



## A New Look at the Nativity

by Warren Krug (November-December, 1999)

The usual crèche or Nativity scene shows a wooden stable with Mary and Joseph standing or kneeling by a manger. Lying on the bed of straw is the Baby Jesus.

To one side of the manger in reverent devotion are two or more shepherds, possibly accompanied by one or more of their sheep. Also standing nearby are three Magi dressed in royal robes holding gifts for the Christ Child. Some other animals such as a cow or a donkey will likely also be in the scene.

So, what's wrong with this picture? Many have pointed out the Wise Men could not have been in Bethlehem on the night of Jesus' birth. Remember, after seeing the Bethlehem Star they had to travel from a distant country, and they went to Jerusalem first before making the journey to Bethlehem.

G. J. Albrecht and M. J. Albrecht point out that the Christ Child had been circumcised and presented in Bethlehem prior to the arrival of the Magi. Likely several months had passed between the birth of Jesus and the arrival of the Wise Men. **1** Also, the Bible doesn't specify that there were three of them, but because they presented three gifts to the Baby Jesus, it is assumed there were three Magi.

Questions have also been raised about the type of structure in which Jesus was born. Because a manger is mentioned in Luke, people have assumed that Jesus' birthplace was a barn or wooden shed.

However, the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem is built on the site where according to early tradition Jesus was born. Below this church is not a wooden stable but a cave!

Now some new ideas have been proposed regarding the nature of the building in which Jesus was born. According to an archaeologist, Gary Byers, in an article published by the Associates for Biblical Research, Jesus may have been born in a regular house of those days. Furthermore, the picture of Mary and Joseph being turned away from various inns because of overcrowding before one kindhearted innkeeper finally let them stay in a stable may also be incorrect. **2**

"Mangers" and "inns" were common features of ordinary village houses in Bethlehem at the time of Jesus, Byers claims. The Bible doesn't say Jesus was born in a stable; it doesn't mention any animals; and it doesn't mention an innkeeper nor anything else to suggest the "inn" was like a hotel or rooming house.

Textual scholars have long recognized that the word "inn" in Scriptures can simply mean a place where travelers can put down their luggage to rest. The word can also refer to rooms built for entertainment or lodging guests. The same word translated "inn" in Luke 2 is also used in Luke 22 to refer to the upper room where Jesus had the Last Supper. Ancient Jewish writings discuss such rooms as frequent features of the houses of Jesus' time.

If Byers is correct, both the manger and guest-room were part of a common Palestinian house in the days of Jesus. A typical house at that time had an unroofed courtyard surrounded by a wall. A cave could have been part of the house. One or more structures were located in the courtyard. Animals were sometimes kept under one roof and people slept under another. Or the animals could have been kept on the ground floor while the family and guests slept on a second floor.

If this picture of the Nativity is correct, the following description may be more accurate than what people traditionally have believed:

*Joseph and Mary travel to Bethlehem. They go to a dwelling—quite possibly Joseph's ancestral home—only to find that the guest rooms have already been filled by relatives or others who arrived earlier.*

*They are invited to go instead to the part of the house where the manger is kept. There may or may not be any animals present. Here Jesus is born and placed in a manger, and momentarily some shepherds arrive after hearing the message of the angels.*

*In time the other guests leave and there is now space in a guest-room for Jesus and His parents. Mary and Joseph remain in the house for several more months during which time the Wise Men make their visit.*

The exact extra-biblical details of the story of the birth of Jesus are, of course, dwarfed by the importance of the event itself. Yet, it can be refreshing to take another look at this familiar story. *LSI*

**References:**

1. G. J. Albrecht and M. J. Albrecht, *Matthew, the People's Bible* series (Northwestern Publishing House, Milwaukee, 1996), pp. 24-25.
2. Associates for Biblical Research (Walkersville, MD), reprinted in *Christian News* (October 13, 1997)