

Harold McManus

Shepherding Practices of the First Century AD



Perhaps you have visited the “shepherds’ field” near Bethlehem. It is the traditional sight of the appearance of the angel to the shepherds on the night of Jesus’ birth. At that time it must have been grazing land, but today it is terraced farmland with stone fences.

The season during which the angel appeared probably was sometime between March and November.¹ This is the time when the shepherds can tend their flocks in the open

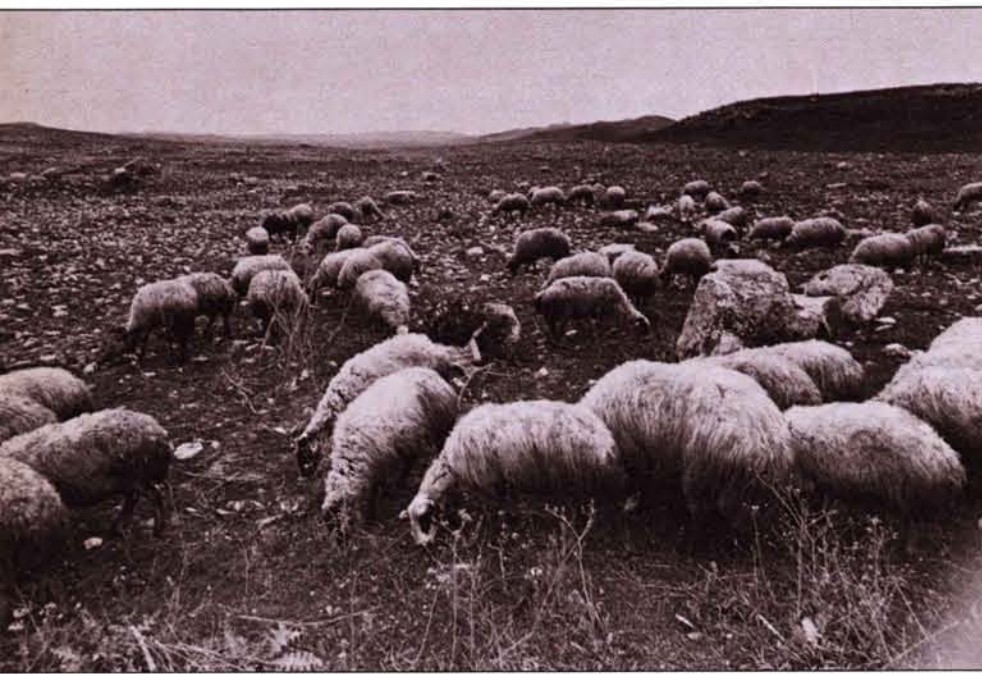
Above: A youthful shepherd tending a herd of goats on the slopes of the Hinnom Valley at Jerusalem. Shepherds often used fierce dogs for protection—but not to round up their flocks. Shepherds instead used chatter, shouting, or whistling to control the flocks.

fields. After November the temperatures are too low for the sheep to be outside a protective shelter.

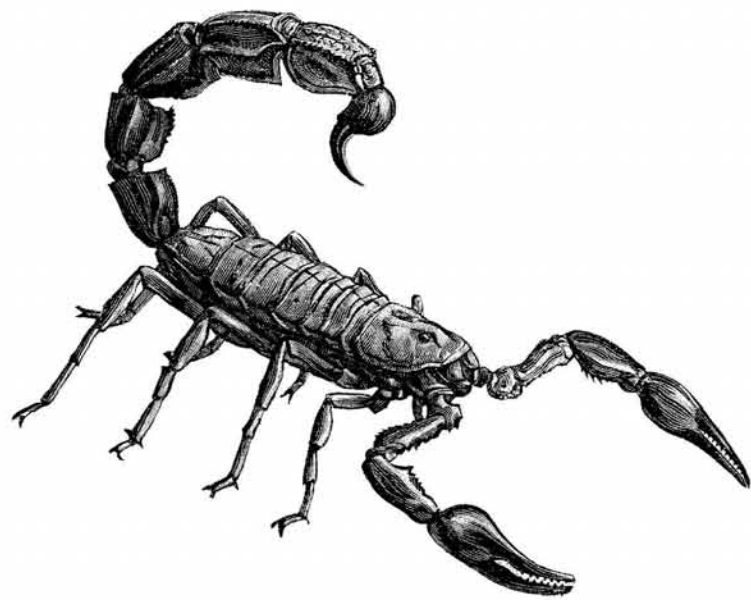
It is possible that the taxing ordered by the Roman government (Luke 2:1) might have taken place in

Palestine during the Passover season. Many of the Jews would be returning to their hometowns for this celebration and a head count would be far easier. This might answer the question of why the sheep were so near Jerusalem. The people would need the lambs for their Passover meals. Although there is no absolute proof for this assertion, it does fit many of

Lesson reference: BBS: Luke 2:8
L&W: Luke 2:8



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/DAVID ROGERS (2/28/5A)



Top: Sheep graze among the unexcavated ruins at Laodicea. **Above:** One of the constant threats to sheep in the Middle East is the scorpion.

the circumstances surrounding Jesus' birth.

If it was early spring the shepherds indeed would have been "seated on the ground" around a warm fire. During early spring, even as far south as Bethlehem, days are rainy and the

nights quite cool. Likely, they were passing the time by telling stories and singing before drowsiness overtook them; all except one. He would have been on duty at the entrance to a sheepfold where their sheep lay huddled against the cool night air. When his friends went to Bethlehem in response to the angel's announcement, he would have remained to keep watch against robbers and wild animals.

