

## Was Jesus Born in a Barn?

by Bob Young

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The Christmas sermons have been preached for another year. Various biblical texts have been cited to shed light on the story of the birth of Jesus. But did the sermons you heard accurately reflect what the Bible teaches? Too often, preachers fail to study the text and thus keep repeating ideas that are incorrect.

Some of the common errors that have crept into the story through the years are well known.

- The number of wise men is not given, only that three different gifts were given. The plural requires at least two, but there could have been several.
- The circumcision on the eighth day is not to be confused with and intermingled with the purification after 40 days (Luke 2).
- It is highly unlikely that the shepherds and the wise men were present at the same time. The shepherds came on the night of the birth; the wise men traveled a distance. Nativity scenes with both groups present at the same time are not accurate.

Some biblical truths are seldom presented. For example, Jesus was a king, even when he was a baby. He was Messiah and Lord from his birth. He did not come as a babe and then turn into a king.

The question of this article: **What does the Bible say about the location of Jesus' birth?**

The birth of Jesus has been described many times during the last month – sermons, nativity scenes. Everyone knows the details. Or do we? Some parts of the common storyline are based on a misreading of Scripture and a misunderstanding of first century culture. How often have you heard it repeated? Jesus was born in a stable because there was no room at the inn. Sorry to burst your bubble, but it is highly doubtful that Jesus was born in a barn or a stable. A careful reading of the New Testament suggests an entirely different scenario.

Luke 2:7. There was no room in the kataluma, referring to the reception room of a private dwelling, often on an upper story. The same word is translated “upper room” when Jesus and his disciples eat the Passover meal. Luke says there was no room in the “upper room,” the reception area that would have been filled with family visitors due to the census. The Greek word to describe an “inn” or place that welcomed strangers is entirely different.

Even if there were an inn in the very small first-century town of Bethlehem, Joseph and Mary would not have stayed there. Joseph had family in Bethlehem. He had come home for the census, and the customs of first-century Palestine would have required him to stay with relatives.

Given the linguistic and historical context, the kataluma was the guest reception area in the house of the family where Joseph and Mary were staying. The house was undoubtedly full of many relatives who had arrived before them, given the distance they had to travel from Nazareth.

The design of homes in the region, even today, helps make sense of the story. Most families lived in a simple home, often a single-room house. The house had a multipurpose area in front, used by the family during the day and used for keeping animals at night. There was also a room at the back or on the roof for visitors.

Jesus was not born in a barn, or even in a detached stable as is often pictured in nativity scenes. Jesus was born on the lower floor of a peasant house. A manger (most mangers were made of stone) was present because the same area was at times used to care for animals.

This understanding is not new. It goes back to at least 1584. New Testament Greek scholars are aware that kataluma does not mean “inn.” The often-repeated storyline is not supported by Scripture.

Think with me. Jesus is not noteworthy for the poverty of his birth. The Bible account does not describe Jesus isolated in a distant barn because his parents could not afford lodging. The birth of Jesus is not sad and lonely, demanding sympathy for an impoverished, deprived baby. Jesus was born amid extended family, with many visiting relatives. Jesus' birth almost certainly grabbed the attention of the family around him. And visiting shepherds arrived almost immediately!

Understanding the historical context of Jesus' birth should change the way the story is enacted and preached. The true meaning and message of Christmas is preserved and understood in a crowded family home: many witnessed the extraordinary event: in the birth of Jesus, the divine became human.