

By Gary A Byers



**This silhouette represents a pretty standard Nativity scene.** At the center is a stable with baby Jesus lying in a manger flanked by Mary and Joseph. To the left are two shepherds with their animals and to the right are three wise men (or the traditional three kings) led to the event by the star seen above the stable. We're only missing the angels who announced to the shepherds and the innkeeper who made the stable available!

## The Nativity Scene

Most of us know how a Nativity scene should look and the story behind it. The night Mary and Joseph arrived in Bethlehem she was ready to give birth. Joseph took her to the village inn, but the innkeeper said, "The inn is full and we have no room, but I have a stable you can use." Before it's over, we have Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus in a stable surrounded by assorted barnyard animals, shepherds and wise men.

A familiar scene and refrain, we've grown comfortable with the story and its message. Yet, this writer proposes that an honest look at the biblical text and archaeological evidence calls for a slight adjustment to our understanding.

The story of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem is found in Luke 2:1-7 (NIV 1984 edition):

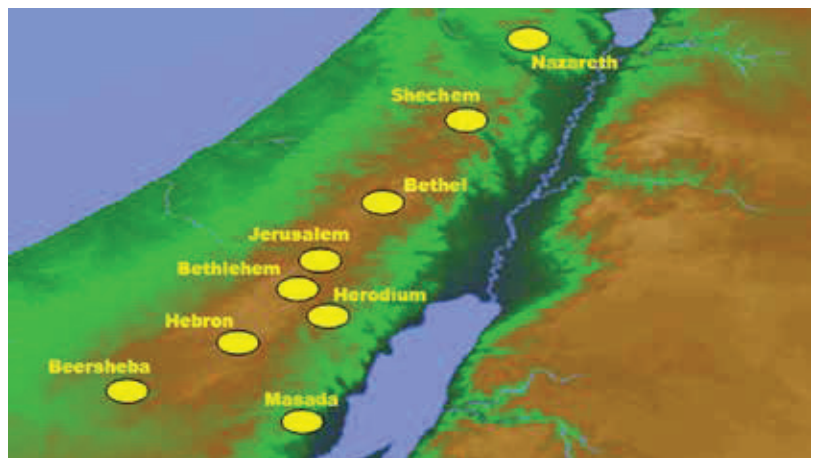
In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to his own town to register. So Joseph also

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. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and 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.

Even a cursory reading of the text indicates there's no mention of a barn or quote from the innkeeper. In fact, there's no innkeeper, at all! And by the end of this article, I hope you'll also understand there wasn't actually an "inn," or hotel, either!

## O Little Town of Bethlehem

Luke (2:3) tells us Joseph and Mary traveled from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Five miles south of Jerusalem's walled city, and east of the Jerusalem-Hebron central mountain road, sat Bethlehem. Located at the eastern end of a ridge, this birthplace of King David remained a small town in Judah (see Micah 5:2).



Gary Byers

**The Way of the Patriarchs** was the ancient north/south road along the central mountains of Israel. Starting from Beersheba in the south, the road passes by Hebron, Bethlehem, Jerusalem, Bethel, Shiloh and Shechem. Ancient roads did not pass through cities, but on the flattest, most level ground possible. The walled cities came later, built along the roads, on higher ground near perennial water sources and arable land.



<http://www.soniahalliday.com/category-view3.php?pri=IS506-2-36.jpg>

**The cruciform Church of the Nativity** (lower left center), the traditional birthplace of Jesus, sat upon the western summit of the OT tell (view from northwest). Herod the Great's fortress of Herodium can be seen to the southeast (skyline at the center).

NT Bethlehem extended west of the OT tell, toward the Hebron Road. When Herod the Great built forts at Herodium (3 mi [5 km] southeast) and Masada, Bethlehem overlooked the connecting road to both and acquired new importance. While always in Jerusalem's shadow, it continued having significance under Roman governor Pontius Pilate, who diverted water from his Jerusalem aqueduct to Bethlehem.

