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## Enclosure and Exposure

Locating the ‘House without Walls’

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**ABSTRACT:** This chapter explores medieval exegetical and affective characterizations of the birthplace of Christ. It focuses in particular on evocations of this birthplace as an exposed, liminal location and argues that the radical exposure endured by Christ at the moment of his birth was crucial to medieval understandings of the significance of the Incarnation. But it also points out that its condition of openness is always in a dialectical relationship with its capacity to enclose and protect.

**KEYWORDS:** enclosure; exposure; vulnerability; Latin; Middle English; the Nativity; exegesis

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# Enclosure and Exposure

## Locating the ‘House without Walls’

ANNIE SUTHERLAND

Carried by the weight of long-standing tradition, we tend to visualize Christ as having been born in a stable. Turned away from an overcrowded inn, we imagine that Mary had no choice but to give birth in a rudimentary shelter, surrounded by animals. Like us, a multitude of influential patristic and medieval thinkers also associated the Nativity with this stable. John Cassian, for example, refers to the ‘stabulum [...] in quo Christus Dominus noster natus est’ (the stable in which Christ our Lord was born).<sup>1</sup> And Bernard of Clairvaux tells us that ‘in stabulo nascitur Christus’ (Christ was born in a stable), while Peter Abelard presents us with a Virgin who enters a *stabula* in place of a *camera* (room) in order to give birth.<sup>2</sup> The stable birthplace also, of course, features prominently in medieval visual iconography, where we often find it presented as a cave-like or ruined structure, open to the

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1 John Cassian, *De Coenobiorum Institutis Libri Duodecim, Patrologia Latina* [henceforth: *PL*], ed. by J.-P. Migne, 221 vols (Paris: Garnier, 1844–64), 49. 53–476 (192).

2 ‘Adhuc autem in stabulo nascitur Christus, et in praesepio reclinatur’ (Thus, however, Christ was born in the stable and laid in the manger; Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermones de tempore*, *PL* 183. 35–360 (‘In Nativitate Domini’, Sermo III, ‘De loco, tempore et aliis circumstantiis Nativitatis’, 123D)); ‘celi domina | Pro cameris intravit stabula’ (the queen of heaven, instead of a room she entered the stable; Peter Abelard, ‘Verbo Verbum Virgo Concipiens’, in *Hymni*, *PL* 178. 1765–1816 (1789)).

elements.<sup>3</sup> And it is this condition of openness which lies at the heart of this chapter. Investigating exegetical and devotional responses to the circumstances of the Nativity, it suggests that the radical exposure endured by Christ at the moment of his birth was crucial to medieval understandings of the significance of the Incarnation. Exposure, in dialectical relationship with enclosure, lies at the heart of all of the Nativity accounts under consideration in the pages to come.

It is easy to see where the stable-birthplace tradition originated and how it gained traction. Luke's account of the Nativity tells us that the newborn Christ was laid in a *praesepeum* (defined by the *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources* (DMLBS) as a 'stall for animals' or a 'receptacle for fodder').<sup>4</sup> And it is also from Luke that we learn that the Christ Child's first visitors were 'pastores [...] custodientes [...] super gregem suum' (shepherds [...] watching [...] over their flocks), advised by angelic hosts to visit the baby 'in praesepeio'.<sup>5</sup> A child laid in a manger and visited by shepherds might logically be imagined to have been born in a stable.

Yet the stable is not mentioned in the Bible. The Gospel of Luke, which offers the most detailed narrative of the circumstances of Christ's birth, tells us only that Joseph and a heavily pregnant Mary travelled from Nazareth to Bethlehem in order to participate in a census initiated by Caesar Augustus and that, soon after their arrival, Mary 'peperit filium suum primogenitum, et pannis eum involvit, et reclinavit eum in praesepeio: quia non erat eis locus in diversorio' (brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him up in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn; Luke 2. 7). In fact, far from telling us where Christ was born, Luke tells us only where Mary did *not* give birth ('non erat eis locus in diversorio').

The Douay–Rheims translation of the Bible, from which I quote in this chapter, renders the Vulgate's *diversorium*, from which Mary and

3 See e.g. 'The Nativity Group', in *The Grove Encyclopedia of Medieval Art and Architecture*, ed. by Colum P. Hourihane, 6 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), online version retrieved from <<https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195395365.001.0001/acref-9780195395365-e-1631>> [accessed 27 July 2021].

4 *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources* <<https://logeion.uchicago.edu/praesepe>> [accessed 21 January 2022].

5 Luke 2. 7, 8, 12. All quotations are from the Douay–Rheims version of the Bible.

Joseph were turned away, as ‘inn’. Most modern translations also tell us that there was no room for Mary and Joseph at the inn. Yet, while the *DMLBS* suggests that ‘inn’ is one of a number of legitimate translations of the Vulgate’s *diversorium*, biblical scholars dispute its appropriateness as a rendition of the original Greek κατάλυμα (*kataluma*) which is used at this point in Luke’s Gospel.<sup>6</sup> Although Strong’s dictionary glosses *kataluma* as ‘lodging place’, ‘guestchamber’, and ‘inn’, others have pointed out that the more accurate Greek term for ‘inn’ is πανδοχεῖον (*pandocheion*), which is actually used with this precise meaning in Luke 10. 34 (the Parable of the Good Samaritan).<sup>7</sup>

That Luke does not use πανδοχεῖον in reference to the dwelling from which Mary and Joseph were turned away could be read as indicating that he did not have a public lodging place, such as an inn, in mind. Instead, it has been suggested, he was thinking of a space in a private home; such a space is, in fact, suggested by Strong’s ‘guestchamber’, quoted above. Indeed, according to biblical scholar Stephen C. Carlson, the ‘familiar translation’ of κατάλυμα as ‘inn’ ‘rests on a series of questionable exegetical assumptions.’<sup>8</sup> Admitting that the term has a broad semantic range and is, perhaps, most safely translated as nothing more specific than ‘place to stay’, he suggests that, in context, the entire clause in Luke

should be rendered as ‘because they did not have space in their accommodations’ or ‘because they did not have room in their place to stay’. This clause means that Jesus had to be born and laid in a manger because the place where Joseph and Mary were staying did not have space for him. Luke’s point is not so much any inhospitality extended to Joseph and Mary but rather that their place to stay was too small to accommodate even a newborn.<sup>9</sup>

6 Definitions offered by *DMLBS* for *diversorium* (singular) are as follows: ‘1 inn, guest-house. b (private) apartment, compartment (esp. eccl. or mon.). c partition. d privy. e “day” (division of mullioned window)’ (<<https://logeion.uchicago.edu/diversorium>> [accessed 17 January 2021]).

