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Watchtower Of The Flock

I want you to turn to Luke 1:3; today we want to look at a familiar story, the story of the shepherds tending their flocks nearby, but a story not well understood. I have to admit I didn't understand it very well until recently I heard a presentation on it and I began to research and investigate it more thoroughly. Let's get some background. Luke tells us in verse 3, "it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully," this is the idea of an investigative reporter preparing to write a story on spectacular events. What does the reporter do? Well, he better have his facts straight. So he's got to investigate and research carefully. Luke was a medical doctor, so he knew something about research. He says, I "investigated everything carefully," meaning I secured first hand information from eyewitnesses, I did personal interviews and I took very careful notes, he says, "from the beginning," that is, from the beginning of the proclamation of the Messiah. So his investigation started with the forerunner of the Messiah, the prophet John the Baptist and ended with the Messiah's resurrection appearances and ascension.

Luke's whole point in writing was to investigate this history very carefully and write it out, notice, "in consecutive order," so it requires close attention to dates and times, when one event occurred in relation to other events and his goal was to put them all together in a timeline, starting at the beginning of the timeline and working down the timeline, so he doesn't jump around like some of the other gospel writers who have other purposes, Luke's purpose is to write a consecutive account.

He starts with the Birth of John the Baptist which was a fantastic birth; he was to be the forerunner of the Messiah. Always the prophet precedes and paves the way for the king. John the Baptist was the prophet who would

pave the way for Jesus and would identify Him and anoint Him. So John is the first on the scene. Then Luke records the Birth Announcement of Jesus to Mary. Jesus would have a more fantastic birth than John, a virgin birth. Third, we have the record of Mary and Elizabeth's Interaction, the mothers of these two sons, the mother of the prophet and the king. Fourth was Mary's Magnificat and the prophecies what her Son will do. Fifth, the account of John the Baptist's Birth and his father, Zechariah's prophecy about what his son will do in preparing the way for Mary's Son. When we come to chapter 2 we have the sixth consecutive event, the decree to take a census of the Roman world which required Joseph to take Mary to the city of David which is called Bethlehem because he was of the house of David so they could be counted. And while they were there she gave birth to the Messiah in a low-lying cave and wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a stone feeding trough.

Then we read verse 8, the famous shepherd account that took place the very night the savior was born. And I just want to make a few remarks as we go through on each verse so we get the picture. **In the same region there were shepherds staying out in the fields and keeping watch over their flock by night.** First of all it says they were **In the same region**, so they were not in Bethlehem but they were in the same region as Bethlehem. Secondly, they were out in the **fields at night**. People say then Jesus could not have been born on Dec 25 in the wintertime because shepherds didn't keep their flocks out in the fields at night in the wintertime. Later I'll show you where that belief originated and how ancient Jewish documents prove it to be false in this region. Third, there was a plurality of **shepherds** but only one **flock** of sheep. That is very significant; a group of shepherds overseeing one **flock** of sheep. Fourth, they were **keeping watch** meaning they, one by one, kept watch while the others slept. Fifth, the word used for **fields** means a living place; they lived out in the fields with their flock and that reinforces the idea that they kept their flock out year round.

Verse 9, **And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened.** Notice, it was a single angel and he wasn't up in the air above them, he stood on the ground in front of them and the glory of the Lord shone around them, that is, a bright light encircled them, like a spotlight. And understandably they were afraid.

Verse 10, **But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people.** The way the angel tries to calm their fears is by announcing the gospel. This is the first preaching of the gospel in the NT and it was done by an angel. The good news he preached is in verse 11, **for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.** Now the **city of David** was Bethlehem, actually there are two cities of David, Bethlehem, the place of David’s birth and Jerusalem, the place of David’s reign. So there is high Davidic interest in this passage because the place of the Savior’s birth will also be Bethlehem and the place of the Savior’s reign will also be Jerusalem. So there are many David-Jesus connections on purpose. And notice the three terms used to describe the One that is born who is good news. First He is **Savior**. It was known that only God could save, so the one that is born must be God. Second, He is **Christ**. Christ is the word Messiah, the anointed One, so He is the King. And third, He is **the Lord**, the equivalent of the OT YHWH, so again He is God. So the Messiah is God, a King, now born, so incarnate.

