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# AN IMPROBABLE INN: TEXTS AND TRADITION SURROUNDING LUKE 2:7

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## Introduction

Few scenes from scripture are drenched in as much tradition as the nativity of Jesus. Both ancient and modern Christian audiences have been fascinated with the circumstances of Jesus's birth. This interest has expressed itself in many forms throughout the ages: additional infancy narratives like the *Protoevangelium of James* (beginning in the second century), artistic depictions of the manger scene (beginning in the fourth century), reenactments of the nativity story (first documented in the thirteenth century), and even modern film depictions of the event. These expressions of piety enrich Christian worship and help impress upon believers the wonder of the nativity, particularly during the liturgically significant Christmas season.

Yet these various depictions of Jesus's birth all carry with them the baggage of embellishment. Even if one draws on both the Matthean and Lucan accounts, there are precious few canonical details about Jesus's birth: Matthew's infancy narrative passes over the birth entirely, and Luke's only hint is that a manger is present. Thus, to create even a basic depiction of Jesus's birth, artists are forced to supply details that are absent from the canonical sources. Unfortunately, so many of these additional details have accumulated over the years that the original accounts of the nativity have been obscured by tradition. Even while looking at the biblical text itself, a modern reader's perception of the account is colored by nearly two millennia of interpretation.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Kenneth Bailey describes the problem in this way: "The more familiar we are with a biblical story, the more difficult it is to view it outside the way it has always been understood. And the longer imprecision in the tradition remains unchallenged, the deeper it becomes embedded in Christian consciousness. The birth story of Jesus is such a story." Kenneth Bailey, *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 25.

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One area in which tradition has perhaps obscured the original narrative is the interpretation of Luke 2:7. This verse, the only real account of Jesus's birth in the New Testament (besides the passing mention in Matthew 1:25), is surprising in its brevity. Luke<sup>2</sup> merely records the following: “ἔτεκεν τὸν υἱὸν αὐτῆς τὸν πρωτότοκον· καὶ ἐσπαργάνωσεν αὐτὸν καὶ ἀνέκλιεν αὐτὸν ἐν φάτνῃ, διότι οὐκ ἦν αὐτοῖς τόπος ἐν τῷ καταλύματι.” “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” (NRSV). Many assumptions have been made about this verse that go beyond the text itself: the mention of a manger has led many to suppose that Jesus's birth took place in a stable surrounded by animals, and the mention of an “inn” has inspired the addition of a cold-hearted innkeeper to many nativity reenactments.

But not only is the insertion of an innkeeper a dubious addition to the text, the presence of an “inn” in the narrative at all is a matter of debate. The Greek term traditionally translated as “inn” here, καταλύματι, is an inflected form of the word κατάλυμα. Here, the term is rendered by most English translations as “inn”—yet when the same term occurs in Luke 22:11, the term is translated as “guest room.” Furthermore, when κατάλυμα occurs in other Greek texts from the Hellenistic and Roman eras, it is translated in a variety of ways (as will be examined below). In the last several decades many scholars have pointed out the broad sense of κατάλυμα, and yet a clear majority of biblical translations continue to use the traditional “inn.”<sup>3</sup> Other translations contend that terms like “guest room,”<sup>4</sup> “guest chamber,”<sup>5</sup> “guest quarters,”<sup>6</sup> “living-quarters,”<sup>7</sup> “lodging place,”<sup>8</sup> “lodging,”<sup>9</sup> “house for strangers,”<sup>10</sup> or “place where people stay for the night”<sup>11</sup> better encapsulate what Luke was trying to communicate.

This debate is not an insignificant one: the meaning of κατάλυμα is critical for determining how Luke meant to portray the circumstances of Jesus's birth. As mentioned before, the actual location of Jesus's delivery goes unmentioned

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2. Examining questions of authorship for the Gospel of Luke is beyond the scope of this paper. For convenience, “Luke” is used here to refer to the author (or authors) of the gospel bearing his name.

3. Of the 50 English translations of the verse available on the popular Bible Gateway website (biblegateway.com), 36 of them (72%) render καταλύματι as “inn.”

4. Common English Bible (CEB), Easy-to-Read Version (ERV), New International Version (NIV), New International Version—UK (NIVUK).

5. Young's Literal Translation (YLT).

6. International Standard Version (ISV).

7. Contemporary English Bible (CEB).

8. Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB).

9. New Living Translation (NLT).

10. Worldwide English (WE).

11. New Life Version (NLV).

in the text: besides the presence of a manger, the only clue we have for deducing the setting of the birth is what Luke implied by saying, “οὐκ ἦν αὐτοῖς τόπος ἐν τῷ καταλύματι.” Did Luke intend to portray the young family being rejected from a commercial inn and forced to give birth in a stable? Or is κατάλυμα used in a different sense here, implying something else? Although this is a minor detail in the Lucan infancy narrative, it bears some significance: not only does it help us better understand how early Christians believed Jesus was born, but it is important for understanding the message Luke wished to send in the “prologue” to his broader work.

In this article, I will seek to establish the scene Luke intended to convey in Luke 2:7. To do this, I will first examine how κατάλυμα is used in literature that may have been familiar to Luke: Greek works of the Hellenistic and early Roman periods. This context shows that the term κατάλυμα has a broad range of referents and should not be rendered in translations as something more specific than what the term denotes. I will then closely examine the context in which Luke uses κατάλυμα, in order to determine which meaning of the word is most likely implied in Luke 2. Although its context does not allow us to definitively state how κατάλυμα should be understood, I argue that the word should be understood in Luke 2:7 as referring to a room for guests. I will then explore what such a translation implies for the story and the overall infancy narrative.

### **The Meaning of κατάλυμα**

καταλύματι is the dative singular form of the third-declension noun κατάλυμα. The noun is tied to the verb καταλύω, which often had the meaning “to unbind” or “to loose,” and eventually gained the connotation of unharnessing pack animals when resting or lodging on a journey.<sup>12</sup> To better explicate the range of interpretations κατάλυμα may have here, I will first analyze how the term is used in Greek literature from the Hellenistic and Roman periods, then examine how the term is used in the Septuagint, and lastly scrutinize how the term is used in New Testament writings. Each of these contexts is crucial for establishing how Luke would have employed κατάλυμα in his infancy narrative.

