

“It is a pleasure to commend this book that lays to rest forty common New Testament urban legends. No doubt it will ruffle the feathers of many believers, including some pastors and even scholars, but it is hard to fault Croteau’s careful analysis of each urban legend, the relevant texts, contexts, and array of significant scholarly insights. But perhaps even more important than correcting these urban legends is the careful reading of Scripture that the book models. Let us not blindly accept handed-down beliefs about the New Testament; rather, examine the text carefully for the truth of God’s Word. This compelling and engaging book helps us all to do just that.”

Constantine R. Campbell, associate professor of New Testament,
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

“We live in an age of biblical illiteracy; that much is undeniable. But as someone once noted, it’s not just what you don’t know, it’s also what you *do* know that just ain’t so! David Croteau does a great job in *Urban Legends* of winsomely, kindly, and carefully correcting misconceptions about the Bible. Here is a book that will not just interest, but inform!”

Greg Gilbert, senior pastor,
Third Avenue Baptist Church, Louisville, Kentucky

“Evangelicals rightly insist that ‘Scripture only’ is our source of truth. Yet our interpretations of Scripture sometimes owe more to tradition than to the Bible itself. David Croteau un.masks some common interpretations that have only dubious biblical support. But he does more than debunk these ‘myths’ of interpretation; he also helps us understand what these passages really are saying and why they matter. Perhaps just as importantly, he encourages all of us to be more careful and attentive readers of Scripture.”

Douglas Moo, Kenneth T. Wessner Professor of New Testament,
Wheaton College

“As evangelicals who believe that Scripture is inspired and authoritative, we want to preach and teach what the Bible truly teaches. Croteau takes on a number of ‘urban legends’ and unpacks for us the meaning of a number of texts by paying attention to context and to historical background. Even if one were to disagree with Croteau here or there, one will be challenged to support alternative interpretations. This is a valuable resource full of wise advice and persuasive exegesis, and I hope it is read widely.”

Thomas R. Schreiner, James Buchanan Harrison Professor of
New Testament Interpretation and professor of biblical theology
and associate dean of the School of Theology,
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Although we prefer not to acknowledge it, all of us hold fervently to certain beliefs about what the Bible teaches that, on closer inspection, turn out to be false. No one has done a better job of demonstrating this than David Croteau in this excellent and informative book. Not everyone will enjoy reading it, as human nature typically recoils from admitting error and being forced to give up long-held and deeply cherished interpretations. But there is no virtue in error, and no Christian can be edified by it. Read this book closely and humbly. Even though you may not agree with everything Croteau asserts, your grasp of God’s Word will undoubtedly increase.”

Sam Storms, lead pastor for preaching and vision,
Bridgeway Church, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

Urban Legends of the New Testament

David A. Croteau

Leo Percer, Consulting Editor



Nashville, Tennessee

Urban Legends of the New Testament: 40 Common Misconceptions

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1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 • 20 19 18 17 16 15

Contents

Acknowledgments	vii
List of Abbreviations	ix
Foreword	xi
Prologue.	xiii

Part I Urban Legends in the Gospels

1. There Was No Room at the Inn	3
2. We Three Kings of Orient Are	9
3. Shepherds Were Societal Outcasts	15
4. Jesus Was a Carpenter	21
5. Jesus Died When He Was Thirty-Three	27
6. All Giving Must Be Done in Secret	33
7. Do Not Judge Others	37
8. Jesus' Most Famous Quote Is John 3:16.	43
9. Hell Referred to a First-Century Garbage Dump near Jerusalem	49
10. The Gospel of John Never Refers to Repentance.	55
11. The "Eye of a Needle" Was a Gate in Jerusalem	61
12. When Two Are Gathered in Prayer, God Will Be There	67
13. Jesus Sweat Drops of Blood.	73
14. Jesus Was Flogged Once	79
15. <i>Agapē</i> Is a Superior Love to <i>Phileō</i>	85
16. "Go" Is Not a Command in the Great Commission	91

Part II
**Urban Legends in The Acts of the Apostles,
 the Epistles, and Revelation**

17. <i>Repent</i> Means “to Change Your Mind”	99
18. The Philippian Jailer “Just Believed” and Was Saved.	105
19. Paul Was a Tent Maker.	111
20. Jews (and Jesus) Primarily Spoke Hebrew in Jesus’ Day	117
21. The Gospel Is Dynamite	125
22. Just Say You Believe in Jesus and You Will Be Saved	129
23. Synagogues Had Men and Women Seated Separately.	135
24. Grace Is Unmerited Favor	139
25. Good Works Are Optional for Christians	145
26. Pastors Are Required to Do the Ministry of the Church	151
27. Jesus Emptied Himself of the Glory of Heaven	157
28. We Can Do Anything Through Christ Who Gives Us Strength.	163
29. Abstain from All Appearance of Evil	167
30. Hell Is the Absence of God.	175
31. A Divorced Man Cannot Be a Pastor	181
32. Money Is Evil	189
33. A Pastor’s Children Must Be Saved	195
34. Christians Are Commanded to Tithe	201
35. Christians Are Commanded to Go to Church	205
36. Women Should Not Wear Jewelry	211
37. First John 1:9 Is a Formula for Salvation	217
38. Christians Should Not Allow Cults into Their Homes	223
39. God Would Rather You Be Cold Toward Him than Lukewarm	227
40. Accept Jesus into Your Heart to Be Saved	233
Epilogue.	239
Name Index	243
Subject Index	247
Scripture Index	249

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As always, my family (Ann, Danielle, and D. J.) has been understanding as I worked through the manuscript. May the Lord bless this effort to accurately interpret his Word.

