

The Birth of Jesus as seen through Middle Eastern Eyes

By Monte F. Shelley
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Kenneth E. Bailey lived for 60 years in the Middle Eastern countries of Egypt, Israel, Lebanon, and Cyprus. He learned their language, culture, and understanding of the Bible. His writings help one gain insights into the scriptures by seeing them through Middle Eastern eyes.

Jesus, his disciples, and Jewish converts to the early Christian church spoke Aramaic. Their descendants spoke Syriac and later Arabic which are both sister languages to Aramaic and Hebrew. About AD 451 the Jewish Christians separated from the “catholic” gentile Christians who spoke Latin or Greek. Today there are “more than ten million Arabic-speaking Christians who ... are rooted in the traditional ways of the Middle East.” Their scriptures are based on ancient Syriac manuscripts. They speak a language closely related to the language Jesus spoke and they are familiar with the traditions of the Middle East. Thus, they “are ethnically closer to the Semitic world of Jesus than the Greek and Latin cultures of the West.”¹

Throughout this article, the subheadings “West” and “M-East” refer to the Western and Middle Eastern traditions respectively.

Traditional Western Story



West: “Bethlehem boasted an inn. When Mary and Joseph arrived (late at night) the innkeeper told them that there was ‘no vacancy’ in the inn, but that they could use the stable. With no other option available, and in desperation, they accepted. Consequently, Jesus was born that night in a stable; hence the manger in which he was placed.”²

M-East: Given their law or code of hospitality, Middle Easterners see several problems with this traditional story: “Joseph was returning to his home village where he could easily find shelter. Because he was a descendant of King David nearly all doors in the village were open to him. Mary had relatives [Elizabeth] nearby and could have turned to them but she did not. There was plenty of time to arrange suitable housing. How could a Jewish town fail to help a young Jewish mother about to give birth?”³ “Does any society known to us fail to help a young woman about to give birth? Can we imagine this happening in any traditional farming community? Would a farm family anywhere in the world tell a young couple (of their own community) who was seeking help for an imminent birth, ‘There’s the barn. Use it if you like. We can’t be bothered with you!’”⁴

When did Mary and Joseph arrive?

West: Mary and Joseph arrived at night and Jesus was born that night. “The *late-night-arrival-imminent-birth myth* ... stems from approximately two hundred years after the birth of Jesus, when an

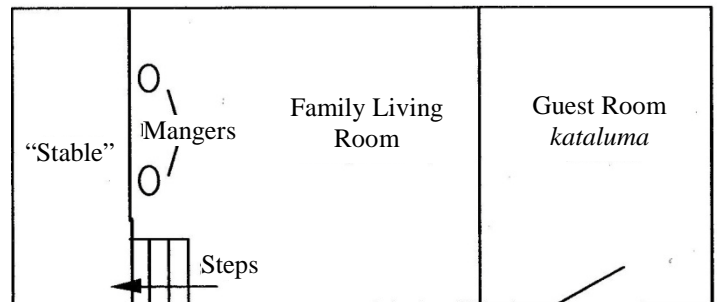
anonymous Christian wrote an expanded account of the birth of Jesus. ... The author was not a Jew and *did not understand Palestinian geography or Jewish tradition*. ... In the novel, as they approach Bethlehem, Mary says ... ‘Joseph, take me down from the ass, for the child ... presses me, to come forth.’ ... Joseph leaves Mary in a cave and rushes off to Bethlehem to find a midwife. After seeing fanciful visions on the way, Joseph returns with the midwife (the baby has already been born) to be faced with ... a bright light overshadowing the cave.”⁵

M-East: Joseph and Mary “went up” to Bethlehem, and “while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered” (Lk 2:4, 6). “We can easily assume a few weeks have passed, perhaps even a month or more.”⁶ A considerate husband and a wise woman would start the 4–5 day journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem several weeks before her due date.

Where was the manger?

West: In our western culture, animals are kept away from a home in a stable or barn with a manger or feeding trough. Since Mary laid baby Jesus “in a manger,” they were obviously in a stable. Since some second century writers said Jesus was born in a cave near Bethlehem, a cave may have been used for the stable.

