

# SHEPHERDS KEEPING WATCH BY NIGHT (LUKE 2:8): Passover Symbolism in the Birth Narrative?<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstrak:** That the birth of Jesus is not commonly associated with the Passover is hardly surprising. There seems to be no Passover allusion, let alone clear citation in this text. However, a closer look suggests that Luke might already evoke the Passover motif in the nativity scene, through his depiction of the shepherds. While there have been many suggestions regarding the significance of the shepherds in the birth narrative, all those proposals focus mainly on the question of identity (i.e. what the term 'shepherd' might evoke). In this paper, I argue that the focus on the temporal setting as well as the action of the shepherds could shed some light to the depiction of the shepherds in the nativity scene. The night setting recalls the Passover night rescue recorded in Exodus 12. Furthermore, keeping watch by night in anticipation of God's salvation is also a well known motif in the story of Passover, a motif that the Lukan shepherds exemplify. To support my proposal, I will look into several early Jewish writings associating the Passover with nocturnal salvation.

**Key words:** *Passover, birth of Jesus, shepherds, night rescue*

## Introduction

This paper is my research project on the appropriation of Passover in Luke-Acts. My aim is to understand where, how, and why Luke uses the Passover theme. Here, I will focus mainly on the

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depiction of the shepherds in the birth narrative. The text to be investigated is Luke 2:8,

Καὶ ποιμένες ἦσαν ἐν τῇ χώρᾳ τῇ αὐτῇ ἀγραυλοῦντες καὶ φυλάσσοντες φυλακὰς τῆς νυκτὸς ἐπὶ τὴν ποιμνὴν αὐτῶν	In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.
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In the Lukan birth narrative, the first group of people who receive the news of Jesus' birth are the shepherds. The reason why the shepherds are chosen has intrigued scholars. Some think that the shepherds represent sinners,<sup>2</sup> others believe that they represent those who are socially and economically needy.<sup>3</sup> Still other argue that they evoke the depiction of the coming saviour as the true shepherd of Israel.<sup>4</sup> Despite the differences, all those proposals above focus mainly on the (symbolic) identity or quality of the shepherds. None, however, has analysed the night setting and the shepherds' actions in order to understand their role in the birth narrative, a task that I

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2. F. L. Godet, *A Commentary on the Gospel of St. Luke*, 2 vols. (T&T Clark: Edinburgh, 1976), 1.130. However, Luke always writes positively about shepherds. Luke 15:4; Acts 20:28; cf. Mark 6:34; John 10; Rev 17:7. Furthermore such a negative description of shepherds comes from literature after the time of Luke (e.g. b. Sanh. 25b.).

3. I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 108; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke*, 2 vols., AB 28-28A (New York: Doubleday, 1981-1985), 1.408; Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 130-31. Yet, they are not the only group who are deprived both socially and economically.

4. However, the link would make more sense if the child, and not the witnesses of his birth, were the one related to the shepherd symbolism (Marshall, *Gospel of Luke*, 108; cf. John T. Carroll, *Luke: A Commentary*, NTL [Louisville: WJK, 2012], 69).

seek to do.<sup>5</sup> Thus, in this paper, I will argue that both the night setting and the shepherds' action evoke the story of Passover night rescue.

A night setting might have a greater importance than being merely the background for a story, especially when it is placed in the context of God's salvation.<sup>6</sup> While the story of God's salvation can be found virtually everywhere in the Old Testament, and within a variety of contexts, it is more likely to associate the notion of nocturnal salvation with the Passover night rescue. To substantiate this argument, we must look at several Passover-related passages from early Jewish writings.

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5. Another line of interpretation is to associate the shepherds with the so-called "Tower of the Flock" (מגדל-עדר / Migdal Eder), where the promise of the coming Messiah has been foretold. The main pretext for this association comes from Micah 4:8 where God, addressing the Tower of the Flock, promises the restoration of the kingdom: "And you, O tower of the flock (מגדל-עדר), hill of daughter Zion, to you it shall come, the former dominion shall come, the sovereignty of daughter Jerusalem" (Mic 4:8). See Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospel of Matthew and Luke*, updated ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 421–3; François Bovon argues that options 2 and 3 are both present to show the birth of the messianic shepherds (Bovon, *Luke*, 3 vols., Hermeneia [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002–2013], 1.87). One major issue with this interpretation is that in Micah 4:8, the tower is identified as part of the vicinity of Zion/Jerusalem and not Bethlehem (Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 1.395).

