

GRAZING LANDS:

- The farming areas for domesticated animals were mainly centred on the rocky hillsides that were deemed unsuitable for agriculture. Farmers often owned very small allotments where animals were housed overnight, but during the day small flock owners utilised the open grazing land on the hillsides.

FARM ANIMALS:

- Domesticated animals were of great value and importance. The rugged terrain and narrow streets made movement with carriages and carts difficult, so sure-footed donkeys or mules were the major method of transporting goods or turning the grinding wheel of a grain mill or olive press.
- Oxen were extremely valuable (100–200 denarii) and essential for ploughing the rocky fields. Due to their value, oxen were generally kept in the family household overnight (Pulling an oxen out of a well on the Sabbath – Lk 14:5).
- A yoke was a piece of farming equipment that went around the neck of an ox. It was attached to a plough or a cart that the ox dragged along (Mt 11:29).
- Cattle were relatively rare and required high-quality pasture land to thrive. Milk generally came from goats in preference to cows. The cattle were only slaughtered for special occasions (of the fatted calf – Lk 15:27).
- Sheep and goats were kept for meat and milk as well as wool or hair. They were hardy animals who were able to find food in marginal semi-arid conditions that were unsuitable for cattle or oxen.
- Goats and sheep grazed together in the one herd during the day, but at night they were separated by the shepherd into two groups. The sheep were left outside in the open air, and the goats, which were more sensitive to the cold, were brought inside. A major distinguishing feature between the two animals is that the tails of goats stick upwards whilst sheep's tails point downwards (Mt 25:32).

SHEPHERDS:

- Most peasant families would own at least a few sheep, making the role of shepherd a common occupation. However, in terms of an honour – and - shame society, hired shepherds (as distinct from young family members) were often viewed as marginal outcasts of dubious reputation and social status (Jn 10).
- In Palestine, shepherds and their flock wandered in search of suitable grazing land, often covering many kilometres. The terrain was very rocky and foliage was spread over a large area.
- Many shepherds were semi-nomadic. Over the course of the year the flocks would move to different regions so as to allow the good grazing land to recover. For example, flocks based around Bethlehem would be moved into the wilderness region towards the Dead Sea when the arid area had received some rain allowing the grass to grow.
- Shepherds knew each sheep of the flock individually, often by name, and each sheep recognised the voice of its shepherd. It would be a source of great dishonour if a shepherd lost one of his sheep (Lk 15:1-7).
- At night the shepherds would build an enclosure to keep the sheep together and safe from predators. Because of the arid climate, the camp would generally be adjacent to a water source. Often one of the shepherds would form a human gate by sleeping across the entry to the enclosure (Jesus the Good Shepherd – Jn 10:1).



"The good shepherd"

The Shepherd

"What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he loses one of them, does not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it?" (Luke 15:4)

Because of their frequent appearance in the Bible, as well as their importance to the daily lives of the people, sheep and their shepherd often appear symbolically in New Testament writings.

At first when Jesus related the now-famous shepherd's parable in John 10:1-5, the audience did not grasp his point (John 10:6). However, he continued in the same vein, amplifying the image by adding numerous minutiae of a shepherd's daily life (John 10: 7-18).

At the time of Jesus, in the days before the destruction of the Second Temple, farmers and herders often lived in harmony. In the Galilee, most non-arable areas were set aside for herding. These areas were called *midbar* and are sometimes mistakenly translated as "desert", but they come from the Hebrew word meaning the place "to lead the flocks" and were often a valuable part of a farmer's holdings. The younger people in the family would herd the sheep and goats while the seniors would supervise cultivation on other tracts.

Not everyone saw shepherds in a positive light, especially after the destruction of the Temple. As Torah study became an increasingly prominent feature of Jewish life, the fact that many shepherds practiced their craft in outlying areas far from the centers of learning became a reason to disparage them. Rivalry between shepherds and scholars is reflected in the words of the famed second century scholar Rabbi Akiva, who in his early years was unlettered and worked as a shepherd for his wealthy future father-in-law. He admits that in those days, "Had I had a scholar in my hands, I would maul him like an ass" (Babylonian Talmud, *Pesachim* 49b).

