

"We'll Always Have Bethlehem"

Christmas Devotional 2015

"We'll always have Paris" is an iconic line of dialog from the final scene of the classic film, *Casablanca*.

Humphrey Bogart meant Paris, France. Do you know that there are at least thirty-two other cities named Paris?

Americans seem most fascinated by the name; there are twenty-four Paris' in the United States, including, here in the West, ones in California, Idaho, and Oregon.

You'd better let your travel agent know it's the Paris in France you want to visit, or else you might end up in Denmark, or the Yukon.

One powerful proof of the supernatural origin of the Bible is the presence of predictive prophecy within its pages. Old Testament prophets predicted minute details of events that were fulfilled hundreds of years later in the New Testament.

An example of this is found in the Old Testament Book of Micah. He's the prophet quoted by Matthew in the New Testament that tells us where Jesus would be born.

Micah 5:2 "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, Though you are little among the thousands of Judah, Yet out of you shall come forth to Me The One to be Ruler in Israel, Whose goings forth are from of old, From everlasting."

As predictive prophecies go, this one is a doozy. It predicts the location of Jesus' birth about 700 years before it happened.

Notice the attention to minute detail in the prophecy. Not just Bethlehem; Bethlehem Ephrathah.

It's an important designation, because there were, in Israel, **two Bethlehems**.

1. One Bethlehem is in the north of Israel, not far from Nazareth. It is called Bethlehem of Zebulun.
2. The other, and most famous, Bethlehem is situated on the main highway to Egypt, and was specified variously as Ephrath (Genesis 35:16), Bethlehem Ephrathah (Micah 5:2), Bethlehem-Judah (First Samuel 17:12), and "the city of David" (Luke 2:4).

The promised Savior would be born in the Bethlehem in Judah, in Bethlehem Ephrathah, the one about five miles from Jerusalem.

We are all familiar with the prophecy about Bethlehem, but there is another prophecy, by Micah, about the exact birthplace of Jesus that we too easily overlook. Earlier in his book Micah said something even more specific about Bethlehem Ephrathah:

Micah 4:8 And you, **O tower of the flock**, The stronghold of the daughter of Zion, To you shall it come, Even the former dominion shall come, The kingdom of the daughter of Jerusalem."

According to an early church father, who's name was Jerome, the "Tower of the Flock" was about a mile outside Bethlehem Ephrathah. It translates from the Hebrew phrase "Migdal Eder" [mig-dawl ay-der] and means a *watch tower of the flock*.

It is exactly what it describes - a tower from which shepherds could keep watch over their flocks.

The Targum is an Aramaic translation of the Hebrew Bible (Tanak) which was written during Israel's seventy year captivity in Babylon. In it the rabbis added commentary to the Scriptures. One such commentator, Rabbi Munk, paraphrases Micah 4:8 to say, "He spread His tent beyond Migdal Eder, the place where King Messiah will reveal Himself at the end of days."

We're thus definitely being told the precise place of Jesus' appearance on the earth.

What, exactly, was the Tower of the Flock outside of Bethlehem? Alfred Edersheim, a nineteenth-century Jewish scholar and convert to Christianity, writing in 1833, said this about Migdal Eder:

This Migdal Eder was not the watchtower for the ordinary flocks which pastured on the barren sheep ground beyond Bethlehem, but lay close to the town, on the road to Jerusalem. 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... The same... 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... Thus Jewish tradition in some dim manner apprehended the first revelation of the Messiah from that Migdal Eder, where shepherds watched the Temple flocks all the year round. Of the deep symbolic significance of such a coincidence, it is needless to speak.

The Mishnah is a written compilation of the oral traditions passed down by the rabbis. The Mishnah passage Edersheim references reads like this:

An animal that was found between Jerusalem and Migdal Eder, or a similar distance in any direction, the males are [considered] burnt offerings. The females are [considered] peace offerings. Rabbi Yehuda says, those which are fitting as a [Passover] offering are [considered] [Passover] offerings if it is thirty days before the festival.

The flocks being watched over are therefore assumed to be Passover lambs, fit for sacrifice at the nearby Temple.

What is "the deep symbolic significance" Edersheim mentioned?

It is this amazing fact:

Jesus Christ, who was identified by John the Baptist at His baptism as "the Lamb of God Who takes away the sins of the world," was born not just in Bethlehem, but right where the sacrificial lambs for the Temple were born.

Another scholar wrote this: "[The Bible's] original audience would have immediately picked up on the religious significance of the Bethlehem shepherds watching their flocks by night. Everyone in Israel recognized Bethlehem as being synonymous with sacrificial lambs."

