

BY STEVE BOOTH

OF INNS AND INNS

THE BEGINNING Sunday School teacher thought he was asking his class of second graders a simple question from the Christmas story. “Why was there no room in the inn when Jesus was born?” From one pupil came a quick reply: “Everyone knows that all the hotels are full at Christmas!” Too bad all biblical questions cannot be answered so easily! The challenge for the modern-day reader of Scripture is to be careful not to read back into the text things that do not fit. Since the Christmas story is so beloved, believers often seek to fill in the gaps that the biblical writers left. No other part of the Bible has such a tendency to attract outside traditions.

Was the Inn a Public Caravansary? or a Public Inn?

One of these gaps relates to the “inn” where Jesus was born, or more accurately, the inn with no room for Jesus’ birth. The New Testament has two Greek words that translate into English as “inn.” Both occur in Luke’s Gospel. The more specific term for “inn” (*pandocheion*) is in the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:34), where the wounded man was taken to recover. Here we find an innkeeper who was to tend to the man’s needs until the Samaritan returned. Inns of this type were not numerous and were only found along well-traveled roads. Travel in ancient times was neither comfortable nor easy, and these inns provided a midday rest or a night’s stay for weary travelers.

The English word “inn” may not be the best translation for *pandocheion* if the reader conjures up too many modern ideas. This was no Holiday Inn®! Initially travelers looked for a place that was relatively level and near a water supply. As time went by and travel increased, people enclosed these places with a protective wall. These locations, which provided overnight lodging for caravans, were called khans or

caravansaries and were primitive hostels where large groups of travelers found shelter under a common roof. If the building were two-story, guests stayed upstairs and the animals were sheltered on the ground floor. More common were those with small, unfurnished rooms opening onto the courtyard, which provided space for the animals, carts, or wagons that brought the travelers. Some inns, but not all, had a host or proprietor (*pandocheus*; Luke 10:35). In Jesus’ day such an inn was very likely midway on the major road between Jericho and Jerusalem and thus provided the setting for His story about the Good Samaritan.¹

This Greek word *pandocheion* comes from two words, *pan* (“all”) and *dechomai* (“receive”), implying that public inns received everyone. The reality that this included men of all types often gave inns a bad reputation. Among the guests were thieves as well as government spies. In fact, many inns were nothing more than brothels. Additionally, many inns had a reputation of being filthy and infested with bugs and rats.² Although Herod the Great had built luxurious accommodations for entertaining the rich and wealthy, these would hardly have been accessible to the common traveler.

Left: A 17th century caravansary, which was a caravan rest-house. Often built around a courtyard for animals, accommodations included bedrooms on the upper floor for guests and travelers.

Right: A silver star beneath the marble altar at the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. The star commemorates the place within the grotto (cave) where Jesus was born.

Or a Private Guest Room?/Private Lodging?

The second Greek word in Luke for “inn” is *kataluma* (Luke 2:7). This is a more general term, its root meaning being “a place to loose one’s burden.” The term can include the idea of a caravansary, but it can also have the general sense of a lodging place, a guest room, or even a room that offered meals for travelers.³ Luke used this same word when he spoke of the guest room where Jesus ate the Last Supper with His disciples (Luke 22:11; compare Mark 14:14). He also used the verb form of this word when the disciples advised Jesus to send the crowd away to find lodging (Luke 9:12) and when Jesus was accused of accepting hospitality in the home of a “sinner” (19:7).

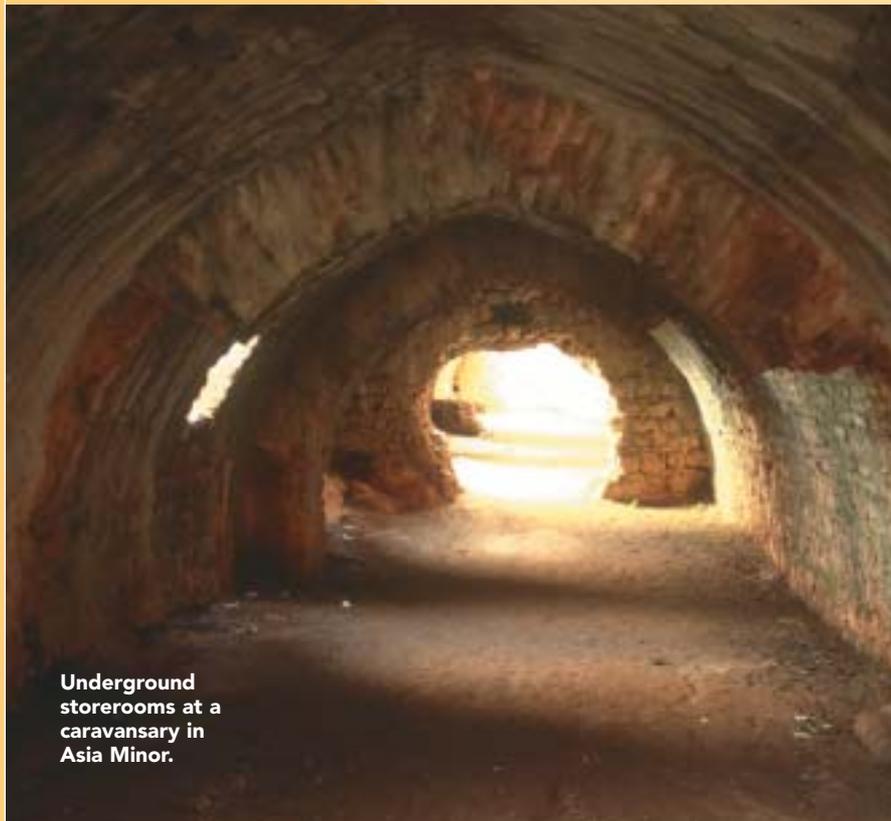
The *kataluma* in Luke 2:7 may refer to a guest room in a private home of either a friend or relative of Mary and Joseph, or of some other unknown citizen of Bethlehem. A home would certainly have been preferable to a dirty and bug-infested khan, especially for a pregnant woman. The existence of a khan in Bethlehem in Jesus’ day has been challenged as well, since the village was not along a major road.⁴ Hospitality was still important in Jesus’ day as an expression of one’s personal piety