Such harsh words had their roots in the disastrous economic changes that were visited on many Jews in those days. Many farmers had lost land or were trying to rehabilitate holdings decimated by war, a task made difficult by the sheep and goats which encroached upon them, and shepherds found themselves cast out by other members of society.



A Roman-era sheep enclosure.

Sheep grazing near Bethlehem



The Shepherd

Sheep were much valued in Bible times. They provided wool, meat and milk. Even the sheep's horns were used – to make special trumpets (Leviticus 25:9) or as containers for oil.

Sheep and goats

In Bible times, the shepherd looked after the goats and sheep together in the same flock. Goats gave a lot of milk, and some of it was used to make a kind of yogurt. Goat's hair was used to make a coarse cloth used for covering tents and for rough clothes, while goatskin leather was used to make water bottles.

The shepherd often looked after the sheep and goats belonging to everyone in his village. After the rain had fallen in winter, there was plenty of grass near the village for the flocks and herds to graze on, and when the grain had been cut at harvest, the sheep and goats grazed on the stubble left behind.

New pasture

But when the hot summer sun had dried the grass, the shepherd had to lead the flocks further away to find pasture (1 Chronicles 4:39-40). He also had to find a well where he could draw water for the sheep and goats to drink.

The shepherd also had to guard his flock from the wild animals that roamed the country (1 Samuel 17:34-36). Lions, bears, jackals and hyena were all looking for animals such as sheep to eat.

Shepherds' tools

The shepherd carried a heavy club spiked with sharp stones to beat off animals (Psalm 23:4). He also had a leather sling for throwing stones at wild animals.

The shepherd had a staff about two metres (six feet) long. He

used this as a walking stick in rough country, and to control his sheep (Ezekiel 20:37-38). Sometimes his rod had a hook, or crook, at one end.

The shepherd also had a leather bag, called a scribe, to carry his food. Some shepherds had a little reed pipe to play while they were watching the sheep and goats.

Shelter

At night the shepherd had to find a safe place to shelter his sheep (Luke 2:8). Often he would take his sheep to a cave, and sleep in the doorway to prevent wild animals from entering (John 10:7). Sometimes, if there was no cave, he had to make a rough stockade out of stones or brushwood.

In the village, there would sometimes be a stone sheepfold, with a little shelter for the guarding shepherd.

The shepherd spent a lot of time alone with his sheep, and learned to know them all by name (John 10:14). He knew which sheep belonged to which family, and could return them to their owners.

Sheep-shearing

At the end of summer the sheep would be sheared. When sheep-shearing was finished, they celebrated with a feast, and plenty of eating and drinking (1 Samuel 25).

Jesus described a shepherd looking for his lost sheep in Luke 15: 3-7. There is also a fine description of the shepherd's job in Psalm 23.

An Eastern shepherd tends his flock. For such men, little has changed since biblical times.



A shepherd's task

In the springtime, after the winter rains, there was plenty of pasturage near the village. When the grain was reaped the sheep were allowed to feed on anything that was left. When that was gone they had to leave the area and seek the dried grasses that remained under the hot sun (1 Chronicles 4:39-40). Sources of fresh grass where a water supply (still water, if available) made such movement possible (Psalm 23:2). When surface water had disappeared, it was necessary to use well water for the sheep. It was customary to cover the well-head with a

large heavy stone that required several men to lift, thus protecting water rights. (The story of Jacob gives an example of this happening. Genesis 29:10 indicates the incredible strength that Jacob had, which also comes across in other parts of his story.)