Verse 12, the angel gives a **sign** to authenticate this message is from God. **This will be a sign for you; you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.** Now the signs all relate to a lowly birth; the cloths people debate but they may have been burial cloths, when people travelled they would often take burial cloths with them just in case they died, so the swaddling of this child in burial cloths may signify already His death and burial. **Lying in a manger**, the manger was a feeding trough for animals, usually carved out of stone, there’s nothing of straw or wooden stables, this occurred in one of the low lying caves in Bethlehem and he was placed in a stone feeding trough wrapped in burial cloths.

Verse 13, **And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly army praising God and saying,** not singing, **saying**, angels don’t sing. There is no passage in either the OT or the NT that shows angels sing and the passages people bring up don’t support it in the original languages, they cry out, they shout, they praise, but there is no evidence that angels sing. Here it says “they said, **Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased.**” There is a shadow of the doctrine of election here in the final expression, **with whom He is pleased.** There will be **peace** among those whom God is pleased with, that

is, those who respond by faith to His Christ. This **peace** will be **on earth** in the kingdom. **Glory to God in the highest** refers to the highest heaven where God's dwells.

Now we come to the response of the shepherds in verse 15, **When the angels had gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds began saying to one another**, in the imperfect meaning each one said to the other one's, over and over they all said this, **Let us go straight to Bethlehem then, and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has made known to us**. Let's slow down here and make some observations. First of all, **Let us go straight to Bethlehem**, the words **Let us go straight** are one word in the Greek, *dielthon*, and mean "let us go through the open space," so that means there was some open space between their location and **Bethlehem**. Secondly, **and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has made known to us**, not the angel has made known to us, but **the Lord has made known to us** because they recognize the source of the message was the **Lord**, the angel was merely the Lord's messenger. There's no need to repeat what they are going to **Bethlehem** to look for; they are going to see the sign; a child wrapped in cloths, lying in a feeding trough, a strange sight indeed.

Verse 16, **So they came in a hurry**, meaning prompt obedience, they immediately left to cross the space between their flock and Bethlehem, and don't you think it odd that they left their flock unattended? That may be significant. Why did they leave their flock out in the open vulnerable to attack? **So they came in a hurry and found their way to Mary and Joseph, and the baby as he lay in the feeding trough. When they had seen this...** There's a sequence to this in the Greek, **they came...they found...they saw**. Just as the Lord had revealed, so it was. Verse 17, **When they had seen this, they made known the statement which had been told them about this Child**. That statement is vv 10, 11 and 12, it is the good news, the gospel as it was then preached.

Verse 18 we have the response to the gospel preached; **And all who heard it wondered at the things which were told them by the shepherds**. The word means they were amazed but it was not necessarily sufficient to bring them to believe it, they were merely amazed by it.

But in contrast, verse 19, **But Mary treasured all these things, pondering them in her heart.** That word **pondering** means “throwing things together,” “putting together pieces of a puzzle,” she was puzzled about what had happened to her. Here she is this 16 year old virgin having a baby and having this visitation of shepherds. What she’s trying to do here is take her training in the OT and put it together, take all the passages about the Messiah and see how they come together in this one child. It’s a tremendous thing she’s doing here; as a 16 year old she’s putting the Scriptures together and realizing who her son is.

Then verse 20, a third response, **The shepherds went back, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen, just as had been told them.** So they have the proper response, glorify and praise God. These were the first people, outside of Mary and Joseph that saw the Savior who is the Christ, the Lord and they responded correctly.

