

The Shepherds and the Angels

Luke 2: 8-20

DIG: How does the shepherds' experience with the angel of ADONAI compare to that of Zechariah (Luke 1:11-20)? And Mary (Luke 1:26-28)? Of all the people the angel of ADONAI could have visited, why did God send him to the shepherds? How did Mary respond to all of this?

REFLECT: The LORD appeared to Zechariah, Miryam and the shepherds when they were just being themselves and doing their jobs. What does that imply about what it means to *be spiritual*? How has God spoken to you in the ordinary flow of life? The shepherds were not accepted by the religious elite of their day. What have you done to include people who might be perceived as social outcasts today?

Shepherds were the social outcasts of their day, a necessary yet ostracized cast without whom the Temple could not function. While they tended the animals required for ritual sacrifice, the conscientious Jew - ever concerned with purity - spurned shepherds as too unclean to stand among other worshipers. There was nothing to romanticize about them. Generally, they were dishonest, and unclean by the Pharisees' standards because they were unable to observe the Oral Laws (see Fs - **Why Do Your Disciples Break the Tradition of the Elders?**) concerning the ceremonial washing of their hands before they ate. They were considered unclean. Imagine the reception a dirty migrant worker would receive at the door of a sophisticated country club, and you will realize where the shepherd ranked in Jewish society.¹¹⁶ They were exactly the kind of outcasts and sinners that Messiah came to save.

And there were Jewish shepherds living out in the fields nearby. Shepherds were usually out in the fields with their flocks from March to December. There are those who argue against a December date for Christmas saying that there would not be shepherds out in the field watching the flocks at night in that month. However, there are plenty of shepherds in the field in Isra'el during December. This is not to argue in favor of the December 25th date. Insofar as the biblical record is concerned, there is just no way to determine positively just what time of year Yeshua was born.

They were keeping watch over their flocks at night (Luke 2:8). Down in the valley, sheep were huddled against the chill. More than likely, the shepherds were trying to stay awake while guarding their sheep. The flocks wandered by day, up and down the grasslands of Judea. Close to Bethlehem, on the road to Jerusalem, there was a tower known as

Migdal Eder, or the watchtower of the flock. It was the station where the shepherds watched the flocks destined for sacrifices in the Temple.¹¹⁷ It seems deeply significant that those shepherds, who heard the Good News of the Savior's birth, who first listened to the praises of the angels, were watching the flocks destined to be offered as sacrifices that pictured the sacrifice of Yeshua ha-Meshiach on the cross.

Some were probably dozing, a few were watching, when the night sky was unexpectedly split apart. Heaven and earth seemed to merge when suddenly **an angel of ADONAI appeared to them, and the Shechinah glory of the LORD**, the visible manifestation of His presence, **shone around them**. It was brighter than day, more like staring at the noon sun, and the sleeping shepherds awakened and, in fear, hid **their eyes** in the folds of **their coats** because **they were terrified (Luke 2:9)**. Sensing this, **their sheep** may have begun to run in circles because they too were **afraid**.

This was the announcement of the birth of the Jewish King to Jewish shepherds. For the first time since the days of Ezekiel (Ezekiel 10:3-5, 18-19, 23), the Shechinah glory was seen. For more than five hundred years the nation of Isra'el had been without that visible sign of God's presence among His people. And now the Shechinah glory, for which Isra'el had waited, was revealed to the shepherds in the field, not to the priests in the Temple. Indeed, **the last [would] be first, and the first [would] be last (Matthew 20:16)**.

But trying to sooth their rattled nerves, the angel said to them: **Do not be afraid. I bring you Good News that will cause great joy for all the people (Luke 2:10)**. Throughout Luke, joy is often associated with salvation. Good News? This would make any Jew open his eyes and lift them to the skies. They had been afraid of the justice and vengeance of HaShem for centuries. They had worshiped carefully, with respect for all the different rituals, for fear that He might be displeased with them. And now - Good News?

They looked up hopefully and the angel spoke again. His voice seemed to fill up the entire valley. **Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you (Luke 2:11a)**. The Greek New Covenant uses *soter* for Savior, corresponding to the Hebrew word *moshia*, which is another form of the word *hoshia* and is related to Yeshua's own name (Matthew 1:21). The New Covenant uses *soter* 24 times and the related verb *sozo*, to save, 44 times. But its use builds on the foundation already established in the TaNaKh. Therefore, when the question comes up if someone is saved, it has its roots in the TaNaKh as well as the B'rit Chadashah (see Bv - Jesus Teaches Nicodemus).¹¹⁸