7 James Strong, *The New Strong’s Concise Dictionary of the Words in the Greek Testament and the Hebrew Bible* (Washington: Faithlife, 2009).

8 Stephen C. Carlson, ‘The Accommodations of Joseph and Mary in Bethlehem: κατάλυμα in Luke 2.7’, *New Testament Studies*, 56 (2010), pp. 326–42 (p. 329).

9 *Ibid.*, pp. 334–36.

And he goes on to point out that the fact that the baby was laid in a manger (*praesepio*) need not suggest that their small resting-place was a stable:

This detail does not mean, as it would to Western Europeans, that Mary gave birth to Jesus in a stable or barn, because mangers were also found in the main rooms of first-century Judean village houses. Typically, the main room was divided into two sections at different elevations separated by about a meter. The animals were housed in the lower section, the people slept in the upper section, and mangers were located between them.<sup>10</sup>

According to such exegetical readings, then, the small space in which Mary gave birth need not have been a stable, and we need not imagine her and Joseph turned away from public lodgings. In a radical departure from traditional perceptions of the Nativity, it may be that we should visualize Christ's birth as having taken place at the heart of a (somewhat crowded) family home.

Such domestic circumstances are not generally entertained in medieval exegetical, homiletic, and meditative responses to the Nativity. While the smallness of Christ's birthplace is commonly remarked upon in both medieval and modern traditions (and this is something to which we will return), the public situation and exposed circumstances of his Nativity in the *diversorium* remain at the heart of medieval academic commentaries and affective meditations on the subject. That the persistent understanding of the Nativity's *diversorium* should be that it indicates a public (one might say 'open') space is interesting. The Greek *kataluma* (Vulgate *diversorium*) is not only used in Luke 2. 7, but also appears in Luke 22. 11, where it describes the upper room (or guest chamber) in which Christ and his disciples ate the Last Supper: 'Et dicetis patrifamilias domus: "Dicit tibi Magister, ubi est diversorium, ubi pascha cum discipulis meis manducem?"' (And you shall say to the goodman of the house: "The master saith to thee, where is the guest chamber, where I may eat the pasch with my disciples?').<sup>11</sup> Yet medieval exegetes do not seem to have reflected on this *diversorium* in relation to that of Luke 2. 7, nor to have queried the common understanding of the term as referring to public lodgings in the narrative of

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 341.

<sup>11</sup> *Diversorium* is also used in Mark's account of the Last Supper. Cf. Mark 14. 14.

the Nativity but to a private room in the Passion narrative. Indeed, the *DMLBS* suggests that contemporary interpretations of the word were sufficiently flexible to incorporate both; alongside the aforementioned translation of *diversorium* as ‘inn’ or ‘guest-house’, the *DMLBS* indicates that it could also be used to mean a ‘(private) apartment, compartment (esp. eccl. or mon.):<sup>12</sup> It seems, then, that while Luke 22’s *diversorium* was understood to denote a domestic space, Luke 2’s *diversorium* defined a more public location.

Another intriguing feature of medieval responses to the Nativity is that the crowded *diversorium* from which Luke tells us that Mary and Joseph were turned away appears to have been understood as the very space in which Christ was born. In fact, in many medieval accounts, it seems to have become elided with the stable to which (as we have seen) traditional readings of Luke’s narrative suggest that the expectant parents retreated.<sup>13</sup> How, then, precisely was this *diversorium* conceptualized? What were its characteristics and why did it possess such imaginative potency as the supposed birthplace of Christ?

A particularly clear evocation of this space is provided by Peter Comestor (d. 1178), and it is to his account of the Nativity that we now turn. In his monumental *Historia Scholastica*, a profoundly influential biblical paraphrase and commentary, Comestor comments thus on the circumstances of Christ’s birth:

Difficile fuerat pauperibus, prae frequentia multorum, qui ob id ipsum convenerant, vacuas invenire domos, et in communi transitu, qui erat inter duas domos, operimentum habens, quod diversorium dicitur, se receperunt, sub quo cives ad colloquendum, vel ad convisendum in diebus otii, vel pro aeris intemperie divertebant. Forte ibi Joseph praesepeium fecerat bovi et asino, quos secum adduxerat, in quo repositus est Jesus.<sup>14</sup>

12 The Early Version of the Wycliffite Bible (a late fourteenth-century translation of the entire Bible from Latin into English) translates Luke 2’s *diversorium* as ‘comyn stable’ and Luke 22’s as ‘herborgerie’ (lodging place). The Late Version chooses the more neutral ‘chaumbir’ (room, chamber) for both.

13 For further discussion of the relationship between the *diversorium* and the stable, see Annie Sutherland, ‘De Wohunge of Ure Lauerde and the House without Walls’, in *Medieval and Early Modern Religious Cultures: Essays Honouring Vincent Gillespie on his Sixty-Fifth Birthday*, ed. by Laura Ashe and Ralph Hanna (Cambridge: Brewer, 2019), pp. 3–19.

14 Peter Comestor, *Historia Scholastica*, PL 198. 1045–1721 (1539–40).

(It was difficult for those who were poor, because of the huge crowds which gathered on account of this [i.e. the census], to find empty houses. And in the public thoroughfare, [in a space] with a roof which was between two houses, called an inn, they took them [i.e. Mary and Joseph] in, beneath which [roof] citizens gathered to chat, or to pass the time on days of leisure, or [to which] they turned during intemperate weather. As luck would have it, Joseph had made there a manger for the ox and the ass which he had brought with him, into which Jesus was placed.)

Central to Comestor's description is that the *diversorium* to which Mary and Joseph are directed is found in a busy road ('in communi transitu'), that it is a covered space ('operimentum habens') situated between two houses ('qui erat inter duas domus'), and that it is a public meeting-place ('sub quo cives ad colloquendum [...]').

All of these features of the *diversorium* are reproduced in Jacobus de Voragine's mid-thirteenth-century *Legenda Aurea*, which, like the *Historia*, circulated exceptionally widely in the European Middle Ages. Referring explicitly to Comestor as his authority, Voragine describes Mary and Joseph's arrival at Bethlehem thus:

Cum igitur ambo Betlehem aduenissent, et quia pauperes errant et quia omnia hospitia alii qui propter hoc ipsum venerant occupauerunt, nullum hospitium habere potuerunt. Deuterunt ergo in communi transitu qui, ut dicitur in hystoriis scholasticis, erat inter duas domos operimentum habens. Qui deuersorium dicitur, sub quo ciues ad colloquendum uel ad conuiscendum in diebus otii uel pro aeris intemperie deuertebant.<sup>15</sup>

(So, when they both arrived in Bethlehem, because they were poor and because all the other guest houses were occupied by those who had come there because of this [i.e. the census], they were not able to find lodgings. So, they turned into a public street which was, as is said in the *Historia Scholastica*, between two houses with a roof covering. [This covered space] is called a *diversorium*, beneath which citizens gathered to chat or to pass the time of day on days of leisure or [to which] they turned during intemperate weather.)

