

# Chapter 8 - The Shepherds

## Bethlehem

Bethlehem is a small village about 6 miles southwest of Jerusalem, about a 2 hour walk. Originally it was called Ephrath, meaning beautiful, describing the rich fertile soil of Bethlehem. David's father was a weaver of the veils of the sanctuary - hence David's reference to the size of Goliath's spear. Bethlehem is called the city of David since he was born and raised there. Rachel's grave is there (Genesis 35:19), explaining Matthew's reference to "Rachel weeping for her children" when Herod destroyed the male children 2 years old and younger. There are wells of fresh water in Bethlehem that David craved. During Jeremiah's time (2 Chronicles 42:17) there was a caravan inn near Bethlehem (2 Samuel 19:37-40) which was the starting place for caravans going to Egypt. This could well have been the inn of Bethlehem where no room was found for Mary and Joseph. (Fausset p.90)

Northeast of the city are the rolling hills where the shepherds would have been watching their flocks when the angels visited. Justin Martyr of the second century wrote that the Lord's birthplace was a cave near the city that served as a stable. The cave was about 39 feet long by 11 feet wide and 9 feet high. In 132 AD Hadrian's forces destroyed the city leaving no traces of what it once was. Since then, several churches have been erected over the grotto believed to be the birthplace of Christ. Micah 5:2 heralded Bethlehem as the place where the Messiah would be born. (Zondervan Vol.1, pp.538-539.)

So it was on or around the 9th of Tebeth (the Jewish month that straddles December and January) in BC 4. Mary and Joseph arrived in the overcrowded city of Bethlehem and settled into a comfortable grotto-stable somewhere outside the city. It is most probable that the stable itself was crowded with beasts of burden and loaded with fodder for camels, donkey, and oxen, smelling like any other stable. It was there among the common things of everyday life that Jesus came into the world - probably much like any baby coming into the world, with loud crying and hunger for love and nourishment. The scripture records that they wrapped him in "swaddling clothes" and laid him in a manger. (Luke 2:7) Swaddling clothes were strips of cloth customarily used to wrap a baby - perhaps a primitive diaper.

# Shepherds

There were shepherds not far removed from Bethlehem in the remote wilderness where it was most common for them to be, but near Bethlehem on the road to Jerusalem. There was a watchtower (the Migdal Eder by name) from which shepherds could spy their sheep over vast stretches. These were not ordinary shepherds, nor ordinary sheep. They were shepherds entrusted with the sheep destined to the temple sacrifices in Jerusalem. They were the shepherds who year round watched over those prepared for sacrifice. What wonderful symbolism hidden in this report of the shepherds "keeping watch over their flocks by night". The angels chose to herald to them (and not the crowds in Bethlehem) that the Great Shepherd and the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world was born. The scripture tells us further that these temple-shepherds carried the news with them to the temple, perhaps alerting Simon and Anna to the great event of the Messiah's birth. "When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child." Luke 2:17 (Edersheim, p.131-132)

## Shepherd's Watchtowers: Migdal-Eder

Migdal-eder was a small plain located just to the southwest of Jerusalem, between Jerusalem and Bethlehem. Bethlehem was about six miles away. And just a couple of miles from Jerusalem, out in the fields, there was an ancient tower which had been built as a watchtower so that shepherds could be on the alert for marauders and thieves who might steal from the flock. It was called "Migdal-eder", "the tower of the flock". The Levitical shepherds watched over the flocks which were raised for sacrifices in the Temple. They erected towers (migdal) from which they watched over the sacrificial flocks. It is one of these towers that is referred to in the prophecy.

It was probably named by Jacob. It was at Migdal-eder that Reuben, Jacob's first-born, committed incest. That was something Jacob could not forget. It haunted him to the end of his days. When he pronounced his blessings on his sons, he said of Reuben, "You're like water -uncontrollable. You've lost your preeminence because you went up to my couch." He still can hardly believe it! And it is as though he turns to his other sons and says, "He went up to my couch." That was a disaster in Jacob's life, and it happened at Migdal-eder.

### The Prophecy: Tower of the Flock

"In that day, "declares the Lord, [the day when the mountain of the house of the Lord is established] "I will assemble the lame, And gather the outcasts,

[ "Those who are shunned because they are morally defiled" is the meaning of the term used here. That is the kind of people God loves - the lame, the weak, the outcasts.] Even those whom I have afflicted. I will make the lame a remnant, And the outcasts a strong nation, And the Lord will reign over them in Mount Zion from now on and forever. And as for

you, tower of the flock [or, "Migdal-eder"], Hill of the daughter of Zion, To you it will come -- Micah 4:6-8

On the strength of the prophecy in Micah 4:6-8, the ancient rabbis, before Jesus' time, predicted that it would be at Migdal-eder that the announcement would be made that Messiah had come. For in the very next chapter, just a few verses away comes the prophecy that we westerners are more familiar with - Micah 5:2

"But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting."

This was part of the expectancy of Israel. And it was at Migdal-eder, the tower of the flock, that the shepherds were gathered that first Christmas night, when the angel of the Lord announced the coming of Jesus. There were shepherds, shepherding their flocks by night, and the angel of the Lord appeared and said, "I have good news for you. Today in Bethlehem there is for you born a savior, the Messiah." They left their flocks and walked the three or four miles down to Bethlehem, and there they worshipped Jesus. Is that not like the Lord, to take a place like that, which had such terrible memories, and make it the very place where the promise of the ages is announced?

Footnote: <http://www.pbc.org/dp/roper/3370.html>