Shepherds from all over Israel would drive their flocks to Migdal Eder. There, special Temple shepherds would inspect them for any defects that would render them unsuitable for sacrifice. Those sheep that were certified without spot or blemish would then be watched by these Temple shepherds until needed for sacrifice.

The shepherds who were responsible for certifying a lamb as spotless and without blemish for sacrifice were the ones notified that the perfect Lamb of God had been born.

When the angels appeared that night to the shepherds in the fields outside Bethlehem, it was not just a declaration of the Good News to simple shepherds. It was a powerful prophetic sign to all of Israel.

Here is another commentary, citing the Law of Moses in Leviticus, that lends credibility to Jesus being born exactly where the sacrificial lambs were birthed. It's a little long, for a quote, but it is worth a listen.

Tradition would have us believe that Joseph and Mary became stuck in an animal stable as a means of last resort. The Greek word used in Luke 2:7 for "inn" is *kataluma*, which is the same Greek word translated as "guestchamber" in Mark 14:14 and Luke 22:11. This scripture speaks of "no room in the *kataluma*" - not [an] "inn."

***Kataluma* would have been a guest room in [Joseph's] family home.**

According to the [Law], when a woman had an issue of blood for any reason, she was ritually unclean for that time and for seven days thereafter. She remained ceremonially unclean until she was purified by entering a *mikvah* (water immersion) in the witnessing presence of a rabbi. While she was ritually unclean, she had to live separately from the rest of the family so as not to defile the people in the household and by her presence rendering them ceremonially unclean. Therefore, during those times, the woman would leave and stay in a nearby area where she would not defile the home.

During childbirth and with the issue of blood loss, the same rule applied to women giving birth.

If she were to give birth in the common living area, she would defile the family and make it necessary for them to be ceremonially purified by both a ritual immersion and a sacrifice; therefore, women would leave the home and give birth elsewhere.

After the cessation of blood and the required time of waiting for purification, the woman and child would perform the necessary rituals of purification to be ceremonially clean and return to the household with the rest of the family.

Thus, with this understanding, there being "no place for them in the *kataluma*" would be regarded as completely appropriate.

Where, then, might Jesus have been born? We have, in the Bible, a further clue. What was the baby Jesus wrapped up in after His birth? That's right, swaddling cloths.

The information come from the angel's announcement of Jesus' birth to the shepherds in the field. "The angel said to them, "Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger" (Luke 2:11-12).

The significance of Jesus' swaddling clothes is often overlooked. But notice that the angel specifically explains that the fact that Jesus will be found in swaddling clothes, in a manger, was the "sign" to them of his true identity as the Savior (Luke 2:12).

How is that a sign?

Both swaddling clothes and mangers were components of the Tower of the Flock.

The sacrificial lambs were immediately wrapped in "swaddling cloths" after their births to protect them from injury, since baby lambs tend to thrash about and harm themselves in their first couple of hours of their lives.

Swaddling "bands" were also used for subduing them prior to sacrifice.

Regarding the manger in which Mary lay her swaddled baby, it could be that Jesus was born right there, among the flocks that were there near the Tower of the Flock, in a shelter that was used as a birthing room for the lambs.

While some of this is sanctified speculation, it would explain why there was no need for the angels to give these shepherds directions to the birth place, because they already knew where it was. He would be found bound by the lamb's swaddling clothes in the birthing room, in a manger, and they knew where that place was - at the Tower of the Flock.

The sacrificial lamb is a theme running all through the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation.

In Genesis, in the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve sinned. God promised He would resolve their sin and give Adam and Eve and their descendants eternal life. He said He would come Himself, into our world, and act in our place, on our behalf.

What would He have to do to resolve sin and death and give them and their descendants eternal life?

God showed them right there in the Garden. He slew animals in order to provide clothing for them. Something or someone had to die in their place, as a substitute.

I suggest those animals were lambs because from that moment on the followers of God approached Him by faith, offering lambs as a sacrifice.

In Bible times, while the Temple stood, very day of the Jewish calendar year, two lambs were required for a daily sacrifice, meaning that 730 were needed each year, plus the thousands more lambs needed annually for Passover, as well as for the other religious rituals.

Think back for a moment, to the immediate aftermath of Adam and Eve's sin. God provided animals as a sacrifice, but He also promised them that He Himself would eventually enter the human race as the Seed of the woman, and that He would be the ultimate sacrifice.

A little later on, in Abraham's near sacrifice of his son, Isaac, God gave us a picture of what that sacrifice would be like.