Shepherding in Palestine in the first century had undergone only one significant change since the time of Abraham. After their conquest of Canaan around 1250 BC, God's people ceased being nomads. They settled in villages and became farmers and vineyard keepers in addition to being herdsmen. Understandably, farmers and shepherds became competitors for land. The problem was solved by assigning land beyond the fields and vineyards to "community" shepherds who grazed their own small flocks and those of a few friends and neighbors. The animals were brought home each evening or after a few days and nights.² The herdsmen near Bethlehem to whom the angel appeared probably were such village shepherds.

The tending of large flocks was continued by shepherds who preferred life on the open range to village life. To them the important thing was freedom to move wherever pasture and water were regardless of distance or length of stay. This was their only vocation, and seasonal migrations enabled them to pursue it all year. The best grazing lands were in the central highlands, the hills of Syria, portions of the Negev, and the Transjordan plateau. Grass and water were plentiful in late winter and spring, but once the hot, drying winds of summer arrived, shepherds and flocks ranged far and wide looking for pasture. The normal practice was to set up camp near water and return to it at night. In winter the older shepherds lived in the encampment while the younger ones led the animals to warmer grazing grounds on lower terrain.³

Open-range shepherds were highly knowledgeable concerning sheep and goats. They knew how to breed and crossbreed them for the finest wool and mutton. In the first century, as today, the curling-horned, flat-tailed sheep especially were prized

because of their deep wool and tails which weighed as much as fifteen pounds and yielded large quantities of fat.⁴ On any given day, a shepherd had to be a veterinarian and nurse to his animals. From long experience he knew the best remedies for their illnesses, bruises, and scratches. He knew how to set broken bones and care for newborn lambs and kids. These he would carry in an inner pocket of his cloak when they needed special care.

A shepherd's responsibility for his flock was total and unending. The first requirement, of course, was to find grass and water. From June to mid-September this was not always easy to do. Although sheep and goats usually find something to eat even in the sparsest pastures, they cannot find water on their own. For this they depend on their shepherd. Since flocks have to drink at least once a day, finding water is imperative. Too, since sheep will not drink readily from fast-flowing water the shepherd must locate calm pools. This could be a problem at times because still water can become dirty quickly.

A shepherd's second most important responsibility was to protect his flock. On hot summer days and during storms, a place of shelter was desirable, but not an absolute necessity. Also, sheep were defenseless against wild animals such as wolves, jackals, and hyenas. Goats will form a tight ring for mutual protection, but sheep simply scatter.⁵

Thieves were a further threat to the safety of shepherd and flock, especially on lonely ranges far from human habitation. Other dangers were snakes, scorpions, poisonous weeds, briars, and bramble. Thus, a shepherd's need to be vigilant was never ending. All day long he kept an eye on his animals and at night he slept near them. Even if they were in the comparative safety of a sheepfold, he stretched himself across its

entrance while he slept.

Two items of equipment signified a shepherd's determination to protect his flock and himself: his rod and his slingshot. Both were useful against wild animals and thieves. His rod was an especially formidable weapon. About three feet in length, it was made from the root and trunk of a sapling oak. The knob of the root formed the head of the club and into it were driven pieces of flint and metal.⁶ The very sight of it was a "comfort" to sheep (Ps. 23). The slingshot was less formidable but potentially lethal. It could be used to drive away wild animals, to drop a stone near a sheep that was lagging behind, or to startle into a sense of danger a sheep innocently wandering in a wrong direction.

Sheep and goats were comforted by the sight of their keeper's staff as they were by his rod. About six feet long, often crooked at one end, it was made from a stout young tree and was useful for guiding the flock, for prodding loitering animals, and for striking off leaves and small branches for a tasty morsel. Young sheep often felt its touch in helping them over difficult places, in pulling them out of pits or ditches into which they had fallen, and in disentangling them from bramble. If in fording a stream an animal got in water over its head, or was swept along by the current, the staff was an emergency tool for rescue. At night each animal passed under the staff for counting and an inspection of its face and mouth for scratches and signs of disease. The staff also helped the shepherd maintain his footing on the steep slopes of the wilderness.

We need not suppose that a shepherd's protectiveness stemmed exclusively from a love for his animals. True, close relationships often developed between shepherd and sheep, but a herdsman's primary concern for the well-being of his flock was

economic in nature. Whether he or someone else owned them, sheep and goats were valuable. Each lost animal represented lost wool or milk as well as a lost lamb or kid that would have been born the next year. Sheep were shorn twice a year for wool that could be sold, bartered, or used for making clothing. Goats provided milk, butter, and cheese, and their hair and skins were used to make a variety of things. Both animals, of course, were valuable for meat when killed.

Further indication of a shepherd's concern for his flock was his preference for leading rather than driving them. Unlike western shepherds who drive their flock from behind, Palestinian herdsmen walk ahead of their animals to assure them of their presence and to inspect the terrain. In the first century the typical picture of an eastern shepherd was that of a man, heavily clothed against the elements, going ahead of his flock and carrying a staff in full view of his flock.

Considering the care and concern that shepherds manifested for their flocks, it is not strange that the Hebrews, from a very early time saw the same qualities in God, their best rulers, and their hoped-for Messiah. Nor is it strange that from the beginning Christians have seen in Jesus Christ the same shepherdlike qualities of care and concern and have employed His own phrase in speaking of Him as the Good Shepherd (John 10:11). ○

1. Malcolm O. Tolbert, *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, vol. 9, (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1970), p. 29.

2. *Harper's Encyclopedia of Bible Life* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), p. 143.

3. *Ibid.*

4. Madeline S. Miller and J. Lane Miller, "Sheep," *Harper's Bible Dictionary* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), p. 671.

5. George M. Mackie, *Bible Manners and Customs* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1896), p. 34.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 32; Miller and Miller, "Sheep," p. 675.

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