Now you can pick up several things in the text that are important for the key thing I want to draw your attention to this Christmas morning. One is that the shepherds were not in Bethlehem, but they were in the region of Bethlehem. Two is that these shepherds had only one flock of sheep. Three is that there was some open space between them and Bethlehem that had to be traversed to see the child. Fourth is that these shepherds lived in the fields around Bethlehem. And fifth is that the Lord revealed to them the birth of the Savior. Those are all key observations.

Now we want to ask why? Why did the Lord reveal the birth of the Savior to these shepherds? And who were these shepherds? What was this one flock? Where were they located when they angel appeared and revealed this information?

Let’s start with the questions about the shepherds and the flock? Who were these shepherds? What’s the significance of the angel appearing to shepherds and revealing this information? If you’d turn to Micah 4:8. What the majority of commentators do at this point is go into some discussion of how shepherds were unclean because their vocation required them to violate certain Laws of Moses and therefore the point is that shepherds were the lowest of the low in society and so Luke’s point is that the Messiah came to save peasants and

people of low status who are spurned and reproached. That's typical commentary stuff.

However, there is some evidence that this is not Luke's point. While Christ may have come to save the lowly Luke's point is to say an OT prophecy was fulfilled by this announcement of the Savior's birth to shepherds in this field near Bethlehem. I will be quoting extensively from Alfred Edersheim's *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*. Edersheim is a unique scholar because he was born to parents who practiced Judaism and he was raised in the Jewish traditions of Talmud but he became a Christian as a young man. So he has background in both Judaism and Christianity. He says, "That the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem was a settled conviction." he's talking about among the Jews. The Jews were convinced that Bethlehem would be where the Messiah was born. And indeed in Matt 2 when the wise men come to Jerusalem looking for the King of the Jews, what did they ask? "Where is the King of the Jews to be born?" And the Jewish scribes said? Micah 5:2, in Bethlehem Ephrethah. So that was well-known to the Jews and that is well-known among Christians today. However, what is not well known to Christians today is what Edersheim then explains, "Equally so was the belief, that He was to be revealed from *Migdal Eder*, 'the tower of the flock.'" So here we have a conviction among the Jews that there would be an announcement of the birth of the Messiah at a place called Migdal Eder, translated, "the tower of the flock. Notice Micah 4:8. "As for you, tower of the flock, Hill of the daughter of Zion, To you it will come—Even the former dominion will come, The kingdom of the daughter of Jerusalem." Now in the context the prophecy in Micah is referring to the restoration of the Jewish nation in the last days, the restoration of the kingdom to a kingdom like unto but greater than that of David and Solomon, the restoration of the kingdom at the place called the "tower of the flock" or Migdal-Eder. This was known to occur at the hands of the Messiah. "To you it will come" that is, to "the tower of the flock" the revelation of the Messiah will come. The point, said the rabbi's, was that when the Messiah was born there would be an announcement made at Migdal Eder that the Messiah had been born. As Targum Yonathan says of Micah 4:8, "He spread his tent beyond Migdal Eder, the place where King Messiah will reveal Himself at the end of days."

So where exactly is this place Migdal-Eder, "tower of the flock?" Let's turn to Genesis 35:16. "Then they journeyed from Bethel," this is Jacob and Rachel,

they're journeying from Bethel, Bethel was north of Jerusalem "and when there was still some distance to go to Ephrath," Ephrath is an early name for Bethlehem as verse 19 says, so they're travelling from Bethel to Bethlehem. But before they get there look what happens, "Rachel began to give birth and she suffered severe labor. 17When she was in severe labor the midwife said to her, "Do not fear, for now you have another son." Verse 19, "So Rachel died and was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is Bethlehem). 20Jacob set up a pillar over her grave; that is the pillar of Rachel's grave to this day." Okay, that place is called Ramat Rachel and its just south of Jerusalem. Verse 21, "Then Israel journeyed on and pitched his tent beyond the tower of Eder," and there is our place, Migdal Eder or "the tower of the flock." So they were on their way from Bethel to Bethlehem but Rachel died somewhere south of Jerusalem and then not much further on Israel passed Migdal Eder and pitched his tents before he got to Bethlehem. So we can conclude that Migdal Eder is south of Jerusalem and Ramat Rachel but north of Bethlehem, it's nearby, but north of Bethlehem.

