Why shepherds?

A short meditation, based on the article on Shepherds in The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament.

One question about the Christmas story: Why are shepherds involved? By the way, this is the only time in the New Testament that real shepherds show up; the rest of the time, shepherds are metaphorical.

Sometimes, there is a romantic notion that those who live in the country are more real than those in the city, move representative of God’s work. We see this in “Kountry Kitsch” in the modern day; this was present in the Hellenistic world. But there’s no indication that the life of these shepherds is in any way better.

Alternatively, there was a tradition among the rabbis that shepherds were especially bad—thieves and cheats, whom one could not trust. You weren’t supposed to buy wool, milk or a kid from a shepherd, because it was assumed that that would be getting stolen goods. So maybe this is a typical ironic stance by Luke, showing Jesus among people like the tax-collectors and prostitutes. But there’s no indication that these shepherds were in any way worse than normal.

Now, David was a shepherd before he was king, of course, and so are these shepherds connected to Jesus, born “of the house and lineage of David,” in David’s city, Bethlehem? If so, why isn’t that spelled out? Wouldn’t the analogy imply that Jesus would be a shepherd for a while? But we have no evidence of this—and it seems just too little connection that that shepherds happened to be mentioned.

Some people say the angel appeared to the shepherds because they just happened to be awake. I think this is closer. But notice that in Luke’s telling the story, that it doesn’t seem to be an accident that the angel appears to the shepherds; the shepherds are mentioned first, and the angel shows up. Not, the angel comes to announce, looks for someone to talk to, and finds the shepherd.

I think it’s likely that the answer is straightforward. It’s speculation, but reasonable. Let’s start by considering where Jesus is—it’s mentioned three times. He’s not in the inn, because there is no room there. He is in a “manger,” a place where animals eat.

Now, it turns out that there are very ancient sources that say that this manger was in a cave. Helena built the Church of the Nativity over a cave around 330. An anti-Christian religious group, that worshipped Adonis, desecrated the cave in the 200s, showing that it was important to Christians at the time. And writings about the birthplace being in a cave go back to the 200s.

So, the manger isn’t, as we depict it in our crèches, a building attached to the inn, but a cave somewhere else. Caves often served Palestinian shepherds as mangers; here is a manger in a cave. In other words, it looks likely that the manger belonged not to the inn-keeper, *but to the shepherds*. Notice that the angel tells them that the baby will be born in a manger, and they seem to know exactly where to go right away (they don’t need no stinkin’ star). This is certainly consistent with their owning the manger.

So, why shepherds? If this ancient testimony correctly implies that the manger was found in a cave, which likely belonged to the shepherds, it’s because the shepherds are as intimately involved in the story as, say, the inn-keeper is. The angel doesn’t just happen to appear to the shepherds, the angel tells the shepherds to go back to their own manger to meet the baby.

Of course, whether or not the shepherds tending to be good people or bad people, they were definitely poor people, as were Jesus’s parents. The are of the same social class, and it’s the peasant class, not the kingly class, they have in common. Eventually, the magi-kings will show up, but now is Jesus is among his own: poor shepherds who don’t have many riches or privileges. As Paul writes, Jesus took on the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.

It is a great honor that the shepherds receive, I think. They get an angel invitation, and front row seats at the coming of the Messiah. They get this honor by being intimately connected into the Jesus story. I do think that Luke and Paul are trying to make a point about how Jesus empties himself to live among “poor ornery people, like your or like I.”

But I think we want to be part of the Jesus story, tool. The ways of getting engaged in the mission are the same old ways: Love your neighbor and Love your God. Be among the poor, and befriend them, since they seem to have a longer connection to him.

And let this be our Christmas meditation, the thing we ponder in our hearts:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

6 who, though he was in the form of God,

did not regard equality with God

as something to be exploited,

7 but emptied himself,

taking the form of a slave,

being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,

8 he humbled himself

and became obedient to the point of death—

even death on a cross. (Php 2:5–8)[[1]](#footnote-1)

1. *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Php 2:5–8). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)