## The Royal Family of David

The census (Lk 2:1) sent Joseph back to the village of his origin. Whether he was actually born there or not, as a descendant of King David, Bethlehem was Joseph's ancestral home. In the

ancient Near East, an extended family's connection to its hometown was always important. So when Joseph appeared in Bethlehem and said, "I am Joseph, son of Jacob, the son of Matthan, the son of Eleazar" (Mt 1:15–16) space would certainly have been made for him in one of the town's homes.

The Mosaic Law called for family land to be a perpetual inheritance (see Nm 27:8–11), and Bethlehem was within the tribe of Judah's inheritance. Boaz, the great-grandfather of King David (Ru 4:21–22), lived there—David could even have been born in his house. The men of Bethlehem later returned from the Babylonian captivity (Ezr 2:21; Neh 7:26), and presumably the House of David went back to its perpetual landholding.

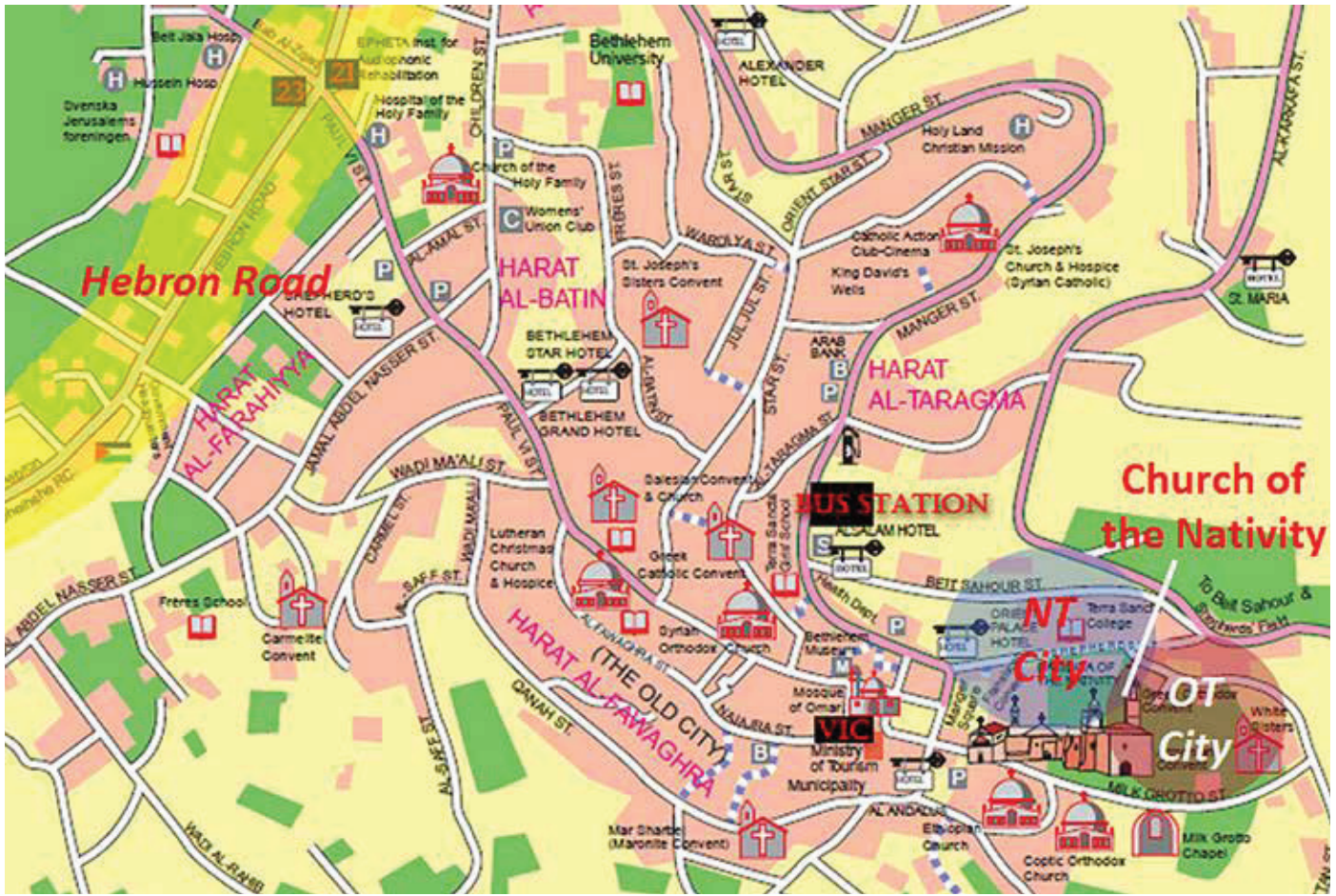
The ancient custom of receiving guests would have been sufficient to provide Joseph and Mary appropriate lodging—even more so for returning family. And Joseph was not just a Bethlehemite, he was a "royal" from the line of King David.

