

Shepherding: Care of Lambs and Sheep



Shepherding in present-day Palestine. *Top right:* Sling stone from Ai. *Right:* Ancient Phoenician figure of a shepherd.

father's flock. Young David's skill in delivering the flock from a lion and a bear (1 Sam. 17:34-35) was sufficient recommendation to Saul to qualify David to fight Goliath.

Shepherding appears, on the surface, to be an easy vocation. The image of the shepherd alone with his sheep, living in direct contact with nature, subsisting on a diet of cheese and dried figs, blowing his reed flute and composing poetry, makes a pretty story, but it isn't factual. The shepherd had to contend with different character types among his flock. Some sheep would stay near the shepherd constantly. These were the special favorites, and were contented and happy. These sheep were in no real danger of getting lost or being mischievous. Most of the flock, however, were interested only in themselves and their own interests. They leaped from bush to bush looking for more food. Perhaps they followed the shepherd so as not to be rebuked or scolded for misbehaving. Some sheep were restless—jumping into various fields, climbing into bushes (and even into leaning trees)—giving the shepherd incessant headaches and troubles. A few sheep were the reckless type, running to and fro, without real regard for their safety or for obeying the shepherd. All too often they met an untimely demise at the hands of a lurking thief or the jaws of a beast of prey.¹

A shepherd's life was tough. The shepherd spent a full eight months of each year away from his home—from about April 1 until mid-November—in the open air with his flock. Sheep and shepherd spent the cold winter under cover. Jacob complained to Laban, his father-in-law, of the harsh life of the shepherd: "By day the heat consumed me and the frost by night, and sleep deserted me" (Gen. 31:40, NEB).²

Large flocks demanded the shepherd's constant attention. When one sheep strayed too far to find its way back, the shepherd had to find it. Hyenas, jackals, wolves, and bears were constant menaces. The shepherd often fought wild beasts, as David did. The shepherd armed himself with three weapons to protect himself and his sheep: a sling (consisting of two leather strips joined by a piece of woven material), a thirty-inch long rod (or stout club) with a knob on the end, and a large knife. Scorpions and snakes also threatened the safety of the sheep. The "good shepherd who gives his life for his sheep" was a reality in Jesus day.

Under ordinary circumstances, each morning the shepherd's first duty was to lead the sheep to a grazing spot where the grass was green and nourishing. He moved the animals from one pasture to another as the



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/KEN TOUCHTON

Gary K. Halbrook

The oldest occupation in Israel is that of shepherd. The Israelites had been nomads dwelling in tents and driving their sheep from one pasture to another long before they settled down to farm the land. Earliest mention of the shepherding task is in Genesis 4:2, where Abel is described as a "keeper of sheep." Shepherding was important in Israel in the time of Jesus, and its importance continues today.

Some flocks numbered in the thousands; their care could be entrusted only to the highly skilled. Shepherdesses are mentioned in some cases. Jacob met Rachel (Gen. 29:9), and Moses met Zipporah (zip-POH-ruh; Ex. 2:16-22) while the women were watering their flocks at wells. Although David was a youth, he was strong and mature enough to provide adequate protection for his



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/DAVID ROBERTSON/ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM, BEIRUT, LEBANON

grass was devoured. At noon he watered the sheep. Rushing streams frightened the sheep, so the shepherd stayed away from these. Instead, he led them to quiet waters—either wells, pools, or streams sheltered by sandbars. Beside the Wise Men's Well on the northern outskirts of Bethlehem is a circular stone trough two feet in diameter. Shepherds still draw water from the well in a skin bucket and fill the trough from which the sheep can drink easily. This trough maybe the "cup which ran over" (see Ps. 23:5), or the passage may refer to a drinking cup for a person.

In late autumn (when the pastures dried up) and in winter (in those places covered with snow), the shepherd had to furnish the food for the sheep, not just lead them to pasture. In eastern Lebanon, many flocks would gather between Baalbek and the cedars. All day long the shepherds cut down branches from the bushy trees. The green leaves and tender twigs provided sufficient nourishment for the flocks.³

The deep rock-cleft wadi (canyon or gully), in which thieves or wild animals could hide and through which the shepherd led the sheep at sunset, is most likely the "valley of the shadow" to which the psalmist referred (Ps. 23:4). Wolves and serpents lurked in the shadows ready to prey on unwary sheep. The shepherd used his rod to beat off the predators; with his crooked staff he lifted struggling sheep or dangerous stones.