#### *Hellenistic Greek Usage*

κατάλυμα is not used frequently by Greek writers in the Hellenistic and Roman periods, but the few instances in which it is used give us a sense of how Luke may have encountered the term in literature during his time period. In

12. Walter Bauer, “καταλύω,” BDAG 414.

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these works κατάλυμα generally refers to a person's quarters or lodgings; these accommodations were often temporary in nature.

The term is first used by Polybius in his second-century BCE *Histories*. Polybius mentions that Hasdrubal, a Carthaginian military leader and governor of Punic Spain, “ἐτελεύτησε δολοφονηθεὶς ἐν τοῖς ἑαυτοῦ καταλύμασι νυκτὸς ὑπὸ τινος Κελτοῦ τὸ γένος ἰδίων ἔνεκεν ἀδικημάτων” “was assassinated at night in his lodging by a certain Celt owing to wrongs of a private nature.”<sup>13</sup> The Paton translation of the text renders καταλύμασι with the ambiguous “lodging,” but the context gives some insight into what the term means. Polybius does not seem to infer that Hasdrubal was campaigning or traveling at the time of his assassination, and the logical assumption is that he was murdered at his residence in Spanish Carthage.<sup>14</sup> This begs the question of why Polybius used κατάλυμα for the governor's quarters when he had a variety of other possible terms to use. Certainly Hasdrubal was not staying in an inn or other temporary accommodations: Polybius states that he had been governing Spanish Carthage for eight years. It is possible that Polybius used the term as an acknowledgement that although Hasdrubal was residing in Spain, his true ‘home’ was Carthage in Libya, and thus his quarters in Spanish Carthage, in a sense, lodgings away from home.<sup>15</sup> Thus, κατάλυμα here could be defined as a semi-permanent residence.

Polybius also uses the term when discussing the report of Roman legates after a diplomatic mission to Illyria. The Dalmatians had been hostile hosts: the Romans reported to the Senate “πρὸς δὲ τούτοις διεσάφουν μή<τε>κατάλυμα δοθῆναι σφίσι μήτε παροχήν” “that they had neither been given a residence nor supplied with food” during their time in the country—an offense so grave that the Senate used it as a pretext for declaring war.<sup>16</sup> In this context, κατάλυμα clearly refers to a temporary place for guests or travelers to stay: the Romans were offended at not having been offered some sort of housing during their visit.

This meaning of “guest-housing,” particularly in a government context, is also implicit in Diodorus Siculus's use of κατάλυμα in his first-century BCE *Library of History*. He first uses the term when discussing the service which Timasitheus, a Liparaean general, rendered to a group of Roman ambassadors.

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13. Polybius, *Histories* 2.36.1 (Paton, LCL).

14. Stephen C. Carlson, “The Accommodations of Joseph and Mary in Bethlehem: κατάλυμα in Luke 2:7,” *NTS* 56:3 (2010), 332.

15. This could be compared to an ambassador living in a foreign country: although she or he might live in a home for decades in a different country, that place is not definitively their “home.”

16. Polybius, *Histories* 32.13.2 (Paton, LCL).

The Romans were conveying a golden vessel to Delphi when they were captured by pirates, only to be rescued by Timasitheus's timely intervention. When the citizens of Rome learned of the event, they "παραχρήμα αὐτὸν ἐτίμησε δημόσιον δούς κατάλυμα" "honored him at once by conferring the right to public hospitality."<sup>17</sup> It is not entirely clear what "public hospitality" exactly entailed (particularly for a Liparaean general living in Carthaginian territory), but it seems evident that Rome offered Timasitheus state-funded accommodations. Later, Diodorus Siculus also recounts the story of Battaces, a Phrygian priest "of the Great Mother of the Gods" who came to Rome and demanded that the state perform rites to restore the goddess's ritual purity. His persuasive oratory ensured that "καταλύματος μὲν δημοσίου καὶ ξενίων ἡξιώθη" "he was granted lodging and hospitality at the expense of the state."<sup>18</sup> Once again, the implication is that κατάλυμα refers to accommodations for a visitor.

κατάλυμα is used twice more by Diodorus Siculus, although with slightly different meanings. He notes that king Ptolemy, while visiting Rome in the guise of a commoner, discovered the residence of Demetrius the topographer and stayed with him ("πεπυσμένος δὲ κατὰ τὴν πορείαν τὸ κατάλυμα τὸ τοῦ Δημητρίου τοῦτο πογράφου, πρὸς τοῦτον ζητήσας κατέλυσε πεφιλοξηνημένον").<sup>19</sup> Diodorus mentions that Demetrius was renting his cramped κατάλυμα for a hefty sum, conjuring the image of an apartment-like space. It is perhaps because the housing is rented space (and thus nominally temporary) that Diodorus uses κατάλυμα to describe it, as opposed to one of the terms traditionally used to describe a person's home. He also uses the term while describing the capture of Manius Aquillius by a group of Lesbians. While he was staying in Mytilene for medical treatment, "ἐπιλέξαντες οὖν τῶν νέων τοὺς ἀλκῆ διαφέροντας ἔπεμψαν ἐπὶ τὸ κατάλυμα" "they sent to his lodgings some youths, chosen for their strength, who all rushed inside the house."<sup>20</sup> The sense of temporary housing or traveler's accommodations is once again present in this usage.

One other Hellenistic author uses κατάλυμα in a significant way. In the *Letter of Aristeas*, a group of seventy-two Jewish elders travel to Egypt in order to create a Greek translation of the Hebrew Torah. Ptolemy II, duly impressed with the wise scholars, "ἐκέλευσε καταλύματα δοθῆναι τὰ κάλλιστα πλησίον τῆς ἄκρας αὐτοῖς" "gave orders that the best quarters near the citadel should be assigned to them."<sup>21</sup> Here καταλύματα unmistakably means guest chambers

17. Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History* 14.93.5 (Oldfather, LCL).

18. Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History* 36.13.2 (Walton, LCL).

19. Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History* 31.18.2 (Walton, LCL).

20. Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History* 37.27.1 (Walton, LCL).

21. *Letter of Aristeas* 181 (NRSV).

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provided by the king; the term is once again being used in the context of accommodating visitors.

### *Septuagint Usage*

Another important corpus of texts which provides context for Luke's writings are the books of the Septuagint. While the classical texts mentioned above contributed to the literary milieu in which Luke wrote, it is unknown whether Luke ever interacted with these writings. On the other hand, it is clear that Luke was familiar with the Septuagint: not only does he quote from it, but in certain places he also appears to imitate its style.<sup>22</sup> Thus, it is possible that he was familiar with how the Septuagint employs κατάλυμα and that he used it similarly in his writing. There are a significant number of verses in the Septuagint which mention a κατάλυμα: the noun occurs over a dozen times and in various books. While some verses use the term in ways similar to the sources previously examined, many give it different meanings entirely, further broadening the sense of the word.

κατάλυμα is first used in Exod 4:24: as Moses and his family travel from Midian to Egypt, “ἐν τῇ ὁδῷ ἐν τῷ καταλύματι συνήντησεν αὐτῷ ἄγγελος κυρίου καὶ ἐζήτηει αὐτὸν ἀποκτεῖναι” “on the way at the lodging, an angel of the Lord met him and was seeking to kill him.”<sup>23</sup> There are no specifics about this κατάλυμα: all we know is that it is where Moses stayed while traveling in “the wilderness”. While an inn-like structure may be inferred here, another possibility is simply a tent, or a natural shelter where Moses and his family spent the night. Indeed, many verses give κατάλυμα the sense of being a “traveler’s shelter.” While on a pilgrimage to Shiloh, Hannah receives an answer to her prayer at the tabernacle and then “ἐπορεύθη ἡ γυνὴ εἰς τὴν ὁδὸν αὐτῆς καὶ εἰσῆλθεν εἰς τὸ κατάλυμα αὐτῆς καὶ ἔφαγεν μετὰ τοῦ ἀνδρὸς αὐτῆς καὶ ἔπιεν” “went on her way and entered her quarters and ate and drank with her husband” (1 Reigns 1:18). Because Hannah and her husband were in Shiloh as pilgrims, the κατάλυμα was likely some sort of temporary accommodations.<sup>24</sup>

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22. For a list of the most common “Septuagintisms” in Luke, see Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke (I–IX)* (AB 28; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981), 114–16.

23. All English translations in this section come from Albert Pietersma and Benjamin G. Wright, eds., *A New English Translation of the Septuagint* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

24. Raymond Brown notes that this verse in particular is significant in establishing context for Luke, since the story of Hannah “is certainly part of Luke’s background in the infancy narrative.” Raymond Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. New Updated Edition* (ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 1993), 671.

Several verses in the Septuagint place κατάλυμα in parallel constructions with tents. In a revelation to Nathan, the Lord states that during Israel's wanderings in the wilderness "ἤμην ἐμπεριπατῶν ἐν καταλύματι καὶ ἐν σκηνῇ" "I was moving about in a temporary abode and in a tent" (2 Reigns 7:6)—or as the parallel account in 1 Supplements 17:5 puts it, "ἤμην ἐν σκηνῇ καὶ ἐν καταλύματι" "I was in a tent and in a lodging." Sir 14:25 declares that one who meditates on wisdom "στήσει τὴν σκηνὴν αὐτοῦ κατὰ χεῖρας αὐτῆς καὶ καταλύσει ἐν καταλύματι ἀγαθῶν" "will set his tent according to her hand, and he will lodge in a lodging place of good things." All of these verses give κατάλυμα the sense of a place for travelers to stay. Their mention of κατάλυμα in conjunction with tents gives the term an added nuance: it may suggest that κατάλυμα can refer to accommodations as transitory as a tent.

Other verses in the Septuagint use κατάλυμα in yet different ways. The song of Moses in Exod 15:13 exclaims that the Lord led his redeemed "τῇ ἰσχύι σου εἰς κατάλυμα ἁγίων σου" "by your power into your holy abode." This may be an anachronistic reference to the tabernacle or temple; it may also just refer to the temporary home the Lord provided for Israel in the wilderness. Jer 14:8 records a lament that the Lord has become "ὡσεὶ πάροικος ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς καὶ ὡς αὐτόχθων ἐκκλίνων εἰς κατάλυμα" "like a resident alien in the land and like an indigenous person turning aside for lodging." Once more, the implication of traveler accommodations is present, though what form they take is not stated. A more lasting (though still temporary) home is inferred by κατάλυμα in Ezek 23:21: the prophet reminds Israel how "ἐπεσκέψω τὴν ἀνομίαν νεότητός σου, ἃ ἐποίησες ἐν Αἰγύπτῳ ἐν τῷ καταλύματί σου" "you reflected on the lawlessness of your youth, what you used to do in Egypt in your lodging." Egypt was, by implication, a temporary place for Israel to stay. In a similar way, the narrator of 1 Macc 3:45 laments that "τὸ ἁγίασμα καταπατούμενον, καὶ υἱοὶ ἀλλογενῶν ἐν τῇ ἄκρᾳ, κατάλυμα τοῖς ἔθνεσιν" "the sanctuary was trampled down, and aliens held the citadel; it was a lodging place for the Gentiles." Whether the author is depicting Jerusalem as a figurative κατάλυμα or whether the term itself is broad enough to appropriately refer to a city occupied by foreigners is unclear.