List of Abbreviations

BDAG	Bauer, Walter. <i>A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> . 3rd ed. Revised and edited by F. W. Danker, W. F. Arndt, and F. W. Gingrich. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.
BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
Louw and Nida	Louw, Johannes P., and Eugene A. Nida, eds. <i>Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains</i> . 2 vols. New York: United Bible Societies, 1988, 1989.
EBC	Expositor's Bible Commentary
HNTC	Holman New Testament Commentary
ICC	International Critical Commentary
NAC	New American Commentary
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
PNTC	Pelican New Testament Commentaries
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary

Bible Translations

ASV	American Standard Version
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ESV	English Standard Version (2011)
HCSB	Holman Christian Standard Bible (2009)
ISV	International Standard Version
KJV	King James Version
NASB	New American Standard Bible (1995)
NET	New English Translation
NIV	New International Version (2011)
NKJV	New King James Version
NLT	New Living Translation (2007)
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
RSV	Revised Standard Version
YLT	Young's Literal Translation

All Scripture quotations are from the HCSB unless otherwise noted.



Foreword

For almost a decade I have had the joy of teaching hermeneutics in a college and seminary setting. Often we define this discipline as the art and science of biblical interpretation. The class is, in a real sense, foundational to the rest of the program of study our students will engage. That is why we encourage our students to take it in their first semester of study if at all possible. The primary goal is to help them “rightly [divide] the word of truth” (2 Tim 2:15 NKJV), the Bible. Because we operate from the presuppositional conviction that the Bible is the inerrant and infallible Word of God, we believe we have a moral and spiritual obligation to honor the authorially intended meaning of the text. After all, the Holy Spirit of God is the ultimate author of Scripture. Bible interpreters have a holy assignment that must be undertaken with gravity and seriousness. Eternal truth is before us. Human souls and their destiny hang in the balance.

As we “do hermeneutics,” we teach our students to follow several tried and proven principles. These include: (1) Observation: what do I see? (2) Interpretation: what does it mean? (3) Application: how does it work? Further, I encourage my students to ask five theological/practical questions that have a definite ordering and, in a sense, follow what we call The Grand Redemptive (or Narrative) Story Line of the Bible:

Creation-Fall-Redemption-New Creation (or Restoration)

Those five questions are: (1) What does this text teach us about God? (2) What does this text teach us about fallen humanity? (3) How does this text

point to Christ? (4) What does God want us to know? (5) What does God want us to do? We encourage them to take a good hard look at the text before consulting resources like commentaries, Bible dictionaries, encyclopedias, etc. We urge them to learn the biblical languages, if at all possible, and to read a text in multiple translations like the HCSB, ESV, NASB, NIV, and NLT.

As they are putting all of this together, we remind them over and over of a vitally important principle: context is king. You must know both the immediate (what goes right before and after the text you are studying) and the far (chapters, book, testament) contexts. And this is so crucial: what is the genre or type of literature you are examining?

All of this may, at first, sound like a daunting task. However, it is much like riding a bicycle. The more you do it, the better you get, and the faster you can go! The key to developing the skills of a good Bible interpreter is practice, practice, and more practice.

I share all of this because what I have described above is masterfully displayed in this book by David Croteau. *Urban Legends of the New Testament* is a model of biblical scholarship and hermeneutics. Each of the forty legends David tackles is addressed with care and respect for the authority of Scripture. His practice of careful and humble hermeneutics is a model worthy of emulation. You will not have to agree with every conclusion he reaches. However, you will have to do your homework to swim against the tide of the interpretation he reaches.

David recognizes that while we do have an inerrant Bible, we do not have inerrant interpreters! However, when we approach the Word of God with good interpretive tools, we can quickly narrow the options and, more often than not, make a compelling case the majority of Bible students will agree on. Further, we can put to rest “urban legends” that are inaccurate understandings of God’s Word, misunderstandings that sometimes bring significant hurt to the bride of Christ.

Dr. Croteau is a graduate of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. I am proud of that fact. This superb treatment has only increased my gratitude to our God for how he is using this fine servant for his glory and the good of his people.

Daniel L. Akin
President
Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary
Wake Forest, North Carolina



Prologue

What's an Urban Legend?

In 1876 a whaling ship named *Velocity* was sailing off the coast of Australia near New Caledonia. Those on board saw some rough water and thought they saw something sandy. They marked the area on their map charts and named the island Sandy Island.¹ After that other map makers saw *Velocity's* map, and Sandy Island started making its way into maps. In 2012, if you had looked at the midpoint between Australia and New Caledonia on Google Maps, you would have found the island. A scientist in Australia thought the water was too deep at that location for an island to be present. So he decided to search for the island. But when he arrived at the location, *there was no island*. The whaling boat in 1876 made a mistake, and everyone afterward has copied the mistake for over 130 years. No one had double-checked *Velocity's* map for *130 years*. We don't know how they made the error. Perhaps they were mistaken about their location. Regardless, the island's existence has become an urban legend. An urban legend is a commonly circulated myth, repeated throughout the culture as common knowledge, but which isn't true.

Interpretations of certain passages in the New Testament have fallen victim to this. Somehow something false is stated, and it gets heard and passed down without someone checking all the facts. Was there really a gate in Jerusalem

¹ Some accounts refer to it as Sable Island.

called the “Needle Gate” (cf. Mark 10:15)? I’ve heard this preached numerous times. But what is the evidence for this supposed gate?

The New Testament commands us to be “approved to God, a worker who doesn’t need to be ashamed, correctly teaching the word of truth” (2 Tim 2:15). The question we will be asking is not whether you have heard some of the supposed legends I will be unraveling, because you might have heard the questionable interpretation repeated five, ten, or twenty times! The real question is this: can the interpretation be justified? Is there a good reason this interpretation has been passed down and taught this way?

You may find that I disagree with an interpretation you have heard from your pastor or favorite preacher. This does not, of course, mean they are bad preachers. I am simply disagreeing with their interpretation of a specific passage. In fact, many of the people who have promulgated these legends (and I won’t necessarily tell you who they are) are pastors and scholars I highly appreciate and love. Let’s focus on the correct interpretation of each passage and not on who has taught a legendary interpretation.

The Structure of Each Chapter

The title of each chapter is actually the legend itself, not the correct interpretation of the text(s) at hand. If a certain passage has more than one legend connected to it, only one will be included in the chapter title. Each chapter will begin with a presentation of the legend. I am going to present the legend *as if* I believe it. Then I will try to prove to you that it is an invalid interpretation of the passage. I will explain some problems I see with that particular interpretation and then tell you what I believe the text means.