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15 Iacopo da Varazze, *Legenda Aurea*, ed. by Giovanni P. Maggioni, 2nd edn, 2 vols (Florence: SISMEL, 1998), I, p. 65.

The etymology which Voragine supplies is derived from Isidore of Seville (d. 636), whose *Etymologies* emphasize the status of the *diversorium* as a civic location and gloss it thus:<sup>16</sup> ‘*Diversorium* dictum, eo quod ex diversis viis ibi conveniatur’ (It is called a *diversorium* because there people gather from diverse roads).<sup>17</sup> But Bede (d. 735), writing a century after Isidore, makes no reference to this etymology, instead locating the *diversorium*’s diversity in its liminal situation and open structure: ‘*Diversorium* est domus inter duos muros, duas ianuas habens. Figurat ecclesiam inter paradisum et mundum’ (The *diversorium* is a house between two walls, with two doors. It represents the Church between paradise and the world).<sup>18</sup> What is interesting about this reading is that, although Bede anticipates Comestor and many others by situating the *diversorium* in a ‘between’ space (‘inter duos muros’, ‘inter duas domos’), he also specifies that it therefore has ‘duas ianuas’ (i.e. two openings which constitute the ‘sides’ not provided by the two walls between which it stands). In other words, what Bede makes explicit is that it is a space which is entirely open on two sides (it is also worth noting that Bede’s description makes no reference to the roof covering which features in Comestor’s description). And he goes on to attribute an allegorical signification to these openings; they indicate that the *diversorium* prefigures the Church, situated between the realms of heaven and earth.<sup>19</sup> Such allegorical readings were not a priority for Comestor, whose primary focus at this point is the clarification of the historical circumstances of Christ’s birth.

Yet, despite their different emphases, what all of these definitions might be said to have in common is an awareness of the *diversorium* as a public structure, characterized — on a number of levels — by multiplicity and openness. On the most basic level, of course, it has

16 Peter Comestor seems to signal his awareness of this etymological tradition when he tells us that ‘cives [...] *divertebant*’ (my italics) to the *diversorium*.

17 Isidore of Seville, *Etymologies*, *Patrologia Latina* 82. 73–760 (liber 15, caput III, ‘De Habitaculis’, 542C).

18 *Bibliorum Sacrorum cum Glossa Ordinaria*, 6 vols (Venice: [n. pub.], 1603), v, p. 707, accessed via the Lollard Society at <<http://lollardsociety.org/>> [accessed 27 July 2021].

19 The *Patrologia Latina* attributes an identical reading to Pseudo-Jerome: ‘*Locus in diversio*, id est, domus inter duos muros, duas ianuas habet: figuram Ecclesie, inter paradisum, et mundum’ (*Commentarii in novum testamentum*, *Patrologia Latina* 30. 531–900 (569B)).



revealed itself to be a term open to diverse interpretation by diverse exegetes. But, in what follows, the focus will fall on the ways in which its diversity and openness were explored, nuanced, and understood in a variety of late medieval devotional texts. In other words, this chapter will consider the imaginative and affective potency of this open space.

For the Franciscan Bonaventure, writing an influential commentary on the Gospel of Luke in the thirteenth century, it is the openness and public situation of the *diversorium* which is most worthy of note. In discussing the birthplace of Christ, he alludes to Isidore's etymology, but pays more attention to Bede's reading of the space:

For according to Isidore it is called a *diversorium* because diverse peoples might congregate there. And it is an open space. But according to Bede, it is called such because it has diverse openings. For it is an empty space between two districts of a town and has access to and egress from both.<sup>20</sup>

However, unlike Bede (but like Comestor), Bonaventure points out that this open space nonetheless offers shelter and protection: 'It is also covered because of inclement weather, so that the citizens could convene to talk among themselves.' This dialectic of enclosure and exposure is important to the imaginative functioning of the *diversorium* and is recognized by Bonaventure and others in the description of the space of the Nativity as at once intimate and public. Its provision of shelter is matched by its capacity to expose, and its smallness by its open, inclusive nature: 'And this space was constricted or even filled with others, so that she had only the tiniest of places among the brute animals.' The *diversorium* is, for Bonaventure, a paradoxical space at once both 'empty' and 'filled', both 'open' and 'covered'. And it is a space whose diverse occupants allow for the fulfilment of the prophecies of the Old Testament:

Whence Christ would say what the Psalm has: 'I have become a beast among you, and I am always with you' (72:23). And this is verified in Jeremiah 14: 8–9: 'Why will you be as a wayfaring man, and as a stranger turning in to lodge? Why will you be as a

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20 Bonaventure, *Commentary of the Gospel of Luke*, trans. by R. Karris, 3 vols (New York: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2001–04), 1 (2001), p. 147. Available from ProQuest Ebook Central at <<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/oxford/detail.action?docID=3240049>> [accessed 25 March 2021].

wandering man, as a mighty man that cannot save? But you, O Lord, are among us, and your name is invoked upon us,' etc.<sup>21</sup>

As suggested by Bonaventure's musings on the Nativity, reflections on Christ's birthplace found their way into the meditative literature of the late Middle Ages. For example, in the popular fourteenth-century pseudo-Bonaventuran *Meditationes Vite Christi*, often attributed to Johannes de Caulibus, the *diversorium* clearly informs the description of Christ's birthplace as 'quandam uiam coopertam, ubi homines tempore pluuię diuertebant' (a certain covered street, into which men turned in time of rain). Here, we see again the foregrounding of a dialectical relationship between intimacy and exposure; within the communal space of the street, 'Ioseph, qui erat magister lignarius, forte aliquo modo se clausit' (Joseph, who was a master carpenter, in some way enclosed them). In this text, we are asked to gaze 'diligentissime' (with the greatest diligence) at the paradoxical space of the Nativity, at once private and public, sealed off yet open.<sup>22</sup>

Expanding on the pseudo-Bonaventuran *Meditationes*, the late fourteenth-century *Vite Christi* of Ludolph of Saxony describes the circumstances of Christ's birth thus:

[E]t sic in communi transitu, in diversorium se receperunt, quod intra civitatem, in fine, juxta unam portarum sub rupe concave erat, non habens desuper tectum, ut hodie cernitur, nisi rupem de monte dependentem. Secundum *Bedam*, diversorium est spatium inter duos vicos, ex utroque latere habens murum, et ex utraque parte portam, ut sit inde exitus in utrumque vicum, desuper coopertum propter aeris intemperiem, ut in festiuis diebus possint ibi homines convenire ad colloquendum et solatiandum. Et figurat Ecclesiam inter paradisum et mundum existentem, in quam divertamus ab erroribus mundi hujus. Ibi etiam homines ad illam civitatem propter aeris intemperiem, locare consueverant: unde et diversorium dicebatur, quia illuc homines diuertebant.<sup>23</sup>

21 Ibid., pp. 147–48.

22 Johannes de Caulibus, *Meditationes Vite Christi*, ed. by C. Mary Stallings-Taney (Turnhout: Brepols, 1997), p. 31.

23 Ludolph of Saxony, *Vita Jesu Christi: Ex Evangelio et Approbatiss ab Ecclesia Catholica Doctoribus Seditate Collecta*, ed. by Ludovic M. Rigollot, 4 vols (Paris: Palmé, 1878), 1, pp. 68–69, pars 1, caput 9, 'De Nativitate Salvatoris Nostri'.

(They were finally received into a public accommodation in a communal passageway; this was inside the city, near one of the gates, under a concave cliff. There was no roof above it other than the overhanging rock, as can still be seen today. According to Bede, a *diversorium* is a passageway between two streets that has walls on two sides and doorways on each end opening onto the two streets, with a covering to provide protection in inclement weather; people gather here on festive occasions for conversation and comfort. This serves as an image of the Church, situated between paradise and this world, into which we turn from the deceptions of this world. People who had come to that city on business also sheltered their animals there from the elements, so it was also called a *diversorium* because people drove their animals in there.)

In this account, Christ's birthplace assumes characteristics of the cave, long associated with the Nativity in patristic writing and apocryphal tradition, yet it remains identified as the *diversorium*. Ludolph's emphasis falls on the space's protective capacities, both literal (it provides comfort in inclement weather) and figurative (as an image of the Church, it shields us from worldly deceit). But, as we have seen elsewhere, this emphasis is matched by an awareness of the space's liminality (it is close to the city edge and is situated 'inter' (between) other spaces) and of its openness to strangers. In fact, in Ludolph's text, its openness extends beyond its provision of a space for people to gather 'in festivis diebus' (on festive occasions). For he recognizes its capacity to encompass us all in its expansive reach; as a prefiguring of the Church, it is a space 'in quam *divertamus* ab erroribus mundi hujus' (into which *we turn* from the deceptions of this world; *my italics*).

In the early fifteenth century, Nicholas Love, an English Carthusian monk and prior of Mount Grace, produced a vernacular translation of the Pseudo-Bonaventuran *Meditationes*, not including any of Ludolph of Saxony's expansions. Entitled *De Mirour of þe blessedde life of Jesu Criste*, Love's text remains close to its Latin original in recounting the circumstances of Christ's birth:

And what tyme þei comen to Bethleem.' for þe gret multitude þat was þerinne þ[e] same tyme for þe self cause.' þei mi3t gete none herbere in none hous, bot in a comune place by twix tweyn houses, þat was hiled aboue, men fort stand þere for þe reyne, & was cleped a Diuersorie.' þei were nedet to rest inne, &

abide al þat tyme. In þe which place Joseph þat was a carpentry  
made hem a closere & a crach for hire bestes.<sup>24</sup>

(And at the time that they came to Bethlehem, because of the great multitude that was there at the same time, for the same reason, they were not able to get any lodging in any house, other than in a public place between two houses, covered above, in order for men to stand there when it was raining, called a *diversorie*. It was necessary for them to rest in there, and to remain all of that time. In which place, Joseph, who was a carpenter, made them an enclosure and a manger for their animals.)

Here, we see the characteristic emphasis on Christ's birthplace as both exposed ('comune') and enclosed ('hiled aboue') more clearly foregrounded. For where the Pseudo-Bonaventuran text had Joseph rather vaguely shielding his wife and child 'aliquilater' (in some way), Love tells us that he built them a 'closere' (enclosure) within this public space. However, where the Latin *Meditationes* referred to the *diversorium* as a space 'inter duos vicos' (between two streets), Love places it 'by twix tweyn houses'. In so doing, he not only recalls Peter Comestor's terminology ('inter duos domos'), but also alerts us to a specifically English interest in Christ's birthplace as situated near — if not within — a house of some sort. With this in mind, the next part of this chapter will trace the origins and development of this insular reading of the *diversorium*. In order to do this, we have to go back to Peter Comestor and his influence on the devotional literature of thirteenth-century England.

We have seen that Comestor's explication of the circumstances of the Nativity exerted a considerable influence on meditative responses to the birth of Christ during the Middle Ages. While not alluding specifically to its multiple openings (Bede), or to the diversity of its occupants (Isidore), Comestor's account presents us with a space which is public and, despite its protective roof, to some degree exposed by virtue of the fact that it is not bounded by its own four walls. Although it does not explicitly identify Christ's birthplace as a *diversorium*, the thirteenth-century *Speculum Religiosorum*

24 Nicholas Love, *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ: A Reading Text*, ed. by Michael G. Sargent (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2004), capitulum 6m, 'Of þe Natiuite of oure lorde Jesu criste', p. 38, lines 6–13.

of Edmund of Abingdon (1174–1240) appears to have been inspired by Comestor in locating the Nativity to a ‘*casa sine pariete*’ (house without walls). Apparently intended initially for a religious audience, this early thirteenth-century text is a simple guide to the patterns of monastic prayer. Widely circulated in medieval England, its content includes fourteen short meditations on the life of Christ, appended to the seven canonical hours in the latter part of the treatise. Each hour has two meditations attached to it, one on the Passion and one on some other aspect of Christ’s earthly life. The first of these meditations, to be undertaken before matins, involves consideration of the circumstances of Christ’s birth, followed by consideration of the circumstances of his betrayal. The outline of the Nativity is much more comprehensive than that of the Passion, and begins thus:

Ante matutinas sive nocte media cogitare debes de tempore, loco et hora in quibus Christus natus est. Tempus erat hiemale, quando maxima frigiditas solet dominari; hora noctis media, periculosior, durior seu gravior aliis horis, ideo dicitur intempestatum; *locus erat in via, in casa sine pariete*. Pannis involutus, instita ligatus, in praesepe positus ante bovem et asinum erat Iesus, quia non erat ei locus in diversorio.<sup>25</sup>

(Before matins or in the middle of the night you must think about the season, place, and time in which Christ was born. The season was winter, when the greatest chill tends to dominate; the hour was midnight, more dangerous, harder, or more oppressive than other hours because it is said to be stormy; *the place was in the street, in a house without a wall*. Jesus was wrapped in cloths, wound in swaddling-bands, and placed in a manger before an ox and an ass, because there was no room for them in the inn.)