Four more verses add several other meanings for κατάλυμα. Jer 32:28 uses the term to refer to a lion's home ("ἐγκατέλιπεν ὡσπερ λέων κατάλυμα αὐτοῦ" "like a lion he has left his lodging"), making κατάλυμα appear synonymous with a lion's den. Then just a few chapters later, in Jer 40:12, there is a reference to the "καταλύματα ποιμένων κοιταζόντων πρόβατα" "lodgings of shepherds resting sheep," possibly referring to shelters for shepherds traveling with their herds. Finally, two Septuagint passages use κατάλυμα to



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refer to accommodations for priests serving at a sanctuary: in 1 Reigns 9:22 it refers to the “lodging place” adjacent to the sanctuary of Ramathaim where Samuel brings Saul to partake of the recently offered sacrificial meat (“καὶ ἔλαβεν Σαμουηλ τὸν Σαουλ καὶ τὸ παιδάριον αὐτοῦ καὶ εἰσήγαγεν αὐτοὺς εἰς τὸ κατάλυμα”), and in 1 Supplements 28:13 it refers to “τῶν καταλυμάτων τῶν ἐφημεριῶν τῶν ἱερέων καὶ τῶν Λευιτῶν” “the lodgings of the classes of the priests and the Levites.”

### *New Testament Usage*

Of prime importance are the other verses in the New Testament which use κατάλυμα, particularly because of where they are found: Mark (a known source for Luke), and Luke itself. These two references, though brief, seem to indicate that the Gospel authors used κατάλυμα to refer to a type of guest room.

Κατάλυμα is first used in Mark 14:14. In preparation for the Passover meal, Jesus tells his disciples to approach a man in Jerusalem and say, “Ὁ διδάσκαλος λέγει, Ποῦ ἐστὶν τὸ κατάλυμά μου ὅπου τὸ πάσχα μετὰ τῶν μαθητῶν μου φάγω;” “The Teacher asks, Where is my guest room where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?” Little is clear about this space: the only details provided in the text is that it was a “ἀνάγειον μέγα” (“large room upstairs”) provided by the “master of the house” and that it was sufficiently spacious and furnished for Jesus to share the Passover meal with the twelve apostles. Luke’s account of the incident closely parallels Mark’s: in Luke 22:11 the disciples say to the master of the house: “Λέγει σοι ὁ διδάσκαλος, Ποῦ ἐστὶν τὸ κατάλυμα ὅπου τὸ πάσχα μετὰ τῶν μαθητῶν μου φάγω” “The teacher asks you, ‘Where is the guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?’” The comment about the room being a “ἀνάγειον μέγα” is also repeated.

These two New Testament uses of κατάλυμα are extremely significant for evaluating how the term is used in Luke 2:7. We know with certainty that Luke was familiar with Mark’s use of the term (since he used Mark’s account as a source for his own narrative), and Luke’s other use of the term naturally reflects how he understood it. Though some ambiguity remains, the room is clearly not an inn: it refers to a room on the upper level of a home which could be used for hosting guests.<sup>25</sup>

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25. Bailey also emphasizes this point. He explains that in Luke 22:11, “the key word, *katalyma*, is defined; it is ‘an upper room,’ which is clearly a *guest room in a private home*. This precise meaning makes perfect sense when applied to the birth story. . . . If at the end of Luke’s Gospel, the word *katalyma* means a guest room attached to a private home (22:11), why would it not have the same meaning near the beginning of his Gospel?” Bailey, *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 32–33.

Although these are the only times that a κατάλυμα is mentioned in the New Testament, two uses of the verb καταλύω in Luke bear mentioning. In Luke 9:12, Jesus's disciples encouraged him to disperse his audience “ἵνα πορευθέντες εἰς τὰς κύκλῳ κώμας καὶ ἀγροὺς καταλύσωσιν καὶ εὔρωσιν ἐπισιτισμόν” “so that they may go into the surrounding villages and countryside, to lodge and to get provisions.” Later, when Jesus entered the house of Zacchaeus the tax collector, “ἰδόντες πάντες διεγόγγυζον λέγοντες ὅτι Παρὰ ἁμαρτωλῷ ἀνδρὶ εἰσῆλθεν καταλύσαι” “all who saw it began to grumble and said ‘he has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner’” (Luke 19:7). In both of these verses, a form of καταλύω is used to denote lodging somewhere—and in the second, the term is specifically used in the context of being a guest in a private home. The fact that Luke alone of the New Testament writers uses καταλύω in this sense helps provide context for his use of the related κατάλυμα in 2:7.

### *Synthesis*

How does this analysis of κατάλυμα's use in other literature inform how it should be translated in Luke 2:7? Rather than suggest a singular meaning the word could have in Luke 2:7, this examination of other literature shows that κατάλυμα has an intrinsic vagueness which allows it to be used in a variety of situations to refer to a variety of things: government housing, priests' chambers, or even lions' dens. Translating the term specifically (with a term such as “inn”) does not preserve the ambiguity Luke favored through his use of κατάλυμα. There are more specific Greek terms for places like inns or guest rooms—Luke himself employs one, πανδοκίον, in his parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:34). Luke's choice to use a broad term should be reflected in translations of this verse: instead of terms like “inn” or “guest room,” a term such as “lodgings” (frequently employed in the translations of other texts cited above) is more appropriate.<sup>26</sup>

### **The Context of κατάλυμα**

The above survey of how κατάλυμα is used in other literature establishes the range of meanings which the term could have in Luke 2:7, but only a close reading of the context of the verse can establish what meaning κατάλυμα should have. In this section, I will briefly examine four aspects of Luke 2 which provide context for how κατάλυμα should be translated: the immediate context of Luke 2:7, Joseph's relationship to Bethlehem, the timing of Mary and

26. This stance is also advocated in Carlson, “The Accommodations of Joseph and Mary in Bethlehem,” 334; he advocates the terms “place to stay” or “accommodations.”

Joseph's arrival, and the features of first-century Palestinian homes. When read in the light of each of these pertinent issues, κατάλυμα makes the most sense being translated as "guest room."