M-East: “Any Palestinian reading the phrase, “She laid him in a manger,” would immediately assume that the birth took place in a private home, because he knows that mangers are built into the floor of the raised terrace of the peasant home.”⁷



Typical village home in Palestine with attached guest room

“Simple village homes ... were often an extension of a small cave if one was available.” Justin Martyr [c. AD 160] “grew up in the Holy Land ... and he records that Jesus was born in a cave. This cave tradition is the universal assumption across all of the ancient Eastern Christian churches.”⁸ “Simple village homes often had but two rooms. One was exclusively for guests. That room was attached to the end of the house or ... on the roof ... (1 Kgs 17:19). The main room was a ‘family room’ where the entire family cooked, ate, slept and lived.” They slept on mats that they would take up in the morning (Matt 2:9–11). “The end of the room next to the door, was either a few feet lower than the rest of the floor or blocked off. ... Each night into that designated area, the family cow, donkey, and a few sheep would be driven. And every morning those same animals were taken out and tied up in the courtyard of the house. ... A guest room [was on the flat roof], or ... the end of the house. The door on the lower level serves as an entrance for people and animals. The farmer wants the animals in the house each night because they provide heat in winter and are safe from theft. ... The elongated circles represent mangers dug out of the lower end of the living room. ... If the family cow is hungry during the night, she can ... eat. ... Mangers for sheep can be of wood and placed on the floor of the lower level.”⁹ “Such homes can be traced from 1000 BC up to 1950.”¹⁰

Several verses imply such a house. One lamp on a candlestick gives “*light to all ... in the house*” (Matt 5:15). “The woman had a fat calf *in the house*” (1 Sam 28:24). When Jephthah vowed to sacrifice whatever came out “of the doors of my house to meet me,” he apparently expected an animal to come out (Judg 11:31). After healing a woman on the Sabbath, Jesus asked, “Doth not each one of you on the sabbath loose his ox or his ass from the stall, and lead him away to watering?” (Lk 13:15) In an ancient Arabic New Testament, this verse says, “does not every one of you untie his ox or his donkey from the manger *in the house* and take it outside and water it?”¹¹ Early Christians believed Isaiah was referring to Jesus in the manger when he said, “The *ox* knows his master, and the *donkey* his owner's *manger*” (NIV Isa. 1:3). Since the second century, an ox and a donkey have been included in art and nativity scenes.¹² “But that manger was in a warm and friendly home, not in a cold and lonely stable”¹³

“William Thompson, an Arabic-speaking Presbyterian missionary scholar ... observed village homes in Bethlehem and wrote, ‘It is my impression that the birth actually took place in an ordinary house of some common peasant, and that the baby was laid in one of the mangers, such as are still found in the dwellings of farmers in this region.’”¹⁴

Where was the inn?

West: In our culture, travelers go to an inn (motel or hotel) and ask for a private room. Usually there are several inns in a city. Thus, “no room in the inn” suggests that the inn had a “no vacancy” sign because each of the rooms in Bethlehem’s inn(s) was occupied. An ancient public inn was called a *caravansary* or *khan*. Variations of this story as well as a description and a picture of a caravansary are found in *Remembering Christ at Christmas*.

M-East: In the Good Samaritan story (Lk 10:33–34), Luke uses the Greek word *pandocheion* to refer to a public inn or caravanserai with an innkeeper (*pandocheus*). These public inns were found on major roads and “small villages on minor roads had no inns.”¹⁵ In the story of Jesus’ birth, Luke does not refer to a public inn when he says, “no *topos* for them in the *kataluma*.” The Greek word *topos* means “place, position, region.”¹⁶ It does not refer to “a room in an inn” but to *place* or *space*. *Room* reflects this meaning when we say “there is no room” on the table, in the car, or in the kitchen. Luke and Mark use *kataluma* (guestchamber or guest room) elsewhere to refer to the upper room of a private house used for Christ’s last Passover (Lk 22:11–12). In the Middle East where hospitality is a sacred duty,¹⁷ even simple village homes described above often had only two rooms with one used only for guests. Because of this code of hospitality, Christ’s disciples could travel without purse or scrip and expect food, lodging, and protection from virtually any home (Lk 10:4–12).

