

One of the latest “interpretative approaches” in regards to the “Christmas Story” as recorded in Luke 2 regards the arrival of Joseph & Mary to Bethlehem.

The “interpretative position” being more and more commonly heard is that Mary & Joseph did not arrive at a commercial inn, but the home of one of their relatives who was living in Joseph’s hometown.

After adopting that position, writers add all kinds of unsupported speculation as to how it must have, could have, and/or did take place when Mary & Joseph arrived in Bethlehem.

Unfortunately, after a few people “buy into the approach,” more and more others began teaching this “fascinating interpretation,” without examining the grammatical support, the historical understanding of the early church commentators, or the argument which Luke is making.

#1) The Word:

The word in question is the word for “inn.” It is the Greek word “kata - luma.”

That word is found in only two accounts in the whole of the New Testament

“The Christmas Story” -- Luke 2:7

“The Passover Celebration Account,” -- Mark 14:14 and Luke 22:11

In the Christmas Story Account “kata-luma” is translated “inn”

In the Passover accounts, “kata-luma” is translated “guest chamber.”

Throughout the whole Greek New Testament, that Greek word “kata-luma” is only found in these two accounts.

However, the root word from which “kata-luma” (noun form) comes from, “kata-luo,” (the verb form - to guest with, to lodge with) is found in Luke 9:12, and clearly refers to inns or lodges (not family guest-rooms of relatives). “Kata-luo” is also found in Luke 19:7 speaking of “dinning with” / “guesting with” sinners, with the rich tax collector, Zacchaeus (I do not think they ate in a guest-chamber with manger & bed.) The Luke 19:7 passage also helps us understand the Passover account. Zacchaeus, as a rich tax collector would have had a dinning place much more like that which was used for the Lord’s Passover.

The word is a compound word: “kata” & “luma” -- (“against” / “to” / “down”) plus (“loose”). It is the word which is also translated “dissolve,” “destroy, or “thrown down” (i.e. Luke 21:6). When this word is used for speaking about a journey, the idea is -- “to halt on a journey,” and unpack. The root word speaks more about what does when traveling & stopping, than the kind of building or room one occupies. When one stops on a journey, he/she unlooses, or unpacks. The word is never used to speak of a kind of room, but of the kind of place -- a place used during a journey or in travel.

Larry Pierce states the “kataluo” speaks “of travellers, to halt on a journey, to put up, lodge (the figurative expression originating in the circumstance that, to put up for the night, the straps and packs of the beasts of burden are unbound and taken off; or, more correctly from the fact that the traveller’s garments, tied up when he is on the journey, are unloosed at it end)” [Outline of Biblical Usage -- by Larry Pierce, creator of the Online Bible]

William Mounce, in his terrific and present-day volume on Greek & Hebrew words - "Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words" - also states that "inn" is one of the meanings of this word and cites it Luke 2:7 as an example.

Also, “kataluma” is found thirty-five times in the Old Testament Septuagint (which is the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, sometimes called the LXX). The actual word “kata-luma” is repeatedly used in the Septuagint to refer to a commercial inn or lodge (It is the same Greek word which is used to translated the Hebrew words “ma-lown,” or “luwn”- to lodge.) -- Gen. 42:27; 43:21; Ex. 4:24; Jer. 9:2; I Sam 9:22. It is never used in the Septuagint to refer to a “family guest-room.”

The Greeks obviously understood that “kata-luma” was an appropriate word to use when referring to a commercial inn. “Inn” is indeed a legitimate & proper way to understand the word “kataluma.” **

#2) The Passover Account: In the Passover account (Mark 14:14; Luke 22:11), the same word, “kata-luma,” is translated found translated “guest-chamber.” This English translation may or may not be the best way of translating that word into the English language. Today a “guest-chamber” speaks of an extra room for visitors or family members. “Guest-chamber” was how English translators decided to translate the word in the Passover account. However . . .

Thayer’s Greek dictionary says that it means a “dinning room” or “eating room,” not “guest-chamber” as we think of it. Thayer’s understanding fits the Passover account, and argues against the position that it should be translated as what we call “a family guest-room.”

Thayer’s New Testament Greek Lexicon also states . . .

“Definition

an inn, lodging place

an eating room, dining room”

Add to this the fact that there is no other place in the New Testament, or in the Septuagint, that this word, or a cognate, is used to speak of a “family guest-room.”