### *Immediate context*

The immediate context of this verse is crucial for understanding what meaning to assign κατάλυμα. As stated before, Luke's comment that "οὐκ ἦν αὐτοῖς τόπος ἐν τῷ καταλύματι" is often rendered, "there was no room for them in the inn." "Inn" is not the only questionable translation within this verse: there is some debate about how τόπος should be rendered as well. The most common understanding of τόπος is a place or physical space.<sup>27</sup> Such a meaning is clearly intended when the term is used in Luke's parable of the Great Banquet: after inviting the disadvantaged members of the city to his master's feast, "εἶπεν ὁ δοῦλος, Κύριε, γέγονεν ὃ ἐπέταξας, καὶ ἔτι τόπος ἐστίν" "the slave said, 'Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room'" (Luke 14:22). When τόπος is translated as "room" in Luke 2:7, it is too often read to mean a private, rented 'room' (like those available in hotels today), and reinforces the notion that κατάλυμα must be referring to an inn. This is incorrect: regardless of how κατάλυμα is rendered, τόπος should be understood to refer to physical space. (Interestingly, far more English translations are attuned to this issue than they are to the issues surrounding κατάλυμα: many opt for the more spatial-specific "place.")<sup>28</sup>

While this understanding of τόπος does not preclude the κατάλυμα of Luke 2:7 being an inn-like structure, it does inform our interpretation of the term. At the very least it eliminates the notion that there were no "rooms for rent" in the village inn: the phrase "οὐκ ἦν αὐτοῖς τόπος" means that there was no physical space for them in the κατάλυμα, be it a caravansary-style establishment<sup>29</sup> or private guest room.

Another relevant issue in the immediate context of κατάλυμα is the article preceding it. Many commentators view this as a definite article, even inferring from its use that there was only one inn in Bethlehem, or that the inn

27. Bauer, "τόπος," BDAG 822–23.

28. Nearly half of the fifty English translations available on Bible Gateway eschew "room" for a less misleading translation.

29. "The public inns of the time should not be pictured as snug or comfortable according to medieval or modern standards. They were closer to a type of khan or caravansary where large groups of travelers found shelter under one roof; the people slept on cots or on a terrace elevated by a few steps from the floor, with the animals on the floor in the same room." Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 400.

was well-known.<sup>30</sup> Yet this assumption does not take into account the other grammatical functions which τῶ may be serving in this context. An alternative possibility is that τῶ is an anaphoric article: it refers “back to the accommodations of Joseph and Mary presupposed in v. 6” and can be construed in English with a possessive.<sup>31</sup> Thus, the end of Luke 2:7 can accurately be rendered “in their κατάλυμα,” inferring that the couple had been staying in this κατάλυμα prior to the birth of Jesus. Commentators who regard the τῶ of this verse as a definite article often view the word as an obstacle to reading κατάλυμα as a private home or guest room;<sup>32</sup> however, when the article is properly understood, it instead recommends these other translations as viable alternatives. Indeed, an implication of viewing τῶ as anaphoric is that Mary and Joseph had stayed in the κατάλυμα for some time before the birth of Jesus, and such a stay would make more sense in a private home than in public lodgings. This pivotal issue will be addressed below.

### *The Timing of Mary and Joseph’s Arrival*

One area in which tradition has trumped text throughout the ages is in the supposed timing of Jesus’s birth relative to the arrival of Joseph and Mary in Bethlehem. Traditionally, Mary and Joseph have been depicted as arriving in Bethlehem very shortly before the birth of Jesus, necessitating a frantic search for accommodations and the reluctant acceptance of a stable as a delivery room. Under these assumptions, it only makes sense that κατάλυμα should be translated as inn: had the couple arrived in town with more time, they might have been able to find alternative lodgings. Their late arrival, however, would have made it more likely that the inn would be full, and their urgency to find a safe place for Jesus’s delivery would have driven them to use a stable.

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30. The following quote from Elmer A. McNamara is representative of the opinions of several commentators: “That some such inn was meant by St. Luke, is attested to by his use of the definite article with the noun, i.e., there was no room for them in the inn. He supposes the inn was well known, probably because it was public and very likely the only one since Bethlehem was a small town.” Elmer A. McNamara, “Because There Was No Room for Them in the Inn,” *The Ecclesiastical Review* 105:6 (1941), 435. See also Brown *The Birth of the Messiah*, 400.

31. Carlson, “The Accommodations of Joseph and Mary in Bethlehem,” 335. Carlson points out that “when the context indicates that the object referred to by the noun is possessed by or belongs to a person in the context, English often employs a possessive pronoun for Greek’s definite article,” as exhibited by a comparable construction in Luke 5:2.

32. For example, Brown cites Luke’s use of the definite article as the primary counterargument against reading κατάλυμα as a private home or room. See Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 400.

Although this interpretation does not necessarily contradict the text of Luke 2:6–7, the desperate details are not present in Luke’s text, which simply states that “ἐγένετο δὲ ἐν τῷ εἶναι αὐτοὺς ἐκεῖ ἐπλήσθησαν αἱ ἡμέραι τοῦ τεκεῖν αὐτήν,” literally “during their being there [in Bethlehem] the days for her to deliver were completed.” Nothing in these words can be construed as necessarily implying that Jesus’s delivery immediately followed Mary and Joseph’s arrival in Bethlehem. Unless Luke’s audience had access to other traditions or context for the infancy narrative, we can reasonably assume that they understood the text as it straightforwardly reads: while Joseph and Mary were in Bethlehem, Mary’s pregnancy came to full term.

There are several explanations for why a hurried entry into Bethlehem has traditionally been the predominant reading. Late antique and medieval readers of the text likely approached the text in this way in order to make sense of the comment in Luke 2:7 that “οὐκ ἦν αὐτοῖς τόπος ἐν τῷ καταλύματι.” If the κατάλυμα is assumed to be an inn (as it was), then readers must grapple with why there was no room in the inn, and a frantic late-night search for accommodations fits. Readers from the second century on were also influenced by the popular *Protoevangelium of James*, which describes Mary going into labor before even reaching the outskirts of Bethlehem: she is forced to give birth in a wilderness cave.<sup>33</sup> While this story was primarily valued by ancient Christians for its Mariological perspectives, it almost certainly influenced nativity traditions. Perhaps also related is a textual variant for Luke 2:6 found in Codex Bezae: it states that the days of Mary’s pregnancy were completed “ὡς δὲ παρεγένοντο” or “as they came near” to Bethlehem, inferring that she gave birth immediately upon arriving in the village. While the details in the *Protoevangelium of James* and Codex Bezae are important in helping us understand the early Christian communities who valued them, they should not (consciously or unconsciously) influence our understanding of Luke’s much earlier text, which does not contain this late-night arrival scenario.

