

David A. Croteau

Urban Legends of the New Testament

40 Common
Misconceptions

Matthew 18:20

20 For where two or three are gathered
together in My name, I am there among
them.

Philippians 4:13

13 I am able to do all things through
Him^[a] who strengthens me.

Matthew 7:1

Do Not Judge

7 Do not judge, so that you won't be judged.

Revelation 3:16
16 So, because you are
and neither hot nor cold
I am going to vomit you out of

ut when you give to the poor,
don't let your left hand know
what your right hand is doing.

“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 unmasks 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

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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.

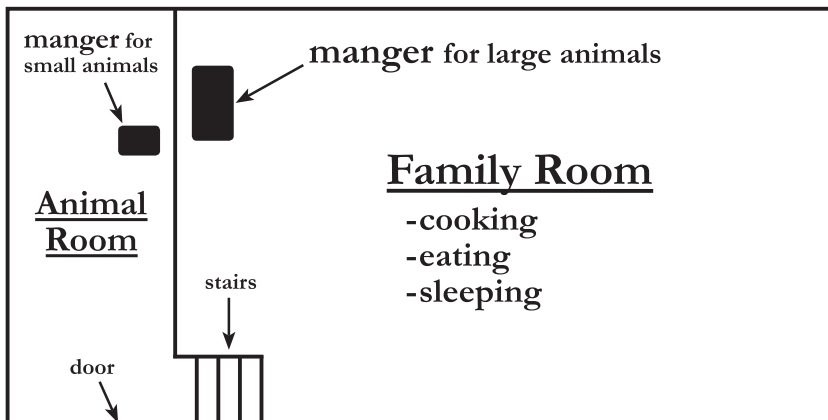
Urgency, the Manger, and the Inn

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?

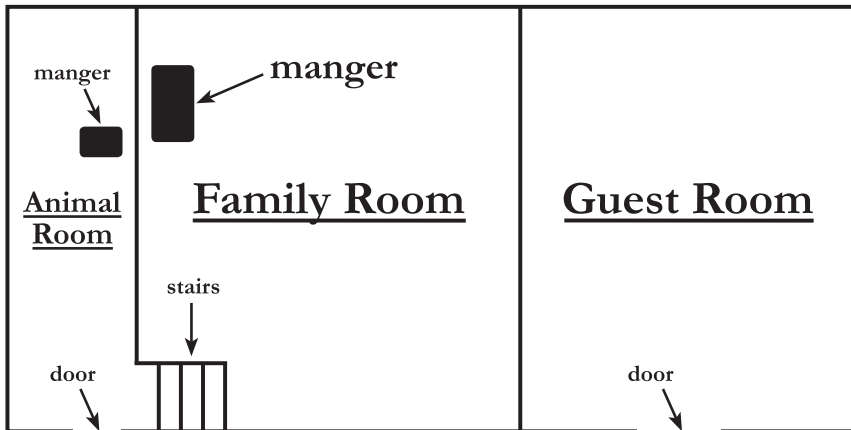
Notice how the HCSB translates Luke 2:7: "And laid Him in a feeding trough—because there was no room for them at the lodging place." Most translations use the word "inn" rather than "lodging place." The word "inn" or the phrase "lodging place" bring to mind the idea of a hotel, which did exist in first-century 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

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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.

Websites

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.