

History's most notorious rude host gets a bum rap

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—'Tis the season for Christmas pageants everywhere to dramatize one of Scripture's most familiar scenes and cast a cold-hearted innkeeper, who shoos away the holy family to a lowly stable.

But pageants and sermons castigating the infamous innkeeper give him an underserved bad rap, scholars say, and feed dangerous misconceptions about how Jesus' contemporaries received him.

"We're so brainwashed into this idea of the mean old innkeeper and no room at the inn, we don't even notice that this is a violation of the text that we've just read," said Kenneth Bailey, a Bible scholar and author of *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*.

The stained-glass nativity scene at New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington shows the baby Jesus in a manger. Scholars agree Jesus' birth in such humble surroundings offers evidence of divine humility, but some are calling into question traditional views about the inhospitable innkeeper. (PHOTO/RNS/David Jolkovski)

The innkeeper's reputation stems from a single, oblique reference in Luke 2:7. The verse says Mary wrapped the newborn Jesus in cloth "and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn." From this text, Christian communities through the centuries have inferred that their Savior was rebuffed at birth.

The reality possibly was much different. The "inn" (or "lodgings" in some translations) was not a hotel or hostel but perhaps a guest room in the private residence of one of Joseph's relatives, according to Mikeal Parsons, a Baylor University New Testament scholar who's writing a commentary on Luke.

Because that room already was occupied, Parsons suggests, hosts may have made room for Mary and Joseph within their own family quarters and cleaned up an animal feeding trough—a manger—to serve as a crib.

Such details are important, scholars say, in part because the birth narrative is rich with symbolism. The divine infant's portrayal in modest circumstances suggests, for instance, God humbled himself to join the commonest of humankind. Hence for later generations to conjure a fictitious innkeeper and make him into something of a villain may be to read a new, unwarranted and potentially misleading significance into the story.

"It's kind of a 'gotcha' moment to recognize there is no innkeeper or reason to castigate an innkeeper, but that's what we tend to do," said Thomas Stegman, associate professor of New Testament at Boston College School of Theology and Ministry. "It's an easy thing to cast judgment on this figure, (but) anything that gives us an out from examining ourselves first is not a good thing in the spiritual life. ... We need to consider instead, 'How hospitable have we been?'"

Surrounding the innkeeper's image is the question of who welcomed Jesus

and who rejected him. Bailey cautions that Christians need to be careful not to let presuppositions about an innkeeper perpetuate harmful stereotypes about Jews.

“It’s important for us as Christians to look at our text and say, ‘We have read an anti-Jewish undercurrent into a lot of stories where it’s not there, and here’s one of them,’” Bailey said.

Scholars continue to press for a new image of an anonymous host who never hesitated to show respect—and who now deserves a little reciprocity.

“Luke is highlighting the hospitality of the anonymous householder (friend or relative) and not condemning the inhospitality of an insensitive innkeeper,” Parsons said.