Cocaine and Coca-Cola: Types of Urban Legends

There are different types of legends. The legend of Sandy Island is one without any solid evidence. We can trace its historical origins, but we are not sure why the legend began. Another type of legend is one that is part truth but doesn’t tell the whole story.

For example, take the following legend: Coca-Cola contained cocaine from 1885 to 1929. Is that true? Yes and no. Yes, in that while Coca-Cola technically did have derivatives of the coca leaf in it (which is what cocaine is made from),² that isn’t the entire story. In fact, the amount of coca leaf derivative in Coca-Cola was so miniscule by the late 1920s, about twenty-five million gallons of Coca-Cola syrup might have six-hundredths of an ounce of coca leaf

² That’s the “Coca” part in the name, from “cocaine.” The “Cola” part of the name comes from kola nuts.

derivative.³ In other words, simply saying “Coca-Cola originally contained cocaine” has an element of truth but is misleading because the amount was ridiculously small. So while the Sandy Island legend relates to mistaken legends, the Coca-Cola legend refers to misleading legends. Which is which in the following chapters? You’ll have to read to find out!

Addressing Legends

Let me offer a warning. Some readers might be tempted to use the information in this book as a sledgehammer upon hearing someone preach one of these legendary interpretations. In the epilogue I will provide some advice about how to address legends when you hear them.

I was honored to be able to teach through some of these chapters at Heritage Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Virginia, in the Spring of 2013. You will notice ten QR codes placed throughout this book. By scanning the code with your mobile device, you can view a short video clip summarizing the content of that chapter. If you do not have a mobile device, the videos clips are also available at <http://www.bhpublishinggroup.com/>.

³ Cf. Mark Pendergast, *For God, Country, and Coca-Cola: The Definitive History of the Great American Soft Drink and the Company That Makes It*, 3rd ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2013), 149–50; James Hamblin, “Why We Took Cocaine Out of Soda,” *The Atlantic* (January 31, 2013), accessed May 20, 2014, www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2013/01/why-we-took-cocaine-out-of-soda/272694, and Barbara Mikkelsen, “Cocaine-Cola,” *Snopes* (May 19, 2011), accessed May 20, 2014, www.snopes.com/cokelore/cocaine.asp.

PART I

Urban Legends in the Gospels

CHAPTER 1

There Was No Room at the Inn

Luke 2:1–7

The Legendary Teaching on Luke 2:1–7

Joseph was required to take his betrothed wife, Mary, to Bethlehem, the city of his ancestors. It was a long journey, probably three or four days' travel, and Mary was already far along in her pregnancy. They traveled south through Israel, and as they approached Bethlehem, Mary started to feel the baby pressing. Joseph began to panic, and as they entered the town of Bethlehem, he went from house to house looking for a place for them to stay. Everyone was turning them away, door after door, house after house.

Carrying Mary, he finally received permission to use someone's stable, a place where only animals should be kept. Joseph took Mary inside, and she gave birth to Jesus. Jesus should have been placed on a throne, but he was rejected from the beginning, being placed in a feeding trough for animals. There was no place for him at the inn, and there was no place for him in many of their hearts.

Introduction: Unraveling the Legend

I love the movie *The Nativity*, but the history behind some of the details in the movie and the legendary teaching above do not come from Scripture. Some of it comes from the *Protoevangelium of James*, a short book written around AD 200. It was not written by James the brother of Jesus or James son of Zebedee. They had died long before AD 200. It contains a fanciful and fascinating retelling of the birth of Jesus. It appears to be the earliest document that portrays the birth of Jesus as an emergency upon approaching Bethlehem. In fact, the way the story reads in the *Protoevangelium of James*, they are about three miles from the town when Joseph found a cave for Mary to give birth in, not

ever reaching Bethlehem. There are several problems with this depiction of the birth of Jesus. For example, if it is true, then Jesus was not born in Bethlehem and the prophecy about that did not get fulfilled (cf. Matt 2:6 and Mic 5:2). Regardless, there are two problems with the traditional understanding of the birth story about Jesus, particularly the idea (1) that there was no room at the inn, and (2) that they had a hard time finding a place to stay.

The Historical Setting

The traditional portrayal has Joseph, a descendant of the famous King David, going back to Bethlehem, the city of David, and having a hard time finding a place to stay. On the surface that seems hard to believe. Even with the census taking place, it's difficult to believe he arrived in Bethlehem and was rejected. Also, Mary had relatives nearby. Luke 1:39–40 mentions Mary staying with Zechariah and Elizabeth, who lived in the hill country of Judea. Bethlehem was a small town in the region of Judea. Zechariah and Elizabeth were probably fairly nearby. But *if* Mary went into labor suddenly as they were approaching Bethlehem, her relatives being nearby wouldn't help much.

Hospitality was greatly important in that culture. It would have been unthinkable for a pregnant Jewish woman to arrive in a city and have people turn a blind eye to her. That might not be unthinkable today, but we are not as hospitable as first-century Israel. Many verses in the Old Testament talk about the importance of hospitality.¹ If someone knocked on the door of a house and the person said, "Go away," the inhospitable person would be shunned by that community. That is how seriously hospitality was taken back then.