The sheep needed constant protection because in Bible times there were plenty of dangers to the flock from the wild animals that came up from the jungle surrounding the Jordan river gorge. Lions and bears were common (Judges 14:8; 2 Kings 2:25), and David's adventures in

protecting his own flock were commonplace (1 Samuel 17:34-36). Amos tells of a shepherd who actually tried to take a sheep from a lion's mouth (Amos 3:12). Hyenas and jackals were also common. Not accidentally Jesus said that the Good Shepherd had to give his life for the sheep (John 10:11). The shepherd had to fight back, because he had to make good any losses to the owners (Genesis 31:39; Exodus 22:10-13). Any hired help the shepherd might have used did not have the same kind of commitment (John 10:12-13).

A shepherd leads his flock through barren lands. Notice the shepherd's heavy rod and staff. His herd includes both sheep and goats.



The sling

For weapons the shepherd used a heavy club and a sling. The club is referred to as a "rod" in Psalm 23:4, but it was a heavy weapon, and flints (later nails) were often embedded into its heavy "working end" to make it more effective. The sling was made from a small pouch of leather that could securely hold a stone about one and one-half inches (four centimetres) in diameter. The pouch was attached to two cords of sinew, rope, or leather about two feet (sixty centimetres) long. The stone was placed into the pouch and the sling whirled about so that the stone was held in place by centrifugal force. When one of the strings was released, the stone would leave the pouch with tremendous force. In the hands of a shepherd who had time to practise, the sling could be used with great accuracy. The sling was also used to control the sheep. A well-placed stone dropped in front of the sheep that was wandering from the main flock would bring it back again. When the sheep was tired or sick, the shepherd carried it on his shoulders (Luke 15:5), and when it was lost, the shepherd went to search for it (Psalm 119:176; Isaiah 53:6; Luke 15:3-6).

The staff

The shepherd was also equipped with a staff, but it was not a weapon, although it was used as such on occasions. The staff was about six feet (two metres) long and sometimes had a crook at the end of it. It was normally used to help the shepherd get around easily in hilly or rough country. It was often used to help control the sheep. When the sheep

Jesus' birthday

Nobody knows the exact birthday of Jesus. December 25 was chosen as the "official" birthday because it coincided with the Jewish festival of Hannukah (25th Chislev), which was a festival of light, and with many of the festivities that were invented to counteract the dark winters of the northern hemisphere. The fact that there were sheep on the Bethlehem hills indicates that Jesus was actually born about Passover time, because sheep were kept on the hillsides of Bethlehem to provide for the Passover lambs at Jerusalem. The fact that there was no room for Jesus to be born at a *kataluma*, a rough marquee for shelter that was also put up for pilgrims unable to find a bed in the city at Passover time, is additional evidence. Because God sent his son "when the time had fully come" (Galatians 4:4), and his whole life was bound up with the imagery of sheep, some people believe Passover would have been the most appropriate time for the birth.

Luke 2:8

were passing through a narrow entry, as for example when they entered the sheepfold at night, they were counted in under the rod or staff. Ezekiel uses this term to say that God will prevent rebels from returning to their homes after the Exile. Only those who had been loyal to him would "pass under my rod" (Ezekiel 20:37-38). It was also used to mark the sheep. The end was dipped into dye, and as the sheep passed under the rod, every tenth one was marked and given to God as the tithe (Leviticus 27:31-33).



A shepherd with his staff leads his flock in the hills near Bethlehem.

The scrip

The shepherd carried a second leather pouch, considerably larger than the one used in the sling, known as a scrip. It was to hold food while the shepherd

was away from civilization. David must have already eaten his food when he filled his scrip with stones, one of which was used to fell Goliath (1 Samuel 17:40).

A musical reed pipe was also part of the shepherd's possessions. It was made from two hollowed-out pieces of cane. The sound was made by blowing across a sharp edge and the notes were controlled by blocking off holes with the fingers in each tube. They could provide bright music on holy day parades (1 Kings 1:40) and sad music as well (Jeremiah 48:36). They were easily made and easily broken, so when damaged the shepherd would normally discard the old and make a new. When it was said of Jesus that "a bruised reed

Two pouches

Abigail made an interesting contrast between the two pouches used by the shepherd. "Even though someone is pursuing you to take your life, the life of my Master will be bound securely in the bundle of the living by the Lord your God. But the lives of your enemies he will hurl away as from the pocket of a sling." The bundle of the living is the pouch that held food; the hollow of a sling is the pouch that held the stone.