Clearly, the best understanding of “kata-luma” in the Passover account, is that of a commercial area which is rented out and/or can be used for dinning. Clearly, it is not a spare room located off the stable area, with a manger and animals close by, since this account refers to a two storied house with a furnished room which is located on the upper floor -- Luke 22:12.

In fact, I think many have it backwards. It is the translation in the Passover account -- Mark 14:14 / Luke 22:11 -- which ought to be questioned and changed. It should be understood as "a dinning area of a commercial inn" and not with the alternate words of “guest-chamber” (if we imagine “guest-chamber to mean “a family guest sleeping room”). Let me support the translation of which argues for a commercial business - a rented eating or dinning room, as is also an "inn."

Luke 22:10 — “And he said unto them, Behold, when ye are entered into the city, there shall a man meet you, bearing a pitcher of water; follow him into the house where he entereth in.

Luke 22:11 --And ye shall say unto the goodman of the house, The Master saith unto thee, Where is the guestchamber (kataluma), where I shall eat the passover with my disciples.

Luke 22:12 -- And he shall shew you a large upper room furnished: there make ready.

What kind of “house” are we to imagine? One help is found in the reference to the “goodman” / “householder” / “master of the house.” The “goodman” has “a man,” a servant, who is bearing a pitcher of water.

Peter and John are told to follow that man into the house.

Then, they are speak to the “goodman,” since that “man” is not the “goodman” (“And ye shall say unto the goodman of the house”).

They are to say to the goodman, “The Master saith unto thee, Where is the guestchamber (kataluma), where I shall eat the Passover with my disciples?”

Obviously, the “guest-chamber,” this upper room (22:12), is not a spare bedroom, but a place appropriate for eating the Passover dinner, with at least 13 people in attendance.

I understand that today we have rooms with pull out couches, and that we can blow up air mattresses, or sleep on the floor with sleeping bags, but to make this room what we call “a guest chamber,” something which is turned into a dinning room for the Passover meal, stretches the simplest understanding of the account. If “family guest room” is the proper interpretation, we may need to “re-paint” the picture of the last Passover, as some would like to “re-paint” the picture of Mary & Joseph in Bethlehem. More could be said about the size of this so called “guest-room,” in light of the typical family house of that day.

#3) The “Goodman Of the House,” in the Passover Account:

Luke 22:11 - NKJV -- “Then you shall say to the master of the house, ‘The Teacher says to you, “Where is the guest room where I may eat the Passover with My disciples?”’

Mark 14:14 - KJV -- “And wheresoever he shall go in, say ye to the goodman of the house, The Master saith, Where is the guestchamber, where I shall eat the Passover with my disciples?”

First of all . . .

this word is a compound word, and is translated here as “goodman” or “master”

“goodman” or “householder” = “oikodespot” (“oiko” & “despotes” = house & despot)

the sentence reads: “the house despot” “of the house”

oikodespotes oikos

other places where this word is used it is translated “goodman” / “householder” / “landowner” / “master of the house”— Matthew 13:27, 52; 20:1, 11; 21:33, 24:43; Luke 14:16-21

In all cases, “the goodman ” or “householder” refers to something more than just “the man of a family house.”

The place where the Passover was held had a householder or house-despot over it. In the Passover account, the guestchamber/guest room, or the “kataluma,” was run by “the goodman / master of the house.”

In the accounts which speak of a “goodman,” “house despot,” or “householder,” he” typically has servants under him, who carry out his instructions. Such is also the case with the Passover account

(though obviously servants are not unique to a “house-despot”).

Clearly, it should be understood as "a rented out area for dining within a commercial inn."

#4) The Passover Room Defined In The Passover Account - “A Large Upper Room” (Luke 22:12):

Jesus goes on to say in 22:12 -- “And he shall show you a large upper room furnished: there make ready.”

The word “large” is the word “megas.” It is large enough to provide the celebration of the Passover with at least 13 participating in the meal.

It is a compound word of -- “upper” or “above,” - plus - “ground” or “land.”

The word “upper room” is NOT found referring to any ordinary family home.

This compound word, “upper room,” is only used in the Passover account.

The upper room is a furnished place (for a Passover meal)

To make the “upper room” a family guest room means that it must have been converted from a large “family guest sleeping room” in to a dining room for Passover. Again, a strained explanation of what the word means.

