

Shepherd's Story

Well it happened just like this, don't ya know. There we was, sittin' around the fire, with our noses freezin' off, when all of a sudden crazy little Perez pokes me in the ribs and he says, "Jorim! Looky there!" An' he's lookin' way up in the sky with his fool mouth ahangin' open an' . . .

Hey, wait a minute, y'all don't know Perez, do ya? But you know *me*! My name's Jorim. An' I'm *famous*! Well that was me, and my brother Eli, my cousin Matt, ol' Naggai, and . . .and poor little ol' Perez. (He was a little "touched", don't ya know). It's a good thing we let him work for *us*, or he woulda starved *clean* to death. But he did right good work as a shepherd. Had a lot in common with the sheep, don't ya know.

So there we was, out there in the cold a-watchin' them *sheep*-- Hey, I bet you think these were some ordinary sheep! No siree! These sheep belonged to the high priest . . .sorta. "This is a *real* honor", they used to say, "*these* sheep belong to the *Lord*" they said. . . Humph! They just said that so they could pay us less! But one thing's for sure, they were *all* bound for the *same* end--(thumb across throat)--"Solomon's Barbecue" we used to call it. Every one of 'em. Kinda made us sorry for the little critters. 'Specially when they was cute and white and fuzzy. And you'd hafta carry 'em sometimes. And they'd think I was their mama. . .and they'd say so . . . "mahhhh!"

Funny how folks can git all *happy* readin' the Law of Moses. All it's talkin' about is killin' po' little ol' sheep. Seems like *nobody* ever asked the *sheep* how *they* felt about it!

So there we was, watchin' "the Lord's sheep", out there in the *freezin'* cold. . .Hey, did I tell you it was *cold* out there? Now *most* shepherds, don't ya know, get to go *indoors* in the wintertime. But we weren't like "*most* shepherds!" No siree, these were "the *Lord's* sheep", and the *Lord's* sheep got to be kept out in the *cold* to git ready for "Solomon's Barbecue", don't ya know, so *we* had to stay out in the cold *too*, keepin' warm any way we could.

And I wasn't used to all this cold, neither. Me 'n Eli grew up down south near Beersheba. Our daddy had been a well-digger. . . "Well, well, I'm a *well* well-digger, he used to say". 'Til he got *sick*. Then he was a *sick* well-digger, don't ya know. And there wasn't much call for sick well-diggers in those parts, so Mama said "Jorim ", you and Eli, gotta go git work." Now I was only twelve, and Eli just fourteen. So we had to quit school (I wasn't doin' too good anyhow) and go git us a job. We tried everything: haulin' bricks, diggin' graves, just tryin' to s'port the family. Course, pretty soon daddy died. That made life a little easier. One less mouth to feed, don't ya know. Poor ol' Mama never did stop cryin'.

Not 'til she was gone too. Then it was just me 'n Eli. And *we* near starved to death a couple of times 'til good ol' Uncle Jake got ahold of us. He got us this job takin' care of sheep. Now bein' a shepherd was a good bit beneath our dignity, don't you know, but at the time we were thinkin' a lot more about food than dignity, so we started workin' up here just outside the *big* city of Jerusalem. "The City of David" the ol' graybeards used to call it. To which all the folks from Bethlehem would say, "The *Second* City of David", don't ya know.

So there we was, sittin' around the fire--Hey! Not like you see in some of them paintings where those duded-up shepherds are sittin' around the fire like they was campin' out! Man, if you sit and stare at a fire at night, you can't see nothin' but *fire*! If you do that, all "the Lord's sheep" be wanderin' half-way to Galilee by the time you turn around! No, man, you gotta sit with your *back* to the fire, so you can see what those dumb sheep are doin'! Then if one dumb sheep sneaks off when you aint lookin', you gotta git your achin' bones up off that hard ground and go out there in the dark and *get* it 'fore some wild dog gets it; and then if one of them dogs eats one of the *Lord's* sheep, don't ya know, and *you-know-who's* gotta pay for it!

So old Naggai always says "I don't care if your nose *does* freeze off, you gotta watch them *sheep*!"

