

# Encounters with Jesus: The Shepherds of Bethlehem

Duncan McLea – Christ Church Kenilworth

Luke 2:8-20

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We have been doing a series of sermons looking at encounters with Jesus. And this morning on Christmas Eve we look appropriately at the encounter the shepherds had with the baby Jesus as they responded to the call of the angels and went and found Jesus lying in a manger.

But where was this manger and who were these shepherds?

The problem we have is that so much of what we take as the Christmas story is clouded by Christmas Card images and is layered over with tinsel and snow bells. We have added to the visitors who came to the manger wise men and their camels, and for good measure donkeys and cows, and in attempts to be contextual we have added in bunnies, monkeys and giraffes. I even saw Spiderman at one crib service.

## ***But where was Jesus born, and who were these shepherds?***

I want to answer those two questions this morning.

I have drawn on the work of Cooper Abrams.  
(See <http://www.bible-truth.org/BirthPlaceofJesus.html> )

Tradition says that Jesus' birth place was in a cave over which the Basilica of the Nativity was built in Bethlehem.

Roman Emperor Constantine, built a Basilica over this cave in the 4th Century at the request of his mother, Helena. It was destroyed and the present basilica was built by Emperor Justinian 530 AD. Origen of Alexandria (185 - 254 AD) wrote that Jesus was born in a cave at Bethlehem which could be visited in his day.

Clearly the city of Jesus' birth was Bethlehem.

In Micah 5:2 it is prophesied

*"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel"*

The Gospels of Matthew, Luke and John confirm this. In our reading today the angels say to the shepherds ...

*11 Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.*

And 1 Samuel 17:15, confirms Bethlehem as the City of David.

The shepherds knew this as Luke records their response as they say to each other ... (verse 15)

*15 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."*

But where in Bethlehem was Jesus born? The fact is that the New Testament does not mention of the exact place in Bethlehem of where Jesus was born nor does the Bible record that Jesus was born in stable attended by donkeys, chickens, and cows as many nativity scenes present? All the New Testament says is that Jesus was lain in a manger in Bethlehem.

The popular conception has been that the word referred to a trough where animals were fed. The Greek word which is translated in our English Bibles "manger" (pronounced phatnay). The definition of the word is of a "stall" where animals are kept. The same word is used in Luke 13:15.

The question is what kind of "stall" or manger is the New Testament referring to and what kind of animal was fed or housed there.

### **We need to do a little detective work ... bear with me ...**

The New Testament does not tell us where in Bethlehem Jesus was born but the Old Testament does. In a prophetic message looking forward to the coming of the Messiah who will redeem Israel the prophet Micah 4:8 states,

*"As for you, O watchtower of the flock, O stronghold of the Daughter of Zion, the former dominion will be restored to you; kingship will come to the Daughter of Jerusalem."*

The phrase "watch tower of the flock" is the Hebrew phrase "Migdal Edar" [mig-dawl ay-der].

In ancient times this was a military tower to view into the valley just outside of Bethlehem to protect the city. Several of these military towers are recorded in the Old Testament.

Proverbs 18:10

*The name of the LORD is a strong tower (migdal); the righteous run to it and are safe.*

The tower at Bethlehem is first mentioned in Genesis 35:21. Jacob and Rachael left Bethel and while they were on their way but still some distance from Ephrath, Rachael began hard labour and as she delivered Benjamin but died in child birth. She was buried there "on the way to Ephrath (which is Bethlehem)" - that is what Genesis. 35:19 says.

Then in Gen 35:21 it says ...

*Israel moved on again and pitched his tent beyond Migdal Eder.*

What this does for us is pinpoint the location of Migdal Eder as being near to Bethlehem, and this establishes that Migdal Eder was the "the tower of the flock" at Bethlehem from where Micah foretold that the Messiah would come.

This watch tower from ancient times was used by the shepherds as a place of protection from their enemies, and also a place where ewes gave birth. It was also in this sheltered building that the priests would bring in the ewes which were about to lamb. These special lambs came from a unique flock which were designated for sacrifice at the temple in Jerusalem.

What Cooper Abram's research of Mishnah (that is the written record of the oral teaching of the Jewish Rabbis) reveals is that this Migdal Eder was not "the watchtower for the ordinary flocks that pastured on the barren sheep ground beyond Bethlehem, but it lay close to the town, on the road to Jerusalem."

A passage from the Mishnah (Shekelim 7:4) leads to the conclusion that "the flocks, which pastured there were destined for Temple sacrifices..." It was as required no more than 3 miles from the Temple. The lambs would obviously have to be herded to along the road and they should not be injured or dishevelled from the journey.