It should be understood as "a large room rented out for dining, on the second floor of a commercial inn"

#5) Luke's Argument: In the Christmas account, the reader needs to realize that an argument is being made. The argument defines whether it is a so-called “family guest room” or “a commercial inn.”

Luke 2:7 -- And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

There is an explanation given as to WHY they “laid Him in a manger.”

The explanation is designed to make a point about the birth of Jesus.

They “laid Him in a manger BECAUSE (Gk. “dioti”).

Luke clearly states the reason they laid Jesus in a manger!

Luke says, “because” (the reason) -- because there was no room/place for them in the “inn.” That is the point Luke is making, they had to lay Him in a manger because there was no other room/place for them.

Is Luke stating, “they laid Him in a manger, because there was no room/place for them in the “family guest chamber”? They were already in the so-called “family guest-chamber.” Was there no room/place for them in the “inn,” or was there no room for Jesus in this supposed “family guest-chamber” (which they were already given, and were presently occupying)? The text does not say “they laid him in a manger because there was no room for him in the guest-chamber.”

If the word ought to be translated “guest-chamber,” then the verse would read, “They laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the guest-chamber.”

or to say it another way . . .

“because there was no room/place for them in the family guest-room, they laid him in the manger.”

Such a rendering of the verse is not only awkward, but convoluted! The argument/point being made by Luke is the cause for having to put Jesus in a manger. Is the cause for putting Jesus in the manger because the “family guest-room” was so unaccommodating and small (“no room/place for them”), that there was no other place in the room to put Jesus, except to place Him -- “yea, over there, put him in the manger.”

Because the passage would read, “there was no room for them in the guest-room,” some contemporary interpreters are forced to “tweak”/twist the meaning of Luke’s words by saying something like this . . .

“The family guest-chamber, in a home of one of Joseph’s relatives, was already occupied when Joseph and Mary arrived [therefore = no room for them in the guest-chamber of that house]. The family members who were already occupying it at the time, gave it up and allowed Joseph & Mary to occupy it instead of them. But since it was the “family guest-chamber,” it had a manger in it [which they maintain was typical - I will address that later], and it was the only place to put their baby. The situation was so small and unaccommodating, and no other provision was made available to them by their family members, that there was no other place to put Him. That is the reason they had to lay Him in a manger.”

The obvious and simple understanding is that Luke is making the argument that there was no room for them in the “inn.” Therefore, they found themselves in a situation that left them with only a manger for Jesus’ bed. Luke is pointing to the fact that having a manger for a baby’s bed reveals where they found themselves, where they were situated, in a wooden or cave-like stable, connected to or independent of the “inn.” Luke is making a contrast with where most babies are laid, no less the Messiah.

As it states, “They laid him in a manger because there was no room/place for them in the inn.” The passage cannot be made to say Initially, the guest room in the relative's house was occupied (to explain the words “no room/place for them”), but then a relative gave up that guest room. Jesus was not laid in a manger because there was no place for him, but because there was no room for them.

If kataluma means “guest-chamber,” then the verse states that there was no room/place for them in the guest-chamber. With that meaning of the word, the verse does not say that there was no guest-chamber, but that there was no room/place IN THE GUEST-CHAMBER.

διότι οὐκ ... ἦν αὐτοῖςτόπος ἐν ... τῷκαταλύματι

because not ... was ... for them place in ... the .. inn or guest-chamber

If the word “kataluma” means “a family guest-room,” and not some sort of “commercial inn,” then just read the verse with the word “guest-chamber,” and see how the meaning is changed!

With that meaning of the word, the verse is then saying . . . they had to use an animal manger as a bed for the baby Jesus . . .

. . . . because there was not for them room/place in the guest-chamber (word order purposeful, to follow the Greek as seen above).

Apparently, these gracious and hospitable family members who had opened up and given the very unaccommodating family guest-chamber, to this pregnant mother, in which there was not even enough room for the three of them, and had not provided any other bedding place for their baby, so they had to lay Jesus in the animal manger, situated by and used by the cattle.

Such a translation changes the meaning of the verse to -- "no room/place in the guest-chamber." The text would then be saying . . .

i.e. -- Luke 22:7 -- And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger in the guest room, because there was no room for them in the guest-chamber.

The meaning switches from -- they could not find a room/place in the inn -- to saying -- they could not find room/a place in the guest room! One speaks of the inability to find a place to stay. The other speaks of not being able to find a place in the room which they were already occupying.