So--did I tell you this part yet?-- there we was, sittin' around the fire, with our noses freezin' off, when all of a sudden crazy little Perez pokes me in the ribs with his stick and he says, "Jorim! Looky there!" An' he's a-lookin' way up in the sky with his fool mouth ahangin' open an' his ol' eyes a-buggin' out. So I look up where he's a-lookin', and I can't see nothin', so I says, "Perez, aint nothin' there. You're crazy! And right *then*, I seen it too, so I jabs Eli in the ribs, and I say, "Eli! Looky there! What is it?" And all we could see for a minute was a light--like a big star, 'cept it was sorta movin' and a'wigglin' and it had some color in it. Then just about that time Perez yells out "It's a angel!" And *swoosh*! There he was --just like that! We all closed our eyes 'cause of the light, but when we peeked our eyes back open, there he was, just a-standin' right there on the ground, right beside a thorn bush and a big ol' mama sheep--a *real* angel!

Now I know what some of you folks are thinkin'! You're a-sayin', "O, you're just a dumb shepherd! What do *you* know about angels?" To which I says, "Don't know nothin'. 'Cept I *seen* one." Then all you *other* folks are a-sayin', "Well Jorim, quit yer jabberin'. What's a angel *look* like anyway?" Now *that* I can tell you sumpm' about. And I gotta tell ya that them ol' artists usually get it wrong again. (They're a funny bunch!) Angels got no *wings*! And they got no long flow-ery robes, and they *don't* look like *women*, and they *don't* fly around up in the sky! This angel, he just look like a man . . . little bit like a

shepherd, as a matter of fact! 'Cept all his clothes were whiter 'n white, and he was all a-glowin' real bright. But he spoke just as natural as you an' me. Didn't have no funny accent at all. Sounded just like *normal* folks from back home in Beersheba.

Now the first thing Mr. Angel says is "Woah, there! Don't be so scared!" And to make the point, he walks right up and pats ol' Perez on the rump, 'cause he was all hunched over and shakin' like a leaf. Soon as Mr. Angel touches him, Perez stops a-shakin' and looks up all happy and serene-like, and do you know what that boy says? He says, "I been *touched* . . . *by an angel!*" Then Mr. Angel kinda ruffles Perez's hair and commences with his little speech. He says, "What I've got to tell you is some *real* good news!" ('Course, me 'n Eli, we get to thinkin' that a blast of warm weather would be kinda nice 'bout now!) But he says, "This is gonna make a *lot* of folks *real* happy. Right up yonder in the city of David" (and he points to *Bethlehem*, don't you know!) "a deliverer has just been born for you!"

Perez yells out, "For *me*"?.

And the angel just saays, "Yep, fer you and fer *all* the people."

"Oh, that's wonnerful! " Perez says again. "But where *is* he?"

Now me 'n Eli, we don't feel like its 'propriate for Perez to be carryin' on a conversation with a angel--bein' a little "touched" and all--so we says, "Hush, Perez! Quit yer jabberin'!" But Perez, he don't pay us no mind. He just blurts out, "But *how* we gonna *find* 'im?"

And the angel --bein' nice on account of he could tell Perez was a little touched--he just answers Perez, nice as he can be. He says, "This here'll be the thing to look fer: look fer a brand-new baby all wrapped up in a blanket and lyin' in a feed trough."

"In a feed trough!?" Perez, he blurts out again.

And this time, me'n Eli and cousin Matt *and* Ol'Naggai are a-jumpin' all over ol' Perez and sayin' "Shut up, now Perez, this man didn't come all the way from. . .er, from uh. . .from *nowhere*'s to talk to a little ol' pea-brain shepherd like *you!*" And right then, all of a sudden there was this *big* blindin' flash of light, and there was angels *everywhere* just a singin' (real loud!) "Doxology to God in the *extreme* degree, and upon the earth, *peace* to folks who mean to do well!" Or somethin' like that. To tell you the truth, it was kinda hard to piece all together--all that singin'; and we were all kinda down on the ground half-way passed out with fright. All of us 'cept crazy ol' Perez, that is. He commenced to dancin' around and singin' and hollerin' like the crazy fool he was. That boy got *no* dignity.

