

“There Was No Place in the Room”

Luke 2: 1-7

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Do you ever wonder what it was really like the night when Jesus was born? We have created so many traditions and myths associated with Jesus' birth that it is difficult for us to put ourselves back in time to the village of Bethlehem on that amazing night in 6-8 BC.

Many of you have been to Bethlehem. You have visited the Church of the Nativity in Manger Square and the cave beneath the altar of the Greek Orthodox Church. Most certainly a guide or, perhaps, one of our faculty members has explained to you that this lower chapel was once a cave once used as a stable. However, standing there in the chapel it is difficult to see a cave. The room has been altered over the centuries and there is no resemblance to a cave at all. For visitors it is almost impossible to imagine what this cave might have looked like.

Quite by accident in the mid-1990's, a first century house was discovered in a village to the northeast of Ramallah, in the West Bank or Palestine. The village is named Taybeh and is not found on most maps of modern day Palestine or Israel. The house is located on the property of a modern church in the heart of the village. ¹ What made this house so important is that at the time it was the only first century house of its kind that had been found in the area of northern Judea or lower Samaria. In other words, it is exactly the kind of house we could expect to find in Bethlehem during the closing years of the reign of Herod the Great. ²

An understanding of and appreciation for architecture is presupposed by the gospel writers. As archaeologists working on first century sites in Israel, ³ we are always excited to find buildings, worship centers, and especially houses. ⁴ For this reason we were very excited to find the house in Taybeh.

It will be difficult to paint a word picture of this house for you. But, I will try. ⁵ The first thing we noticed when we entered the house was that there is a corridor connecting the front door to a cave which functions as a stable in the first century. A few meters from the front door, on the left are steps leading up to the family room. This room functioned as the primary room of the house for the family living here. It is in this room that the family cooks and eats their meals, interacts with one another, stores their personal belongings, sleeps, and more. In this room we also find a fireplace which would have been used for heating the house and cooking the meals. There are also nooks and crannies for the storage of personal belongings. In the northeastern corner is an open closet used for storing mats for sleeping. Under the floor of the family room is an area for storing family possessions.

In the southeastern corner of the primary family room are steps leading to a second room, an upper room, if you will. During New Testament times this room had a specific function and name. The room is called a *kataluma* in Greek, and means an “upper guest room.” This word should be contrasted with another Greek word, *pandocheion*, is similar to our modern concept of a motel or inn. ⁶

At this time it is imperative that we mention a very important custom of the indigenous peoples of Western Asia. In the first century and today, when a son gets married it is the obligation of his father to provide a home (house) for his son and his son's new wife.

Therefore, if Joseph's home village is Bethlehem, as both Matthew and Luke state, then Joseph would have lived in a house or home provided by his father in Bethlehem.⁷ This home, provided by the father of Joseph for his son and his new wife, was, most likely, the *kataluma*, or upper guest chamber of their house. In the house of Taybeh we have such a guest chamber.

Again, we must rely on function and custom to get a clear picture of the circumstances surrounding the birth of Jesus. In antiquity, when a young woman becomes pregnant and is about to deliver her child, the birth cannot be in a room where others might be sleeping. The discharge associated with childbirth would cause the room and all who live there to become defiled. Therefore, the delivery of a new born baby would take place in a place that is private, quiet, warm, intimate, and where defilement is not an issue. Where can such a place be found in a first century house? The answer is the stable or cave. Furthermore, there will be a midwife present during the birth of Jesus.⁸

"There were high infant and maternal mortality rates in the first century. Because delivery was sometimes difficult, midwives assisted with childbirth. The Mishnah informs us that midwives were very active and were even allowed to travel beyond the prescribed limits on the Sabbath to assist in the delivery of newborns. 'They may deliver a woman on the Sabbath and summon a midwife for her from anywhere, and they may profane the Sabbath for the mother's sake and tie to the navel-string.' (*Mishnah Sabbath* 18:3)."⁹ The reason that midwives are so important in Biblical times is because they are helping to fulfill the first commandment in the Bible, "Be fruitful and multiply." (Genesis 1: 28).

The English translation of Luke, "And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn." (2:7). However, as mentioned above, we now know that in Greek the passage should be translated as follows: "And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the upper guest room (*kataluma*)." Jesus was born in a stable. However this stable was a cave in the lowest part of the house. Mary delivered there because it was a quiet, warm, private place and a place not affected by the laws of ritual purity.

What may we conclude from this important archaeological discovery in Taybeh? The lesson is wonderful in its simplicity just as the teachings of Jesus are wonderful in their simplicity. On an ordinary day, in an ordinary way, an extraordinary event took place in our world and in our lives. Jesus was born in a simple stable (cave) in the home of his grandfather. His parents lived in the upper guest room (*kataluma*). To preserve to purity of this room and to give Mary privacy, she went to the stable. And in this simple, quiet, and humble place, God broke into our world and our lives.

There has never been a time when we need to feel the power of the Christmas message as this time in history. May the Prince of Peace, the Rabbi of hope, compassion, forgiveness, and love, whose birth we celebrate every Christmas, be in our hearts and minds as we struggle to find meaning in a time of fear and oppression.

NOTES:

1. The church is a modern Roman Catholic church. Most of the people of the village are Catholic or Orthodox Christians.
2. The years of the reign of Herod the Great are 37-4 BC. Jesus was born while Herod was still alive. Some Biblical scholars estimate Jesus' birth in the year 6-7 BC based on the story of the slaughter of the innocent male infants in Bethlehem as reported in Matthew 2. In Matthew we find that Herod orders the slaughter of male infants age two and under.
3. The author is the associate director of the excavation at Bethsaida and the director of the excavations at Kursi (on the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee) and the new excavations of Capernaum set to begin in September 2002.
4. In Bethsaida we discovered and excavated two first century houses. One was the house of a wealthy family which we call a "villa." The more important house we found and excavated is a house of a first century fisherman. This type of house is called an *Insula*, a common style of house found in the villages around the Sea of Galilee. This is the kind of house found in Capernaum and known as the house of Peter (see Matthew 8: 14; Mark 1: 30). Other examples of this type of architecture have been found on Korazim (Matthew 11: 21-23).
5. We will be supplying you with a generous collection of current digital photos of the Taybeh house along with this article.
6. The word ***pandocheion*** is the Greek word used in the parable of the Good Samaritan. In the parable the Samaritan takes the wounded man to an "inn," or "***pandocheion***," where he is restored of health. This is a very different definition from that of ***kataluma***.
7. There are conflicting accounts of the birth of Jesus in Matthew and Luke. Matthew locates the family of Jesus in Bethlehem. In his account (see chapter 2), Jesus is born in Bethlehem and his family moves to Nazareth after the death of Herod the Great (see Matthew 2: 19-23). Luke has the parents of Jesus beginning in Nazareth, traveling to Bethlehem for a census, and returning to Nazareth. This is a complicated matter addressed, without much resolution, by many competent Biblical scholars. Among these are Hendrikus Boers, *Who Was Jesus?*, (San Francisco: Harper and Row), 1989; David Flusser, *Jesus*, (Jerusalem: Magnes Press), 1998; Rami Arav and John Rousseau, *Jesus and His World*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), 1995.
8. We are aware that there is no mention of a midwife in the nativity stories of Matthew or Luke. The Western mind concludes that since this person is not mentioned, she must not be present. However, the Eastern mind concludes that the reason she is not mentioned is because it is so obvious that a midwife would be present, Matthew and Luke do not refer to her.
9. Charles R. Page, II, *Jesus and the Land*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press), 1995, 41.