

Swaddling Sheep
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Luke 2:12

(NA 28th ed.)

(LEB)

καὶ τοῦτο ὑμῖν τὸ σημεῖον,	And this will be the sign for you:
εὕρήσετε βρέφος	you will find the baby
ἐσπαργανωμένον	wrapped in strips of cloth
καὶ κείμενον ἐν φάτνῃ.	and lying in a manger.

Semeion is “sign” as in semantics. In line 2, see “Eureka!” in *eurisko*, “I found it!” Brephic is a synonym for embryonic. A *phatne* is a stone boxlike hollowed-out receptacle for fodder. Here is a picture I took of one in Israel→



Keimai means “to lie down.” But the most interesting word in the verse is *sparganoō*, to swathe or wrap in strips. Let me share with you what Ashraf, our guide in Bethlehem last Christmas, said about that.



First of all, the hills of Bethlehem (as shown) raised sheep for sacrifice in the Temple in Jerusalem. When a lamb was born, it was wrapped in strips of cloth for a while to keep its feet from the ground. It started life specially treated, since it was destined to be a holy sacrifice. On the other hand, such treatment was not practiced for human infants. Thus, a good translation of Luke should not give the impression that the “swaddling band” or “strips of cloth” was an ordinary receiving blanket. Rather, wrapping the baby Jesus in these strips of cloth set him apart in an unusual way as destined for sacrifice, like the lambs.

The angels said that to find a baby wrapped in the sort of cloth that they used on newborn lambs was a “sign.” It would not be much of a sign if Jesus were wrapped up like any other infant. Rather, the shepherds found him wrapped up in a unique and distinctive manner. They relayed this special identifying mark to his parents (v17). Again—it would not have been much of a “saying” if Jesus was simply in a receiving blanket.

In Bethlehem it was not unusual for houses to be built above caves. The cave was basically the basement. Ashraf suggested that Joseph’s family in Bethlehem had a full house, and Mary needed privacy to give birth. So Jesus was born in what was probably a cave in the lower part of the house. I have seen in Bethlehem just such a cave. And guess what? It looked a lot like caves used for tombs in that place and time. In the Greek Orthodox Service of Matins for Christmas, the place of Jesus’ birth is called a σπήλαιον, “cave” (think, “spelunking”), the same word used for Lazarus’ tomb (John 11:38).

In the Service of Matins for Easter, the “Myrrh-bearing women” cry,

O friends, come let us anoint with spices the life-bearing yet buried Body, the flesh that raises fallen Adam, lying as it is in the grave. Let us go, let us hurry like the Magi, and adore Him, and offer the ointments, as if gifts, to Him who is wrapped, not in swaddling but grave clothes.

In the gospels, myrrh is found three times. It was a gift to Jesus at his birth (Matt 2:11). It was offered to Jesus on the cross (Mark 15:23). And it was one of the burial spices used with linen cloths to wrap the body of Jesus in preparation for burial.

When we read the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke, we are being treated to a foreshadowing of Jesus' dénouement, the very purpose for which he was born. He was born to die for the sins of the world. His life was headed there from the moment he first took breath. As he lay (*keimai*) in the manger, so he lay (*keimai*) in a tomb (Matt 28:6).

But of course that wasn't the end. The shepherds "found" Jesus in the manger. But with the stone rolled away, the disciples didn't "find" his body (Luke 24:3). Of course, angels announced both his birth and his resurrection (John 20:12). He was born to die, and to rise again.

So when we celebrate Christmas remember that we are really celebrating the whole story, and not just his birth. We can see the end in the beginning.

Something to think about in the Christmas season.