The ill-defined space which has featured in so many of the texts referenced in this chapter is here identified as a *casa* (house), albeit ‘*sine pariete*’ (without walls). The *casa*’s public location (‘*in via*’) obviously recalls Comestor’s ‘*in communi transitu*’, and its wall-less-ness appears to be extrapolated from Comestor’s description of the *diversorium* as situated between two houses, apparently possessing no walls of its own.

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25 Edmund of Abingdon, *Speculum Religiosorum and Speculum Ecclesie*, ed. by Helen P. Forshaw (London: Oxford University Press for the British Academy, 1973), capitulum 18, ‘*De nativitate Christi et eius capcione in media nocte*’, pp. 82–84 (my italics).

This house without walls also appears in the Anglo-Norman *Mirour de Seinte Eglyse* ('le liu estoit enmi la voie, en une mesun sanz pareie'; the place was in the middle of the street, in a house without walls), a widely read translation of the Latin *Speculum Religiosorum*.<sup>26</sup> And, in expanded form, we also find it in the *Speculum Ecclesie*, which is generally accepted to be a back-translation into Latin from the Anglo-Norman *Mirour*. This translator, however, seems to have a more detailed familiarity with Comestor's account of the Nativity, and also includes an etymology of *diversorium*: '[L]ocus erat in media via, in una domo sine pariete, qui dicitur diversorium a divertendo: nam illic homines divertebantur pro pluvia et aliis tempestatibus' (The place was in the middle of the street, in a house without walls, which is called a *diversorium*, from the word meaning 'to turn off from the road': for men were diverted there because of rain or other bad weather).<sup>27</sup> In terms of their response to Peter Comestor, what all three of these versions of Edmund's *Speculum* have in common is their clear identification of the *diversorium* as a wall-less construction. In other words, they make Comestor's apparently two-walled structure much more radically and explicitly exposed. And all three also remove the *operimentum* (covering) which, in the *Historia Scholastica*, supplies a protective roof. While the *Speculum Ecclesie*'s account indicates the building's protective capacity, neither the *Speculum Religiosorum* nor the *Mirour* make reference to any provision of shelter. In the English tradition, then, Christ's birthplace becomes quintessentially open in the sense that it offers little or no protection to those in its space and remains unboundaried on all sides.

Of course, the very idea of a house without walls is logically and conceptually confounding. For how does one begin to imagine a space which lacks boundaries and delineation, a space which should be finite (after all, a house has four walls) but which resists closure? Yet such a space is precisely that which we see in Edmund's *Speculum*, and it is precisely that with which readers of the lyrical meditation *De Wohunge of ure Lauerd* (hereafter *Wohunge*) are faced. A thirteenth-century text apparently written, initially at least, for an audience of female anchor-

26 *Mirour de Seinte Eglyse*, ed. by Alan D. Wilshire (London: Anglo-Norman Text Society, 1982), ch. 21 (xviii), 'De la [na]tivity Jhesu Crist e de la capciun a matines', p. 58.

27 Edmund of Abingdon, *Speculum Ecclesie*, capitulum 20, pp. 83–85.

ites, the *Wohunge* is a first-person reflection on Christ as lover and on aspects of his earthly life, most particularly his Nativity and his Passion. Roughly contemporary with Edmund's original *Speculum*, it also locates Christ's birth to a house without walls. It is impossible to say whether the *Wohunge* borrows from Edmund at this point or whether the anonymous author was directly familiar with the *Historia Scholastica's* account of the Nativity. But, whatever its direct inspiration, its narration of Christ's birth follows in the same tradition as that of Peter Comestor and Edmund of Abingdon.

Occurring at roughly the mid-point of the text, following an extended meditation on Christ's attributes as ideal husband, the *Wohunge's* account of Christ's birth takes the form of a direct address to him:

Poure þu born was of þe meiden þi moder . for þenne iþi burð  
tid in al þe burh of belleem ne fant tu hus lewe þer þine nesche  
childes limes inne mihte reste . Bot in a wafeles hus imiddes  
þe strete . poure þu wunden was irattes & i clutes & caldeliche  
dennet in a beastes cribbe.<sup>28</sup>

(Poor you were born of the maiden your mother. For then, at the time of your birth, in all the city of Bethlehem you could not find any sheltering house in which you might rest your soft, childish limbs. But in a wall-less house in the middle of the street, poor, you were wrapped in rags and cloths and coldly laid in an animal's manger.)

Like the *Speculum Religiosorum* and the *Mirour*, the *Wohunge* makes no reference to this building's protective capacity, and neither does it mention Comestor's *operimentum*; like Edmund of Abingdon's wall-less structure, the *Wohunge's* *hus* is a quintessentially exposed location, defined by the absence of what makes it what it is.<sup>29</sup>

I have written elsewhere on the *Wohunge's* 'wafeles hus' and its very particular resonances for an anchoritic audience whose walled

28 *De Wohunge of Ure Lauerd*, ed. by W. Meredith Thompson, EETS, orig. ser., 241 (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 28, line 321–p. 29, line 329 (my italics).

