



The Shepherds and the Lamb

Just about everyone has heard the account of Christ's birth, even those who don't believe or acknowledge Him as Savior. It is a piece of history that has been well-preserved for over 2,000 years thanks to its details being dutifully recorded in Scripture and other texts. As we approach Christmas this week, I'd like to take a deeper look at one aspect of the account, specifically the shepherds who were given the announcement of Christ's birth by angels.

In the same region there were some shepherds staying out in the fields and keeping watch [lit: guarding] over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened. 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; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." [Luke 2:8-12](#) NASB

Most of us have heard or been told that these night shepherds were the lowliest, poorest, and most humble people of all, which is why the angels announced Christ's birth to them first. While this seems like a nice storyline, is it true or is there more to it?

For some context, we need to step outside sacred Scripture to the oral traditions of the Jews, specifically the Mishnah. It is here we see that it was forbidden by Jewish law to raise cattle (which included sheep and goats) inside the cities of Israel (ref: [Bava Kama 80a](#)). Yet, in [Luke 2:4-7](#) we read:

Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, in order to register along with Mary, who was engaged to him, and was with child. While they were there, the days were completed for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son; and she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

[Luke 2:11](#) indicates that Mary and Joseph remained there ***in the city*** of Bethlehem for the birth of baby Jesus. In fact, this must be the case because it fulfilled a specific prophecy of the coming Messiah (see [Micah 5:2-4](#)). Was Jesus born in an illegal barn in the city? And were there shepherds keeping an illegal flock in the City of David? Not likely.

Again, using external resources like the Mishnah, we learn that there was a specific exception made for raising cattle in the city: the animals that were used for the sacrificial offerings in the temple (ref: [Shekelim 7:4](#)). In fact, there was even a specific place in Bethlehem called Migdal-edar, or 'tower of the flock', where these sacrificial sheep were meticulously raised and cared



for. Interestingly, another Messianic prophecy in [Micah 4:8](#), refers to this place by name: **As for you, tower of the flock [Migdal-edar], hill of the daughter of Zion, to you it will come—even the former dominion will come, the kingdom of the daughter of Jerusalem.**

With this in mind, we can ask: who were these shepherds? If indeed they were raising sheep for sacrifices, then we know they were Levitical shepherds because the Levities were the only Jewish tribe specifically set apart by God to be priests over Israel, care for the temple, and perform sacrifices (cf: [Num 18](#)). These shepherds were likely themselves priests and perhaps even waiting and looking for the coming of Messiah. We can also deduce that, because these sheep had to be kept in perfect condition and free from blemishes ([Num 28:9](#)), the shepherds “guarding over their flock by night” were the most elite of the Levitical shepherds – those who would not dare fall asleep and allow the flock to be injured or attacked.

This also seems to make sense when we read: ***when they*** [the shepherds] ***had seen this, they made known the statement which had been told them about this Child. And all who heard it wondered at the things which were told them by the shepherds*** ([Luke 2:17](#)). These shepherds had some clout as their incredible testimony was both believed and accepted by those they told. While speculation, this would appear unlikely if these shepherds were the lowest of the low in society.

All of this put together seems quite appropriate when you take the entirety of Scripture and Christ’s coming into account. When John the Baptist declared of Jesus, “***behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!***” ([John 1:29](#)), he knew exactly what he was saying – indeed prophesying – as Christ’s very purpose in coming to earth was to be the final once-for-all sacrifice for sins (cf: [Rom 6:10](#), [1 Peter 3:18](#)). What better place for Christ to be born than where all the sacrificial sheep were kept, and under the watch of the priestly shepherds who cared for this reserved flock.

There is so much more to this than we have time for here, and I encourage you to study this on your own if you want to learn more. I personally found this to be quite fascinating and reaffirmed that everything God does is done with intention. There are no accidents in God’s plan, and certainly none in the birth of our Savior. May this give us an enriched perspective on what happened the day of Christ’s birth, increase our belief and trust that, no matter what happens in life, the Lord’s plan will work out perfectly.

Merry Christmas!

~Associate Pastor Jeremy Preece