Well, soon as they were through--'bout a chorus and a half, I'd say--they all went flyin' back up into. . .well, into, heaven, I guess. We watched 'em go as long as we could. Then, there we were--back out in the cold with our noses freezin' off, with a bunch a dumb sheep and a little fire, mostly out. We all stood there for a while just a-lookin' up in the sky with our mouths a-hangin' open--waitin' for the second verse, I guess--when Perez starts

squawkin': "C'mon, lets go, *Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us!*" . . .(Funny he should say it that way, but that's *exactly* what he said!)

So we're all a-gettin' ready to go up the hill, when all of a sudden Naggai shouts out, "Wait a minute here! Who's gonna stay and watch these sheep?" In all the excitement, we'd near *forgotten* about the sheep. They were still just layin' around like nothin' ever happened. So we took a vote. And we *all* elected. . .that's right, *Perez!* *He* could stay with the sheep. So we all says, "Perez, *you* stay and watch the sheep!"

"Me!" he squawks, "Why me? It was *my* angel! I seen 'im first! And he touched *me*, didn't he?"

"Now, Perez", Ol' Naggai was a sayin', "somebody's gotta stay here and watch the *Lord's* sheep. It wouldn't *do* to have the *Lord's* sheep wanderin' all over Judea, now would it?"

Of course, poor ol' Perez couldn't think of *nothin'* to say to *that*, so he just plunked his self down all sad-like, and the rest of us, we're pickin' up our stuff to go find this baby--born to us in Bethlehem.

The sky was *just* startin' to turn gray when we got up into Bethlehem--Aint really that big a place--'bout two thousand folks back in those days, but when two thousand folks each has *one* mule or *one* cow apiece, and every cow or mule has at least *one* feed trough apiece, well, there gets to be a right many feed troughs, don't you know. So Naggai says, "Hold on, here. We gotta get ourselves organized." And him bein' the leader and all, we let him organize us into four groups--one group is me, one group is my big brother, Eli, one group is my cousin Matt, and one group is his self. Then, when we are all divided into groups, he tells us all which way to go, and to be *real* quiet. "Most folks is still sleepin'", he says, "and they don't take too well to havin' shepherds pokin' their noses all over the place while it's still dark outside. Might look sorta bad", he says.

So we commence to lookin' all over town for *one* feed trough with a *baby* in it. I *hears* a baby or two, but they wasn't in feed-troughs, and I finds a *bunch* of feed-troughs, but none of em' have babies in 'em. Then just about the time I'm sneakin' round the side of a hill, I sees a glow comin' from a little ol'shed up a-side of the hill, and then I see somebody sneakin' up *ahead* of me, an' *then* I hears a baby cryin' in the shed, and *then* I see. . .why, it's ol' *Perez!* An' he's just a'lookin' at this baby layin' in a feed trough, and there's a mama, and a daddy just a-sittin' there, purdy as a picture. An' I'm about to clobber ol' Perez, and I says, "Where'd you put them sheep?" But the mama says "Shhh!", and so I shush.

And there *he* was. All wrapped up in cloths, just like the angel says. Kinda pink and wriggly just like any other little ol' baby. An' then Eli and Naggai and Matt shows up, and

the mama shushes them, too, so we all just sorta stand there a lookin' at this baby just a sleepin' in the feed trough.

And Naggai tells the ma and pa all about them angels, and they listen real carefully. And the daddy, he says, "so *you* all are *shepherds*." he says. Wasn't exactly a question. More like he was *thinkin'* somethin'.

An' we're standin' there all quiet for awhile when little ol' Perez turns around with his big ol' eyes full of big ol' tears and his big ol' smile with two big ol' teeth missin', an' he says, "I'm a-watchin' the Lord's sheep." An' there was somethin' in the way he said it that made us not say anything back. We had a lot to learn way back then, don't ya know; an awful lot to learn.

