Was Jesus born in a stable?

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Bible Version
Scripture quotations are taken from the 1890 Darby Bible.
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Many Christians believe that Jesus was born in a stable, surrounded by animals.
This notion is reinforced through Christmas cards and carols and nativity scenes.
Scriptural support supposedly derives from the following:
First, according to most Bible translations, there was no room for Mary and Joseph "in the inn" (Lk 2:7).[1]
Second, the newborn Jesus was placed in a "manger" — an animal feeding trough (Lk 2:7).
According to the standard narrative, it was the inability of Mary and Joseph to find suitable lodging on the night of their arrival that resulted in the birth of the child in a stable.

It would be a shame to dispel this quaint narrative, but it is almost certainly incorrect on several counts.
Not least of which is the fact that Mary and Joseph arrived in Bethlehem some time, probably weeks, prior to Jesus' birth. This is evident from Luke 2:6:
And it came to pass, while they were there, the days of her giving birth [to her child] were fulfilled.

We need to work out the real reason why the full "inn" led to Mary placing her baby in the manger.
Luke 2:7 states the connection thus:
and she … laid him in the manger, <u>because</u> there was no room for them in the inn.

The answer is that the "inn" was not a commercial inn at all, but rather the <u>guest room</u> of a private home.
And because that was already occupied, and the house was overcrowded, Mary resorted to placing her newborn baby in the relative privacy of the house's lower level — where the animals dwelt at nighttime.

Judean peasant homes consisted of three levels:

1. There was one main room in which the whole family lived and ate and slept.
2. Within this main room was a lower section where animals were housed at night. The family's ox or donkey was brought into the house in the evening and taken out early the next morning (Lk 13:15).
   This lower section had a manger fixed to the floor or wall for the animals to feed at night.[2]
3. Finally, there was an upper room, usually accessed via an external staircase. Upper rooms were used as an extra bedroom, as a guest room for visitors, or for meetings.

[1] Most of the common Bible versions perpetuate the notion that there was no room or place "for them in the inn." The exceptions, which substitute "guest room" or something similar, include the CSB, CEB, CJB, ERV, ISV, LSB, NIV (2011), NTFE, and NRSVUE.
[2] Luke 13:5 (Darby): *The Lord therefore answered him and said, Hypocrites! does not each one of you on the sabbath loose his ox or his ass from the manger and leading [it] away, water [it]?* Those animals housed at night in a Jewish peasant home were released the next morning "from the manger" so they could feed and drink outside. (Most Bible versions substitute "from the stall" here.) Note that this is the only New Testament occurrence of "manger" (Greek: *phatnē*) outside of Luke 2.

The upper (guest) room

Upper rooms afforded some privacy and were quieter than the lower levels, making them suitable for hosting visitors or for meetings. And because they were normally accessed via an external staircase, people could enter and leave the upper room without disturbing the household.
The first Christians met together in the upper rooms of private homes (Acts 1:13; 9:37-39; 20:8-11).[3]

There are good reasons for identifying the "inn" of the Christmas story as an upper (guest) room of a private Bethlehem dwelling. Consider the following:
The Greek word translated "inn" in Luke 2:7 is *katalymati*, from *katalyma* (Strong's G2646) — "an inn, lodging place, guest room".[4]
Now this term certainly can denote a commercial (public) inn or lodging place. The Septuagint of Exodus 4:24 states that it was *en tō katalymati* (= at the inn) that the angel of the Lord met Moses.
But it is surely significant that in the Parable of the Good Samaritan, Luke employs a completely different Greek word for the commercial inn: The Samaritan brought the injured man to a *pandocheion* (Lk 10:34). And he gave some money to the *pandochei*, from *pandocheus* — "an innkeeper" (Lk 10:35).[5]
Of further significance, Luke's gospel employs some verbal forms of *katalyma*, with the sense of "to find lodging" (in 9:12) and "to be a guest" (in 19:7). The latter at least, where Jesus goes to be the guest of Zacchaeus, clearly denotes a private setting.[6]
Finally, and to clinch the case, both Mark and Luke note that Jesus celebrated his last Passover with his disciples in a *katalyma* (Mk 14:14; Lk 22:11) — usually translated as "guest room". This was a large, fully furnished upper room of a private dwelling (Mk 14:15; Lk 22:12).[7]

A crowded house

So again, why did the full "inn" lead Mary to place her baby in a manger?
The answer is that Jesus was born in a crowded house, where the (upper) guest room was already full.
Mary resorted to placing her newborn baby in the relative privacy of the house's lower level — where the animals were normally confined at nighttime.
She utilized the feeding trough for Jesus' bedding.

