

Keeping Watch

The Rabbinical Shepherds of Bethlehem

December 23, 2012



Bethlehem Shepherds, c. 1900^{AD}

Today, we're talking about the shepherds near Bethlehem. Have you ever wondered why, when the angels announce Jesus' birth to the shepherds, they don't give 'em an address or something?

[The angel just says He's in the city of David (Bethlehem is his hometown), and that] "This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

[Doesn't seem like much of a *sign*] – Luke 2:12 NIV

A blinking star came to rest over the baby, for the Wise Men! And yet, Luke makes it sound like they hurried right to Him, in the dark! So, who *are* these guys and how'd they *know* where to go?



And why did God *want* to involve shepherds? They were *mostly* uneducated and despised ... *except* for one unique group: the rabbinical or, priestly, shepherds who tended the Temple flocks. Sacrificial lambs *had* to be *perfect* to be *acceptable*. No scrapes, scratches, or scars; healthy, whole, and ritually squeaky-clean.

And so, *rabbinical* shepherds were trained in the Law, the OT scriptures, and the special skills necessary for keeping bouncing little lambs spotless and unblemished!



They're the *only* shepherds who *lived* in the fields, and worked in shifts, 24/7. They couldn't afford the risk of leaving 'em alone. Common shepherds locked their flock in a pen at night and cozied up at home, while the rabbinical shepherds of Bethlehem warmed themselves with the words of the prophet ...

"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, [Ephrath [EE-frath] is a *former* name, and there were two Bethlehems, so Micah adds it for clarity] though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times." – Micah 5:2 NIV

King Herod's Chief Priests recited this when the Wise Men asked about the newborn King. And it was widely believed that a Messiah King would come from the land where King David was anointed.

But, why did *God* want that? Why *Bethlehem*? Thanks to the Mishnah, (Shekalim 7:4) a collection of ancient rabbinic teachings on the law and tradition (compiled about 200^{AD}), and regarded as 2nd in authority *only* to OT scripture, we know that Bethlehem was the officially sanctioned location of certified sacrificial lambs!



The Law required two perfect lambs for the daily Temple sacrifice (730/year) and tens of thousands of unblemished lambs every year for Passover and other religious rituals. Bethlehem was a spotless-lamb factory! Every perfect lamb there was born to be sacrificed. And every last perfect and innocent Bethlehem lamb, born to die to atone for sin, prefigured Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away our sin. And *that's* why Bethlehem *had to be* His birthplace!



View from the Shepherd's Field

The Mishnah also mentions the Migdal Eder, Hebrew for *Tower of the Flock*. This is the view from where it once stood, high on a hilltop on the north edge of Bethlehem. It probably once served as a military border tower. Flock towers were common (to guard against animals and robbers), but the Migdal Eder was the only one of its kind.

The lower level was where the Temple ewes were brought to give birth. That was its sole purpose; it was a holy place that had to be kept ritually clean according to the Law. I wonder if Paul was picturing the Migdal Eder, the Tower of the Flock, when he wrote ...

But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. – Galatians 4:4-5 NIV

The King's Highway, one of Israel's main roads, ran right past it and was perfect for herding lively lambs safely to the temple.

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. – Luke 2:1 NIV

As King David's descendant, Joseph had to register in the town of David to keep the family land. And since most saw Mary's pregnancy as shameful, she refused to leave her loving husband's side.

While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. – Luke 2:6-7 NIV



Why did God want *that*? Why strips of cloth and a manger? When a sacrificial lamb was born, the priestly shepherd would wrap it in cloth and lay it in the confines a manger, to keep it calm, and to let it gain strength without thrashing about or stumbling on unsteady legs or otherwise blemishing itself.¹ Have you seen those TV ads for Thundershirt to help dogs cope with anxiety? It's *just* like that! I think God used the census to draw Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem *and* to overcrowd it, so they'd turn to the priestly team at the Migdal Eder, who would've eagerly assisted the bloodline of David.

¹ Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. – Luke 2:8 NIV

Every shepherd “[lived] out in the fields” when food got scarce and the flock was far from home. But *only* the rabbinical shepherds lived in the fields “*nearby*” Bethlehem ... and had a “[nightshift]”!