Now when we come to extra-biblical sources about the location of Migdal Eder we find in the Mishnah, in Shekalim vii. 4, it was in the vicinity of Jerusalem. Jerome, circa 4th century AD, who lived in Bethlehem and had his study in the Church of the Nativity, the traditional site for the birthplace of the Messiah, he said of Migdal Eder, it is "about 1000 paces (a mile) from Bethlehem." And Arculf in his *Early Travels in Palestine*, AD670 found "a Church of the Shepherds," a mile from Bethlehem. In 1927, 160 orthodox Jews established a small farming community south of Jerusalem, they named it Migdal Eder; it was attacked and destroyed by Arabs in 1929. So from both the Bible and extra-biblical evidence we are quite certain that Migdal Eder was located about a mile north of Bethlehem.

If we look at a map from Google earth of this region, to the north you see Ramat Rachel, where Rachel died giving birth to her son, Israel traveled on further, pitching his tents beyond Migdal Eder but not as far as Bethlehem, where he was headed. So I would guess somewhere around Highway 60 which is the main road from Jerusalem to Bethlehem is Migdal Eder, and this is where the shepherds tending their flocks by night and keeping watch were located. That satisfies the requirement that there is some distance or space they had to traverse to get to Bethlehem.



Now what exactly was Migdal Eder? It means “tower of the flock” and it was a tower. But remember, they lived in the field, so the tower was also a place of shelter for the shepherds and the surrounding area was a pasture for the flock.



So now we know that the Jews were convinced, on the basis of Micah 4:8, that God would reveal the birth of the Messiah at a place called Migdal Eder. We know from Gen 35:16-19 and extrabiblical witness that Migdal Eder was in the region north of Bethlehem. And we know there was a watchtower there to give shelter for the shepherds and for keeping watch.

Now we return to Edersheim to learn more about the shepherds and their flock. Remember, there was only one flock these shepherds watched over. Edersheim says, “This *Migdal Eder* was *not* the watch-tower for the ordinary flocks which pastured on the barren sheep-ground beyond Bethlehem, but lay close to the town, on the road to Jerusalem.” Alright, we’ve already shown pictures of that. “A passage in the Mishnah leads to the conclusion that the flocks, which pastured there were destined for Temple-sacrifices, and, accordingly, that the shepherds who watched over them were not ordinary shepherds.” Alright, so this flock of sheep is set aside for the Temple sacrifices in Jerusalem, it is kept near Bethlehem but destined for Jerusalem. And the shepherds were not ordinary shepherds. As one author states, “The shepherds who kept them were men who were specifically trained for this royal task. They were educated in what an animal that was to be sacrificed had to be and it was their job to make sure that none of the animals were hurt, damaged, or blemished.” You had to offer unblemished sacrifices, you couldn’t bring a lamb with a broken leg in, you had to offer the best, so these

were the best and they would be taken to Jerusalem near Passover so they could be sold to those who came to offer sacrifice.