6. Marshall reckons that somehow Luke chose the night as the "appropriate time ...for divine revelation" (*Gospel of Luke*, 108). However, he does not explain why it is so. For some, the sole purpose of the night setting is to dramatise the angel's appearance in glorious light (Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 1.409; John Nolland, *Luke*, 3 vols., WBC 35A–C [Dallas: Word, 1989–1993], 1.106).

### Nocturnal Salvation in the Jewish Tradition

The main source for the story of Passover rescue is found in Exodus 12. In this passage, God punishes the Egyptians with the death of their firstborn. The punishment will take place at night,

And I will pass through the land, Egypt, on this night (καὶ διελεύσομαι ἐν γῆ Αἰγύπτῳ ἐν τῇ νυκτὶ ταύτῃ), and I will strike down every firstborn in the land, Egypt, from human being to animal, and on all the gods of the Egyptians I will execute vengeance. I am the Lord.

(Exod 12:12)

In Exodus 12, the Passover night is not only depicted as the time when God punishes the Egyptians. It is also remembered as the time when God rescues the Israelites. Through the Passover ritual, God protects the Israelites and leads them out from Egypt (Exod 12:1–13, 21–27). Just as promised, God strikes down the firstborn of the Egyptians at midnight (μεσούσης τῆς νυκτός, Exod 12:29). On the same night, Pharaoh orders the Israelites to leave (Exod 12:31). Thus the people go out from Egypt hastily (Exod 12:33; cf. 12:11).

The salvation by night is later reiterated in Exodus 12:41–42,

<sup>41</sup>καὶ ἐγένετο μετὰ τετρακόσια τριάκοντα ἔτη ἐξῆλθεν πᾶσα ἡ δύναμις κυρίου ἐκ γῆς Αἰγύπτου νυκτός· <sup>42</sup>προφυλακὴ ἐστὶν τῷ κυρίῳ ὥστε ἐξαγαγεῖν αὐτοὺς ἐκ γῆς Αἰγύπτου· ἐκείνη ἡ νύξ αὕτη προφυλακὴ κυρίῳ ὥστε πᾶσιν τοῖς υἱοῖς Ἰσραὴλ εἶναι εἰς γενεὰς αὐτῶν.<sup>7</sup>

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7. The position of νυκτός in verse 41 follows John Wevers (*Exodus, Septuaginta: Academiae Scientiarum Gottingensis editum* II, 1 [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991], 177; cf. John W. Wevers, *Notes on the Greek Text of Exodus* [Scholars, 1990], 190; Daniel Gurtner, *Exodus: A Commentary on the Greek Text of Codex Vaticanus* [Leiden: Brill, 2013],

<sup>41</sup>And it happened after four hundred and thirty years that all the host of the Lord went out from the land of Egypt during the night. <sup>42</sup>It is a vigil for the Lord so that he might bring them out of the land of Egypt. That night is this vigil for the Lord so that it might be for all the sons of Israel throughout their generations. (Exod 12:41–42 NETS)

In verse 41, the narrator reports that all the Israelites (“the host of the Lord”) go out from Egypt “at night” (νυκτός) and the nocturnal nature of the salvation gives rise to the instruction to have a nocturnal commemoration. Verse 42b states that “that night” (ἐκεῖνη ἡ νύξ) is a vigil to the Lord to be observed by all Israelites in all ages.<sup>8</sup>

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321). Rahlfs places it at the beginning of verse 42. The OT Greek versions of Aquila and Symmachus follow the MT order but change the wording. Both use the nominative νύξ. Aquila has νύξ παρατηρήσεων (“night of observations”), while Symmachus uses νύξ παρατερημένη (“observed night”).

8. Scholars differ in interpreting the two vigils in Exod 12:42. Some argue that verse 42a refers to God, who keeps the vigil by his salvific act to protect and liberate the people, while verse 42b refers to the people who are obliged to observe the Passover in remembrance of God’s liberation (Alain Le Boulluec and P. Sandevour, *L’Exode, La Bible D’Alexandrie* 2 [Paris: Cerf, 1989], 154; cf. William H. C. Propp, *Exodus 1-18: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 2 [New York: Doubleday, 1999], 416; J. I. Durham, *Exodus*, WBC 3 [Waco, Tex.: Word, 1987], 173; Thomas Dozeman, *Exodus*, ECC [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009], 284). Others state that both parts speak about the Israelites who are called to keep the Passover. The only difference is that the first part makes reference to the first generation (i.e. those who experience the exodus liberation), whereas the second refers to the later generation (Wevers, *Notes*, 190–91; William Johnstone, *Exodus 1-19* [Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2014], 240; Cornelis Houtman, *Exodus: Volume 2 (Chapters 7:14–19:25)*, HCOT [Kampen: Kok, 1996], 204–5).