This Davidic connection was evidently so strong in Bethlehem that it was still called "the city of David" (Lk 2:4, 11; the town of David's birth), even though everyone knew the Hebrew Scriptures referred to Jerusalem as "the City of David" 43 times, starting with David's capture of Jebus in 2 Samuel 5:7 to Nehemiah's rededication of Jerusalem's rebuilt walls in Nehemiah 12:37. A member of that famous and royal

family, Joseph should have been welcome anywhere in town.

It would have been natural for a woman about to give birth to be offered special attention. Childbirth was even an important community event in the ancient Near East—with other women assisting, regardless of the circumstances. The people of Bethlehem no doubt made themselves available to pregnant Mary and hometown Joseph of David's royal family.

Besides, only six months earlier, Mary had visited relatives nearby in the "hill country of Judea" (Lk 1:39). If Bethlehem had been inhospitable, Joseph could have taken her to stay with them. And the text may even suggest time to make such arrangements—because Jesus was born "while they were there" (Lk 2:6).



Martin Lightner

Overlaid on a modern map of Bethlehem are the Hebron Road (left), OT and NT Bethlehem (right) and Constantine's Church of the Nativity (326 AD).

Taken together, it's highly unlikely Joseph and Mary could only find a Bethlehem barn in which to lodge. And remember—a barn's not even mentioned in the text!

### Away in a Manger

So, if Mary and Joseph were in a family home in Bethlehem, why do we always think of a barn? It is because of the prominence of the "manger" in the story (2:7, 12, 16). In our thinking, that suggests a barn.

But both the OT Hebrew and NT Greek terms translated "manger" (*ebus* and *phatne*) come from verbs "to feed" or "to eat." Baby Jesus was laid in a domestic animal's feeding trough and in the biblical world, that would have been within the confines of a home in Bethlehem.

The only other use of *phatne*/manger in the New Testament is also made by Luke (13:15). It doesn't mention a flock of sheep or goats, but a single "ox" or "donkey"—valuable individual work animals which would have been kept and fed safely at home.

While *ebus*/manger is not used in Old Testament accounts of Saul visiting the witch at Endor (1 Sm 28:24) or Jephthah's vow to sacrifice the first to come out of the door of his house (Jgs 11:31), both also point to animals being kept in the home.

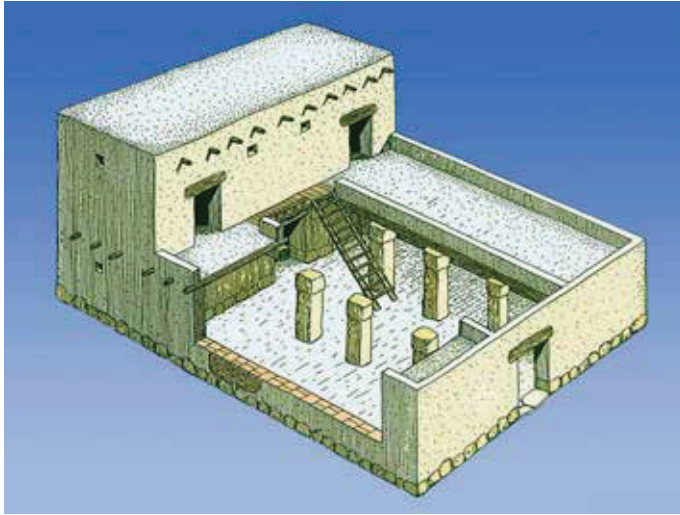
### "Domestic Stables"

Of course, portable wooden mangers like we know from Nativity scenes would not have survived in the archaeological record over millennia. Yet numerous permanent stone-carved or plastered stone-built mangers have been identified on the ground floor of domestic structures from biblical times. Historians and anthropologists have also noted the ongoing practice of keeping animals in the house throughout history down to the present.