29 *A Talkyng of þe Loue of God*, a prose meditation extant in two fourteenth-century manuscripts, includes an adaptation of the *Wohunge* in which the 'wouhless hous.amidde þe strete' is included. Unlike the *Wohunge* author, the *Talkyng* compiler comments that the house was 'a symple refuit.in so cold a tyme' (a humble refuge in such a cold time). *A Talkyng of þe Loue of God*, ed. by M. Salvina Westra (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1950), p. 42, lines 5–6.

and enclosed existence appears diametrically opposed to the un-walled and exposed circumstances of the Nativity.<sup>30</sup> I do not wish to repeat here what I have said elsewhere, but it is worth briefly revisiting my central contention, which is that the anchorite is intended to map the enclosed circumstances of her own life onto the exposed circumstances of Christ's earthly existence. Despite being shut off physically from her external surroundings, she is to cultivate a radical spiritual openness to the world around her, embracing and encompassing it in prayer and intercession. In other words, in her cell-bound existence she is to strive towards emulation of the incarnate Christ's radical vulnerability, seen most clearly at the moment of his birth in a 'waeles hus'. This mapping of the circumstances of the enclosed life onto those of the exposed Nativity is, in fact, articulated very clearly late in the *Wohunge*, when the anchoritic speaker thanks Christ for having 'broht [...] me fra þe world to bur of þi burðe . steked me i chaumbre' (brought me from the world to the bower of your birth, confined me in a chamber).<sup>31</sup> Here, the anchoritic cell and the 'waeles hus' are elided, the former overtly identified as the 'bur' of Christ's 'burðe', the 'bower' of his 'birth'. Existence within both requires absolute vulnerability, an openness to all elements. The dialectical relationship between the conditions of exposure and enclosure that we have seen in so many of this chapter's Nativity scenes adopts new resonances in the context of anchoritic literature, revealing the two to be mutually reliant, if not — ideally — identical.

Although the *Wohunge* does not explicitly identify the 'waeles hus'/'bur of þi burðe' with the *diversorium* at any point, its author is clearly indebted to exegetical readings of that space. In this context, it is worth reminding ourselves that *DMLBS* records '(private) apartment, compartment (esp. eccl. or mon.)' as one of the definitions of *diversorium*, alongside 'inn, guest-house'. This association of the *diversorium* with a private religious space seems to have been influenced by the Vulgate's rendition of Jeremiah 9. 2: 'Quis dabit me in solitudine *diversorium* viatorum, et derelinquam populum meum et recedam ab eis?' (Who will give me in the wilderness a lodging place of wayfaring

30 See Sutherland, 'De Wohunge of Ure Lauerde'.

31 *Wohunge*, p. 35, lines 572–75.



men, and I will leave my people, and depart from them?). Here, we find the *diversorium* categorically associated with solitude, an association highlighted in the Glossa *Ordinaria*'s marginal comment on this verse: 'Quasi dicat. Melius est habitare in solitudine, quam inter tanta scelera hominum commorari' (As if it said, it is better to live in solitude than to be detained among such sins of men).<sup>32</sup> Yet, that its position in 'solitudine' is countered by its sheltering of 'viatorum' (wayfaring men) encapsulates perfectly the curious liminality of this space, poised as it is between society and seclusion, between the conditions of openness and closedness. Such was the space into which Christ was born, and such was the space within which the anchorite was required to live.

In terms of the English tradition, the intriguing circumstances of Christ's birth do not, however, feature only in texts intended for those living lives of religious enclosure. On the contrary, we see them reflected on in devotional and homiletic literature intended for wide and diverse audiences. Sermons on the Nativity are, of course, an excellent repository of information in this context. The *Festial*, a popular late fourteenth-century collection of sermons composed by John Mirk, Augustinian canon and prior of Lilleshall, is particularly useful.<sup>33</sup> Like so much of the *Festial*, Mirk's Nativity sermon has been singled out as reliant on the *Legenda Aurea*; more specifically, its most recent editor, Susan Powell, comments that although his account of the arrival in Bethlehem is biblically inspired, it is more directly indebted to the *Legenda*.<sup>34</sup> Yet, while Mirk's narrative certainly borrows elements of the earlier account, it is by no means a straightforward imitation:

But when þey comen into þe cyte, hyt was so ful of pepul þat þey myght[e] geton no herbor but turnet into a cave þat was bytwisse too houses, þeras men setton hore kapulus when þey comen to þe market, and þey fondun þer a crach wyth hey and setton þe oxe and þe asse þerto.<sup>35</sup>

(But when they came to the city, it was so full of people that they were not able to get any lodging, but they turned into a

32 *Bibliorum Sacrorum cum Glossa Ordinaria*, iv, p. 653.

33 John Mirk, *Festial*, ed. by Susan Powell, EETS, orig. ser., 334–35, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009–11), I (2009), p. xix.

34 *Ibid.*, II (2011), p. 284.

35 *Ibid.*, I, p. 24, lines 49–54.

cave that was between two houses, where men put their horses when they came to the market, and there they made a manger with hay and placed the ox and the ass beside it.)

The space between two houses that we saw in the *Historia Scholastica* and the *Legenda Aurea*, and the house without walls that we have encountered in the English tradition, becomes, in Mirk's hands (rather as it did in Ludolph of Saxony's) a 'cave [...] bytwisse too houses'. The situation of the cave 'bytwisse' two houses is then taken as the starting point for an extended reflection on the significance of Christ's earthly life, in which the 'between-ness' of the Incarnation is singled out as of central importance: '[He] ys prince of pees [who] was comyn to make pees *bytwynne* God and mon, *bytwynne* angel and mon, and *bytwynne* mon and mon' (The prince of peace who came to make peace between God and man, between angel and man, and between man and man).<sup>36</sup> The incarnate Christ, Mirk says, serves as a bridge between heaven and earth, and between one man and another. It makes sense, then, that he would be born in a liminal space which is also defined by its position 'bytwisse' and 'bytwynne' (betwixt and between). In fact, Mirk's cave recalls Bede's influential reading of the *diversorium* as a space 'inter' (between) two walls, signifying 'ecclesiam inter paradisum et mundum' (the Church between paradise and the world). It is a space which facilitates movement and exchange, offering protection against the elements yet crucially retaining a degree of openness.<sup>37</sup>

This open, liminal space also features — in a variety of forms — in other Middle English homiletic and devotional texts which retell the Gospel narrative. *La Estorie de Evangelie*, for example, is a metrical

36 Ibid., 1, p. 23, lines 13–14 (my italics).

37 In William Caxton's late fifteenth-century *Gilte Legende*, Mary and Joseph's arrival at the *diversorium* is described in terms which reproduce almost exactly those of its source, the *Legenda Aurea*: 'And whanne thei come bothe into Bethlem thei myght gete hem no hous for thei were pore and multitude of other hadde all take up. Thanne thei turned hem to [a] comon place that was bitwene .ij. howses and was hilled aboue and called the diuersorie, wher men of the cite assembled togederis to speke and to dyne in idell dayes, or ellis for distemperaunce of the tyme, or ellis as som sayn that the churles of the contrey, whanne they come to the market, thei wolde teye thaire bestis, and for that cause was there a crache redie made' (*Gilte Legende*, ed. by R. Hamer, EETS, old ser., 327–28, 339, 3 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006–12), 1 (2006), p. 33, line 48–p. 34, line 58).

life of Christ, reliant on a range of sources, first written in the late thirteenth century. Extant in incomplete form in seven geographically diverse manuscripts (including the compendious and significant Vernon) ranging from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries, it circulated widely throughout the late Middle Ages. Its account of the arrival in Bethlehem reads thus:

In Bethlehem hous [Joseph] tok  
 Luytel and pore, as seiþ þe bok  
 In an old cote and al tofalle  
 Nedden heo no betere halle.