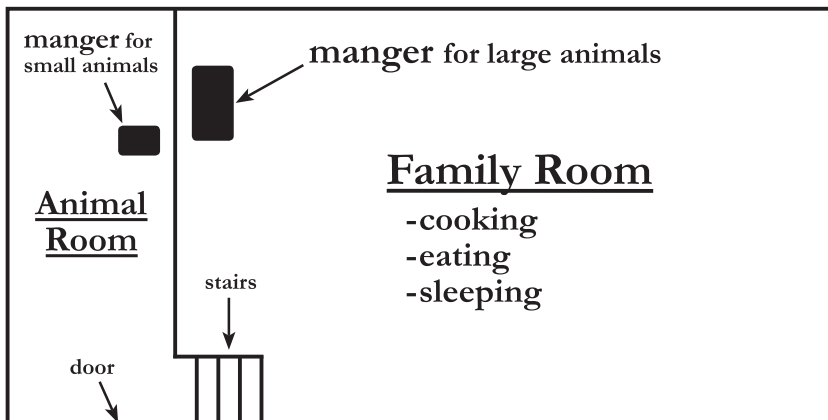
Urgency, the Manger, and the Inn

Was there an urgency upon approaching or entering Bethlehem? Luke 2:6 says, "*While they were there*, the time came for her to give birth" (emphasis added), not "as they were approaching." He doesn't mention whether they were there for five minutes or five weeks, but it could allow for both. Luke does not portray that her time for giving birth came as she was approaching the city, so there was no reason for panic or urgency. There is no evidence that the baby was pressing as they arrived. But if they got to Bethlehem and Mary was fine, why couldn't Joseph find adequate housing? Zechariah and Elizabeth were nearby, they were in a hospitable culture, and he was from the line of David. Why did he put his pregnant wife into a stable filled with animals?

¹ For example, see Genesis 18–19; Exod 23:9; Lev 19:33–34; Deut 10:19; Isa 58:6–10; Ezek 16:49.

The HCSB says they “laid Him in a feeding trough” (Luke 2:7). When you read “feeding trough,” images of a stable probably come to mind. However, there are three options for the location of the feeding trough. First, feeding troughs were placed outside homes in a stable. This is the traditional understanding: wealthy homes in first-century Israel would have a stable. Countering the traditional view are two other options. Understanding how houses were typically constructed will help comprehend the other options.

A first-century house in Israel would have a large family room where the family would eat, cook, sleep, and do general living. At the end of the room there would be some steps down to a lower level, going down only a couple of feet. That lower level would be the “animal room” of the house. There was no wall separating the rooms, just one room with two parts: the family room and the animal room. They would construct it so it slanted slightly toward the animal area for easy cleaning because the exterior door would be in the animal area. On the raised surface in the family room would be a feeding trough for the larger animals carved out of the floor. The larger animals in the animal area, like a cow or a donkey, could walk over and eat out of this trough. The smaller animals, like sheep, would have a smaller manger that would be carved out of the floor in the animal room, or the family might have a wooden trough that could be brought inside.



Scripture offers no explicit description of this design, but archeological evidence and implicit evidence from Scripture suggest that this was the general design of houses. Animals are mentioned being inside houses in a few biblical stories. First Samuel 28:24 describes Saul going to the witch of Endor. As they were talking, she decided to slaughter the “fatted calf *in the house*” (ESV, emphasis added). Judges 11 tells the story of Jephthah making a vow. He asked

the Lord to help him win the battle. Then, if the Lord helped him, he promised to sacrifice the first thing that came out of his house (Judg 11:31). When he arrived home, the first thing out of his house was his daughter. Since animals were kept in the house, he probably expected a calf or sheep to come out.

The design of one-room houses can be seen in verses like Matthew 5:15, where Jesus mentions a light on a lampstand giving light to all who are in the house. If there were multiple stories, multiple rooms, hallways, and bathrooms, that would be impossible. But when the house has one big room with one section being a little lower for the entrance and animals, it becomes clear how a light on a lampstand would give light to the whole house.

The larger manger is in the family room, and the smaller manger is in the animal room. These are the other two options for its location. The most likely location for Jesus' manger is the one in the family room. But the traditional understanding of the story doesn't say Jesus was born in a house. It says the family was turned away from the inn so they went to a stable. Why am I describing a house?

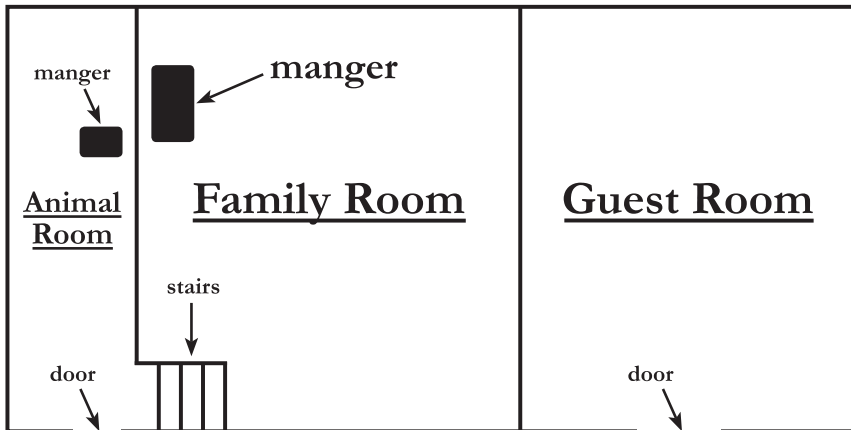
Notice how the HCSB translates Luke 2:7: "And laid Him in a feeding trough—because there was no room for them at the lodging place." Most translations use the word "inn" rather than "lodging place." The word "inn" or the phrase "lodging place" bring to mind the idea of a hotel, which did exist in first-century Israel. I don't know if one existed in first-century Bethlehem (though that seems unlikely since it was a small town), but the parable of the good Samaritan in Luke 10:34 says, "Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him." The following verse even references an innkeeper. This is a reference to public lodging, like a hotel. So there were inns in first-century Israel.

But the Greek word used in Luke 2:7 (*kataluma*) is different from the Greek word used in Luke 10:34 (*pandocheion*). The word *pandocheion* occurs only here in the New Testament. The word *kataluma* occurs two other times, once in Mark and once in Luke (which are parallel verses). Luke 22:11 says, "Tell the owner of the house, 'The Teacher asks you, "Where is the *guest room* where I can eat the Passover with My disciples?'" (emphasis added). The Greek word *kataluma* is translated in Mark 14:14 and Luke 22:11 as "guest room" in most translations. However, most translations have "inn" in Luke 2:7.

