

# A New Light on the Life of Jesus

by **Sir Knight John W. White, 32°**

The story of Jesus is so deeply ingrained in the received knowledge of our culture and so central to Templary that questioning any part of it may seem like heresy to some. However, in one of his letters to the early Church, St. Peter admonished members to "make every effort to supplement your faith...with knowledge." (II Peter 1:5 RSV) That should be borne in mind with regard to scholarly concerns being raised about Jesus's birth and occupation which stem from what may be mistranslations in the Bible.

According to John Tiffany, writing in *The Barnes Review*, Nov/Dec 2006, some historians are saying that Jesus was not born in a stable as conventionally believed, and likewise that he was not a carpenter. Tiffany's article, "New Revelations on the Life of Jesus," draws upon various disciplines, primarily archeology and linguistics, to present a different view of these matters. It is available on line at <http://www.barnesreview.org/html/nov2006lead.html>

Our accepted notion that the birthplace of Jesus was a wooden structure comes from the art of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, Tiffany says, but the artists who created the images drew from their experience in Europe and apparently were ignorant of some basic details about the daily life in Palestine at the time of Jesus. Europe was a woodworking culture and animals were kept in barns. In Palestine, however, the primary construction material was stone. Caves were numerous there, and people used them as living quarters. Even today many houses in Bethlehem are built in front of caves, just as they were in Jesus's day. Typically, the caves were two-level spaces in which people used the upper level for living quarters and the lower level to shelter their animals, where the animals' rising body heat would help to warm the upper level when the weather was cold.

Many linguists, Tiffany says, now believe there may have been confusion about the words for "inn" and "second level" when the Bible was translated. Consequently, translation errors were made. A European-style inn would house guests in upper rooms away from the common area on the first floor; the guests' animals would be stabled in a barn separate from the inn. But dwelling caves in the Holy Land would have mangers placed along the lower-level cave walls for the animals. So the phrase "no room at the inn" may have meant no room in the upper level of a dwelling cave where Joseph and Mary sought shelter. Instead, they may have been offered use of the lower level where livestock lived and fed from mangers.

According to this line of thinking, then, Jesus was born in a cave, not a wooden European-style stable. Two extrabiblical texts, the Gnostic Gospel of James and the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew, say exactly that, Tiffany points out.

As for Jesus's profession, Tiffany says it is more likely he was a mason than a carpenter. The same goes for Joseph. Translation errors are again said to be the source of the confusion. The Greek term *tektone* or *tekton*, which is translated as "carpenter," actually

means "artisan" and refers to a skilled craftsman whose medium might be metal, stone, or wood. In the Middle East at the time of Jesus, wood was scarce but stone was plentiful. Since European building focused more on woodworking and carpentry, a cultural bias led to the choice of "carpenter" rather than "stonemason." But an accurate translation of the Greek word describing Joseph's profession, in which Jesus would have been raised and trained, is one which reflects a stoneworking society. Tiffany concludes by saying the possibility remains that Jesus was a woodworker or carpenter, but the words used to describe him have a broader meaning than one particular vocation. Despite tradition, he says, a translation as "stonemason" may have more evidence to back it up.

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