

## [Lesson From the Bethlehem Innkeeper](http://www.lamblion.us/2011/12/lesson-from-bethlehem-innkeeper.html)

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By [Nathan Jones](#)

### **Was the Bethlehem Innkeeper a jerk?**

Visiting downtown San Antonio, Texas, is to visit a city rich in historic buildings, most famously the Alamo. The city is filled with grand hotels which boast of unique and interesting histories. While my wife and I were residing in one such antique hotel this Christmas season its ambiance drew me inexplicably to that wonderful Christmas-time passage in [Luke 2:1-7](#) concerning another famous (or infamous) inn. The story reads:

*"In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world... And everyone went to his own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem... He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn."*

I was just struck by the harsh reality that the coming King of Kings was turned away from the little town of Bethlehem's possibly only local establishment. Certainly the unnamed innkeeper didn't know the Messiah had just shown up at his doorstep, but just what kind of person would turn away a pregnant woman who was well into labor? Sure, the inn was full of visiting guests, but was the Innkeeper so heartless? Was the guy such a big jerk?

The Scriptures are silent about there even being an innkeeper, but we must assume an inn must have one. The Bible is also silent about the character of this person. Nevertheless, I was determined to track down just what kind of man (or woman) this was. What I learned was that the character of the Innkeeper could be determined based on what the definition of what an inn was in Bible times.

## **1) The Inn was a hotel, therefore the Innkeeper was a jerk.**

Ask any Westerner to picture an inn and they'll most likely picture a building with tens or maybe even hundreds of cube-like rooms all tended by a front desk person who supplies coarse towels and magnetic swipe cards. This could have been what the Bethlehem inn was like (minus the cards), as Jesus explains one inn very similar in the Parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10.

If the Bethlehem inn was a type of hotel, then I can only conclude that the Innkeeper actually was a jerk. Even if (let's say it was a he) he actually didn't have any rooms available, he must have had a room to himself which he could have lent to a poor young girl in the pangs of labor pains. Maybe even once hearing Joseph's Galilean accent beg for mercy a bit of prejudice crept into his thinking. Who knows? Nevertheless, the cretin sent the poor family away to retreat to an open stable to give birth to their first child among the filth of the local animals. Great guy!

## **2) The Inn was a house, therefore the Innkeeper was indifferent.**

Because the Greek transliterated word for "inn" in [Luke 1:7](#) is *kataluma* (Strong's Number 2646), the Western style hotel was most likely not the setting for Bethlehem's inn. *Kataluma* has a number of meanings, one in particular is used of the Upper Room during the Last Supper. If this is a truer description of a Bible times inn, then it was not a hotel but a private residence. The families were all returning to their ancestral homes due to the census, so the *kataluma* could very well have been Joseph's own extended family's house and the innkeeper the patriarch.

Family town homes in Jesus' day consisted of two story structures. The family slept in the large upper room while the animals were brought into the lower floor for protection and to add heat. There being no room in the inn could well have meant that Joseph's family were occupying the upper room, leaving Mary to give birth downstairs among the animals and to lay baby Jesus in the house manger. If this is the true scenario, then Joseph's family were the real jerks for not giving up some space upstairs and the Patriarch/Innkeeper was merely indifferent to the dire needs of yet another extended family member crowding up his home.

### **3) The Inn was a courtyard, therefore the Innkeeper was generous as well as shrewd.**

Although *kataluma* could mean an upper room of a house, in essence it means "a loosing down place." Such places were widely known throughout the Middle East as a resting stop for caravans. This type of inn was more like a camp ground, all open but for a surrounding stone wall incorporating stall slots for the animals like camels and donkeys and providing areas to pitch a tent.

If the Bethlehem inn was a camp ground, then the thought of Mary giving birth out there in the open among the crowds of tents would be just awful for any woman to contemplate. The Innkeeper would have been sensitive to this lack of privacy and generously moved Mary to the place where he kept his animals far up the hills in the caves. He also would have been shrewd because he could still make a little extra money renting out his personal stable, the mark of a true Jewish businessman.

That the inn was a courtyard is the most likely scenario out of the three possibilities, for the hills of Bethlehem are filled with limestone caves. Justin Martyr in the Second Century AD stated that Jesus was born in one of those caves. Emperor Constantine later built the Church of the Nativity over the widely accepted site which can be visited this very day. Jerome who translated the Bible into Latin spent 30 years living in that cave so as to give the world the Latin Vulgate, a translation used for almost 1,100 years. So, there's strong doubt that Jesus was born downstairs in the family house, but rather he was born in an external cave.

Since the historicity of the Bethlehem inn was most likely a courtyard, then the benefit of the doubt can be given to the Innkeeper. History can go easy on this person for generously giving Mary the seclusion any woman in the pangs of delivery would greatly desire, providing the only lodging suitably available. And, the label jerk (or more ethnically schmuck) should not be granted to this individual.

### **What I Learned From the Innkeeper**

While I was researching the meaning of the Bethlehem inn and Innkeeper, I had one of my own "innkeeper experiences." I must admit that I'm not proud of myself.

My wife and I that evening were walking the famous River Walk that runs through downtown San Antonio. Lining each side of the river is an amazing 1.8 million LED Christmas lights, making San Antonio the eighth largest Christmas light show in America. Fancy restaurants and gift shops also line the way, filled with mariachi music and bustling strollers enjoying the lights and joy of the Christmas season.

We were reveling in all of this Christmas atmosphere when I was stopped short by a woman accompanied by two small children. She asked me if I could give her something before they headed back to the shelter. Her question affected me like throwing a penny on the railroad tracks. I was so caught up in the lights and extravagance of the festivities that the very thought of someone being in need caught me so off guard. My mouth just stuttered something like, "Shelter?"

When sense returned, I looked this way and that for a simple place to take her little family to eat, but only expensive sit down restaurants surrounded us. Serving in Philadelphia I knew not to give a person money directly, so that didn't seem like an option either. Surrounded by bounty I felt helpless. Exasperated at my indecision, she moved on to question the couple behind us and the crush of the crowd pushed us down the waterway. Guilt washed over me.

So, what was I? The Innkeeper rang in my head. Was I the jerk of a hotel innkeeper who seeing someone in need turned them coldly away? I sure hope that wasn't the case. I cared about her needs, but like the house innkeeper, did I end up being indifferent? The result sadly was a certain yes. I wanted to be the courtyard innkeeper, quickly coming up with a solution to her needs, but I was unprepared.

The lesson I learned that night was to be the courtyard innkeeper. I shouldn't have let the hustle and bustle of Christmas catch me off guard. I should have been better prepared to help a young mother in need. And, in the future, I'll make sure I will be.

We need to be prepared when the Lord sends our way a chance to serve those in need, or we may miss out on one of God's amazing Christmas miracles.