A Closer Look at Luke 2:7

The NIV says, "Because there was no *guest room* available for them" (Luke 2:7, emphasis added). This is probably the most accurate translation of Luke 2:7. It was the only translation I examined that had *kataluma* translated the same way in all three places. The guest room in Luke 2:7 most likely referred

to a room added on to a single-story house. The guest room (*kataluma*) would have its own exterior entrance.



Another piece of evidence implies that Joseph and Mary had attained adequate accommodations when they got to Bethlehem and were not in a stable. The shepherds were told by an angel that they would see a baby lying in a feeding trough (Luke 2:12). After the shepherds saw this, Luke says, “The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had seen and heard, just as they had been told” (Luke 2:20). In a culture that prized hospitality so highly, it would have been unimaginable that the shepherds would have walked away and left the family with a newborn baby in a stable. The more you understand Middle Eastern hospitality, the more powerful that verse becomes.

Joseph took Mary to Bethlehem for the census ordered by Caesar Augustus. He was not rushed to find a place. When he arrived, the guest room was already full, so he and Mary had to stay in the family room with everyone else. When it came time for Mary to give birth, she did so in the family room. They placed the baby Jesus into the feeding trough for animals located in the floor of the family room. There was no cave, no stable, and probably no wooden trough.

Application

If we tell the story of Jesus’ birth with an inaccurately reconstructed historical backdrop, skeptics to Christianity will find out. When they point out the unbiblical and unhistorical picture being painted, it can cause panic and doubt for the believer. I’ve seen this happen with some of the legends in this book. Let’s dedicate ourselves to being precise and accurate about the way we portray the birth of the Savior.

The story of Jesus' birth is not a story of rejection, a harsh innkeeper, or an incompetent husband. It is the story of a normal birth in humble surroundings. There was no palace and no throne. The absolute "normalness" of the birth is striking. This king, God incarnate, had a normal, typical birth. He was received the way a normal child would have been, but He was not a normal child. The incarnation is the story of God the Son leaving heaven and coming to earth, demonstrating His love for mankind by living a perfect life and dying a perfect death. This is the beginning of the story of how God saves those who place their trust in Him.

Annotated Bibliography

Books

Bailey, Kenneth E. *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2008.

This is probably the best resource on this issue. Bailey's presentation is easy to read and brilliant. See especially pages 25–37.

Journals

Bailey, Kenneth E. "The Manger and the Inn: The Cultural Background of Luke 2:7." *Theological Review* 2, no. 2 (1979): 33–44.

This immensely helpful article is available online at www.tinyurl.com/MangerInn.

Carlson, Stephen C. "The Accommodations of Joseph and Mary in Bethlehem: κατάλυμα in Luke 2:7." *New Testament Studies* 56, no. 3 (2010): 326–42.

Carlson's study demonstrates the unlikelihood of Jesus being born in a stable, though his conclusion slightly differs from the one above.

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MacPhail, Bryn. "From a Throne to a Feeding Trough." *MacPhail's Manuscripts*. Accessed July 14, 2014. www.reformedtheology.ca/luke2a.htm.

A helpful summary of the issue at hand.

Sprinkle, Preston. "Was Jesus Born at an Inn?" *Theology for Real Life*. December 15, 2011. Accessed July 12, 2014. www.facultyblog.etsnbiblecollege.com/2011/12/was-jesus-born-at-an-inn.

Sprinkle's discussion on the inn is well done, though I disagree with his (admittedly) speculative conclusion.

CHAPTER 2

We Three Kings of Orient Are

Matthew 2:1

The Legendary Teaching on Matthew 2:1

We three kings of Orient are, bearing gifts we traverse afar. Field and fountain, moor and mountain, following yonder star.” Probably written in 1857, but not appearing in print until 1863, this famous Christmas carol was written by John Henry Hopkins, who became a priest in the Episcopal Church. It was the featured song in a Christmas pageant he organized. Reverend Hopkins was able to write lyrics and a tune that has captured the text of Scripture so well. What a wonderful carol!



Introduction: Unraveling the Legend

The opening line of this hymn brings to mind three questions.

1. “We three”—Were there three?
2. “kings”—Were they kings?
3. “from Orient are”—Were they from the Orient?

When I was in college, I was listening to J. Vernon McGee on the radio while driving to a friend’s house. While teaching on Matthew 2, he mentioned that there were not three wise men. My car swerved on the road as I exclaimed out loud: “Not three wise men?!” Every manger scene I had ever seen had three wise men. I wondered if he was denying the Bible. Then he read the verse, and I thought, *Why did I think there were three wise men?* I was simply stunned, shaken in my faith.

I want to investigate the opening line of this Christmas carol and compare it to what is stated in Scripture. Matthew 2:1 says, “After Jesus was born in

Bethlehem of Judea in the days of King Herod, wise men from the east arrived unexpectedly in Jerusalem.” Verse 7 says, “Then Herod secretly summoned the wise men and asked them the exact time the star appeared.” Verse 16 mentions the wise men two more times, for a total of four times in this passage. What can we glean about the “three kings from the Orient” in Matthew 2:1? The word translated “wise men” is plural, so there was more than one. But some translations have “magi,” the plural of “magus,” referring to priests in ancient Media and Persia. No translation used “king.” Also, the text says they came “from the east.” No translation says “Orient.” That’s what Scripture says.

Background Texts on the Wise Men

Most scholars believe the mention of *three gifts* has caused many people in church history to assume there were three wise men. In fact, the “three wise men” have been given names: Melchior (supposedly King of Arabia), Balthazar (supposedly King of Persia), and Caspar or Gaspar (supposedly King of India). Three ancient documents mention some details about these “three kings.” The *Armenian Infancy Gospel*, which was written around AD 600, mentions the three names. The second document was a Greek text written in Alexandria, Egypt, around AD 500. The translation into Latin (titled *Excerpta Latina Barbari*) includes these names as well. Some people have proposed that these are legitimate texts on which to base this conclusion, but there is another document many people aren’t as familiar with: *Revelation of the Magi*. This document was written in the eighth century in Syriac. It was kept in the Vatican library for many years and was recently translated into English.¹ The translator believes the text goes back to a mid-second century document (I remain unconvinced). It was written as if the wise men themselves were writing it. While it is not a reliable source for interpreting Scripture, it has some interesting details regarding the wise men. First, what characterizes the magi is that they pray in silence, which was abnormal during that time period. Second, there were twelve or more wise men, maybe even forty or fifty in the group. Third, they were from Shir, possibly a reference to China. Fourth, they were descendants of Seth, Adam and Eve’s third son. Being descendants of Seth, they had knowledge of an old prophecy passed down by word of mouth about a star that would appear proclaiming that God would come in human form. Those are some salient points from the *Revelation of the Magi*, an unreliable source for interpreting the New Testament text.

