

The Shepherd Who Couldn't Give a Lamb



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Cover image: a detail from the Piper Window in St Mary’s Iffley,
Oxford, UK

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as the author.

You can't pull the wool over my eyes. When I find my shepherds downtown carousing, it's not angelic visitations to blame; they're skiving, plain and simple.

It's sheer chance I discover them. I've been doing business in Bethlehem, and this census means what seems like the entire population of Judea is cramming the streets like olives in a press. I take a detour round the back of an inn riotous with travellers, and find even the stable has been taken over.

As I glance in, I recognise faces. 'Shem! Simon! What are you doing here? You're supposed to be watching my flocks.'

Shem looks sheepish, then grins and starts babbling about a star and angels and a baby.

'You must have had a skinful, to think I'd be taken in by such gibberish,' I say. 'Get back to work!'

Then I spot Zeb further in, talking to the tired-looking girl who's leaning over the manger.

'Don't tell me you're *all* here?'

'We left Bart,' says Simon.

'But he's only ten! What if wolves come? What about my lambs? That new one which needs keeping warm?'

'Zeb has it, in his robe.'

Zeb is making his way towards us.

'Where's my lamb?' I demand.

'I gave it to him.' He nods back at the man standing beside the girl. 'For his baby.'

‘It’s not yours to give. What’s with you tonight? You’re drunk, you’re incompetent, I’ve a good mind to sack you.’ I only mutter this threat. Good shepherds are scarce these days.

I fight my way over to the manger, where a crumple-faced new-born baby lies swaddled on the hay.

I’m more interested in the lamb the man holds: ‘That’s mine!’

‘Here, take it,’ he smiles. ‘I’ve already got one little one to carry home, I don’t want another.’

Outside, my shepherds are waiting, unseasonably cheerful.

‘You’ll get no pay tonight,’ I announce.

But it doesn’t stop them singing as we take the track up out of Bethlehem.

Something prompts me to look back.

Funny, from this angle, there’s a peculiarly bright star directly over the stable, almost as if it’s trying to draw attention ...

Maybe Shem wasn’t so drunk. Maybe I missed something in there.

In my mind, I review the scene we’ve just left: the girl, the man, the baby, and the travellers settling down for the night. No, nothing out of the ordinary there, not that I can see.

And no one pulls the wool over my eyes.