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO: DAVID ROGERS (4/14/77)

LESSON REFERENCE

FBSC: Luke 2:1-20; 10:25-37



Underground storerooms at a caravansary in Asia Minor.

COREL PHOTO

toward God. The practice of showing hospitality to others, including aliens and strangers, was worthy of praise, and failure to do so invoked condemnation.⁵ In Jerusalem and its surroundings no man was to count a house as only his own, and it may have been customary to hang a curtain in front of the door to indicate that the owner still had room for guests.⁶ Showing hospitality to travelers in and around Jerusalem would have been especially important during times of key festivals, as well as during a time like the census of Augustus. Jesus Himself also instructed His disciples to accept gracious hospitality in private homes when He sent them out on their mission (Luke 10:5-11).

Understanding of the structure of the common Jewish home of Jesus' day may cause us to see Jesus' birth in a different light. Evidence shows that in the houses of Near-Eastern peasant farmers the domesticated animals often slept and ate in the same one room where the family lived. The family quarters were simply on one end of the

room raised about 24 inches, while the animals were on the lower level.⁷ The manger or feeding trough was often on this lower level inside the house rather than outside in a separate barn, although there could have been a shed and feeding area in the family courtyard.⁸

Another possibility is that Joseph and Mary sought accommodations in the guest room attached to a synagogue in Bethlehem. Inscriptions and archaeological evidence indicate that many first-century synagogues had guest rooms for Jews to use as they traveled. The custom of lodging travelers and their horses or donkeys at synagogues was widespread.⁹

Inn Conclusion

Luke simply did not give us enough information to determine if the *kataluma* was the guest room in a private home or synagogue or at a public inn. In any case, the context does not imply that Mary went into labor on the first night they arrived in Bethlehem or even soon thereafter; rather the wording "while

they were there, the days were completed" (Luke 2:6, NASB) indicates the passage of some time. The couple had obviously been staying somewhere, and the accommodations could have been either public or private. Luke mentioned no cruel innkeeper nor a compassionate innkeeper's wife. The early church tradition that Jesus was born in a cave may fit as well but does little to answer the question. Caves often sheltered animals, and people often would build homes or khans near them for that purpose.

Whether Joseph and Mary did not find adequate room in public or private quarters for the birth of their first child makes little difference. The significant point that Luke's account highlights is the striking irony that the Son of the Most High, whose kingdom will never end (Luke 1:32-33), was born not in a luxurious palace like that of the emperor, Caesar Augustus, but in unexpectedly humble surroundings where animals were kept and fed. **B**

1. The inn of the Good Samaritan has been traditionally identified with Khan el-Ahmar or more commonly with Khan Hathrur. See J. A. Thompson, "Inn" in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 2 (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), 704.

2. Everett Ferguson, *Background of Early Christianity*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2003), 88-89.

3. Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), 415.

4. Ben Witherington III, "Birth of Jesus" in *The Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, eds. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, I. Howard Marshall (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 69-70.

5. J. T. Fitzgerald, "Hospitality" in *The Dictionary of New Testament Background*, eds. Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 524.

6. Alfred Edersheim, *Sketches of Jewish Social Life*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 46-47.

7. Martin Hengel, "favtnh" in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 9 (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1974), 52.

8. Ben Witherington III, "Birth of Jesus," 69.

9. S. Safrai, "Home and Family," *The Jewish People in the First Century: Historical Geography, Political History, Social, Cultural and Religious Life and Institutions*, eds. S. Safrai and M. Stern, et. al., vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 943; Fitzgerald, "Hospitality," 524.

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