As Abraham and Isaac climbed the mountain, Isaac asked his father,

Genesis 22:7 ... My father: and he said, Here am I, my son. And he said, Behold the fire and the wood: but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?

Genesis 22:8 And Abraham said, My son, **God will provide himself a lamb** for a burnt offering: so they went both of them together.

It was a prophecy. "God will provide **Himself** a lamb." God would Himself come and be the sacrificial lamb.

There's no mystery as to exactly Who that was, and when He came.

- When Jesus came to be baptized, beginning His public ministry, John the Baptist identified Jesus as the Lamb of God Who takes away the sins of the world.
- In First Corinthians 5:7, the apostle Paul calls Jesus "our Passover," which is can be rendered our "Passover Lamb."
- In the Book of the Revelation of Jesus Christ, the apostle John sees Jesus in Heaven and calls Him the "Lamb that had been slain." It is Revelation's favorite name for Jesus, occurring some thirty times.

Migdal Eder, the Tower of the Flock, was the place where lambs destined for the Temple sacrifice were born and raised. Generations of hereditary shepherds tended the sacred flocks. The shepherds would separate the lambs, choosing only the perfect firstborn males to drive to Jerusalem. There the lambs would be purchased by those who wished to atone for their sins.

Then, on the same mountain where Abraham had nearly offered his son to the Lord, the lambs would shed their blood and lose their lives as substitutes for those offering them.

The day Jesus died on the Cross, the very hour He hung there, the sacrificial lambs from Migdal Eder were being offered in the Temple at the Passover of the Jews.

Jesus was born in the very place sacrificial lambs were born. He died just as the sacrificial lambs were being killed.

God promised He would provide a lamb. He promised He would provide Himself the Lamb. In Jesus we Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

What a wonderful fulfillment of prophecy and promises we have in Jesus!

A popular American pastor, as a kind of signature to his preaching God's Word, presents his material, then tells the congregation to ask him, out loud, "So what?"

It's a way of moving from information, to application.

What does this mean to us?

Well, first of all, it's pretty cool. *I mean that.* If you're a believer, stuff like this touches something in your spirit, exciting you about growing deeper in the Word and in your walk. Just when you thought you'd heard everything about the birth of Jesus, you find a rich vein of insight to mine.

More importantly, stuff like this reminds us that **God is in the details.**

Apple is known for its insane attention to detail in its products. A couple of examples:

- When engaging the voice dictation feature on newer Mac laptops, the computer automatically slows the internal fan speed to better hear your voice.
- The animated wallpapers on the Apple Watch aren't computer generated - they're actual photographs. The company spent hundreds of hours filming flowers blooming over time to create its motion watch face. The longest one - a single wallpaper - took 285 hours, and over 24,000 shots.

God is way more into details than Apple. And He's into details for you.

The Bible promises you, as a believer, that He Who has begun His good work in you, will definitely complete it. God calls you, personally, His workmanship. You are promised that you will be presented, in Heaven, perfect.

Co-operate with Him. Let Him have His perfect work in you. Don't complicate it by falling into sin, or by stumbling others, or by falling asleep in the light of Jesus' imminent return.

If you are not a believer - not a Christian - information like we have presented helps you to see that God wants to reach you with the Good News. He has acted, in history, to save you.

The Bible is unlike any other book. It's prophecies are 100% accurate, and, as you've seen, they are not obscure, but are bold in their detail.

Ever watch *Pawn Stars*? I was watching an episode where someone brought in a brass statue of the Hindu god, Shiva. In the little talk Rick likes to give about items, he said that the Hindu religion was the world's oldest.

A lot of times people will argue that many religions pre-date Christianity. But that's because they think, erroneously, that Christianity was founded by Jesus or His immediate followers in the first century.

Christ was promised in the Garden of Eden, to our first parents, right after they sinned. He pre-dates every religious system, and all of them are doctrines of demons that seek to keep you from the Good News.

You need saving. All of us, every human being, is born spiritually dead. We are all going to die physically one day. And if we die physically while remaining spiritually dead, we will die eternally.

To die eternally means you will live forever in eternity separated from God and from everyone else in a place of eternal conscious torment.

But you don't have to die eternally! You can instead have eternal life. You can live forever in Heaven in a place specially prepared for you by a loving God.

John 3:16 For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

God “gave” Jesus as the sacrifice, as the Lamb. If you believe in Him, He takes your sin upon Himself and gives you salvation in its stead. You become born again, born spiritually.

Come behold the Lamb. He is **your** Lamb, He is **your** sacrifice.