(In Bethlehem, [Joseph] took a house which was little and poor, as the book says, in an old, entirely ruined, hovel. They had no need of a better hall.)

The anonymous homilist goes on to tell us that, after Christ was born:

Heo leyden him in bestes stalles  
 Lloke bitwene two olde walles.  
 [...]  
 And Abacuc also haueþ iseyd,  
 Bytwene two bestes he scholde be leyd.<sup>38</sup>

(She laid him in the stalls of the animals — look between two old walls! [...] And Habakkuk has also said that he should be laid between two beasts.)

Here, while the *diversorium* does not feature quite as it has in the texts explored thus far, it is recognizable in the ‘olde cote’ which, being ‘al tofalle’, does not provide comprehensive shelter for its inhabitants. There is something of the English ‘waeles hus’ tradition in the evocation of a domestic space which does not function as it should. And the liminality that we have discerned as so characteristic of the Bethlehem birthplace is recognizable in the instruction to ‘lloke’ for Christ ‘bitwene two olde walles’ and in the recollection of Habakkuk 3. 2 (‘[b]etween two animals thou art made manifest’), interpreted prophetically as an address to Christ. Once again, in the *Estorie*, we find the

38 *La Estorie del Evangelie: A Parallel Text Edition*, ed. by Celia M. Millward (Heidelberg: Winter, 1998), p. 123, lines 533–36; p. 123, line 547–p. 124, line 554.

Incarnation associated with an open space, poised between enclosure and exposure, situated in the middle of other spaces.<sup>39</sup>

The fourteenth-century *Stanzaic Life of Christ*, another metrical account of Christ's earthly existence, based on the Gospels, follows in the same tradition, narrating Mary and Joseph's arrival in Bethlehem thus:

Quen þat Ioseph & Marie  
to Bethleem thus comen wer  
ffor thai wer pore & al nedie  
herber my3t thai non com ner

forto leng in honestly,  
ffor taken was ich hous & maner  
to lords & men that were my3ty  
That non my3t they get þer ne her.

But a hous woghles þer was,  
that sett was negh þe he3e-way,  
bitwene two houses hylng it has,  
side al opone, soth to say,

In quich hous men of that cite  
haden hor speche in wederes wete,  
vplondisch men þer, als rede we,  
ther setten hor horses in þat strete.<sup>40</sup>

(When Joseph and Mary had thus come to Bethlehem, because they were poor and very needy, they could not come near to any lodging in which they might honestly stay. For each house and manor was taken up by lords and mighty men so that they couldn't get [any accommodation] either here or there. But there was a wall-less house which was situated near the highway, between two houses. It had a roof but, to tell the truth, its sides were entirely open. In that house, men of the city gathered to converse when the weather was wet and, as we read, provincial men put their horses there, in that street.)

39 The *Cursor Mundi* (a compendious Middle English metrical history of the world) includes an account of the Nativity which does not make reference to the *diversorium* or the 'wahaes hus'. It does, however, situate the Christ child in a liminal space: after Mary has given birth, 'bituix tua cribbes sco him laid' (she laid him between two manglers; *Cursor Mundi: A Northumbrian Poem of the Fourteenth Century in 4 Versions*, ed. by R. Morris, EETS, orig. ser., 57, 59, 62, 66, 68, 99, 101, 7 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961–66), II (1966), p. 644, line 11,237).

40 *A Stanzaic Life of Christ*, ed. by Frances A. Foster, EETS, orig. ser., 166 (London: Oxford University Press, 1926), p. 13, lines 393–408.

Here, again, we see the *diversorium* replaced by the ‘hous woghles’ that we have noted as a particular feature of English Nativity narratives. And while, like Comestor and others, the *Stanzaic Life* emphasizes that this birthplace has a ‘hylyng’ (covering), it also depicts it as a space with ‘side al opene’, the emphatic ‘al’ indicating a condition of radical openness, recalling the spaces evoked in the anonymous *Wohunge* and the *Speculum* translations. Its capacity to provide shelter is compromised by its total lack of protective walls.

This wall-less space also features in the fourteenth-century Northern Homily Cycle, perhaps the earliest collection of metrical homilies in Middle English. In this series, Christ’s birth is located to a ‘pendize [that] was wawles, | Als oft in borwis tounes es’ (shed that was wall-less, such as is often in villages [and] towns).<sup>41</sup> The ‘hous’ here is replaced by the more makeshift structure of the ‘pendize’, its fragility compounded by its absent walls. And we see a similar edifice evoked in the mystery plays’ retelling of the Nativity. In the York Cycle, for example, Joseph complains of Christ’s birthplace: ‘The walls are down on ilka side, | The roof is raved above our head’ (The walls are down on each side, the roof is torn open above our head). They will, he says, be ‘stormed in this stead’ (exposed to storms in this place), which is no longer even protected by the *operimentum* (covering) present in so many of the continental evocations of the *diversorium*.<sup>42</sup> And in the Coventry Play of the Nativity, Joseph refers to Christ’s birthplace as ‘an hous that is desolat with-owty any wall’ (a desolate house without any walls), the addition of ‘desolat’ reinforcing the abject circumstances of the Nativity.<sup>43</sup>

In the English tradition, then, we see the *diversorium* become a vividly imagined space which, while seeming to promise shelter (what, after all, is a house but a refuge?) fails in its provision, leaving its

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41 *English Metrical Homilies from Manuscripts of the Fourteenth Century*, ed. by John Small (Edinburgh: Paterson, 1862), p. 63. For discussion of the current state of scholarship on this homily cycle, see Roger Ellis, ‘The Northern Homily Cycle: A Work in Progress’, *Medium Aevum*, 88 (2019), pp. 23–51.

42 *York Mystery Plays: A Selection in Modern Spelling*, ed. and trans. by Richard Beadle and Pamela King (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), ‘The Nativity’, p. 60, lines 16–18.