Edersheim says, “The same Mishnic passage also leads us to infer that these flocks lay out *all the year round*, since they are spoken of as in the fields thirty days before the Passover—that is, in the month of February, when in Palestine the average rainfall is nearly greatest.” This is a point of importance. I don’t know how many Christians I’ve argued with about this. But they’ll say something like; did you know Jesus was not born on Dec 25 but in the summertime? Yeah, I heard that. Why do you think that I ask? Because shepherds didn’t keep their flocks outside at night in the wintertime. And since Luke says the shepherds were staying out in the fields and keeping watch over their flock by night then obviously Jesus wasn’t born in the wintertime. However, this is inaccurate. As Edersheim points out in a footnote, “Those who have copied Lightfoot’s quotations,” that’s J.B. Lightfoot in the 1800’s, “Those who have copied Lightfoot’s quotations about the flocks not lying out during the winter months ought, at least, to have known that the reference in the Talmudic passages is *expressly* to the flocks which pastured in ‘the wilderness’ (אלו הן מדבריות)” That is, it doesn’t refer to the flock north of Bethlehem. Because if it did the Mishnah couldn’t say this, “Herds found between Jerusalem and Migdal Eder— and in an equivalent range on all sides of the city—[if] male, they are deemed to be burnt offerings; [if] female, they are deemed to be peace offerings. R. Judah says, “That which is suitable for Passover offerings are Passover offerings [if they are found] thirty days before that festival.”ⁱ In other words, what is being said here is that there was a flock of sheep within the radius of about 5 miles around Jerusalem that were the Temple flock destined for sacrifice and this flock was kept outside year round. “Rabbi maintains...that *the wilderness-flocks remain in the open alike in the hottest days and in the rainy season—i.e. all the year round (Bezah 40 a).*”ⁱⁱ So it’s just inaccurate to say these flocks weren’t kept out in the open at night.

And my point isn’t to say that Jesus was born on Dec 25,ⁱⁱⁱ He may have been. Edersheim thinks He was because of a feast day added on Dec 25 for an unknown reason, or we might speculate, for a concealed reason. So it may be but what I am saying is that a Dec 25 birth is not excluded on the basis of the claim that shepherds didn’t keep their flocks out in the fields at night in the wintertime. That is simply untrue based on the literature of the Jewish

people who lived there. So this was a special flock of sheep that were found in and around Jerusalem at a radius up to five miles, those sheep were the Temple flock destined for sacrifice in Jerusalem and the group of shepherds were specifically trained for this royal task. They were educated in what an animal that was to be sacrificed had to be and it was their job to make sure that none of the animals were hurt, damaged, or blemished.

Is it not significant that the very shepherds to whom this was revealed were situated around Bethlehem guarding the temple flock from Migdal Eder that was destined for sacrifice in Jerusalem? And that it was to these very shepherds that God revealed the birth of the Lamb of God in Bethlehem, a babe they would find Him wrapped in burial cloths destined for sacrifice in Jerusalem? Do we not see more here than a few lowly shepherds in a field at night? Do we not rather see shepherds who knew the significance of this announcement and even left their own Temple flock defenseless in the field because they recognized that the sacrificial Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world and end the sacrificial system had been born? There are far too many things here to casually dismiss these facts as not pointing to a remarkable event that occurred that night outside of and in the city of Bethlehem in fulfillment of Micah 4:8. Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved.

ⁱ Neusner, J. (1988). *The Mishnah : A new translation* (263). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

ⁱⁱ Edersheim, A. (1896). *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*. Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

ⁱⁱⁱ However, Edersheim says, "There is no adequate reason for questioning the historical accuracy of this date [Dec 25]. The objections generally made rest on grounds, which seem to me historically untenable. The subject has been fully discussed in an article by *Cassel* in Herzog's Real. Ency. 17. pp. 588-594. But a curious piece of evidence comes to us from a Jewish source. In the addition to the Megillath Taanith (ed. Warsh. p. 20 a), the 9th TebBeth is marked as a fast day, and it is added, that the reason for this is not stated. Now, Jewish chronologists have fixed on that day as that of Christ's birth, and it is remarkable that, between the years 500 and 816 A.D. the 25th of December fell no less than twelve times on the 9th TebBeth. If the 9th TebBeth, or 25th December, was regarded as the birthday of Christ, we can understand the concealment about it. Comp. *Zunz*, Ritus d. Synag. Gottesd. p. 126."

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