He is the Messiah, the Lord (Luke 2:11b). Jesus' role as **Savior** is qualified by the title **Messiah** and **Lord**. This verse gives us a brief summary of the **Gospel** message and provides the reason for the statement found in **Luke 2:11a**. The long awaited **Meschiach has been born**. This **Savior** is also **the Lord**. Although the realization of the authority of the titles **Messiah** and **Lord** would have to wait until resurrection, in reality, **He** already was **Messiah** and **Lord**. As **Peter** said: **Therefore, let all Isra'el be assured of this: God has made this Jesus whom you have crucified, both Messiah and Lord (Acts 2:36).**

When **Peter** preached at the Festival of Shavu'ot, **he** confirmed that this prophecy was fulfilled (**Acts 2:36** and **10:36**). The message was simple and direct: **do not fear, a Savior is born** and **He is the Messiah**. This was **Good News!** It was better than **good news**. It was the long-awaited **News**. It was the thing that had been promised by **God** a long time ago. It was the arrival of **the One** who would save **the people** of the world.

Two signs were given to **them**. The first sign was that the **shepherds** would find a **baby wrapped in cloths (Luke 2:12a)**. This could not be **baby cloth** because that would not be a **sign**. **Cloth** here refers to **burial cloth**. **Baby Jesus** was wrapped in **burial cloth**. The mountains and hillsides of the hill country of Judah were not only caves used for housing animals, but caves were also used as tombs. Quite often these would be intermixed. Among the caves used to shelter animals would also be caves used for the storing of **burial cloth**. Since **Messiah** was **born** in a cave, **Joseph** and **Mary** had to make use of that which was available to **them**. **Therefore, on the first day of His life Jesus was wrapped with the same kind of cloth that He would be wrapped with on the last day of His life (see John 20:7)**. The symbolism should not be missed. What is happening here is the clear reason why **He** was **born**. That is . . . **He was born to die.**¹¹⁹

And the second sign would be that the **baby** would be **lying in a manger (Luke 2:12b)**. This told **the shepherds** **they** were to look for the **baby** in a cave. In those days stables were not separate buildings like farmers have today, but were caves. Again, Doctor **Luke** stresses **Christ's** humanity. **He** came into this world as a human being. **He** is touched with the feeling of our frailty. **He** knows about us. **He** understands us because **the Savior** came into this world as a human being. This also means we can know something about **God**, because **He** took our humanity upon Himself.¹²⁰ That should be a comforting thought to us all.

Having announced to the **shepherds** the two signs by which they would be able to find **the Messiah**, suddenly a **great company of angels** appeared with the **angel of ADONAI**, praising **God** and began to sing a two line hymn: The first line is for **God**, singing: **Glory to God in the highest**. And the second line is for humanity: **peace on earth to people of good**

will (Luke 2:13-14). These are **people** whom **the will of God** favors and who desire what **Ha'Shem** wills. This is the third of four songs recorded in **Luke** by **Mary 1:46-66**, **Zechariah 1:68-79**, here by a choir of **angels 2:14**, and **Simeon 2:29-32**.

When the **angels** had left them and returned into heaven, the **shepherds** said to one another over and over: What did you see? Did you hear what I heard? Is it true the **Messiah** has come to save mankind? After a short discussion, **they** believed the message and said to each other: **Let's go to Bethlehem and see this word that has happened, which ADONAI has told us about (Luke 2:15)**. This was much like the action of **Miryam** after she had heard the message of Elizabeth. Such an attitude contrasts sharply with that of the religious leaders who knew where **the baby** was to be **born (Matthew 2:5-6)**, but did not take the time or the effort to confirm it for themselves.¹²¹

As always, in times of crisis, **the shepherds** delegated a few of **their** number to guard the sheep. **So** the rest **hurried off and they** moved across the dark, grassy valley and up the sides of the hills, they climbed, they talked and they wondered. Could it really be? It stands to reason that the older **shepherds** believed it was no hoax. The Jews were students of the Torah, the prophets and the writings. Since there were no common books, they memorized all their teachings about **ADONAI**. **He** had promised a **Savior** who would come through the house of **David**, to be **born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2)**. More than likely, the thing that mystified all the **shepherds** the most was that the birth of **the Messiah** was so humble. They could not imagine **the Son of God lying in a manger**.

Hadn't the elders said that when **the Savior** came to earth, **He** would be riding on a great white cloud, sitting in august kingliness, listening to trumpets and songs of hosts of **angels** surrounding **His** throne as **He** ruled over heaven and earth? Tonight, the **angels** seemed to be an afterthought. It was as though **His** birth had been so insignificant, so humble, that the **angels** had to come down from heaven to call for a few lonely **shepherds** to go to a cave and worship **Him**. Could **He** not at least have been **born** in the great palace of Herod the king? **A manger, the angel** said. They understood the word. It meant a sort of trough out of which animals ate grain. It would have the sweet odor of old oats and barley, and the side would be chewed and chipped. A salt lick would lie in the bottom.