43 *English Mystery Plays: A Selection*, ed. by Peter Happé (London: Penguin, 1975), ‘The Nativity’ (*Ludus Coventriae*, 15), p. 235, line 101.

inhabitants ‘al opene’ to the elements. Language of desolation and dilapidation (the ‘old cote [...] al tofalle’, the ‘raved’ roof) suggests that these texts are engaging fully with the human degradation willingly embraced by the incarnate Christ at the moment of his birth. But the Northern Homilist’s linking of the ‘wawles pendize’ to structures which one encounters — in the present — in ‘borwis tounes’ (villages and towns) suggests that authors and audiences did not view the circumstances of the Nativity as unique to first-century Bethlehem, but were able to make connections between the biblical past and their own existence in fourteenth-century England. The openness of Christ’s birthplace, described in terms so clearly redolent of everyday poverty, may have presented its medieval viewers with a means of understanding their own experience of earthly hardship, a way of situating their own privations within a redemptive context. But equally, Christ’s ‘wawles hus’ may have challenged them to live as openly as he did. This is certainly how it appears to have functioned for anchoritic and religious readers, confronting them with a paradoxical requirement to live lives of spiritual vulnerability and generosity while physically isolated, if not enclosed; after all, the anchoritic ‘chambre’ is the ‘bur’ of Christ’s birth, it is the ‘wawles hus’. But it would be fair to say that if it poses that challenge to enclosed readers, it equally poses it to us all; as Ludolph of Saxony says, the *diversorium* is a space into which *we all* turn (‘divertamus’) to shelter ‘from the deceptions of the world’. To invoke, once again, the mutually reliant categories of exposure and enclosure, it is an open space which — ideally — offers the promise of protection.

Viewed slightly differently, it is also tempting to speculate that the wall-less structure described in the English tradition (and, indeed, the space between two houses/walls evoked by Comestor and others) would have reminded medieval audiences of the architecture of the contemporary marketplace. Evidence supplied by surviving buildings in medieval market towns indicates that commerce was often conducted in open, colonnaded spaces found at ground-floor level beneath first-floor civic quarters.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, the insistence that we have seen

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44 For discussion of the archaeology and architecture of the medieval marketplace, see James Davis, *Medieval Market Morality: Life, Law and Ethics in the English Marketplace, 1200–1500* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

in many of these texts on the centrality of the birthplace ('negh þe he3e-way', 'imiddes þe strete', 'in via', 'in communi transitu') further encourages the association of the *diversorium/hus* with the marketplace, situated at the heart of civic life. To return to Jeremiah 9. 2's evocation of the *diversorium*, although it can function as a place of solitude, it also offers shelter to *viatores*, to those who pass by on the road. The association of Christ's birthplace with a bustling market may, in fact, have been fruitful for medieval audiences in facilitating meditative engagement with the significance of the Nativity. Firstly, it serves as a reminder that humanity is purchased through the incarnate Christ's redemptive sacrifice; the Crucifixion in particular was — and is — often explained by recourse to the language of commerce. Second, the birthplace-as-marketplace analogy provides us with a vivid manifestation of the *diversorium/hus* as a liminal ('inter'/'bytwene') space of interaction and exchange. In situating itself in the 'bytwene', and in facilitating contact between God and man, Christ's birthplace recalls the marketplace as a place enabling communication between seller and buyer, a liminal space in which one thing is exchanged for another.

We can also relate the liminality and openness of the Bethlehem birthplace to Christ's own nature as the revealed Word of God. Medieval reflections on the Incarnation and on the New Testament as a fulfilment of the Old are often interwoven with the language of openness, as we see in the following example from the early thirteenth-century *Ancrene Wisse* (Book of Guidance for Anchorites). Written for an audience of enclosed women who may also have been early readers of the *Wohunge*, *Ancrene Wisse* includes a famous allegory likening Christ to a chivalric lover-knight who has come to the rescue of a besieged noblewoman, representative of humanity. His first move is to send his messengers in advance of himself: 'Earst, as a mon þe woheð, as a king þet luuede a gentil povre leafdi of feorrene londe, he sende his sonden biuoren, þet weren þe patriarches ant te prophe[te]s of þe Alde Testament, wið leattres isealet' (First, as a man who woos, as a king who loved a poor gentlewoman from a foreign land, he sent his messengers before him, who were the patriarchs and prophets of the Old Testament, with sealed letters). But when the noblewoman refuses to receive these Old Testament messengers, he decides to engage with her directly: 'On ende he com him seoluen, ant brohte þe Godspel as

*leattres iopenet*; ant wrat wið his ahne blod saluz to his leofmon, luue gretunge, forte wohin hire wið ant hire luue wealden' (In the end he came himself, and brought the New Testament as *opened letters*; and wrote greetings to his beloved with his own blood, a love-letter, to woo her with and to gain her love).<sup>45</sup> As the fulfilment of messianic prophecies, the *Ancrene Wisse* author tells us that Christ 'opens' the closed books of the Old Testament, revealing an unambiguous offer of redemption. That he should have been born in a radically open space, therefore, makes absolute sense.

Indeed, Christ's open vulnerability remains crucial to his identity well beyond the moment of his birth; on the cross, the *Ancrene Wisse* author states, he 'open[s] his side, to schawin [us] his heorte' (opens his side, to show us his heart), revealing how 'openliche' (openly) he loves us.<sup>46</sup> Born in a quintessentially open location, he opens closed mysteries, and interacts openly with those who love him; as adjective, verb, and adverb, the category of 'the open' is indivisible from the incarnate Christ. But of course, as this chapter has argued, the condition of openness always relies for its existence on its dialectical relationship with that of closedness. The open birthplace that has been under consideration here invariably exists alongside ideas — and realities — of enclosure. The 'house without walls' is imaginable only by reference to the domestic space whose boundaries it negates. Equally, the *diversorium* not only invokes the walls and buildings which contain it on two sides, but is also a space which provides the shelter of a roof. And to return, finally, to Luke's Nativity narrative and to the very beginning of this essay, as a translation of the Greek κατάλυμα (*kataluma*), the *diversorium* always carries traces of a familial, domestic space, even as it evokes a public, peopled dwelling. The openness of Christ — and of his birthplace — is, ultimately, indistinguishable from the containment and protection that he — and it — offers.

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45 *Ancrene Wisse: A Corrected Edition of the Text in Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 402 with Variants from Other Manuscripts*, ed. by Bella Millett, EETS, orig. ser., 325–26, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005–06), 1 (2005), p. 146, lines 61–66 (my italics).

46 *Ibid.*, 1, p. 148, lines 126–27.



Annie Sutherland, 'Enclosure and Exposure: Locating the 'House without Walls'', in *Openness in Medieval Europe*, ed. by Manuele Gragnolati and Almut Suerbaum, *Cultural Inquiry*, 23 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2022), pp. 145–67 <[https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-23\\_08](https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-23_08)>

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