“Joseph was returning to the village of Bethlehem from whence his family originated. The Middle Easterner is profoundly attached to his village of family origin. ... Even if he has never been there before he can appear suddenly at the home of a distant cousin, recite his genealogy, and he is among friends. ... If Joseph did have some member of the extended family resident in the village, he was honor-bound to seek them out. Furthermore, if he did not have family or friends in the village, as a member of the famous house of David ... he would still be welcomed into almost any village home. ... Even if he was a total stranger appearing in a strange village— still he would be able to find shelter for the birth of a child. Indeed, the birth of a child is a special occasion in any culture anywhere in the world. The idea that a woman about

to give birth cannot find shelter and assistance from the village women in a Middle Eastern village, even if she is a total stranger, staggers the imagination.”¹⁸

When Luke says Mary laid the baby “in a manger,” the (Palestinian) reader instinctively thinks, ‘Manger—oh—they are in the main family room. Why not the guest room?’ ... ‘Because there was no place for them in the guest room.’ The reader concludes, ‘Ah, yes—well, the family room is more appropriate anyway.’” “No unkindness or lack of hospitality is implied when the Holy Family is taken into the main family room of the home in which they are entertained. ... The host is not expected to ask prior guests (or a recently married son) to leave. Such would be quite unthinkable and, in any case, unnecessary. The large family room is more appropriate in any case.” “A private home would have bedding, facilities for heating water and all that is required for any peasant birth.”¹⁹

“The churches of the Middle East, for two thousand years, have never seen an ‘inn’ in the story. The oldest translation of the Gospels into any language is the Old Syriac that dates from the second century. In that version, the key word *kataluma* is left out. The Old Syriac reads simply, ‘There was no space for them.’ The Peshitta Syriac (third to fourth centuries) offers, ‘There was no space for them where they were staying’; and the most common Arabic translation says, ‘There was no space ... in the *manzil* (house).’”²⁰

“To summarize ... the holy family traveled to Bethlehem, where they were received into a private home. The child was born, wrapped and ... ‘put to bed’ ... in the living room in the manger that was either built into the floor or made of wood and moved into the family living space. ... The guest room was already occupied by other guests. The host family graciously accepted Mary and Joseph into the family room of their house. ... The village midwife and other women would have assisted at the birth. After the child was born and wrapped, Mary put her newborn to bed in a manger filled with fresh straw and covered him with a blanket.”²¹

Where did the shepherds find the baby?

West: The night Jesus was born, the shepherds “came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger” (Lk 2:16). The manger was in a stable or cave where animals were kept away from homes.

M-East: “Shepherds in first century Palestine were poor, ... uneducated types. ... who were close to the bottom of the social scale.” The upper classes would not welcome a visit from them. “The angels ... told the shepherds they would find the baby wrapped (which is what peasants, like shepherds, did) ... [and] lying in a manger! That is they would find the Christ child in an ordinary peasant home such as theirs. ... They found the holy family in perfectly adequate accommodations, not in a dirty stable. ... The fact that they walked out, without moving the young family [to their own homes], means the shepherds felt they could not offer better hospitality than what had already been extended to them.”²² “At the end of their visit they went home ‘praising God for *all* that they had seen and heard.’ The word ‘all’ includes the quality of the hospitality. If they had found a young mother with her first child in the middle of a filthy stable, scared to death with no older women around to help her, the shepherds would have said, ‘This is outrageous! Come home with us! Our women will take care of you!’”²³

Where did the wise men find the baby?

West: When the wise men “were come *into the house*, they saw the young child with Mary his mother” (Matt 2:11). The wise men did not visit Jesus in the manger on the night of his birth as did the shepherds. They came months later and found the “young child” in his house instead of in the stable where he was born.

M-East: Matthew says “the wise men entered *the house* where they saw Mary and the child. ... [This] confirms the suggestion that Luke’s account describes a birth in a private home”²⁴ with a manger in the living room.

Where were the wise men from?

“There came wise men *from the east* to Jerusalem, Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star *in the east*, and are come to worship him” (Mt 2:1–2).

“If the magi [or wise men] were east of Israel and they saw his star in the east, they should have gone to India! ... In Hebrew, the word for ‘East’ also means ‘the rising.’”²⁵ Other translations say “we saw his star at its rising” (NRSV) or “when it rose” (NIV).