The shepherds walked among the pilgrims of **Beit-Lechem**, asking where **the Messiah** might be found. Most turned away from **them** in silence. A few asked, "What **Messiah**?" **The shepherds** probably inquired if anyone had seen **the angles**. "What **angels**?" Sometimes the travelers were rude, asking if they were drunk. Abuse was not new to **the shepherds**. **They** had known it before. Patiently, **they** carried on **their** search, asking here and there and

finally narrowing **their** questions to this: Where can we find a newborn **baby** in this town? Someone probably told **them** to try the inn. Most likely the innkeeper, worn out after a long day, remembered **the young man** and pregnant **wife** using the cave behind the inn.

The shepherds approached the cave timidly. **They** moved down the path in **their** sandals, whispering. As **they** approached the lighted opening, **Joseph** saw **them** coming. **He** studied **them** carefully, and the leader told **him** that **they** had seen **angels** in the valley, and one had said that **the Messiah** had been **born** that night in the town of **David**. **They** had . . . if it wasn't too soon . . . come to worship **Him**.

Coming in with the hoods down off **their** heads, their long hair fell on **their** shoulders, and **their** beards trembled with soft prayers. In the flickering yellow light of the oil lamp, **they** saw **the young mother**, probably around thirteen, seated on straw. **She** was looking over the side of an old manger. From **their** knees, **they** also straightened up and peered over the edge. There **He** was, wrapped tightly in **strips of burial cloth**.

The scene in the chilly cave, warmed by the bodies and breathing of the animals, was, to the **shepherds**, closer to **their** hearts than if **the Meshiach** had come on a big cloud with trumpeting **angels**. **They** understood babies, and **they** understood animals and **they** were delighted that **God** would see fit to come to earth in a dwelling only slightly less worthy than **their** own homes in the hills.

Therefore, the **shepherds found Miryam and Josef, and the baby, who was lying in the manger** just as the **angel** had prophesied (**Luke 2:16**). So it was the **shepherds**, and not the magi, who first worshiped **the baby Jesus lying in the manger**. **They** must have been torn between wonderment and happiness. The little **baby** was **ADONAI**, and **the Son of God**, but **He** was also a helpless, lovable infant. **Their** hearts surely welled with joy and **their** smiles were probably erased when **they** remembered that **they** were in the presence of **the King of kings**. **They** were **men** of such poverty and humility that **their** tattered coats spoke more elegantly than **their** tongues. **They** worshiped **the King** with full and grateful hearts.¹²²

When the **shepherds** had seen **Him**, **they** spread the word concerning what had been told **them** about the **baby** (**Luke 2:17**). The **shepherds** carried on what the **angels** had begun. **And all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them** (**Luke 2:18**). The broadest meaning of the Greek word for **amazed** is a sense of astonishment with a tinge of fear at what is unusual or mysterious. **The travelers** who had come for the census where **amazed** by what **they** saw and heard. As **they** selected their sacrifices in the Temple courtyard, how eager, how curious might **they** gather around to discuss, to wonder, yes, perhaps even to mock the news of **the baby Messiah** laying in a manger. Nevertheless, how

the heart of **the righteous and devout Simeon** would be overjoyed in the expectation that **his** life's hopes and prayers were near; and how **the very old prophetess Anna**, who had not left the Temple compound, but prayed daily for **the redemption of Isra'el**, would be looking for the baby **Yeshua** from that moment forward (see **Au - Jesus Presented at the Temple**).

All this made a profound impression on **Mary**. **She treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart (Luke 2:19)**. The Greek word for **treasured up** means *to protect, to preserve, to guard, or to keep watch over something*. **Miryam** did not fully understand the implications of all that happened to **her**. When it says **she pondered**, it describes someone who is puzzled by what they have heard, but keeps it in mind in order to understand. Not unlike something like a jigsaw puzzle, **she** reflected or meditated upon them, placing them together for comparison. Everything that had happened to **her**: the announcement by **the angel Gabriel**, the crisis it caused **Joseph**, the timing of the census, the birth of **the Messiah** in a cave, and the worship of the **shepherds** all floated around in **her** mind, challenging **her** to arrange them in some kind of order.¹²³ Years later **she** would reveal **them** to Doctor **Luke** for his **Gospel**.

In due time, **the shepherds returned to their flocks, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen**. It was no accident, **they** said to **themselves**, that what **they had been told** by the **angels** and what **they had seen** with **their own eyes**, led **them** to believe that **Yeshua ha-Meshiach** had indeed been born (**Luke 2:20**). Accordingly, if one can say that the place of **His birth** was small, humble place for animals, then one can also say that **His first worshipers, shepherds living out in the fields nearby**, were the most humble and scorned of men.