

Lamb of God

The Rabbinical Shepherds of Bethlehem

December 20, 2020

Welcome to where we're learning to follow the lead of the Lamb!



We're putting the LPG on pause, for the LOG: that is, the Lamb of God, because this is my chance to show you something really cool about Jesus' birth! Remember when the angels tell the shepherds that the Christ is born? Well, if you had been there, **would you have gone to Bethlehem?** You know, to see baby Jesus. I think probably not.



Now, you might be thinking, "If angel declared it, I'd do it," but that's just it. **Not only did the angel not tell them to go, he didn't tell 'em He was in Bethlehem.** The actions of the shepherds totally depended on their ears, on whether or not they had what the Lord later calls "ears to hear". Which is a seriously playful way to describe receiving and knowing God's Word.



We might've missed it by twelve miles. Know why? The angel says He's in "the City of David"; and **that's not Bethlehem. That's Jerusalem.** It's Jerusalem's official title. Scripture makes that so clear that some commentators accuse Luke of getting the name *wrong*. But, there's a way to make it make sense. And what a wonderful story it reveals!



So, let's take a breath, and **take a break from all the Yule tide noise**, and take a moment to **remind our hearts and hearten our minds with the season's reasons for celebrating** in the first place. The first place, of course, being Bethlehem, which is where King David was born and raised. So in *that* sense, it *is* David's city, his own town, his hometown.



And so, when it came to pass that ...



A decree went out ... that all the world should be registered [by their land] ... everyone to his own city [his own town where he owned his family's land]. [Joseph went] into Judea, to the city of David, which [in that sense] is called Bethlehem, because [Joseph] was of the house and lineage of David, [the little shepherd who was born and raised and anointed as a shepherd king, in Bethlehem] – Luke 2:1-5 NKJ



Ever make a mix-tape of songs for someone you love? Do people still do that? Well, I love you; and I've made you **a Scripture mix regarding the birth of the Lamb of God.** It's Luke's Gospel (in green), interlaced with pertinent passages. So, let's sit back and relax and open our ears.

By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac ... *his* only begotten son ... concluding that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead – Hebrews 11:17-19 NKJ

But Isaac spoke to Abraham ... and said, “My father ... where is the lamb” ... And Abraham said, “My son, God will provide for Himself the lamb” – Genesis 22:7-8 NKJ

All we like sheep have gone astray ... and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all. ... like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, – Isaiah 53:6-7 ESV

Son of man, cause Jerusalem to know her abominations, and say ... “As for your nativity ... your navel cord was not cut, nor were you washed ... nor wrapped in swaddling cloths ... but you were thrown out into the open field,” – Ezekiel 16:2-5 NKJ

Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. – Luke 2:8 NKJ

And the Lord will give salvation to the tents of Judah first, that ... the glory of the inhabitants of Jerusalem may not surpass that of Judah ... and the house of David shall be like God, like the Angel of the Lord, going before them. – Zechariah 12:7-8 ESV

And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. Then the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” – Luke 2:9-11 NKJ

Hear now, O house of David! ... the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, – Isaiah 7:13-14 NKJ

“And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger.” – Luke 2:12 NKJ

The Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind ... “Is the wild ox willing to serve you? Will he spend the night at your manger?” – Job 38:1, 39:9 ESV

Listen, O earth! ... “I reared children ... but they have rebelled against Me. The ox knows his master, the donkey his owner’s manger, but ... My people do not understand. ... I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs ...

Though your sins ... are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.” – Isaiah 1:1-18 NIV

... and the glory of the Lord shone around them, – Luke 2:9 NKJ

I am the Lord ... and My glory I will not give to another ... and new things I declare ... Sing to the Lord a new song, and His praise from the ends of the earth, – Isaiah 42:8-10 NKJ

And suddenly there was with the Angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!” – Luke 2:13-14 NKJ

O Bethlehem ... from you shall come forth for Me One who is to be Ruler in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. – Micah 5:2 ESV

So it was, when the angels had gone away from them into heaven, that the shepherds said to one another, “Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us.” And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger. – Luke 2:15-16 NKJ

She bore a male Child who was to rule all nations ... and her Child was caught up to God and His throne. – Revelation 12:5 NKJ

Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! – John 1:29 ESV

And I looked, and behold, in the midst of the throne ... stood a Lamb as though it had been slain, – Revelation 5:6 NKJ

For Christ, our Passover Lamb, has been sacrificed. – 1 Corinthians 5:7 ESV

Like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, – Isaiah 53:7 ESV

You were redeemed ... with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. – 1 Peter 1:18-19 NIV

Where there are no oxen, the manger is clean, – Proverbs 14:4 ESV

It's like the angel is giving the shepherds *clues* more than an *address*.