¹ Brent Landau, *Revelation of the Magi: The Lost Tale of the Wise Men’s Journey to Bethlehem* (New York: HarperOne, 2010).

All the theories and traditions advocating there being *three* wise men are late and unreliable documents. An alternate tradition states there were at least twelve, but there wasn't a uniform tradition throughout church history.

I believe it is unlikely that there were only three wise men. While I don't have proof, I think there is some compelling evidence. There is no compelling reason to believe there were three wise men. On the one hand, if three men were traveling hundreds of miles with expensive gifts, it would seem to be *unwise* for them to go in a group of only three. On the other hand, they could have had an entourage go with them. While, theoretically, there could have been three, there could also have been thirty. We simply do not know the precise number.

Who Were They, and Where Were They From?

Were these men kings, magi, or wise men? They are known as kings because of the Christmas carol, but church father Tertullian (died AD 225) referred to them as kings as well. We don't know for certain why he believed that. Regardless, in Daniel 2 the Greek word for *magi* is used to translate a Hebrew term that meant "astrologer" (Dan 2:2, 10). Several hundred years before the New Testament, *magi* referred to astrologers, but words can change in meaning through time. By the time of the New Testament, magi were most likely non-Jewish, religious, and (possibly) priestly. They were skilled in several areas including astronomy, astrology, dream interpretation, fortune telling, and magic or divination. This is what characterized the magi.

The magi in Matthew 2 are likely not Jewish since they were ignorant of Old Testament Scriptures. They asked Herod to inform them about the birthplace of the Messiah. They appear to be religious scholars skilled in astronomy. They had some dreams while they were visiting Jesus, so they were apparently skilled in dream interpretation. They probably interpreted the stars to indicate that a great Jewish king was about to be born. New Testament scholar Craig Blomberg says, "They combined astronomical observation with astrological speculation."²

Were the wise men from the Orient? The answer could depend on what you mean by the word *Orient*. Years ago that word referred to any where east of the Mediterranean. Now it typically refers to East Asia, near China. If the latter definition is meant, then the answer is probably no. However, they were from an area east of Israel. Given that astronomy was prevalent in Persia, and that it seems to have played a role in leading the wise men to Israel, perhaps a case can be made that wise men did come from Persia. However, the three gifts

² Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, NAC (Nashville: B&H, 1992), 62.

they brought (gold, frankincense, and myrrh) connect them to Arabia. Since they appear to know something about Judaism, maybe there was a community of Jews in their homeland who supplied them with Old Testament passages (like Num 24:17) that led them to read the stars as pointing to the birth of a Jewish king.³ That would point to Babylon as their origin. In the end we can't be certain, but I think Babylon and Arabia are most likely. This journey would probably have taken several months from deciding they wanted to go, getting the supplies together, and making the long journey.

There may have been three wise men, or there may have been thirty. They weren't kings, but astronomers, astrologers, and dream interpreters. They were from the east, but the term *Orient* is misleading.

The Main Point of Matthew 2: Worshipping the King

Matthew's focus is not the number, origin, or identity of the wise men, and that is probably why he is so ambiguous about some of the details we want to know. His main point is communicating that these non-Jewish men came to *worship* Jesus the king. Matthew 2:2 says, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him." They are seeking to worship a king.

Jesus' receiving worship is a minor motif in Matthew's Gospel. It is mentioned at least six times, including this passage: Matthew 2:2, 8, 11; 14:33; 28:9, 17. Near the beginning of Matthew's Gospel, in 2:2, he mentions the wise men coming from outside the land of Israel to worship Jesus as king. Herod refused to worship Jesus, but the wise men seek to worship him. Then at the end of the Gospel, in Matthew 28:17, Matthew mentions that the disciples worshipped Jesus. That is followed by a command for the disciples to go outside the land of Israel to teach others about Jesus. The themes in 2:2 and 28:17 are overlapping: people outside the land of Israel and worshipping Jesus connect these two passages.

Another motif in the Gospel of Matthew is Jesus as king. In Matthew 2, two kings are discussed. In 2:1 Matthew mentions that Herod was the king. In 2:2 Jesus is referred to as "King of the Jews." The next verse and 2:9 mention Herod as king. Matthew 2 has four references to "king," and only one of those refers to Jesus. Matthew is preparing the stage for the conflict Herod is going to have with Jesus and the slaying of the boys two years and younger in Bethlehem and its vicinity (Matt 2:16).

³ Allen C. Myers, ed. "Wise Men," in *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 1,061. See also Chad Brand, Charles Draper, Archie England, et al., eds., "Magi," in *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Nashville: B&H, 2003), 1066.

The Old Testament has a prophecy foretelling the coming of a king in the line of David. Matthew presents Jesus as the fulfillment of these prophecies, particularly in three places. Matthew 1:6 provides a genealogy declaring Jesus as a descendant of “David the king” (ESV). Matthew 21:5 cites a prophecy from Zechariah 9:9 (“your King is coming to you”), which is fulfilled by Jesus. Matthew explicitly connects Jesus to the Old Testament prophecy about a coming king. Matthew’s portrayal of Jesus’ crucifixion includes several references to the theme of Jesus as king. In 27:11, Pilate asks Jesus if he is “King of the Jews.” In 27:29, Jesus is mocked as king. In 27:37, the charge for the crucifixion put on the sign on the cross says, “THIS IS JESUS THE KING OF THE JEWS.” A few verses later (27:42) Jesus is mocked as “King of Israel.” The entire crucifixion scene is filled with this theme of mocking Jesus as King. Matthew 2 and the visit of the magi serves to reinforce the Matthean motif of Jesus as king.

