December 31, 1879