

No Room in the Inn

By Ruth Magnusson Davis

And she brought forth her first begotten son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn—Luke 2:7, KJV.

Englishman William Tyndale (c 1494-1536), servant of the Lord, was a linguist with great knowledge of ancient Greek and Hebrew, Latin, and other languages.¹ He was an accomplished grammarian and a gifted student of the Holy Scriptures. He was also the man chosen by God in the turbulent and painful years of the Reformation to open the Greek New Testament to the world in his native English.

In 1526 Tyndale published his first edition of the New Testament, and a significant revision followed in 1534. It was in the 1534 revision that Tyndale was the first to use the word *'inn'* in Luke's Gospel where the physician tells us that Joseph and Mary, Mary then ready to give birth to Jesus, were unable to find accommodation when they arrived in Bethlehem for the Roman census:

And it fortun'd while they were there, her time was come that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her first begotten son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them within in the inn.²

Modern critics sometimes discredit the choice of *'inn'* here as an incorrect translation of the Greek. They say it was unlikely that Joseph and Mary would have been looking for accommodation in public lodgings, but would probably have sought a room in the private home of a relative, as was then the custom for weary travellers. Dr. Donald Brake recently wrote, commenting upon the KJV translation:

The term incorrectly translated from Greek into English as "inn" is a word used only twice in the New Testament. The other reference is Luke 22:11, where it refers to a "guest room" for Jesus and the disciples to eat the Passover...It seems more likely that Mary and Joseph intended to stay in the homes of their Bethlehem relatives, only to find other relatives had arrived for the census and occupied the "guest room". The only room available was the room reserved for the animals.³

But this criticism derives from our modern understanding of the word *'inn.'* My *Webster's Dictionary* defines *'inn'* as: "1 a: a public house for the lodging and entertaining of travelers b: tavern." This narrow definition of course precludes the possibility of there having been "no room" in a private house.

When Tyndale wrote, however, the noun *'inn'* was polysemous; that is, it had many *'senses'*, or meanings. This was the case with many words in the 16th century, when the English vocabulary was much smaller, and a few thousand words served where we now have tens of thousands; in other words, fewer words carried more meanings, but now we have more words with narrower meanings. An example is the noun *'mansion,'* which once not only meant a large or stately house, but could refer to almost anything that served as a dwelling, including a tent, and was also used to refer to stopping-places in a journey.⁴ Clearly *'mansion'* said to the ancients something quite different from what it now says to us at John 14:2: *"In my Father's house are many mansions."* We are familiar with this

verse because the KJV followed Tyndale here, but the KJV committee preferred 'house' at 2 Corinthians 5:1-2 where Tyndale again had 'mansion,' in a passage that illustrates its early polysemy:

We know surely if our earthy mansion wherein we now dwell were destroyed, that we have a building ordained of God, an habitation not made with hands, but eternal in heaven. And herefore sigh we, desiring to be clothed with our mansion which is from heaven...

While this state of affairs in early modern English, where one word could mean so many different things, no doubt led to misunderstandings, the ambiguity must also have been a welcome refuge for translators when the facts were not certain, as was the case with the circumstances of Jesus' birth. In 1380, Wycliffe put 'chaumbre' at Luke 2:7. In his 1526 New Testament translation, William Tyndale first put 'hostrey,' but he then made the 1534 revision to 'inn,' which was carried into Miles Coverdale's 1535 New Testament; Coverdale put, "for they had els no rowme in the ynne." Soon thereafter, in 1537, John Rogers utilized Tyndale's translation in the Matthew Bible: "because ther was no roume for them within the ynne," from whence it went almost verbatim into the KJV.

When Tyndale published, and also in 1611 when the King James committee brought out its revision, the word 'inn' could be used to refer to not only to public inns, but also to private houses or seasonal residences, and it was also used in interesting figurative senses. Below are only a few of the obsolete meanings and uses of 'inn' that I have taken from the LOED online.⁵ Note the variety of spellings: 'yn,' 'Inne,' 'In'—

1.a *A dwelling-place, habitation, abode, lodging; a house (in relation to its inhabitant).*

An example from 1546: "Resty welth wyth me this widow to wyn, To let the worlde wag, and take myne ease in myne yn." From 1657: "Queen Mary gave this House to Nicholas Heth, Archbishop of York, and his successors for ever, to be their Inne or Lodging for their repair to London."

2.a *'to take (up) one's inn (or inns)': to take up one's abode, residence, quarters; so, 'to have, keep (one's) inn.'*

From 1590: "With me ye may take up your In For this same night."

3. *Dwelling-place, abode, place of sojourn, in various figurative uses.*

From Coverdale's 1549 translation of Erasmus' paraphrases: "The bodie is the dwelling house of the soule and the soule is the Inne of God."

Given our lack of certain knowledge about that wondrous night so long ago, 'inn' was surely an apt choice for Tyndale, and we can understand why the KJV committee kept it.

The etymology of 'inn' and 'mansion' shows how much words have changed since our bible was first given to us. In particular, we see how word meanings have narrowed: where once a single word may have carried ten senses, we now, as it were, have ten words in its place. How much more precisely we moderns express ourselves! Moreover, it is evident that the polysemy that characterized Early Modern English also characterized ancient Greek,⁶ and correspondence between the senses of some of the old Greek and English words makes for a fascinating study.



Ruth Magnusson Davis, a retired lawyer, is founder and editor of the New Matthew Bible Project, formed for the purpose of restoring the Matthew Bible to the 21st century English-speaking world. The Matthew Bible, also known as “Matthew’s Version,” was first published in 1537. It was the joint work of William Tyndale, Miles Coverdale, and John Rogers, and is God’s word bought in blood: both Tyndale and Rogers paid for their labour with their lives at the stake. It is a little known fact that the Matthew Bible formed the basis of our King James Bible. More information about the Matthew Bible and about the New Matthew Bible Project is at www.newmatthewbible.org.

ENDNOTES:

¹ More information about William Tyndale, with sources and references, can be found in my article “Least Among Men: The Enduring Testimony and Enduring Persecution of William Tyndale,” linked through the Topics page on the website at newmatthewbible.org.

² From Daniell, David, *Tyndale’s New Testament*, Yale University Press (New Haven and London 1995), being a modern-spelling version of Tyndale’s 1534 New Testament. All scripture quotations are from this version unless otherwise indicated.

³ Donald L. Brake, Ph.D, ‘The King James Bible’s Christmas Season’, article in *Bible Editions and Versions*, October-December 2012 edition, Volume 13, No. 4., p.26.

⁴ My source for this information is the Longer Oxford Dictionary online, as at November 28, 2012. The online dictionary is accessible only to subscribers. Many public libraries make this service available to their members.

⁵ From the LOED online as at November 28, 2012.

⁶ This no doubt partly explains why so-called “literal” bibles, if they attempt to foist one English rendering only upon an ancient Greek word, make so little sense.