The recollection of the Passover rescue as a night rescue extends beyond the text of Exodus. In Deuteronomy 16:1, God summons Israelites to observe the Passover for they come out of Egypt at night (“for...you came out of Egypt by night/ ὅτι... ἐξῆλθες ἐξ Αἰγύπτου νυκτός). A similar line of reading is found in Jubilees 49:2, where it states, “For on this night – it was the beginning of the festival and the beginning of joy – you were eating the Passover in Egypt when all the forces of Mastema were sent to kill every first-born in the land of Egypt...”

In both texts above, the night rescue is explicitly related to the Passover (i.e. the term ‘Passover’ is present). However, in some other texts, the nocturnal salvation is only implicitly related to the Passover. These passages assume that the reader would understand the association between the night rescue and the Passover. Three samples of these passages will be discussed.

### **Wisdom 18:6–8**

Here, the author depicts the death of the Egyptian firstborn in contrast to the protection of the Israelites (Wis. 18:5–25). The author begins by stating how the Egyptians kill the infants of the Israelites (cf. Exod 1:22) and how one child, Moses, is rescued from the infanticide. In retribution, God takes the lives of Egyptian firstborn and, later, the lives of the Egyptians themselves, by flood (Wis 18:5). The author then describes the Passover-night rescue,

<sup>6</sup>That night (ἐκεῖνη ἡ νύξ) was made known beforehand to our ancestors, so that they might rejoice in sure knowledge of the

oaths in which they trusted. <sup>7</sup>The deliverance of the righteous and the destruction of their enemies were expected by your people. <sup>8</sup>For by the same means by which you punished our enemies you called us to yourself and glorified us. (Wis 18:6–8)

“That night” refers to the time when God strikes the Egyptian firstborn (cf. Wis 18:10–19). The phrase itself, ἐκείνη ἡ νύξ, is also found in Exodus 12:42b. For the author of Wisdom, the night is well known not merely because of the plague of death. The significance is far greater. First, it signifies the deliverance of Israel and the destruction of her enemy (Wis 18:7). Second, ‘that night’ is also credited as being the time when God calls and lifts up Israel to be his people (Wis 18:8). That night is the beginning of Israel as a nation under God’s rule. Third, God has foretold the night of deliverance to the patriarchs.

### **The Passover Prayer in 4Q505 125**

In his influential study, Daniel Falk has identified a number of festival prayers found in the Qumran Cave.<sup>9</sup> Among the prayer fragments, there is one that is identified with a great certainty as a Passover prayer, 4Q505 125.<sup>10</sup>

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9. Daniel K. Falk, *Daily, Sabbath, and Festival Prayers in the Dead Sea Scrolls*, STDJ 27 (Leiden: Brill, 1998). There are a number of DSS manuscripts that mention Passover. It is found in the Calendrical Document, particularly in 4Q320 and 4Q321. Here the Passover is mentioned in a list of festivals without further discussion. It is also found in the Temple Scroll, especially 11Q19. It preserves the Passover law (11Q19 XVII 6–16). Other discussions of Passover are found in the fragment of 4Q365, 4Q265, and 11Q18.

10. Cf. James R. Davila, *Liturgical Works*, Eerdmans Commentaries on the Dead Sea Scrolls (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 38. Baillet regards

1 [Prayer for the night of] vigil. <sup>11</sup> Reme[mber, O Lord...]	[...תפלה לליל] שמורים זכן[רה אדוני...] 1
2 [...Yo]u [passed] over our houses [...]	[... פסחת]ה עלבתינו [...] 2
3 [...] not [...] delivered [...] <sup>12</sup>	[...] לוא חלצכ[...] 3
4 [...] all the nations [...]	[...] כול הגוים[...] 4

In line 1, the plural שמורים (“vigils”) is very particular. In the Jewish Scripture, the plural form is only found twice in Exodus 12:42 MT.