#6) A Strained Argument From Hospitality: Let me also make the point that those who argue that Joseph & Mary would have been given a room/place in the home of a relative because this was "his city," and the culture's high view of hospitality. The argument runs: Hospitality was a cultural mandate, and they would not have told a pregnant mother to stay in an animal stable, and deliver her child in that setting.

However, while some make such an argument, they concurrently take the position that Joseph & Mary were given a so-called "family guest-room," relinquished by another family member or family friend, a room which was so unaccommodating that it only offered a manger for their baby's bed. Apparently, such hospitality does not run too deep. Apparently, the birthing of a baby did not significantly move anyone, not even their own supposed family members, to offered them better accommodations or a place for Jesus to sleep. There not even a willingness by the family to offer their own household accommodations, for such a time as this. I'd stay at Motel 6 with that kind of display of hospitality towards a mother in labor and the arrival of a newborn!

#7) No Mention Of (I understand the lesser strength of this argument, but just saying):

The Christmas account . . .

makes no mention of the family room being previously occupied

makes no mention of anyone vacating a room for them

makes no mention of any other close relatives or their presence

makes no mention of of Joseph or Mary initially seeking that family guest room

makes no mention of any family hospitality or care shown them

makes no claim that a family guestroom has a manger in it

#8) The Purpose Of Luke's Statement:

What is the intent of making a point that Jesus was laid in an animal manger, while staying in a relative's "family guests-room," if all the details surrounding it were not unusual?

Let me again state that Luke is seeking to make a point about the coming of our Lord. He chooses his words to establish the fact that the Lord of Glory had no place to lay His head, because there was no room for them. Therefore they resorted to a stable and placed Jesus in an animal's manger. The purpose of mentioning where Jesus was placed is to highlight the humble circumstances surrounding the Lord's birth. What is the purpose of mentioning that they occupied a previously vacated family guest-room, and laid Jesus in a manger which was typically located in such a room?

#9) Lacking Historical Support

As you read the words of those who gravitate towards the bizarre and unusual, you will find that there are many statements made, with no historical backing or actual historical reference. One writer may cite another writer, but neither provide any historical or scholarly support. The support just keeps going round and round, citing each other for support. I have found none who cite the commentaries from the early church (being the closest to the culture and language of the day), which clearly understand the word to refer to an "inn."

Oh, I imagine it is likely that there was a "guest-room" in many of the homes of the day. I imagine that there were guest-chambers which had an animal stable next to one's guest-chamber or which was open to the stable area. However, I don't know if that is even generally typical, since any support cited is very sketchy or vague, at best.

Surely, the house was very open in its structure, to promote air flow throughout the house. I am very skeptical of the assertions that a family-guest room had a manger in it, or had animals in it, or was so open or exposed to where the animal were (no less exposed to the smell and unclean conditions). I do understand that those who maintain this contemporary view have to account for the fact that a manger is present. That detail cannot be worked around! At the end, I have little understanding of -- "Where they are getting that from?"

I find words like . . .

"We could well assume"

"During the days of the Bible people would. . ."

"Some believe . . ."

"Wouldn't you, if you were there . . ."

"The animal heat would keep guests warm and"

(not sure then why the family did not have their regular room there)

"In some near-eastern homes today, or in the houses of _____"

(Some even cite the practice of some present-day country - even Scotland!)

I look for . . . footnotes, sources, authoritative support, historical documentation, the citing of early commentaries or theological studies on these verses

(by the way, early commentaries hold the position that it was "an inn")

#10) Other Greek Words: It is a logical fallacy to assert that because there are other Greek words (such as --- πανδοχείον / pandocheion / pän-do-khā'-on --- Luke 10:34) used to refer to an inn, that the word "kata-luma" cannot also be a word used to refer to a lodge, inn, or rented out building.* In fact, even IF a Greek word is used only once to convey a particular meaning, or there are other similar words, does not negate a singular occurrence. The fact that there are indeed other Greek words used to speak of a commercial building or inn, used for lodging, dinning, or long-term care, does not mean that "kataluma" cannot also refer to the same general kind of facility.

There is such a lack of support for this modern-day interpretive conclusion which is proffered / parroted over and over, which is designed to excited readers who are looking for something to say that catches the ears of God's people!

Apparently, for centuries, Bible readers never had these amazing insights into the Scriptures, and were ignorant to the manners and customs of Bible times, even back to the earliest centuries. It must be that the earliest writers, closest to the time of Christ, never understood what we now understand.

