

### Translating *Kataluma* in Luke 2.7

In Luke 2.1–7 the evangelist presents the birth narrative of Jesus briefly in a clear, familiar style. The story is straightforward, and the historical events connected with the birth are given in simple logical order. Fancy details are left out—the story is told with the minimum of words. There is little to misunderstand.

However, much has been added to the simple account as the story is retold from year to year. And in particular the statement that “there was no room for them in the inn” has given rise to a slant in the Christmas story which may be a long way from Luke’s picture. There is the weary Joseph, and his wife Mary in the last stages of pregnancy. They fail in their last-minute frantic search for accommodation, and so they have to lodge in a dingy smelly stable located somewhere at the back of the overcrowded inn. There the baby Jesus was born with the cattle looking on.

But does the key word *kataluma* really mean “inn”? The word is derived from *kataluō* (to lodge), equivalent to the old *katagōgeion* (resting-place) which carries with it the idea of place. In late classical Greek *kataluma* usually means “lodging”, located possibly on a roof. Sometimes it means simply public hospitality.

In the Septuagint (OT in Greek) the term is found twice: once in 1 Kings 17.19 as a reference to the upstairs room in the house of the widow in Zarephath where the prophet Elijah was staying during his exile from king Ahab; and again in 2 Kings 4.10 as a reference to a small room on the roof-top which the rich woman of Shunem and her husband built so that Elisha had a place to stay whenever he visited them. The latter mentions the contents of the room—a bed, a table, a chair and a lamp. This kind of guest room was probably reached by an outside staircase.

In the New Testament, apart from Luke 2.7, *kataluma* occurs in two other places—in Mark 14.14 and Luke 22.11; and in each case it refers to the room where Jesus had the Last Supper with his disciples. Matthew’s parallel account does not even distinguish the room where the Passover meal was held from the house (Mt 26.18). We may well ask the question: Would Luke have used the one term *kataluma* for an upstairs room in Luke 22.11 and for the traditional inn of the time in Luke 2.7? In the story of the Good Samaritan Luke is careful to use a different term for inn, namely *pandocheion* (Lk 10.34). Whatever later translators who translated into other languages made of it, it seems unlikely that by *kataluma* Luke meant a traditional inn of his time.

If this line of reasoning is accepted, we can conclude that wherever *kataluma* is used in the Bible it means an additional room constructed on the flat roof-top in a Palestinian setting. Therefore in the birth narrative also it is probably more appropriate to translate as “guest room”. So Luke writes:

She gave birth to her first son, wrapped him in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no space for them in the guest room in the house. (Lk 2.7)

With this interpretation, Luke’s account hardly refers to an ill-fated emergency situation. The statement that “While they were in Bethlehem, the

time came for her to have her baby" (Lk 2.6) suggests a much more relaxed atmosphere than that usually portrayed. But where does the manger come from? It would seem quite possible that in an ordinary Palestinian house the ground floor was shared by domestic animals and the human inhabitants (as is the case with many oriental houses even to this day), so that a manger could very well be a household item for storing fodder. If so, it would have provided a conveniently safe place to lay the baby.

Furthermore, the immediate context suggests that "for them" in Luke 2.7 could possibly refer just to Mary and her child! Why was there no place for them in the guest room? According to some commentaries Jesus was born in the month of Nisan (April), the Passover month; and if so, the guest room could have been occupied by other relatives who had come to celebrate the Feast. On the other hand, for reasons of privacy and sanitary considerations it may have been necessary that the birth should take place on the ground floor of the house. It was probably an all-woman affair!

The popular understanding that, because of the overcrowded inn, Joseph and Mary had to lodge in a stable and the birth took place there poses a further problem for the narrative that follows. Where did the family spend the period before they went to Jerusalem to present the child for purification? (Lk 2.21–22). It would mean that they had to find a place to stay for some forty days (see Lev 12.2–4). Are we to assume that they stayed on in the imaginary stable, or that they found a room in the mythical inn? The fact that Luke did not mention this suggests that the problem did not exist for him.

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### Mark 8.23

The account of the healing of the blind man at Bethsaida is found only in the Gospel of Mark. Mark 8.23 demonstrates that in a given passage there may be two levels of implicit (hidden) information that must be expressed in words in some languages, and that these levels are interdependent. The first level has to do with information of a formal nature, while the second level concerns what is required logically.

The phrase "placing hands on him" contains a great deal of hidden information within this context. The person who placed hands on the blind man is clearly Jesus. And by the same token the hands belong to Jesus. Thus, when the participle is translated as a conjugated verb we read: "*Jesus placed his hands on him*" (GNB). In a similar manner, most English versions state that Jesus' hands were placed "on him" or "upon him" without indicating what part of him. But in some languages this is not possible. It is necessary to say precisely where Jesus placed his hands. Two factors in this story make it clear that he placed them on the eyes of the blind man: (1) the story is about healing blindness—it was the eyes that needed attention; and (2) verse 25 specifies that Jesus "again" placed his hands "on his eyes". So in some languages the translator is required to say "placed his hands on the blind man's eyes" in verse 23. The information that is formally implicit in "on him" has to be filled in.