Exod 12:42a That was for the LORD a night of vigil

ליל שִׁמּוּרִים הוא לילה

Exod 12:42b That same night is a vigil to be kept for the LORD

הוא־הַלֵּיְלָה הַזֶּה לִּיהְנֶה שִׁמּוּרִים

Falk’s restoration opens up further information about the prayer fragment. If his reconstruction is correct, the first phrase in line 1 is the title of the prayer (“prayer for the night of vigils”). The words in line two will be the historical recollection on how God passes

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this fragment as part of a copy of *Words of the Luminaries*, hence the label 4Q505 (Maurice Baillet, *Qumrân Grotte 4, III (4Q482–4Q520)*, DJD 7 [Oxford: Clarendon, 1982], 168–70; cf. Dennis T. Olson, “Words of the Lights,” in *Pseudepigraphic and Non-Masoretic Psalms and Prayer; Vol. 4A of The Dead Sea Scrolls: Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek Texts with English Translations*, ed. James H. Charlesworth et al., PTSDSSP [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997], 144–45). However, Falk and others have shown that it is better to regards the fragment as part of 4Q509 *Festival Prayers* (Falk, *Festival Prayers*, 59–61, 175).

11. Davila has “vigils,” to reflect the plural of the Hebrew word (*Liturgical Works*, 38).

12. The exact meaning of line 3 is difficult to ascertain. Davila (*ibid.*) translates it as, “He has not delivered y[ou...]”; García Martínez and Tigchelaar prefers “not your deliverance” (*The Dead Sea Scrolls: Study Edition*, 2 vols. [Leiden: Brill, 1997], 1027).



over the houses of the Israelites and protects them from the death plague that falls upon the Egyptians.

Perhaps the most significant finding from this fragment is the title of the prayer. One would expect a standard title for Passover would be “prayer for Passover” (תפלה לפסח). That the fragment gives a different title suggests a strong awareness and emphasis on seeing the Passover rescue as a nocturnal rescue and the necessity to be vigilance to commemorate (and to hope for) God’s salvation.

### **Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum 32:16–17**

The whole chapter of LAB 32 depicts the victory hymn sung by Deborah, Barak, and the people. Unlike the song in the biblical account (cf. Judges 5), the hymn in LAB describes God’s glory, acts of salvation and election of Israel from the time he confuses the languages in Babel to the recent win over Sisera. In the context, the approaching night would end Deborah’s song of victory. Hence, she calls the day not to end soon so she can continue to sing God’s marvellous work of salvation. However, she then picks up the night motif and ties it to the theme of salvation.

Wait, you hours of the day, and do not wish to hurry, in order that we may declare what our mind can bring forward, for night will be upon us. It will be like the night when God killed the firstborn of the Egyptians on account of his own firstborn.

And then I will cease my hymn, for the time is readied for his just judgments. For I will sing a hymn to him in the renewal of creation. And the people will remember his saving power, and this will be a testimony for it... (LAB 32:16–17)

The depiction in verse 16 shows that the author is familiar with the tradition of the Passover-night rescue. A combination of references to salvation and night is enough to trigger the association with the Passover rescue. It could be that “night” is the favoured time for salvation.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, the author seems to depict an eschatological night of salvation, one that will be similar to the Passover-night rescue.<sup>14</sup>

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13. Daniel J. Harrington, et al., *Les Antiquités Bibliques*, 2 vols., SC 229–30 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1976), 2.175. Howard Jacobson thinks that it is odd for Deborah to request the day to halt but then proceed to sing about the nocturnal salvation. He suggests that there might be a lacunae or a corruption in the text. Perhaps there were originally two nights: the approaching night which Deborah wishes to delay, and the depiction of the future night of salvation (Jacobson, *A Commentary on Pseudo-Philo's Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum*, 2 vols. [Leiden: Brill, 1996], 2.293–94).

14. Roger Le Déaut, *La Nuit Pascale: essai sur la signification de la Pâque juive à partir du Targum d'Exode XII 42* (Rome: Institut Biblique Pontifical, 1963), 225, 354 n. 50. Some think that the night being mentioned is not the eschatological night, but simply the approaching night (e.g. Jacobson, *Pseudo-Philo's*, 2.894). However, scholars have noted the strong eschatological component in LAB (Harrington, *Les Antiquités Bibliques*, 2.53–57; Frederick M. Murphy, *Pseudo-Philo: Rewriting the Bible* [New York: Oxford University, 1993], 256–57). Thus, it is more likely that the author has in his mind a future salvation. To regard the night as the night immediately after the victory has little significance in comparison to reading it as pointing to the eschaton, even indirectly. A reference to a future salvation also speaks more effectively to the present context of the author.

