

What is a Manger

In my Tabernacles article, I mention that the manger where Jesus is supposed to have been placed was more probably a sukkot or temporary shelter. Apparently, this strikes a nerve in some people. I've gotten emails asking for my backup, so here it is.

An inn is mentioned in Luke 2:7. But they did not exist then as we know them today. According to Easton's Bible Dictionary *kataluma* (Strong's 2646 translated 'inn') just means a place for "loosing the beasts of their burdens." Manger could be the stall or crib, or possibly a ledge.

Inn — in the modern sense, unknown in the East. The khans or caravanserais, which correspond to the European inn, are not alluded to in the Old Testament. The "inn" mentioned in Ex. 4:24 was just the halting-place of the caravan. In later times khans were erected for the accommodation of travellers. In Luke 2:7 the word there so rendered denotes a place for loosing the beasts of their burdens. It is rendered "guest-chamber" in Mark 14:14 and Luke 22:11. In Luke 10:34 the word so rendered is different. That inn had an "inn-keeper," who attended to the wants of travellers.

Manger — (Luke 2:7, 12, 16), the name (Gr. *phatne*, rendered "stall" in Luke 13:15) given to the place where the infant Redeemer was laid. It seems to have been a stall or crib for feeding cattle. Stables and mangers in our modern sense were in ancient times unknown in the East. The word here properly denotes "the ledge or projection in the end of the room used as a stall on which the hay or other food of the animals of travellers was placed." (See INN.)

Easton, M. (1897; Published in electronic form by Logos Research Systems, 1996). *Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. Illustrations not included in electronic edition. (electronic edition of the 3rd edition.). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

Jerome's Bible Commentary mentions that people would build a "lean to" on the outside of a cave then keep their animals in the cave portion.

manger: A feeding trough for animals. Jesus was born in one of the caves in the hills around Bethlehem. These caves were used at times as homes for families by adding a lean-to at the entrance of the cave; the family's livestock was housed inside the cave.

in the inn: The word *katalyma* means a room for a guest or for eating (Lk 22:11).

Because the outer room attached to the cave was already fully occupied or at least did not afford privacy, Joseph brought Mary inside the cave where the livestock ordinarily rested.

Brown, R. E., Fitzmyer, J. A., & Murphy, R. E. (1968). *The Jerome Biblical commentary* (Lk 2:7). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

The association of '*phatne*' (manger) with '*kataluma*' (inn) is why the Greek word *phatne* (Strong's 5336) is translated 'manger,' even though it can also mean 'stall' or 'crib.' It doesn't specifically mean a feed trough. Feed trough is inferred by the fact that Mary laid the baby somewhere in the place where the burdens of beasts were unloosed. It might have been something that looked like a basinet or crib as we have in current Nativity scenes. More probably it was a ledge that held food for animals at other times.

So there is quite a bit of uncertainty around the words for "inn" and "manger." We don't know exactly what is meant. Joseph was in town for a census, and there was crowding because many

others had to be there too. It is possible he had relatives with a guest chamber (he was of the lineage of David and presumably there were others of that lineage living in the city of David), but perhaps they had to sleep in the room normally occupied by animals. Animals were probably not present, or if they were it wasn't that unusual to have to sleep in the same room. The room could've been a cave, with the house in front, or it could've been a temporary shelter (a sukkah or booth) in a place where animals were stripped of their loads. The manger might've been the shelf where the feed was normally kept. It was, however, unusual enough to be an identifier, because the shepherds were told to look for a baby in a manger.

I think there are two factors that drive the current narrative showing Jesus in a wooden feeding trough in a barn with animals all around and three wise guys, I mean, wise men standing around. One is the desire to get away from anything Jewish in the birth of the Christ. So if a temporary place where the burdens of beasts are loosed was a booth like the ones used in Tabernacles, there are those who do not want to acknowledge it. The second factor driving the current narrative is that the church wants control of the Bible message, especially the message about Jesus. Through tradition, and myths, they build control by emotional appeals rather than biblical accuracy.

Below are some additional comments from other sources concerning the ambiguity of the two words under consideration.

