How did one of the lowliest jobs of men become one of the dearest images of God and His chosen leaders?

Many consider shepherding to be the lowest rung of migrant labor in America,1 and it was no different 2,000 years ago. An angel announced Christ’s birth to shepherds (Luke 2:8-18), men in a despised occupation. Shepherds could not be witnesses in court. Buying “wool, milk, or a kid from a shepherd was forbidden on the assumption that it would be stolen property.”2 Yet the image of the shepherd was a favorite biblical metaphor to describe God and those He chose as leaders of His people.

The image first appeared in the earliest days of Israel’s history, when the economy was based on a nomadic life and on moving flocks of sheep and goats in order to find sufficient pasture in the rainless summers. The patriarchs lived as herdsmen, as did Moses, David, and Amos.3 The work was both difficult and dangerous, as Jacob and David testified (Gen. 31:38-42; 1 Sam. 17:34-36). Against the backdrop of these early experiences, people began to compare divine and human leadership to the work of shepherding.

The Old Testament contains several references to God as “Shepherd” (Gen. 48:15; 49:24; Ps. 23:1; 80:1; Eccl. 12:11), plus many other references that compare His work to that of a shepherd.4 When the biblical writers said God “tends his flock like a shepherd” (e.g., Isa. 40:11)5 they had the idea of God feeding, leading, protecting, and restoring His people. While most references are to God’s care of the flock as a whole, in Psalm 23 David applies this imagery to his personal experience with God: “The Lord is my shepherd.”6

The concept of God as Shepherd was dear to the Old Testament people, but not unique to them. Assyrian literature speaks of “the god Dumu-zi, a shepherd,” who “ruled 36,000 years” and “Etana, a shepherd, he who ascended to heaven (and) . . . ruled 1,560 years.”7 Egyptian writings refer to Osiris, “the ruler of the world to come,” as one who tends the dead as his flock.8

The Bible often refers to God calling on leaders to shepherd His people. He reminded Nathan that all who ruled His people in the past were those “whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel” (2 Sam. 7:7). These rulers included Moses and Aaron (Ps. 77:20), and David, whom God chose “from tending the sheep . . . to be the shepherd of his people” (7:8-71). Second Samuel makes clear that shepherding God’s people and serving as their ruler meant the same thing: “You will shepherd my people Israel, and you will become their ruler” (5:2).

To be without an earthly ruler was to be “like sheep without a shepherd,” a condition Moses did not want for his people (Num. 27:17).9 God even called the pagan leader, Cyrus, “my shepherd” (Isa. 40:11).10

Lesson Reference

BSFL: Micah 5:1-5; 7:18-20

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who “will accomplish all that I please” in the return of the exiles to Jerusalem (Isa. 44:28).

According to the distinguished biblical scholar F. F. Bruce, “the portrayal of the ideal king as a shepherd is common form in ancient Near Eastern literature and farther afield too. Egypt and Greece, among other areas, provide ready parallels to the biblical material.”

In an Egyptian manuscript whose origins date as far back as the start of the Middle Kingdom (2090–2050 B.C.), a man named Ipu-wer appears before the Egyptian Pharaoh to denounce his responsibilities to his people. Ipu-wer describes the model king as “the herdsman of all men” who “has spent the day caring for them.”

In Greek culture, Homer regularly described care for animals as a shepherd or shepherdess’s responsibility. In his Iliad, King Agamemnon described a shepherd as “the protectors of the flock,” while Plato commented that the rulers of the city-state to shepherds who care for their flock.

C. J. Gadd summarized Assyrian and Babylonian literature and found the title “shepherd” ascribed to Lugal-zaggisi, who prayed that “they may always be the shepherd at the head of the flock.”

Dagan of Isin claimed the authorship of Larsa prayed for “a staff to subdue the people,” while King Ishme-Dagan of Isin claimed the authority given to him from his god was “a staff which makes the loyal men walk with one step.”

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Church leaders are called “pastors” or “shepherds.” Paul commanded the Ephesian elders to “be shepherds of the church of God, taking care of my sheep” (John 21:15–17).

Matthew saw as “shepherd without a sheep” (Matt. 9:36). His mission was to “reach the lost sheep of Israel” (Matt. 10:6).

Jesus declared, “My anger burns against these leaders” (10:6). The Lord echoed Jeremiah, God said that His people had become “lost sheep” because “their shepherds have led them astray” and “have not bestowed care on them.”

In Testament, Jude warned the church of “shepherds who feed only themselves” (v. 15).

Through earthly shepherds, and in spite of incompetent ones, Christ still leads His people as “the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls” (Jude 25).

On the night of the Last Supper, Peter had to caution the church leaders against “lording it over” others or seeking financial gain in their position of authority (1 Peter 5:1).

Just as the prophets warned of derelict shepherds in the Old Testament, Jude warned the church of “shepherds who feed only themselves” (v. 12). This messianic figure like David is what God promised through Micah. This messianic figure, who would come from Bethlehem, would shepherd God’s people:

Should not shepherds take care of the flock? You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally. . . . I am against the shepherds and will hold them accountable for my flock (34:7–10).

Through the prophets, God censured the shepherds for letting wild animals get to the sheep, for leading the flock in the wrong direction, and for leaving them altogether (Zech. 11:7). He also declared, “My anger burns against the shepherds, and I will punish the leaders” (11:7). The Lord echoed this thought when He promised to end such incompetent leaderships. “I myself will search for my sheep and look after them,” He said, adding, “I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David…” (Ezek. 34:21). Even as the people’s shepherding (the god) Marduk had committed to me.” Further, the Assyrian King Esarhaddon called himself “king of the four rims (of the earth), the true shepherd, favourite of the gods.”

Because of his position, a leader’s failure left the people vulnerable. Speaking through prophets, God

2. Joachim Jeremias, “Caring for them.” In Greek cul-

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