An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. **This will be a sign to you:** [Notice that this ‘sign’ is *only* for *them*. That’s because it’s ‘written’ in the religious vernacular of rabbinical shepherds!] You will find a baby **wrapped in cloths** and **lying in a manger.**” [And the unfathomable profundity and multilayered connotations of this overpowering picture of God becoming flesh and being wrapped as a sacrificial lamb is too crushing with love for the angels to withstand] Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.” – Luke 2:9-14 NIV

Why didn’t the angel tell the shepherds where to go to find the Savior? No need! They knew it the moment they heard the sign of the swaddling cloth and the manger! Watch ‘em close now ...

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.” So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. **[Just as the angel had said!]** – Luke 2:15-16 NIV

They changed what the angel said! The angel said “*in* the town of David”. The shepherds say, “Let’s go to Bethlehem”. Luke purposely uses a precise word that means “until” or, “to the edge of”. They don’t say, “Let’s go *in* the town of David and *find* the Savior”; they say, “Let’s go *to* (the border of) Bethlehem and *see* Him!”



Franciscan Chapel at Beit Sahour

And what was located on the *border* of Bethlehem? The Migdal Eder, the Tower of the Flock! This Franciscan Church sits on *one* of a couple possible locations of the tower.

Now I want to drop the bomb: the rabbinical shepherds were taught to expect the Messiah King to be first announced from the Tower of the Flock because Micah names it in his Bethlehem prophecy (seven verses before what I already read in Micah 5:2).

As for you, O watchtower of the flock, **[Hebrew: “Migdal Eder”]** O stronghold **[fort, high place]** of the Daughter of Zion, **[Bethlehem]** the former dominion **[of King David]** will be restored to you; kingship will come to the Daughter of Jerusalem.” – Micah 4:8 NIV

They knew Jesus’ address after all: Migdal Eder, King’s Highway, Bethlehem! Some argue that Micah is using this as a metaphor. It doesn’t matter; the Rabbis taught it, and some still do! The Targum, an ancient Aramaic translation of the Hebrew Bible with rabbinical commentary, describes Migdal Eder as “the place where King Messiah will reveal Himself at the end of days.”²

² Targum Yonatan paraphrase of Genesis 35:23 and Micah 4:8

When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.
– Luke 2:17-18 NIV

If these shepherds were uneducated and despised, *everyone* would be skeptical instead of amazed. But the rabbinical shepherds were able to testify to how scripture was being fulfilled!



Caravan route into Bethlehem, c. 1900^{AD}

Some say the Wise Men didn't arrive for many months, but when they go to Herod, he and his Chief Priests hadn't heard. And an amazing Messiah story like this would've traveled fast! The star had appeared briefly in the east, perhaps months earlier so they'd arrive at God's perfectly planned moment. The Wise Men are overjoyed when the star reappears and "stops over the place where the child was", (Mat 2:9-10) makes sense if they're looking *up* at a tower on a hilltop.

On coming to the house, they saw the child ... – Matthew 2:11a NIV

There's no doubt the rabbinical shepherds, who *lived* in the fields, would've implored Joseph to stay while Mary recuperated. And the Migdal Eder would've had ample living quarters upstairs.



Rachel's tomb near Bethlehem, c. 1900^{AD}

Even the ancient Jewish mystical work, the Zohar (2:8b) says that when the time arrives for the Messiah's revelation, he will appear in a great light in the outskirts of Bethlehem, close to Rachel's tomb, at a place called Migdal Eder. I can't quit without tying in Joseph, the greatest foreshadow of Christ in scripture! Just after his mother, Rachel (whose name means 'ewe') dies, Joseph (whose name means 'God will provide') receives the coat of authority, after his brother Reuben sins against their dad.

Where do you suppose Joseph received that coat of authority, destined to be dipped in blood due to the sins of his brothers?

So Rachel died and was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem). ... Israel moved on again and pitched his tent beyond Migdal Eder. **[The only other place in the Bible it's mentioned by name]** While Israel was living in that region, Reuben went in and slept with his father's concubine ... – Genesis 35:19, 21-22 NIV

Joseph's *authority* that led to his rejection, 'resurrection', and a starving world's salvation, was first announced in the very place where the angels came to announce the Christ!

And 30 years later, when John (the Baptist) saw his cousin, Jesus, coming toward him, he announced to all, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29)

Our Sacrificial Lamb was wrapped in swaddling cloth and placed in a manger, preparing for death even at His birth.