You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger. – Luke 2:12 NKJ

Hmm. Doesn't seem like much to go on. And yet, they immediately knew and hurried right to Him, and in the dark even! So, how'd they *know* where to go? Take a look at our first clue:

“For Christ” is “like a” “Passover lamb” “that is *led* to the slaughter”. (Is 53:7; 1 Cor 5:7) Not driven by a butcher. Led by a shepherd. You see, **sacrificial and Passover lambs came from a very specific flock**, that was raised in a very specific way, in a very specific place. And **they were led to the slaughter by religiously trained rabbinical shepherds**. Because, they had to be *perfect* to be *acceptable*. No scrapes, scratches, dents or dings; only healthy, whole, and religiously squeaky-clean. And that brings us back to Bethlehem!



And we know from the Mishnah (Shekalim 7:4) (ancient rabbinic teachings on the law and tradition), that Bethlehem was the officially sanctioned location for the rabbinical shepherds who raised certified sacrificial lambs. The Law required two per day in the Temple (that's 730 per year). But that's nothing. Every year, tens of thousands of unblemished lambs were required for Passover and other Scripturally mandated religious rituals. **Bethlehem was a spotless-lamb factory!** And every perfect lamb born to die to atone for sin was led from Bethlehem to Jerusalem along what was then called the King's Highway.



The Mishnah also mentions the **Migdal Eder**, Hebrew for **Watchtower of the Flock**. It once stood on a hill on the north edge of Bethlehem. This Franciscan Church was built on the base of a likely location. It served as a base of operations and where the ewes were brought to give birth.

So, when you picture Jesus' nativity, do you picture a dirty ol' barn full of animals? We did a live nativity scene years ago, and everything stank like manure. But, you heard the Scriptures. Why do you think the “*wild ox*” “*spend[s] the night at [His] manger*”? (Job 39:9 1:3) Because **domesticated animals weren't allowed inside this facility**. Too much, as my Auntie Lil used to say, caca-poo-poo-stink-stink. *However ...*

Where there are no oxen, the manger is clean, – Proverbs 14:4 ESV

Hygienically so! The Migdal Eder was the only one of its kind. **Its sole purpose was producing sacrificial and Passover lambs to be led to the slaughter**. It had to be ritually clean according to the strict religious standards of the Law. And in an age when germs were unknown, the Migdal Eder was the only sanitized birthing facility to rival today's standards for cleanliness. So how's “*the donkey [know] his Owner's manger*”? (Is 1:3) I'm guessing Joseph parked him just outside!

Any thoughts on the swaddling cloths and the manger (i.e. food-trough)? Well, rabbinical shepherds were trained in the special skills necessary for keeping bouncing little lambs spotless and unblemished from birth. And this required lots and lots of swaddling cloth. When a sacrificial or Passover lamb was born, **the rabbinical shepherd would bind it in cloth and lay it in the confines of a manger**.

This was to keep it calm, and to let it gain strength without thrashing about or stumbling on unsteady legs or otherwise blemishing itself.¹ And when Joseph and Mary (both descendants of David) showed up that night, the Migdal Eder birthing team would've been all set and ready to assist the bloodline of King David.

Now, there were standard issue shepherds who went home at night, except when they were way out in the wilderness – then they'd temporarily camp with their flock.

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, [because their job required] keeping watch over their flocks [even] at night. [24/7. Rain or shine] – Luke 2:8 NIV

Standard issue shepherds might kept watch over their pregnant ewes at night during birthing season. But in Bethlehem, the ewes were taken into the Migdal Eder, not left with the flocks in the fields nearby. The rabbinical shepherds *lived* out in the fields, even though they were nearby David's hometown. And if people haven't changed, the greenhorns had the nightshift. So, out in the fields during this one otherwise ordinary graveyard shift ...

Behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. Then the angel said to *them*, "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring *you* good tidings of great joy which *will be* to all people. For there is born to *you* [who know God's Word, have ears to hear, and work at the Migdal Eder spotless sacrificial and Passover lamb birthing facility] this day in the city of David [but he doesn't mean Jerusalem] a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be the sign to *you* [who know God's Word, have ears to hear, and work at the Migdal Eder spotless sacrificial and Passover lamb birthing facility]: You will find a *Babe* wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger." [So, why wasn't the angel more specific about the location? No need] ... the shepherds said to one another, [He *didn't* mean Jerusalem!] "Let us now go to [the city where David was born, raised, and anointed king] Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, [at the Migdal Eder] which the Lord has made known to *us*." [through the prophet Micah (4:8 and 5:2) and the angel] And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger. [As foretold] – Luke 2:9-12, 15-16 NKJ

The angel said "in the city" of David. The shepherds say, let's go "to Bethlehem". Two very specific and different words: "in" (Gr. *en*) and "to" (Gr. *heōs*). *En* means in. *Heos* means until or unto, as in "up to the edge/border"; because, watchtowers were built on the borders.

As for you, O watchtower of the flock, [Heb. Migdal Eder] O stronghold of the Daughter of Zion, [a spiritual name for Jerusalem] the former dominion will be restored to you; *kingship* will come to the Daughter of Jerusalem ... Bethlehem [also formerly known in Scripture as] Ephrathah ... out of you will come for Me One who will be Ruler over Israel, whose origins are ... from ancient times." – Micah 4:8, 5:2 NIV

Any thoughts on why Bethlehem's Migdal Eder is a stronghold of spiritual Jerusalem? It's because of its crucial, integral role in Jerusalem's temple sacrificial system. **Sacrificial and Passover lambs that were "led to the slaughter", were led from here to there.** And seriously, **could those with ears-to-hear have asked for a more specific location?!**

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

And don't you think the rabbinical shepherds who were trained to work at the watchtower of the flock in Bethlehem Ephrathah were well aware of Micah's exceptionally precise prophecy?

Shepherding was not a vocation for educated men, or even the literate. So, **the fact that these guys know to go to Bethlehem reveals their rabbinical understanding of Scripture.** And, because of Micah's incredibly specific prophecy (which is quoted by King Herod's counselors when the Wise Men – who have to make a “careful search” – later arrive), **the rabbinical shepherds of Bethlehem were actually taught to expect the Messiah King to be first announced from the Migdal Eder** (the base of operations for sacrificial lambs)! And even though Christ has come, some rabbis still teach this, taking yet another cue from an ancient Aramaic commentary called the Targum, which describes the Migdal Eder as, and I quote: **“The place where King Messiah will reveal Himself”**.² And many *won't* teach this; because, the very well-known Christmas story of Jesus' nativity really *confuses* the issue.

Now, if these were standard issue, illiterate shepherds, everyone who heard what they had to share would've been skeptical, to say the least. But **the highly respectable rabbinical shepherds would make great ambassadors**, because *they* knew their *Scriptures* well; so ...

When they had seen Him, they made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this Child. [with a Scriptural “mix tape” of their own] And all those who heard it marveled at those things which were told them by the shepherds. – Luke 2:17-18 NKJ

Because *these* guys were the *rabbinical* shepherds of Bethlehem Ephrathah's spotless sacrificial and Passover lamb birthing facility in the famously prophesied Migdal Eder along the King's highway; and **they were the very first Ambassadors of Christ ... thanks to their ears!** Jesus said:

I am the Good Shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own ... My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. – John 10:4-28 NKJ



We can't control all the rush and crush and noise at Christmas. **We can only control what we hear and share.** So don't get caught up in all the chaos; get all caught up in Christ. And when maddening crowds and ill-mannered clerks, and strained relations and frustrating jerks, are “exposing” their need for Christ, give it to ‘em!

And the Lamb will overcome them, for He is Lord of lords and King of kings; and those who are with Him are called, chosen, and faithful. – Revelation 17:14 NKJ

So **choose to be an ambassador of the One we're celebrating**; and give ‘em some space, and give ‘em some grace, right in their face! There's *no* better gift at Christmas.

For you were like sheep going astray, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls. – 1 Peter 2:25 NKJ

The *One* Lamb to become the Shepherd. The Good Shepherd who *gives* His *life* for His sheep; and **He expects His sheep to know Him, listen to Him, and follow Him in His Word.** (Jn 10:15)

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