Application

Jesus is our King. As King, he rules over everything, including our lives. Therefore, we are to live in submission to our ruling King.

Also, Jesus deserves our worship. While worship should be reserved for God alone, Jesus deserves our worship because he is God. We should worship him with all of our lives, thoughts, decisions, relationships, attitudes, and emotions. Whether we are at work or at play, all of life should be considered an act of worship.

Annotated Bibliography

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Blomberg’s readable commentary on Matthew is good on textual and historical issues. See especially pages 61–66.

Books

Bailey, Kenneth E. *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2008.

Bailey succinctly summarizes the issue at hand, deciding that the men came from Arabia. See especially pages 51–53.

Dictionary Articles

Witherington, Ben, III. “Birth of Jesus.” Pages 60–74 in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*. Edited by J. B. Green and S. McKnight. Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992.

Witherington masterfully summarizes all pertinent issues involved. See especially pages 72–73.

Journals

Maalouf, Tony T. “Were the Magi from Persia or Arabia?” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 156 (1999): 423–42.

In trying to decipher the origin of the wise men, Maalouf touches on many of the issues discussed here in a nontechnical manner. He believes the origin is Arabia.

CHAPTER 3

Shepherds Were Societal Outcasts

Luke 2:8–12

The Legendary Teaching on Luke 2:8–12

The Christmas story is familiar to most American Christians, including a manger, a baby, three wise men, animals, and shepherds. It's so familiar to us that nothing seems out of place. Luke 2:8–12 says, "In the same region, shepherds were staying out in the fields and keeping watch at night over their flock. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Don't be afraid, for look, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today a Savior, who is Messiah the Lord, was born for you in the city of David. This will be the sign for you: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in cloth and lying in a feeding trough.'" The original readers of Luke's Gospel had a different perspective on this scene. From their perspective it would be scandalous to think God could possibly give shepherds a birth announcement heralding the birth of the Christ as a newborn baby. Why would God invite shepherds when he could have invited Herod the Great, the high priest, or Caesar? Who were shepherds?



Shepherds were societal outcasts with no money, no education, and no culture. They were to be avoided socially. If you were walking down the street and a shepherd was walking toward you, you would cross to the other side of the street. You wouldn't want to be near a shepherd. In fact, they couldn't be judges, and their testimony was invalid in court.

They were also religious outcasts. Their work made them ceremonially unclean so they were not allowed in the temple. They were even considered to be as low and dirty as prostitutes. These men had been the outcasts of Jewish

society their whole lives, and God invited them to the most important birth in the history of the world. He didn't invite Caesar, Herod the Great, or the Jewish leaders; he invited shepherds. And this is a theme in Luke's Gospel: God reaching out to societal outcasts—the poor, women, and slaves. God seeks those who live their lives on the fringe of society. Look at the men Jesus chose to be his disciples. Many of them were untrained and uneducated fishermen. Another was a Jewish traitor: a tax collector. Jesus lifted up those on the fringe and made them leaders of his ministry on earth. Realizing this should give us hope. If God reaches out to those on the fringe, certainly he can reach out to you and me.

Introduction: Sources for the Legend

The conclusion that shepherds were societal outcasts has been reached by many scholars, and they have repeated this concept over and over again. For example, Farrar said in 1893, "Shepherds at this time were a despised class." Strack and Billerbeck (1924) said, "The shepherds were despised people." Stein (1992) said, "In general, shepherds were dishonest and unclean according to the standards of the law. They represent the outcasts and sinners for whom Jesus came." Butler (2000) said, "Shepherding had changed from a family business as in David's time to a despised occupation." Finally, Utley (2004) said, "The rabbis considered them to be religious outcasts and their testimony was not admissible in court." Those are just a few quotes from scholars throughout the last 100 plus years.¹

Three main sources are used to reach this conclusion. First, Aristotle was cited as saying that among people, "the laziest are shepherds, who lead an idle life, and get their subsistence without trouble from tame animals; their flocks wandering from place to place in search of pasture, they are compelled to follow them, cultivating a sort of living farm."² Aristotle declared that shepherding is easy because of the animals involved.

¹ F. W. Farrar, *The Gospel According to St Luke*, Cambridge Greek Testament for Schools and Colleges (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1893), 112; Herman L. Strack and Paul Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch*, 6 vols. (München, Germany: Beck, 1924), 2:113 (author's translation); Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, NAC (Nashville: B&H, 1992), 108; Trent C. Butler, *Luke*, HNTC (Nashville: B&H, 2000), 29; Robert James Utley, *The Gospel According to Luke* (Marshall, TX: Bible Lessons International, 2004), Luke 2:8.

² Aristotle, *Politics*, 1.8; cited in James S. Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era: Exploring the Background of Early Christianity* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1999), 21; Matthew Montonini, "Shepherd," in *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, ed. John D. Barry and Lazarus Wentz (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2012). This is possibly why Philo, *On Husbandry*, 61, refers to "the care of goats or sheep" as "inglorious."

Using Aristotle as background information for understanding Luke 2 has two main problems. First, Aristotle was not a Jew and did not live in Israel; he was a Greek and lived in Greece. His views on shepherding are virtually irrelevant for first-century Judaism. Second, he lived more than 300 years before the birth of Christ. This also makes his view unhelpful for understanding the New Testament. He lived in a different culture, in a different society, during a different time period.