In addition, Migdal Eder is also mentioned by the Targum. The Targum is an Aramaic translation of the Hebrew Bible (Tanak) which was written during Israel's seventy year captivity in Babylon. The Rabbis added commentary to the Scriptures and Rabbi Munk, paraphrases Genesis 35:23 and Micah 4:8

*"He spread his tent beyond Migdal Eder, the place where King Messiah will reveal Himself at the end of days."*

[slide – Rabbi Munk]

What are we to make of all of this information from the writings of the rabbis?

**First**, we know that Migdal Eder was the watchtower that guarded the Temple flocks those who were being raised to serve as sacrificial animals in the Temple.

**Second**, these were not just any flock and herd. 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.”

So with the establishment of Temple worship in Jerusalem, the fields outside of Bethlehem became the place where a special group of shepherds, raised the lambs that were sacrificed in the Temple. Being themselves under special Rabbinical care, they would strictly maintain a ceremonially clean stable for a birthing place.

The Tower of the Flock was used for birthing ewes, and the surround fields were where they grazed their flocks. These shepherds customarily kept their flocks outdoors twenty-four hours a day every day of the year, but brought the ewes in to deliver their lambs where they could be carefully cared for.

It was to this place that Joseph took Mary. It was in this special stable at “Migdal Eder” that Christ was born!

**That answers the question where was the manger.**

### ***Who were the shepherds who first received the news of the birth of the Messiah?***

Luke 2:8-18 records that there were shepherds in the fields keeping watch over their sheep by night. Who then were these shepherds?

I believe it is clear enough that we can conclude that these were shepherds who resided near Bethlehem. They were none other but the shepherds from “Migdal Eder” who were well aware that the Targum hinted and many of the rabbis taught that Messiah might well be announced from “Migdal Eder” at Bethlehem.

The angels only told the shepherds that they would find the Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger. The angles did not say which manger.

But there was no need for the angels to give these shepherds directions to the birth place because they all ready knew. These were the men who raised sacrificial lambs that were sacrificed in the Temple. When the angelic announcement came, they knew exactly where to go, as Luke 2 indicates, for the sign of a manger could only mean their manger at the tower of the flock!

You cannot explain the meaning or direction of the sign they were given or their response unless you have the right manger and the right shepherds!

“Migdal Eder”, (the tower of the flock) at Bethlehem is the perfect place for Christ to be born. In the very birthplace of tens of thousands of lambs, which had been sacrificed to prefigure Him, Jesus the Lamb of God was born to die for the sins of the world.

God promised it, pictured it and performed it at “Migdal Eder”. It all fits together, for that's the place the place where sacrificial lambs were born! Jesus was not born behind an inn, in a smelly stable where the donkeys of travellers and other animals were kept. He was born on the edge of Bethlehem, at the birthing place of the sacrificial lambs that were offered in the Temple in Jerusalem.

John the Baptist in John 1:29 proclaimed of Jesus,  
*"Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"*

Jesus is presented in the Bible as being “in type” as a sacrificial lamb. It was not by chance but by choice that Christ identified His death with the time of the observance of the Passover.

Peter spoke of us being redeemed through the "precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish and without spot" (1 Peter 1:19)

*18 For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers,*

*19 but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.*

*20 He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake.*

*21 Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God.*

Paul told us that "Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us" ( 1 Cor. 5:7)

*Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast--as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.*

## **Conclusion**

So what picture do we have in mind this Christmas Eve as we think of the shepherds and angels?

I invite you to put aside the images of smelly stables with donkeys and cows, perhaps sanitised by a covering of snow. Put aside the reindeer and slays, the mistletoe and tinsel.

Come rather to Migdal Eder, the Tower of the Flock just outside Bethlehem on the road to Jerusalem, where the lambs were born that would be offered as sacrifices in the Temple for the cleansing of sin.

Come and join the shepherds, not mere ignorant labourers but those charged with the care of the lambs that had to be raised without blemish and injury. Join these men schooled and knowledgeable in the teaching of the Scriptures and the Rabbis who knew at once where to find the one born to be Saviour, Messiah and Lord.

Come and kneel with them in the Tower of the Flock at Migdal Eder and look at one called the Lamb of God without blemish or defect who would walk those three miles to Jerusalem and give his life as a Sacrifice on the Cross to take away your sins and mine.

May the encounter of the shepherds with Jesus be ours this Christmas.

*Rev 5:6 Then I saw a **Lamb**, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders...*

*... the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.*

*9 And they sang a new song: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God members of every tribe and language and people and nation.*

*10 You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth."*

*11 Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders.*

*12 In a loud voice they sang: "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and praise!"*

*13 Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing: "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honour and glory and power, for ever and ever!"*