While we cannot know the precise timing of Mary and Joseph’s arrival in Bethlehem in relation to Jesus’s birth,<sup>34</sup> it is plausible to attribute the late-night

33. “When they were half way there, Mary said to him, ‘Joseph, take me down from the donkey. The child inside me is pressing on me to come out.’ He took her down from the donkey and said to her, ‘Where can I take you to hide your shame? For his place is a wilderness.’ He found a cave there and took her into it. Then he gave his sons to her and went out to find a Hebrew midwife in the region of Bethlehem.” *Protoevangelium of James* 17:3–18:1. Translation from Bart D. Ehrman and Zlatko Pleše, *The Other Gospels: Accounts of Jesus from Outside the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 32.

34. Bailey asserts that Joseph and Mary were in Bethlehem “a few weeks, perhaps even a month or more” before the birth of Jesus: a possibility, but an unproven one. Kenneth Bailey, “The Manger and the Inn: The Cultural Background of Luke 2.7,” *Theological Review*

arrival scenario to post-biblical tradition and assume that Joseph and Mary arrived in Bethlehem sometime before the birth of Jesus. Indeed, considering the circumstances of Joseph and Mary, it might be expected that their arrival and their lodgings would have been planned beforehand.<sup>35</sup> Such arrangements would imply that Joseph had ties with the village of Bethlehem—ties that are crucial in evaluating the meaning of κατάλυμα.

### *Joseph's Relationship to Bethlehem*

A critical question which must be answered to ascertain the most likely sense of κατάλυμα is the relationship which Joseph had with Bethlehem. On this the text is somewhat unclear, and as with other aspects of the infancy narrative, it is important to separate details in the text itself from assumptions about the text. For example, the narrative in Luke 1 clearly establishes Mary as a resident of Nazareth. However, while Luke 2 tells how Joseph went with Mary “ἀπὸ τῆς Γαλιλαίας ἐκ πόλεως Ναζαρέθ εἰς τὴν Ἰουδαίαν” “from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea” (2:4) for the purposes of the registration, it does not explicitly state that Joseph was from Nazareth. His residence there can certainly be implied, but other scenarios could be implied by the text as well. After all, at a time when “ἐπορεύοντο πάντες ἀπογράφεσθαι, ἕκαστος εἰς τὴν ἑαυτοῦ πόλιν” “all went to their own towns to be registered” (2:3), Joseph traveled to Bethlehem. This, combined with Luke’s comment that Joseph was of the “ἐξ οἴκου καὶ πατριάς Δαβὶδ” “house and family of David” (2:4), has led some commentators to suggest that Joseph himself was originally from Bethlehem.<sup>36</sup> Joseph, they claim, had traveled to Nazareth previously to seek work or (more likely) to retrieve his fiancée Mary and bring her back to his native Bethlehem.<sup>37</sup> This theory helps explain why Joseph would have had

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2 (1979): 33. He also sees in the phrasing of Luke 2:6 evidence that Mary and Joseph were present in Bethlehem for days before the delivery, citing the comment that ἐπλήσθησαν αἱ ἡμέραι τοῦ τεκεῖν αὐτὴν “the days of her delivery were completed” in Bethlehem. Bailey, *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 26. However, this construction simply means that the days of Mary’s pregnancy were completed, not that the couple spent days in Bethlehem before the birth. See the LXX text of Gen 25:24 for a similar construction.

35. “Knowing that they had to be in Bethlehem over a period, long delays in registration being likely, and that Mary was expecting a child, Joseph and Mary would travel quite some time before the baby was to be born, and would probably have arranged to stay with family or friends. Luke does not say that Jesus was born immediately after Joseph and Mary arrived in Bethlehem.” A. J. Kerr, “No Room in the Kataluma,” *ExpTim* 103:15 (1991), 15.

36. Even though it is important not to harmonize the two infancy narratives, it is worth noting that Matthew’s account does not mention Nazareth at all until after Mary and Joseph’s return from Egypt: the text assumes that the couple are simply residents of Bethlehem when Jesus is born and when the Magi visit.

37. For examinations of this view, see Pierre Benoit, “Non erat eis locus in diversorio” (Lc 2,7), *Melanges bibliques en hommage au R. P. Bédaride Rigaux* (ed. Albert Descamps and R. P.

to travel to Bethlehem for a Roman census, which typically did not require people to register in an ancestral town,<sup>38</sup> but rather where they owned property. Rainer Riesner succinctly argues: “That Joseph set out for Bethlehem because of a tax census (Lk 2:14) is explicable only if he had land holdings there. Indeed, it is probable that it was his place of residence.”<sup>39</sup> It also would help explain why Mary would accompany Joseph on such a journey: her presence would not have been required for Joseph to register, and if his home was in Nazareth, he almost certainly would have left the pregnant Mary in Nazareth as he traveled to Bethlehem for the registration and then returned home.<sup>40</sup>

This approach to the text, though plausible, is not certain. One of the chief arguments against it is Luke 2:39, which states that after Jesus’s circumcision Joseph and Mary returned “εις πόλιν ἑαυτῶν Ναζαρέθ” “to their own town of Nazareth.”<sup>41</sup> But even more relevant may be the simple fact that, despite what is modernly known about Roman registration practices, Luke writes that Joseph was traveling to Bethlehem because of his lineage: he was “ἐξ οἴκου καὶ πατριᾶς Δαυίδ.” The numerous and significant historical issues with how the registration is described in Luke 2 should serve as a caution: we cannot confidently rely on knowledge of standard Roman practices to correctly inform our reading of Luke’s narrative, which for one reason or another appears to present Joseph traveling to Bethlehem as required by his ancestry.

But regardless of whether Joseph’s family home was in Bethlehem or whether it was just his ancestral home, Joseph’s ties to the village are key in determining how the κατάλυμα of 2:7 should be understood. If Joseph truly was a native son of Bethlehem, then he almost certainly would have stayed with

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Andre de Halleux; Gembloux: Duculot, 1970), 184–85; Carlson, “The Accommodations of Joseph and Mary in Bethlehem,” 337.