New Bible Dictionary

MANGER. The feeding-trough for animals in a stall or stable, translated 'crib' in Jb. 39:9 (AV RSV); Pr. 14:4 (AV); Is. 1:3 (AV, RSV). Gk. *phatnē* has an extended meaning of 'stall' (Lk. 13:15), and is used in LXX to translate various Heb. words, 'urwâ, 'stall' (2 Ch. 32:28), *repet* (Hab. 3:17) 'ēbûs (Jb. 39:9; Pr. 14:4; Is. 1:3). In the NT it occurs in Lk. 2:7, 12, 16; 13:15.

Mangers are known in other lands besides Palestine. In Palestine the stable or stall was attached to the owner's house and was furnished with a manger. The stables at *Megiddo, now dated to the Omrid dynasty, had hollowed-out limestone blocks for feed boxes. Christian tradition holds that Jesus was born in a cave in the neighbourhood of Bethlehem. In that case the manger may have been cut out of the rock walls. J.A.T. Douglas, J. (1982). *New Bible Dictionary*. Includes index. (Second edition.). Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers.

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The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament Abridged in one volume

phátnē [manger]

A. Greek Usage. *phátnē*, meaning "manger" or "feeding trough," occurs in the spheres of animal husbandry and veterinary science. The extended sense of "stall" is less common. In a transferred sense the word is used for the digestive organs, "trough" suggests a parasitic life, and we also find a use for the "hollow" of the mouth, the "cavity" in teeth, and the "star cluster." The word has no specific religious significance.

B. The OT and Rabbinic Judaism.

1. The LXX uses the word for “feeding trough” in Is. 1:3; Job 39:9; Prov. 14:4. “Stall” is a possible sense in Is. 1:3 and Prov. 14:4, but it is likely only in 2 Chr. 32:38; stalls are uncommon in Palestine apart from the royal stables.

2. The rabbis use the Hebrew equivalent mostly for “manger” or “feeding trough.” Special rules apply for feeding on the sabbath, e.g., for the size of the trough. Since humans and animals live close together, the sense “stall” is less common. In exposition of Is. 1:3 knowing the master’s crib is not taken messianically but is related to knowing the law.

C. Historical Witness. Archaeology has discovered feeding troughs in Ahab’s stables at Megiddo. We also find pictures of mangers. In the Hellenistic period larger estates have cave-stalls, but on small farms there are feeding places in the main room, troughs outside, or annexed stalls. Cattle and sheep may also be sheltered in folds or caves.

D. The NT.

1. In the NT *phátñē* occurs only four times in Luke. In Lk. 13:15 Jesus refers to the practice, dictated by necessity, of loosing cattle from their stalls and leading them to water on the sabbath. If this is permissible for animals, surely the relief of human suffering is even more permissible.

2. The other three instances occur in Lk. 2:1 ff. in connection with the birth of Jesus (v. 7), the promise of the angels (v. 12), and the adoration of the shepherds (v. 16). The theme is clearly an important one, and the meaning is obviously “manger,” whether in a stall, in the open, or in a cave. The shepherd setting in the city of David proclaims the birth of the Davidic Messiah. The manger contrasts the lowly birth of the world’s Redeemer with the glory of Augustus as the present ruler of the world (2:1, 11, 14). It also prefigures the humility and suffering of the Son of God and Man who has nowhere to lay his head (Lk. 9:58).

E. The Early Church. The manger tradition combines with a cave tradition in the early church (cf. Origen *Against Celsus* 1.51). After Helena’s pilgrimage a church is built at the traditional site of the crib and cave (ca. A. D. 330). The late Pseudo Matthew places the birth in a cave, puts Mary in a stall, has her lay the child in a crib, and then describes the entry into Bethlehem. The ox and ass come into the story on the basis of Is. 1:3 and Hab. 3:2 LXX; they occur in depictions from the middle of the fourth century. [M. HENGEL, IX, 49-55]

Kittel, G., Friedrich, G., & Bromiley, G. W. (1995, c1985). *Theological dictionary of the New Testament*. Translation of: Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament. (1251). Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans.

Vine’s Expository Dictionary of the New Testament

MANGER

PHATNĒ (φάτνη, (5336)), a manger, Luke 2:7, 12, 16, also denotes a stall, 13:15.¶
So in the Sept., the word denoted not only a manger but, by metonymy, the stall or “crib” (Prov. 14:4) containing the manger.