There's even an architectural tradition for "domestic stables" in the Holy Land—stretching all the way back to the time of the Israelite settlement. Interior house walls constructed as a row of stone pillars were apparently deemed most efficient in dealing with animals within the confines of a family home. Sometimes, between these pillars, mangers have been identified.

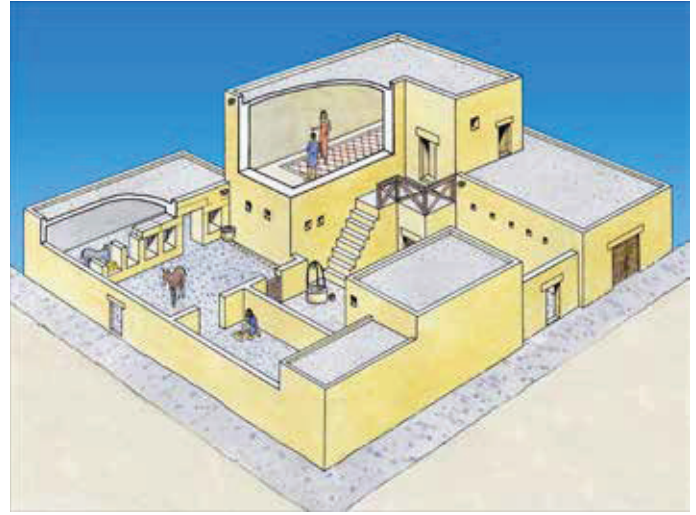
Such pillared interior walls took on the appearance of fenestrated or "window" walls by New Testament times. In fact, at ABR's Khirbet el-Maqatir excavation 9 mi (14.5 km) north of Jerusalem (14 mi [22.5 km] north of Bethlehem!), we uncovered a New Testament-era house with just such an interior wall—and a domestic stable.

While flocks were kept in sheepfolds out in the fields (note the shepherds, Lk 2:8), special animals—ox, donkey, sick or pregnant sheep or goats and their young—would be kept in the house overnight. This kept the animal safe from both harm and



Leen Ritmeyer

**Reconstruction drawing of a typical OT Israelite house,** featuring two interior walls composed of pillared supports. Such interior construction was apparently considered quite efficient for daily family life, including the care of animals within the confines of the home.



Leen Ritmeyer

**Reconstruction drawing of a typical NT house excavated in Capernaum.** Rooms were located around a central courtyard with a water cistern. The main living quarters were upstairs (including a *kataluma*/guestroom), while ground floor rooms were used for storage and daily household activities. Note the domestic stables behind a fenestrated (“window”) wall where fodder was placed.

theft, also allowing special access to them as needed. In the morning they were probably led outside for the day.

## No Room in the Inn

So, this reconstruction of the Christmas story has Mary and Joseph arriving at his ancestral home in Bethlehem. While there, Mary gives birth to Jesus and laid Him in a manger on the ground floor of the house. But what about the “inn”—the whole reason for using the manger?