38. “In Roman censuses there is no clear evidence of a practice of going to an ancestral city to be enrolled.” Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 396.

39. Rainer Riesner, “Archaeology and Geography,” *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, 45.

40. “Even in the historically inaccurate census procedure that Luke describes, women would not have been required to go in person to be counted. Husbands or fathers would have registered for them. So it makes no realistic sense for a woman to make the eighty-five mile trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem, much less a woman nine months pregnant!” Robert J. Miller, *Born Divine: The Births of Jesus and other Sons of God* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 2003), 57.

41. Carlson argues that the lack of an article in this phrase means that the verse should be translated “into a city of their own,” meaning it was one of several they identify with and not that it was necessarily Joseph’s home. Carlson, “The Accommodations of Joseph and Mary in Bethlehem,” 338. While this is possible, I can find no other scholars that advocate this reading, and even without the article the phrase can still imply that Nazareth was “their own town.”

close family members.<sup>42</sup> Bruce Malina remarks that Joseph “would have been obligated to stay with family, not in a commercial inn.” He also points out that “if close family was not available, mention of Joseph’s lineage would have resulted in immediate village recognition that he belonged and space would have been made available.”<sup>43</sup> Thus, even if Joseph was only linked to Bethlehem through lineage, that lineage would have been enough to earn him the hospitality of a distant relative.<sup>44</sup> Arguments that the homes of Bethlehem would have been filled to capacity due to the census disregard the simple fact that Roman registrations took place over a period, not a single day.<sup>45</sup> Regardless, an added measure of hospitality could certainly have been expected due to Mary’s pregnancy.<sup>46</sup>

Each of these points confirms that, regardless of how strong Joseph’s ties with Bethlehem were, he would have been far more likely to stay in a family home than in an inn,<sup>47</sup> thus suggesting the most appropriate translation for κατάλυμα in 2:7 “guest room.” Yet this leaves an unanswered question:

42. It is also worth noting that, in addition to any family members Joseph had in Bethlehem, by this point in his narrative Luke has already made it clear that Mary had relatives living in the vicinity: Elizabeth and Zacharias. Luke 1:39 places their home in “a Judean town in the hill country,” in which Bethlehem was situated. If the ancient traditions that Ein Kerem was John the Baptist’s birthplace have any historical value, then Elizabeth and Zacharias resided only eight kilometers away from Bethlehem. Bailey points out that if it was difficult for Mary and Joseph to find accommodations in Bethlehem, Mary would have naturally turned to the woman with whom she had just spent three months of her pregnancy. See Bailey, *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 26.

43. Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (2d ed.; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 375–76. Emphasis added.

44. This point is also fiercely asserted by Bailey, who argues that it would have been in violation of deep-seated cultural norms for no one to accept even a distantly related man into their home. Bailey, *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 25.

45. “Augustus reorganized the method of assessment of tax throughout the empire and instituted provincial censuses to achieve his purpose, but he did not require everyone in the Roman world to be registered on the self-same day as is required by modern states. Censuses took place at different times in different areas, and in each case over a period rather than on a particular day.” Kerr, “No Room in the Kataluma,” 15.

46. “In every culture a woman about to give birth is given special attention. Simple rural communities the world over always assist one of their own women in childbirth regardless of the circumstances. Are we to imagine that Bethlehem was an exception? [. . .] Surely the community would have sensed its responsibility to help Joseph find adequate shelter for Mary and provide the care she needed. To turn away a descendant of David in the ‘City of David’ would be an unspeakable shame on the entire village.” Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 26.

47. With reference to the traditional inn, it should be noted that “[i]t is doubtful whether a commercial inn actually existed in Bethlehem, which stood on no major roads.” Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 128–29. Granted, we cannot be certain that Bethlehem lacked a small caravansary or comparable lodgings for travelers, but the size, location, and insignificance of the town suggest it would not have needed such an establishment. See also Bailey, “The Manger and the Inn,” 39; Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary*, 375–76.



if Joseph and Mary were being hosted at a private home, why did Mary lay her baby “in a manger?” This question can only be resolved by examining the common features of first-century Palestinian homes.

### *First-Century Palestinian Homes*

Examining some key features of first-century Palestinian homes not only provides important context for the κατάλυμα, but it also helps explain why Mary might have laid Jesus in a manger while staying in a private home. A description of a common Jewish home is given by Safrai and Stern:

From the literary sources and archaeological excavations one finds that most houses had at least two stories, and sometimes even three. . . . The upper floors were not always full stories; sometimes they consisted of single rooms on a roof or an attic with its entrance from a ladder inside the house. These attics could be used for a member of the household or as a guest room. Upper chambers also served as meeting-places for small groups; numerous traditions from the Temple period and later tell of assemblies of sages or heads of schools which took place in such chambers. . . . Whether or not original plans called for upper stories, it was common to add rooms or small structures to the roofs of houses and to the courtyards, as it became necessary. The most frequent reason was the expansion of a family; a newly married son customarily brought his wife to live in the family house. The father would set aside a room within the house for the couple or build a marital house (בית הַתְּנוּת) on the roof.<sup>48</sup>

Several features are noteworthy in this description. First, it affirms that many Jewish homes possessed a small room that could be used to host guests. Of particular interest is the fact that these rooms were often built on the upper floor of a home and were frequently used as a meeting place for small groups. This description neatly matches the description of the κατάλυμα in which Jesus held the Last Supper: it was an “ἀνάγειον” “upper room” and was properly furnished for a meeting of a sage with his disciples. If such a room is indicated by κατάλυμα at the end of the gospel of Luke, could a similar room not be indicated near the beginning of the narrative—in 2:7? The other use mentioned for this type of room is telling: a room for a recently married man and his wife. If Joseph and Mary had returned to stay with Joseph’s family in Bethlehem, it is possible that such a chamber would have been prepared specifically for them. If they were staying with more distant relatives, it is still likely that they would have been given similar accommodations if they were available, as they were the most appropriate for a newly married couple.

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48. S. Safrai and M. Stern, eds., *The Jewish People in the First Century: Historical Geography, Political History, Social, Cultural, and Religious Life and Institutions* (2 vols.; Amsterdam: Van Gorcum, Assen, 1976), 2:730–31.

