

Shepherds

A BIBLICAL IMAGE OF GOD & HIS CHOSEN LEADERS

By Thomas H. Goodman

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 herders, 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



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Above: Mosaic depicts a shepherd playing a flute; 2nd cent. A.D., Corinthian.

Left: Tablet details an inventory for shepherds

and their herds of sheep and goats, which were raised primarily for wool. Found at the Mycenaean palace at Pylos, dated 13-12 centuries B.C.

Below: Young shepherd tending sheep at Hormah. This region served as the southern border of Canaan during the time of the conquest.

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" (78:71). 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"

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.”¹⁰

In an Egyptian manuscript whose origins date as far back as the start of the Middle Kingdom (2300–2050 B.C.), a man named Ipu-wer appears before the Egyptian Pharaoh to denounce the Pharaoh’s failures to fulfill 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.”¹¹ In Greek culture, Homer regularly described Agamemnon as “the people’s shepherd,” while Plato compared the rulers of the city-state to shepherds who care for their flock.¹²

C. J. Gadd summarized Assyrian and Babylonian literature and found the title “shepherd” ascribed to Lugal-zaggisi, who prayed “that he might always be the shepherd at the head of the flock.” Gudea, too, was said to be “chosen as the true shepherd of the land.” Warad-Sin 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.” King Lipit-Ishtar prayed that he could “guide the black-headed people as a ewe does her lambs.”¹³

In addition, Hammurabi called himself “the perfect king...whose (i.e. 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.”¹⁴

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



Left: Modern sheep shearers.

Right: This piece of ivory decorated with a shepherd and his flute with sheep around him comes from Khirbet el-Karmel in Jordan.

Below: Terracotta statuette of a goat; from Boeotia, central Greece; dated to 6th cent. B.C.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO BOB SCHATZ/ DEPT. OF ANTIQUITIES IN JORDAN ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM, AMMAN, JORDAN (8/24/03)

complained against shepherd-leaders who imperiled His flock. Through Jeremiah, God said that His people had become “lost sheep” because “their shepherds have led them astray” and “have not bestowed care on them” (50:6; 23:1-2).¹⁵ God also commanded Ezekiel to “prophesy against the shepherds of Israel”:

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 (34:2,4,10).

Through the prophets, God castigated the shepherds for letting wild animals get to the sheep, for leading the flock in the wrong direction, and for leaving them altogether (Zech. 11:17). He also declared, “My anger burns against the shepherds, and I will punish the leaders” (10:3). The Lord echoed this thought when He promised that incompetent leaders would be punished and removed. “I myself will search for my sheep and look

after them,” He said, adding, “I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David...he will tend them and be their shepherd” (Ezek. 34:11,23; see also vv.12-22; Jer. 23:3-5).

This messianic figure like David is what God promised through Micah. This messianic figure, who would come from Bethlehem, would shepherd God’s people:

out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.... He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth. And he will be their peace (5:2,4-5).

Matthew said this prophecy was fulfilled in the birth of Jesus (2:6). Jesus referred to Himself as the Good Shepherd (John 10) who came to do what other caretakers were unwilling to do. He had compassion on the crowds, whom He

saw as “sheep without a shepherd” (Matt. 9:36). His mission was to reach “the lost sheep of Israel” (15:24).¹⁶ This lostness was due to the carelessness of their earthly leaders, but Jesus said He knew His sheep by name and would lead them (see John 10:3).

Of course, Jesus prophesied that the Good Shepherd would lay down his life for the sheep (vv. 11,15,17-18). “Strike the shepherd,” Zechariah had prophesied, “and the sheep will be scattered” (Zech. 13:7).¹⁷ Matthew cited this prophesy as being fulfilled upon Christ’s arrest (26:31).

The Shepherd laid down His life, sacrificing Himself like a Lamb (John 1:29; Rev. 7:10-17). Yet He was raised to life by the Father who “brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep” (Heb. 13:20). His work, still not

complete—in heaven “the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd” (Rev. 7:17).

As did the Father in the Old Testament, the Son also commissioned under-shepherds through whom He guides His flock. Before His departure, Jesus commanded Simon Peter to “take care of my sheep” (John 21:15-17). Later in life, Peter himself wrote that elders who serve well as “shepherds of God’s flock” will be rewarded “when the Chief Shepherd appears” (1 Peter 5:1-4). This was consistent with Paul’s command to the Ephesian elders to “be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood” because the Holy Spirit had made them “overseers” for “the flock” (Acts 20:28). Church leaders are called “pastors” in Ephesians 4:11, using the word *poimen*, the Greek work most often translated “shepherd.”

Even before the New Testament period was over,

though, Peter had to caution church leaders against “lording it over” others or seeking financial gain in their position of authority (1 Peter 5:1-4). Just as the prophets warned of derelict shepherds in the Old Testament, Jude warned the church of “shepherds who feed only themselves” (v. 12).

Through earthly shepherds, and in spite of incompetent ones, Christ still leads His people as “the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls” (1 Peter 2:25). **B**

1. Dan Frosch, “In Loneliness, Immigrants Tend the Flock,” *The New York Times* [online] 22 February 2009 [accessed 25 February 2009]. Available from the Internet: www.nytimes.com.

2. Joachim Jeremias, “ποιμήν, ἀρχιποίμην, ποιμαίνω, ποιμήν, ποιμνίου” (*poimen*, shepherd) in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Friedrich, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 6 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 489.

3. See Ex. 2:15-3:3; 1 Sam. 16:11-13,19; 17:14-20; Amos 7:14.

4. See Ps. 74:1; 77:20; 78:52; 79:13; 95:7; 100:3; Jer. 31:10; Ezek. 34:15-16,31.

5. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the New International Version (NIV).

6. Psalm 23:1, emphasis added.

7. James B. Pritchard, *Ancient and Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3rd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 265.

8. Jeremias, 486.

9. See also 1 Kings 22:17 where the prophet Micaiah used the same phrase in prophesying what would happen if Ahab went to war against God’s will.

10. F.F. Bruce, “The Shepherd King” in *The New Testament Development of Some Old Testament Themes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 100, see pages 100-114.

11. See Pritchard, 441-444; Bruce, 100.

12. Homer, *The Iliad*, 2.288. trans. Ian Johnson [online; accessed 8 May 2009]. Available from the Internet: <http://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/homer/iliad2.htm>; Plato, *The Republic* in Plato, vol. 7 in *Great Books of the Western World*, ed. in chief Robert Maynard Hutchins (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1952), 4.440 (p. 353); Erich Beyreuther, “Shepherd” in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, gen. ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 3:564-69 (p. 564).

13. C. J. Gadd, *Ideas of Divine Rule in the Ancient Near East* (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), 38-39.

14. J. G. S. Thomson, “The Shepherd-Ruler Concept in the OT and its Application in the NT” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 8.4 (December 1955): 408-409.

15. See also 10:21, where God says the foundation of this poor leadership is that they “do not inquire of the Lord.” Jeremiah often referred to the leaders of God’s people as failed shepherds: 10:21; 12:10; 13:20; 22:22; 23:1-2; 25:34-36; 49:19; 50:6, 44. He even referred to himself as a shepherd in 17:16, reminding God, “I have not run away from being your shepherd.”

16. See 10:6; though He also spoke of “other sheep that are not of this fold” in John 10:16 (HCSB).

17. “Thus at the end of the OT shepherd sayings there stands an intimation of the shepherd who suffers death according to God’s will and who thereby brings about the decisive turn” (Jeremias, 488).

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