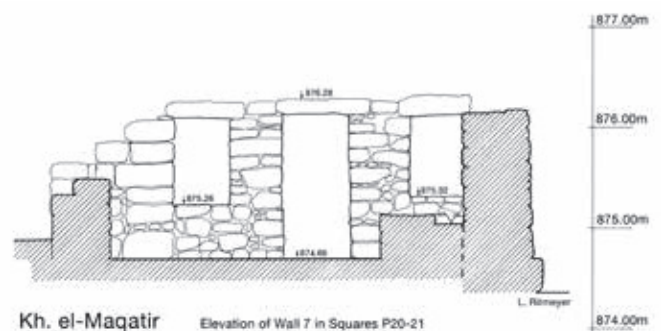
Luke 2:7 said “there was no room for them in the inn.” The text doesn’t say there was not “a room” available in the inn, just no available space (*topos*). The Greek word translated “inn”—*kataluma*—is used in only one other New Testament event. In Luke 22:11 (and its parallel in Mark 14:14), the same writer used the same word and for the upstairs Last Supper chamber (“guest room”) of a house in Jerusalem.

With the only other New Testament use of the term clearly indicating an upper room in a Jerusalem home, I suggest the *kataluma*/inn of 2:7 should be understood similarly. In fact, the NIV 2011 edition now translates this verse as “there was no guest room available.” Presumably, the upstairs guest room of Joseph’s ancestral home was already full of guests, maybe respected elder family members. Or Mary, even desiring some privacy, might have welcomed the ground floor domestic stable and some solitude.

Luke knew about the public institution of inns/caravanserais—he told the story of the Good Samaritan who took the half dead man to a real “inn” (*pandocheion*; 10:34). It even had an innkeeper (*pandocheus*; 10:35)! If Luke wanted us to understand the “inn” of the Christmas account was such a public structure, he knew the correct term to use.



Michael Luddeni—view north



Kh. el-Maqtatir Elevation of Wall 7 in Squares P20-21

L. Ritmeyer

Leen Ritmeyer—view south

**The fenestrated interior “window” wall of a New Testament house** at ABR’s Khirbet el-Maqtatir (KeM) excavation, 9 mi (14.5 km) north of Jerusalem in Israel’s West Bank. Such “window” walls followed the tradition of the “pillared” Old Testament Israelite house, apparently serving similar purposes. Interestingly, while this New Testament “window” wall has been excavated at KeM, a corresponding Old Testament “pillared” wall has not yet been identified at the site.



<http://www.biblewalks.com/Sites/MaaleAkrabim.html>

**Reconstructed remains of New Testament “inn” at Rogem Zafir**, located along the Maale Akrabim (“Ascent of Scorpions”). This road was mentioned in relation to Judah’s southeastern border of the Promised Land (Nm 34:1–4; Jos 15:1–3). But it was also part of the land not settled by the Israelites, remaining Amorite territory (Jgs 1:33–36). Later in history, this pass—the western extension of the Incense and Spice Route—was guarded in New Testament times by Roman Rogem Zafir. The site consisted of a multi-story “inn” to host travelers and a fort to protect them. Also known by their Persian name “caravanserai” (roughly translated “place for desert travelers”), Luke referenced such a public structure in the Good Samaritan story (Lk 10).

## The Importance of Family to God

In review, I propose the following scenario for the Nativity account. Mary and Joseph went to Joseph’s town of origin and stayed in his ancestral home. The second-floor guestroom was already full, so Mary gave birth to Jesus on the ground floor of the same house, laying Him in a manger of the house’s domestic stable.

If this is an accurate reconstruction of the facts, I’ll also propose that the message of the Nativity doesn’t suggest rejection and loneliness. 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 for us. We’re not designed to attempt doing our spiritual walk by ourselves, alone. Family is critical and essential for our own wellbeing.

But some will note that their biological families aren’t available or appropriate—to which Jesus offered some important insights. While he was addressing a crowd, His own mother and brothers came to speak to Him one day, he noted to the group that His mother, brothers and sisters are those who do the will of His Father in heaven (Mt 12:50). The message? Beyond biological family, there is spiritual family—we’re all supposed to be connected!

So, the first Christmas shows us the wonderful truth that God wants us all to be connected to and supported by family. It’s especially important during the holiday season, when so many who’ve suffered loss feel alone.

The Nativity reminds us how important family is—biological or spiritual. We all need to be connected and we should help make sure others are, too!

(This article is an update and expansion of the author’s 2009 article in *Bible Study Magazine*.)

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