Well, pretty soon the sun was a-comin' up, and folks were a-gettin' up and goin' to work, so we left that shed with the baby in it, an' we started back for the sheep. And *you bet!* We told *everybody* 'bout them angels and that baby. My, my, what a ruccous we must'a made *that* morning! But that was a *long* time ago. . .

Oh yeah, we found all our sheep. They was right where we left 'em. Perez says he *told* 'em all to stay put, so they did. (Roll eyes, indicate "crazy".)

But that was the *last* time we ever saw that little baby; never saw no more angels, neither. But we sure thought about 'em a lot. *Some* folks 'round Bethlehem never even believed us; *lot* of 'em did, though, and talked about it for a *long* time. We *heard* they took the baby up to Jerusalem to get dedicated, then lit outa there for. . . fer Egypt, I think it was. Then *nobody* heard about 'em for a *long* time.

Ha! Me 'n Eli 'n Matt used to argue over and over about who that baby was. Even went up to the synagogue school and asked the rabbis about it. They said, sure enough, the deliverer *was* supposed to be born 'bout now--*maybe!*, and *some* folks *even* thought he might come from Bethlehem. But *no* rabbi thought the deliverer would *ever* have to lay in a feed trough! . . . So we just kept on arguin'.

All 'cept Perez, that is! He'd *never* hear *no* arguin' about it at all. He just says over and over "I got to see the Lord's sheep. I seen him, and he seen me!"

Well, years 'n years 'n years went by. Ol' Naggai took sick and died. Cousin Matt went and got a job sellin' sheep up at the temple. Me 'n Eli--*and* Perez--just kept on watchin' sheep. But long time later we got to hearin' some wild stories. Some feller up in Galilee was makin' sick people *well*, and drivin' out demons, and even *raisin'* folks from the *dead!* *Everybody* was talkin' about it. Couple times he came down to Jerusalem. Cousin Matt said he seen him once, and he seemed kinda angry-like. *Everybody* was sayin' "Is *this* the one? Is *this* the one?" Everybody 'cept *Perez*, that is. He just kept on a-sayin' "He's the one! He's the one! That's my Lord's sheep!"

We never did get to see him. He didn't really *last* very long. Seems like the High Priest and the ol' graybeards didn't take to him too well. Nearly had a *riot* right in the middle of *Passover*! So the Romans took him and . . .well, they killed him. That was a *real* dark day. I'll never forget ol' Perez--just sat there on a rock and cried like a baby all day long. "The Lord's sheep, the Lord's sheep", he just kept on a-sayin'. "They always kill the Lord's sheep."

Seems like that woulda been the end of the story. . .but it depends who ya talk to. His *friends* say he came back to life, and then went back up into heaven. (Well, I've seen *that* happen!) The ol' *graybeards* say somebody just stole the body. But it seems like somebody woulda fessed-up by now--'*specially* when they started. . .you know, hurtin' folks. So me'n Eli just *had* to go see for ourselves, so we went up to the city and saw the very place where he was buried. Just as *clean* as you please. Not a *body* in sight! Makes us think he was a very special person. We got lots of friends who believe like we do. Get together with 'em every week. They talk a lot about sheep, so they sorta *like* shepherds!

Well, just one more thing I gotta tell ya. It's been about six years since this all happened, and the *strangest* thing happened to our business. Appears ol' "Solomon's Barbeque" sorta closed down the shop. Folks just stopped buyin' the Lord's sheep. Stopped *killin'* 'em almost altogether. (Made me kinda *happy* for the *sheep*!) The High Priest kept payin' us for awhile--just to keep us appearances--but *we* got to keep all the sheep! Haven't sent one up there for years, now. So me 'n Eli sorta set ourselves up in the wool business. Keep ourselves *indoors* all winter, and dress *real* nice all year long.

Oh yeah, and crazy ol' Perez--he got outa the *sheep* business altogether. Arthritis got too bad for 'im. An ol' widder woman up in town took him in. He's still *happy* as ever, singin' and hummin' all the time. "White r than snow--"

("Perez! We *hates* snow!" we tell 'im.)

"Whiter than snow; The Lord's sheep can make your heart whiter than snow. . ."