Were the household animals kept outside that first night after his birth?
Quite possibly!
That night was evidently warm enough for sheep, and their minders, to be outside in the hills and fields surrounding Bethlehem (Lk 2:8).
This suggests early autumn as the time of Jesus' birth.[8]

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[3] "Upper room" in Acts translates the Greek noun *hyperōon*. The upper room was a house's "third story" (Ac 20:9).
[4] From the Bible Hub's entry for Strong's G2646: https://biblehub.com/greek/2646.htm.
[5] These Greek terms are, respectively, Strong's G3829 and G3830, denoting an *inn* or *hotel*, and an *innkeeper*.
[6] These verbal forms derive from *katalyō* (Strong's G2647).
[7] Mark 14:14 and Luke 22:11 are the only other instances of the use of *katalyma* in the New Testament.
[8] Jesus was probably born in September 3 BC. Josephus situates Herod's death shortly after a lunar eclipse and prior to the Passover. The total lunar eclipse of 10th January 1 BC fits best. Herod probably died in late January when Jesus was 16 months old.
John began to baptize in AD 28 — "the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar" (Lk 3:1). Jesus began his ministry a few months later when aged about 30 (Lk 3:23). 28 (AD) minus 30 (years) = negative 2, but since there was no year zero, the date would be 3 BC.

The Manger

Typical Judean peasant homes had a small, rectangular, hollowed-out stone manger.
The manger would be either resting on the floor or attached to a wall in the home's lower section.
Such a manger on the floor would have provided a fixed and secure bed for the newborn baby.
Obviously, some padding — perhaps of hay or straw — would have been needed.
The strips of cloth (traditionally: "swaddling clothes") wrapped tightly around baby Jesus were intended to provide him with warmth and a sense of security.[9]

Notice how Luke goes out of his way to emphasize that Jesus was placed in a manger.
He mentions this odd fact three times (Lk 2:7, 12, 16).
This placement served as a "sign" to help the shepherds locate the baby (Lk 2:12).
But it also highlights the humble circumstances of his birth.

Conclusion

Jesus was born in a crowded Judean peasant home, one that probably belonged to relatives of Joseph.[10]
Was this house occupied by other relatives who had similarly traveled to Bethlehem for the census?
Whatever the case, the full guest room meant it was unavailable.
If this scenario is right, there would have been no shortage of women present to help deliver Mary of her baby.

In all of this, we see God graciously caring and providing for the Holy Family.
Additionally, the use of a manger in the nativity story highlights the humble circumstances of Jesus' birth.
He identifies with the lowly, and is accessible to all.

Further Reading:

1. *The Judean Home*. Author: Beth Ann Phifer.
   https://shalefragments.com/blog-search/the-judean-home.
2. *The Manger and the Inn*. Author: Kenneth E. Bailey.
   https://biblearchaeology.org/research/new-testament-era/2803-the-manger-and-the-inn.
3. *Animals and Babies, Homes and Barns: Why Modern Perceptions Conceal the Point of the Nativity*.
   Author: Jared W. Saltz.
   https://benneviim.com/2018/12/24/animals-and-babies-homes-and-barns-why-modern-perceptions-conceal-the-point-of-the-nativity/.
4. *Jesus was not born in a stable*. Author: Ian Paul.
   https://www.psephizo.com/biblical-studies/jesus-was-not-born-in-a-stable/.

[9] It is intriguing that Jesus both began and ended his earthly life near, or in, a *katalyma* (Lk 2:7; 22:11), with (chiseled) stone or rock for his "bedding" (Lk 2:7; 23:53), and wrapped in strips of cloth (Lk 2:7; 24:12; Jn 19:40; 20:5-6). The shadow of the cross looms large over the manger in Bethlehem — Jesus' death, of course, being the principal reason for his birth and incarnation.
[10] Bethlehem was Joseph's ancestral town (Lk 2:4), although Mary, too, probably came from David's line. If Luke 3:23ff. records Mary's ancestry, she herself was a descendant of David via his son Nathan.