West: “Any Christian living in Rome ... would naturally think of ‘the East’ as Persia, and indeed the word *Magi* in Greek literature does refer to people from Babylonia or Parthia.”²⁶

M-East: “For the Christian dwelling in the Holy Land, ‘the East’ would refer to the other side of the Jordan River. ... ‘The East’ for them would naturally refer to the Jordanian deserts that connect with the deserts of Arabia. ... Rich people usually possess gold, and gold was mined in Arabia. ... Frankincense and myrrh are harvested from trees that only grow in southern Arabia. Wealthy dwellers of these desert regions would naturally have gold, frankincense and myrrh. ... Justin Martyr [c. AD 160] ... writes, ‘The wise men from Arabia came to Bethlehem and worshipped the child and offered to him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.’ ... A Bedouin tribe in Jordan ... bore the Arabic name *al-Kokabani* ... [which] means ‘Those who study/follow the planets’ ... because their ancestors followed the planets and traveled west to Palestine to show honor to the great prophet Jesus when he was born.”²⁷

Isaiah prophesied of this time saying, “Arise, shine, for your *light* has come, and the *glory* of the LORD rises upon you. ...³ Nations will come to your light, and *kings* to the brightness of your dawn. ...⁵ To you the riches of the nations will come. ...⁶ Herds of camels will cover your land, young *camels* of Midian and Ephah. And all from Sheba will come, bearing gold and [*frank*]incense and proclaiming the praise of the LORD.⁷ All Kedar’s *flocks* will be gathered to you, the rams of Nebaioth will serve you; they will be accepted as offerings on my altar, and I will adorn my glorious temple.” (Isa 60:1–7)

The descriptions related to Jesus’ birth in Matthew and Luke seem to fulfill this prophecy. Midian and Ephah are in northern Arabia, and Sheba was in southern Arabia. “Frankincense is a unique product of southern Arabia.” The wise men are often depicted as three kings riding on camels bringing gold and frankincense. In these verses, “Isaiah promised special blessings for ... Jerusalem. Arabs would arrive with gifts and shepherds [tending flocks] would appear. A great light, along with the glory of God, would shine upon Jerusalem. The Gospel authors saw these promises fulfilled in the birth of a child. ‘The hopes and dreams of all the years’ are shifted from Jerusalem to a child born in Bethlehem. At his birth Jewish shepherds and Gentile Arabs came together in adoration of a child in a manger.”²⁸

Summary of the Middle Eastern view

“With this understanding in mind, all the cultural problems ... are solved. Joseph was not obliged to seek a commercial inn. He does not appear as an inept and inadequate husband who cannot arrange for Mary’s needs. Likewise, Joseph did not anger his wife’s relatives by failing to turn to them in a crisis. The child was born in the normal surroundings of a peasant home sometime after they arrived in Bethlehem, and there was no heartless innkeeper with whom to deal. A member of the house of David was not humiliated by rejection as he returned to the village of his family’s origins. The people of Bethlehem offered the best they had and preserved their honor as a community. The shepherds were not hardhearted oafs without the presence of mind to help a needy family of strangers.”²⁹ The King of Kings was not born in a palace or a dirty stable, but in the home of a peasant (probably a relative) with the help of a midwife and others as was customary.

When I read the Christmas story, I prefer the Middle Eastern view filled with love and hospitality over the heartless Western view.

More Information

Remembering Christ at Christmas (www.sviewp.com) has pictures and more information related the Middle Eastern culture. It also includes several variations of the Nativity story based on different cultures and languages.

¹ Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 2008. p. 1–12.

² Kenneth E. Bailey, *Open Hearts in Bethlehem*, 2005, 1.

³ Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 28

⁴ Bailey, *Open Hearts in Bethlehem*, 1.

⁵ Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 27.

⁶ Kenneth E. Bailey, “The Manger and the Inn,” 1979.

(www.biblearchaeology.org/post/2008/11/08/The-Manger-and-the-Inn.aspx#Article)

⁷ Bailey, “The Manger and the Inn.”

⁸ Bailey, *Open Hearts in Bethlehem*, “Program Notes”

⁹ Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 28–33.

¹⁰ Bailey, *Open Hearts in Bethlehem*, 2.

¹¹ Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 31.

¹² Joseph F. Kelly, *The Origins of Christmas*, 36–37. See also www.scriptoriumdaily.com/2008/12/25/ox-and-ass-at-christs-manger.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹⁵ Bailey, “The Manger and the Inn.”

¹⁶ Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*. 1979.

¹⁷ Monte F. Shelley, Gospel Doctrine—Old Testament Notes, lesson #9, www.sviewp.com.

¹⁸ Bailey, “The Manger and the Inn.”

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Bailey, *Open Hearts in Bethlehem*, 2.

²¹ Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 34–35.

²² *Ibid.*, 35–36.

²³ Bailey, *Open Hearts in Bethlehem*, 1.

²⁴ Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 36.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 51.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 52.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 52–53.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 54–55.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 36.