The notion of eschatological Passover rescue will resurface in early rabbinic as well as targumic literature. Discussion about the role of Passover on the future redemption is found in *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael* (late 3rd century AD). In one passage, the rabbis show different positions on this matter, with some affirming the role of Passover and others refuting it. Taking the cue from Exodus 12:42a (“That was for the LORD a night of vigil”) Rabbi Joshua believes that, just as the Israelites are redeemed from Egypt on the night of Passover, the future redemption will take place on the same night

I have shown that in several early Jewish writings, the Passover rescue is identified as a nocturnal deliverance. Hence, the people is obliged to observe the night, not only to commemorate the past salvation, but perhaps also to await a future rescue. Having equipped with this understanding, we are in a better position to reread Luke 2:8.

### Revisiting the Shepherds in Luke 2:8

In the Lukan passage, we have references to both the night setting and the salvation message. Luke writes that the shepherds keep their flocks “by night” (τῆς νυκτός, Luke 2:8) and, on that night, an angel of the Lord proclaims to them the good news, that a saviour (σωτήρ) is born (Luke 2:11). The nocturnal setting alone does not

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*A Night of Watching unto the Lord*, etc. In that night were they redeemed and in that night will they be redeemed in the future – these are the words of R. Joshua, as it is said: ‘This same night is a night of watching unto the Lord.’” (Mek. R. Ish. Pisha 14; Translation taken from Jacob Z. Lauterbach, *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael: A Critical Edition, Based on the Manuscripts and Early Editions*, 3 vols. (Philadelphia: JPS, 1933), 1.115–16).

Perhaps the most famous of these is the passage of the four nights, an expansion of Exodus 12:42 found in Targum Neofiti 1 (3rd/4th century AD) and Targum Pseudo-Jonathan (7th/8th century AD).

Four nights are inscribed in the Book of Memorials before the Master of the world. The first night, when he was revealed to create the world; the second, when he was revealed to Abraham; the third, when he was revealed in Egypt, and his hand slew all the first-born of Egypt, and his right hand delivered the first-born of Israel; the fourth, when he will be revealed to redeem the people of the house of Israel from among the peoples. And he called all of them “nights of watching.” (Tg. Ps.-J. Exod 12:42; translation taken from Michael Maher, *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Exodus*, ArBib 2 [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994], 195).

prove the presence of an allusion to the Passover. However, this is the first hint of the concept.

The second hint is found in the action of the shepherds. Luke notes that they are in the fields, “keeping watch over their flock by night” (φυλάσσοντες φυλακὰς τῆς νυκτὸς ἐπὶ τὴν ποιμνὴν αὐτῶν). The issue here is whether to take the phrase in a neutral sense, a mere setting for what is to come, or in a theological sense. In the theological sense, the notion of keeping watch, or better, the obligation to keep watch at night is a motif found in the Passover night rescue story. The religious duty of watching at night appears in Exodus 12:42. The night observance is a response to God’s great act of salvation.<sup>15</sup>

If salvation by night is part of the people’s religious repertoire, we have to rethink the significance of this Lukan phrase. Night rescue is close to the memory of the Passover rescue. Is it particularly important to have the declaration of salvation depicted by night? If exodus is indeed in the background, then the night is a reminiscence of the Passover rescue. Furthermore, one of the reasons why the shepherds are suitable as the first recipients of the good news is because they kept watch by night. They might represent

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15. A number of scholars interpret Exodus 12:42 through the shepherd imagery. U. Cassuto argues that the language of watching in Exodus 12:42 is derived from the depiction of the watch of the shepherd. (*Commentary on the Book of Exodus* [Jerusalem: Magnes, 1967], 148). Victor Hamilton comments on the verse by stating, “here is Heaven’s Shepherd “keeping watch o’er his flock by night,”” (Hamilton, *Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011], 195).

the proper attitude of the righteous: to keep watch for God's coming salvation.

Is it therefore possible that Luke casts the shepherds as having the model response to the message of salvation? Is it because they are keeping watch by night, when everyone else is sleeping that they receive the message of salvation? Judging from the analysis above, such an interpretation is possible.

In conclusion, I have shown that in early Jewish writings, the Passover rescue is referred to and remembered as a nocturnal deliverance, and such deliverance leads to a nocturnal watch. It is possible that the depiction of the shepherds in Luke 2:8 should be read in light of this background. The shepherds' action, therefore, represent the proper attitude of the righteous: to keep watch for God's coming salvation.

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