However, as has already been cited, Luke records Mary as placing Jesus in a manger because there was no space for them in the κατάλυμα. There are two plausible reasons for this. First, the guest room might have been taken by other guests, requiring Joseph and Mary to stay somewhere else in the house. While the traditional image of Bethlehem teeming with visitors for the registration is an exaggeration, it is likely that if Joseph had come for the event, others (even members of his family) may have returned as well, and the guest room may have been occupied by someone else. The other possibility is that there was not sufficient space in the κατάλυμα to accommodate Jesus's delivery.<sup>49</sup> Childbirth in antiquity was a dangerous procedure for both mother and child, and it is likely that Mary would have been assisted by a midwife as well as the women of the house. The κατάλυμα of the Last Supper was noted for being large, but these guest rooms likely varied in size. If the room in which Mary and Joseph were staying was small, Mary would have relocated to the main room of the house, where there would have been plenty of space for the other women to help with her delivery.

The other relevant feature of first-century Palestinian homes was the space for animals to be kept within the home itself. Traditionally the mention of a manger in the infancy narrative conjures up images of a stable to modern readers, but such would not have been the case in Luke's day. Many homes in the Levant were equipped to house animals indoors during the night: this protected the animals from theft and also kept the house warm at night during the colder months.<sup>50</sup> Most homes had one large main room, where most of the family lived and slept. Near the entrance at one end of the room was an area that was set lower than the elevated floor of the rest of the room. At night, animals would be brought into this lower portion of the room, and would feed out of mangers that were either set into the walls or in the edge of the raised floor.<sup>51</sup> Structures for housing animals—what modern audiences would con-

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49. Carlson advocates this claim; he claims it fits the grammar of Luke 2:7 better than alternative scenarios. Carlson, "The Accommodations of Joseph and Mary in Bethlehem," 335.

50. Indeed, Israelites were keeping animals and mangers inside their homes long before Luke's day: the traditional "pillared house" common in the Iron Age Levant had an area for animals to sleep and feed. For a description of this type of house, see Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 28–35.

51. Many commentators have noted this sort of layout in first-century houses, particularly emphasizing the presence of a manger in the home. See Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary*, 333; Carlson, "The Accommodations of Joseph and Mary in Bethlehem," 341; Kerr, "No Room in the Kataluma," 15; K. Kippen, "Translating, kataluma in Luke 2:7," *The Bible Translator* 34:4 (1983): 443; Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 29; Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 129.

sider stables—certainly existed in ancient Judea, but if the κατάλυμα in Luke 2:7 is seen as a guest room, then it is far more likely that Mary would have given birth and placed her baby in the manger of a family’s living room than in a stable. In a crowded home, placing a swaddled baby in the hay of a manger would have been a safe and warm resting place for the child.

### Conclusion

Based on the contexts of both Greek literature and Luke 2, we can develop a clearer picture of the scene Luke intended to convey in Luke 2:7. Examining how the term is used in other literature shows that κατάλυμα can be used to refer to a wide variety of “places to stay,” and examining its context within Luke 2 clarifies what sort of lodgings the term likely refers to there: the guest room of a private home. Reading κατάλυμα this way fits with the other elements of the story: it better reflects the immediate context of the verse it is used in, the timing of Mary and Joseph’s arrival in Bethlehem, Joseph’s relationship with the town, and the realities of first-century living than any other interpretation. This reading suggests the following scenario for the birth of Jesus: Joseph, who is to one degree or another connected with Bethlehem, brings Mary to the village some time in advance of her delivery. They stay with relations of Joseph. When the time comes for Mary to give birth to Jesus, the guest room of the family home has too little room to accommodate the process of delivery. Mary is relocated to the main room of the house, where Jesus is born and placed in one of the mangers present in the room.

This reading of Luke’s infancy narrative makes the story of Jesus’s birth even less unusual than the traditional reading of the story. Being rejected from an inn and being forced to give birth amid animals gives Jesus a humble yet noteworthy beginning: Jesus is born in desperate and memorable circumstances. But placing Jesus’s delivery in the main room of a Bethlehemite home gives him a birth narrative similar to probably thousands of Jewish babies. Nothing about the circumstances is extraordinary: being swaddled was a common experience for infants,<sup>52</sup> and the most that can be inferred by being placed in a manger is that the home may have been crowded and there was nothing else approximating a crib available. In short, Luke portrays Jesus entering the world in a rather unremarkable way.

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52. “The statement declares Mary’s maternal care; she did for Jesus what any ancient Palestinian mother would have done for a newborn babe (see Wis 7:4; cf. Ezek 16:4). It is not to be understood as a sign of poverty or of the Messiah’s lowly birth.” Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke*, 408.

Such a reading, though it departs from the traditional exegesis of the nativity, actually fits well the recognized emphases of Luke's infancy narrative. Commentators have long noted the paucity of details on Jesus's birth, particularly in comparison to the lengthier narratives of the annunciation to Mary, the angelic visit to the shepherds, and the presentation of Jesus in the temple.<sup>53</sup> It is in these narratives that Luke finds the evidence he wishes to portray of Jesus's divinity and salvific destiny, for they provide angels and inspired figures (the shepherds, Simeon, and Anna) with an opportunity to bear witness of what Jesus would eventually do.<sup>54</sup> Similar elements were apparently not a part of the earliest traditions surrounding the birth itself, and Luke evidently did not see fit to augment them (though later Christians would take it upon themselves to do so). Luke's emphasis reflects what must have been most important for him and for his early Christian audience: not the specifics of Jesus's birth, but what that birth portended for the world.

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53. In contrast to the annunciation to Mary (13 verses), the angelic visit to the shepherds (13 verses), and Jesus's presentation at the temple (17 verses), the actual birth of Jesus really only occupies two verses.

54. "The birth itself is only briefly narrated (2:6–7) and is not really the focus of the story, which is centered instead on the angelic announcement (2:8–14). The angel's solemn and joyful words in 2:10–11 convey the basic meaning, not only of this scene, but of Luke's whole infancy narrative." Miller, *Born Divine*, 55.