Scholars go to several sources for culling Jewish background material for the New Testament. The two main sources used for understanding shepherds in first-century Israel are the Mishnah and the Babylonian Talmud.³ The Mishnah is a collection of rabbinic sayings. Rabbis would debate issues pertaining to the Old Testament and Mosaic Law. This collection of rabbinic traditions was from the time period before Christ started his public ministry up until around the year AD 200. It was written between AD 200 and 250. These traditions contained in the Mishnah can sometimes be useful for understanding the New Testament, depending on several factors (like the date of the rabbi being cited).⁴

The second source is the Babylonian Talmud. The Babylonian Talmud, compiled around the year AD 500, contains rabbinic interpretations of the Old Testament and interpretations based on the Mishnah. The Mishnah contains rabbinic debates over the correct interpretation and application of Old Testament Law, and the Talmud contains rabbis debating the content of the Mishnah. In general the information in the Talmud is not helpful for interpreting the New Testament. Many of the quotations are simply too late to be reliably useful because the rabbis are so far removed from the first-century context.

Besides Aristotle, a comment by Philo, and one statement in the Mishnah, the bulk of the quotes used to demonstrate that shepherds were despised were taken from the Babylonian Talmud. I was unable to find even one source from first-century Israel used to support the view that shepherds were societal outcasts. Therefore, this viewpoint is dated after the events being studied in Luke 2. It is unreliable information and should be discarded when interpreting the Gospels.

³ Scholars also use Philo of Alexandria (first-century Hellenistic Jew), Josephus (first-century Jew), and intertestamental apocryphal and pseudepigraphal works.

⁴ Though I didn't find any sources citing the Mishnah, *Qidduchin* 4.14 could be cited as evidence of a negative view toward shepherds. This view was given by Rabbi Abba Gurion of Sidon, who is dated around AD 165–200. Evidence to the contrary in the Mishnah would include *Bekhorot* 5:4: "Israelite shepherds are believed [to testify that the blemishes came about unintentionally]." This means the statement in the NET Bible footnote (on Luke 2:8) implying that there is no evidence before the fifth century is an overstatement.

Contextual Clues

One clue in the context, a subtle hint, supports the opposite view of the legend. Luke 2:18 says, “And all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.” They weren’t amazed that *shepherds* were telling them; they were amazed at the content of what the shepherds said. If shepherds were viewed as societal outcasts, they would have been shocked that the shepherds were involved in the process. Instead, they were amazed at the story itself. This is a contextual clue that shepherds were not considered societal outcasts.

A Brief Biblical Portrayal of Shepherds

There is better evidence for the idea that shepherds were not viewed as societal outcasts: the overarching biblical portrayal of shepherds. The description of shepherds in the Old and New Testaments would be formative for the minds of first-century Jews and Christians.

Beginning in the Old Testament, Abraham was a shepherd. Genesis 13 describes him as having much livestock, herds, and flocks of sheep. Exodus 3:1 says Moses was a shepherd: “Meanwhile, Moses was shepherding the flock of his father-in-law Jethro.” David was a shepherd (according to 1 Samuel 17) who took care of his father’s flocks. These three men are pillars of the Old Testament. Abraham, Moses, and David were all connected to shepherding, and all three were greatly esteemed in Jewish society.

God is also pictured as a shepherd in the Old Testament. One of the most famous verses in all of Scripture proclaims this: “The LORD is my shepherd” (Ps 23:1). Genesis 49:24 says, “Yet his bow remained steady, and his strong arms were made agile by the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob, by the name of the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel.” Psalm 80:1 says, “Listen, Shepherd of Israel.” The Lord speaks in Ezekiel 34:12, saying, “As a shepherd looks for his sheep on the day he is among his scattered flock, so I will look for My flock. I will rescue them from all the places where they have been scattered on a cloudy and dark day.” Many more could be quoted, but these should suffice. A Jew in the first century would connect shepherding to Abraham, Moses, David, and God himself.

In the New Testament, Jesus is tightly connected to the shepherd motif. Matthew 2:6 describes Jesus as a shepherd: “And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the leaders of Judah: because out of you will come a leader who will shepherd My people Israel.” If shepherds were viewed as societal outcasts, it is highly doubtful that Matthew would connect shepherding terminology to Jesus. He does it again in Matthew 26:31: “For it is written: I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.” The most powerful passage connecting Jesus to the shepherd motif is

John 10. Jesus discusses shepherding, and he places himself in the role of shepherd, calling himself “the good shepherd” (John 10:11). This would be an oxymoron if shepherds were viewed like prostitutes. Jesus is even referred to as a shepherd outside of the Gospels (see Heb 13:20; 1 Pet 2:25; 5:4). There is no hesitation in the New Testament to refer to Jesus as a shepherd.

Finally, church leaders are referred to as shepherds. In Acts 20:28, Paul explains that the overseers are “to shepherd the church of God.” Peter says to church leaders, “Shepherd God’s flock among you” (1 Pet 5:2). The title “pastor” refers to a shepherd. There is no evidence of embarrassment over referring to church leaders as shepherds.

Many scholars have taught that shepherds were societal outcasts in first-century Israel. Their sources are generally many years after the New Testament time period, plus Aristotle who was from a different culture and 300 years before Jesus. Luke 2:18 appears to lean against the view of shepherds as societal outcasts. The biblical portrayal of a shepherd is extremely positive in the Old and New Testaments.

Application

While shepherds weren’t societal outcasts, they were in the lower class, and they do represent the poor and humble.⁵ God chose to use to the poor and humble components of society to share his wonderful announcement of the birth of his Son. Jesus is not only for the rich.

Also, Luke 2 is telling the story of a pivotal event in the history of humankind. God and his angels are excited and want to rejoice over what is happening. This is the beginning of a life that will be lived in total submission and obedience to God. The second Adam has come, and Jesus will provide forgiveness for sin and reconciliation to God. That is why God and his angels are so excited, because that story is now beginning. We should be excited and passionately tell others about what Jesus came and did.

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Bock, Darrell L. *Luke 1:1–9:50*. BECNT. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994.

Bock’s comments are not technical and summarize the issue well. See especially comments on pages 213–14.

⁵ While this application might sound similar to the legendary teaching, saying someone is “poor and humble” is radically different from comparing them to a prostitute. Getting the right application using the wrong data is still not an appropriate hermeneutical path.

Strauss, Mark. "Luke." In *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002.

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Laniak provides a balanced, cautious view on the shepherds. See especially 197–98.