Some pasture areas had towers in which shepherds kept watch for approaching robbers and wolves. Near Bethlehem, on the road to Jerusalem, is a watchtower known as *Migdal Eder*. Edersheim believes it was here that shepherds watching flocks destined for sacrifice in the Temple received news that Jesus would be born in a manger in Bethlehem.⁴ The angel accordingly could tell them without further explanation that the manger was the site of the baby's birth since they owned the stall in which the manger was located.

Often several shepherds brought their separate flocks together in a common fold for the night. While one shepherd stood watch in turn, the others slept. Sheepfolds, or sheepcotes, often were built to protect sheep against the night dangers of robbers, beasts, and weather, and to keep them from wandering off. In the valleys, sheepfolds are often low, flat buildings called *marah*. The yard is defended by a wide stone wall, completely encircled with sharp thorns. In ordinary weather the sheep sleep in the yard; in cold weather they are inside the *marah*. As spring approaches, the flocks move to higher *marahs* and greener pastures. In the hot, sultry summer, shepherds sleep with their flocks on the cool mountain heights, where the sheepfold of stout, tangled thornbushes is the only protection.⁵

Dr. William M. Miller of the American Presbyterian Mission in Iran was on a three-day journey by donkey in eastern Iran. His group stopped in a mud hut village for the night. As he toured the village, he said, "I came to a mound of earth piled up in a large circle, like a crude rampart, and on the top of the mound all around the circle was a heap of dry thorns. As I stood wondering what this might be one of the villagers approached me. 'Salaam,' I said, 'please tell me what this enclosure is for.'"

"'O, that is for the sheep,' he replied. 'They are brought in here for the night for safety.'"

"'Why are all the thorns piled on top of the wall?' I inquired.

"'Protection against the wolves. If a wolf tries to break in and attack the sheep, he will knock against the thorns, and they will make a noise, and the shepherd will wake up, and drive off the wolf.'"

"'But why does the wolf try to climb over the wall? Here is the entrance to the enclosure, it is open. There is no door to keep out the wolf; he could easily enter here.'"

"'O no,' said my guide, 'you do not understand. That is where the shepherd sleeps; the shepherd is the door.'"

"'And then I understood something that had often puzzled me,' said Dr. Miller. "'It became clear to me why Jesus had in John 10 called Himself first the door and then immediately afterwards the Shepherd. Since He is the Shepherd He is also the Door.'"

After a night with their flocks mixed together in the fold, each shepherd prepared to lead his own flock out to graze. Once outside the fold, the shepherd uttered a piercing cry. His sheep—and only his—responded to his call.

Because of the nature of a sheep—affectionate (2 Sam. 12:3), unaggressive (Isa. 53:7; Jer. 11:19), relatively defenseless (Mic. 5:8; Matt. 10:16), and in need of constant supervision (Num. 27:17; Ezek. 34:5; Matt. 9:36)—a tender relationship grew between sheep and shepherd. Some sheep were so tame that they came at the call of their names. The shepherd loved his sheep; his sheep loved him. ○

³William M. Thomson, *The Land and the Book* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1954), p. 203.

⁴From *The New English Bible*, Second Edition. © The Delegates of the Oxford University Press, and The Syndics of the Cambridge University Press, 1961, 1970. Reprinted by permission. All succeeding quotations from this version are indicated by the abbreviation NEB in parentheses.

⁵Thomson, *op. cit.*, p. 204.

⁶Alfred Edersheim, *Sketches of Jewish Social Life in the Days of Christ* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1950), p. 80.

⁷Thomson, *op. cit.*, pp. 201-202.

⁸Eric F. F. Bishop, "The Door of the Sheep," *The Expository Times*, Vol. 71 (July, 1960), p. 307.

Dr. Halbrook is pastor of First Baptist Chapel, Thomasboro, Illinois.