I well understand the temptation that allures some to be new and different. I also well recognize that there are many who "BUY INTO" the avant-garde (i.e. see the writing of Doug Greenwold, and Kenneth Bailey for examples of these new interpretive trends and tendencies to "bring new meaning to the Scriptures.")

"Biblical Crackpotism" pervades the church, and expresses itself in many different ways. It doesn't reside only among people like the late Harold Camping, it finds its way into the interpretive approaches of many others, concerning simple passages that have been rightly understood for centuries, by men far greater in their understanding of the Scriptures, than those of today, who are looking for the new and different.

I think I'll stay with . . .

There was no room in "The Inn!"

Ted Martens, Ph. D.

ADDITIONAL NOTES

* Let me address Greek word "pandocheion:" The Greek word "pandocheion" is used in Luke 10:34 in the parable of the Good Samaritan. That is yet another Greek word used to refer to an inn.

"And went to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine, and set him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him."

And on the morrow when he departed, he took out two pence, and gave them to the host, and said unto him, Take care of him; and whatsoever thou spendest more, when I come again, I will repay thee.

"Pandocheion" is used this one place in the whole of the New Testament.

The word used in Luke 10:34 is without question referring to some sort of commercial place of rest or physical help.

However, that is hardly a basis to argue that . . .

#1 . . . there is no other Greek New Testament word, other than "pandocheion," which speaks of a commercial place of lodging

It is a logical fallacy to assert that this alternate Greek word would have to have been used in Luke 2, if indeed Luke wanted to speak of a commercial inn. As if only this word can be used to convey said meaning. Like many other Greek & English words, there are many words which refer to the "same thing" (minimally three Greek words for "love"), with slight differences, understood to those familiar with the language . . . "hotel" or "motel". They are the same in many respects, but yet different.

As previously shown, the Septuagint supports the fact that "pandocheion" was not the only word used to

Speak of an inn or lodge. In fact the Greek words ἀλίσθησόμεθα (lodge) and ὄπωροφυλάκιον (grainery as Boaz) are two of the Greek words of their day to speak of a place to lodge, though not used by the New Testament writers (though found in the O.T. Septuagint). Just as today (inn, hotel, motel, lodge, vrbo, airbnb, or bed & breakfast), there was more than one word used to refer to what we call an inn.

or

#2 . . . unless the Christmas account uses the same word as used in the parable of the Good Samaritan, it cannot mean "a commercial place of rest" / "inn."

I might suggest that this singularly used Greek word, found in the parable of the Good Samaritan, refers to something more than what we think of as a typical motel, hotel, or an inn. The situation described in the parable would require someone providing medical care, and that for a possible extended period of time. The Greek dictionary defines the word as "a caravansary." It is a compound word or "all" & "to receive," "to bear", "to sustain," "to take up."

Also the word "take care" is a word speaking of "great care, compassion, and concern for" a person or thing. Perhaps we should consider whether "pandocheion" is the best translated by a word that conveys the idea of a "Hampton Hotel" experience. If it is, it must be a "Hampton Extended Stay Hotel," with a medical or critical care wing.

GK.: πανδοχεῖον / pandocheion / pän-do-khā'-on

a compound word or "all" & "to receive," "to bear", "to sustain," "to take up"

Defined: a caravansary / a public house for the reception of strangers

"Pandocheion" In The Septuagint: Interestingly, this Greek word ("pandocheion") is never used to translate the word "inn" or "lodging" in the LXX. In fact, it is never found used to refer to any kind of lodging, housing, hospitality, etc. in the Old Testament.

=====
**The word "oikos" is the word for "house" - i.e. "Zacchaeus, make haste, and come down; for to day I must abide at thy house" - Luke 19:5.

The word "ἀνώγειον" / "ä-nō'-ge-on" is the word used to speak of a room "upper room" / "above land." - Luke 22:12

The word "ταμεῖον" / "tam-i'-on" is used to speak of an "inner chamber" - Luke 12:3 / Matthew 6:6.

The word "χωρέω" / "chóreó" may be used to speak "of a space large enough to hold a certain number of people"- Mark 2:2

The word "τόπος" / "topos" is the word "place" and may be translated "room," as it is in the Christmas account - Luke 2:7;12:17;14:9, 10, 22.