1 Samuel 25:29



A bedouin shepherd grazes his flock in barren land in the western Negev.

he will not break" (Matthew 12:20) the prophet was saying that contrary to practice, Jesus' way was and is to repair the broken rather than discard them.

The sheepfold

At night the shepherd gathered his sheep to a safe place and kept watch (Luke 2:8). A shallow cave was a good place of safety, and a wall was often built partly across the cave mouth to form an enclosure in front of it. The wall was made of local stones and was topped with thorns. It was in such a cave the King Saul went to sleep (1 Samuel 24:3). If there was no cave, a palisade of stones was made out in the open, thorns being substituted for stones if necessary (Ezekiel 34:14). The shepherd lay down across the one opening, effectively becoming a door for the sheep (John 10:7). It was a tough life. Jacob spelled out the thirst, the frost, and the lack of sleep (Genesis 31:40). Although the shepherd carried a tent with him (Song of Songs 1:8), it was no camping trip.

Sheepfolds were often set up in the home village at a sunny spot, so that when the flock returned it could be kept in safety. The sheepfold was a low, arched building with a drystone wall enclosure attached. The flock could be kept indoors or out of doors according to the weather. A watchman

Care of the sheep

"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you, and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you" probably refers to the care the shepherd has to take when he takes the flock through running water (Isaiah 43:2). Isaiah 40:11 utilizes the action of the shepherd's carrying the lambs and not pushing the ewes too hard when it is lambing time to demonstrate God's care for his people: "He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young." Any flesh wounds incurred by the sheep were anointed with olive oil (Psalm 23:5)—the same method as was used for dealing with human wounds (Luke 10:34).

The scapegoat

It is normally assumed that when John refers to the "lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" he was referring to Isaiah 53:7, "a lamb to the slaughter." However, because sheep and goats are the same so far as language is concerned, he may be referring to the scapegoat—Jesus taking away the world's sin when he died and left the world.

John 1:29

was set to guard the flock. Jesus referred to this kind of setting when he said that thieves and robbers do not use the door but climb over the wall (John 10:1–3, 10). The current criminal practice was to climb over the wall, slaughter as many sheep as possible before detection, and throw them to accomplices outside.

The good shepherd

Living and working with sheep in isolation leads to a close relationship between shepherd and sheep. The shepherds know their own sheep so well that they respond to them instantly. The shepherd has a name for each sheep, the significance being that the name says something about the individual sheep's character or mannerisms. Jesus said that he *knows* his sheep (John 10:14a). His sheep also know him (John 10:14b), so that when they are called they respond to his voice (John 10:4–5).

Detailed knowledge enabled the shepherd to separate the sheep into different flocks, if he was responsible for more than one village, and to be able to return them to individual families. In John 10:16 Jesus refers to the fact that he has sheep that are not of

An Arab shepherd watches over his sheep in fields outside Bethlehem.



A weathered Roman sculpture of a shepherd carrying a lamb on his shoulders, from Caesarea Maritima. Early Christian iconography often depicted Jesus as the Good Shepherd.



this fold (which may refer to the Jewish nation). Jacob found there were three flocks lying by a well awaiting the removal of the stone at the well-head (Genesis 29:1–3). By calling, and by the use of stones in a sling, the shepherd was able to keep the sheep together (Ezekiel 34:1–3), although dogs were used by some men (Job 30:1). When a shepherd led the flock (Psalm 23:3) the dogs always brought up the rear, ensuring that the sheep were not attacked by wild animals and that they kept up with the shepherd. (Isaiah 52:12 sees God in a double relationship to his people. He leads them from the front and at the same time guards them from behind.)

Jacob lived at a time when his knowledge of breeding techniques was put to use. He knew that strong sheep produced strong lambs (Genesis 30:41), but he did not realize that whether sheep were pure white (providing the

The pastor

This verse describes one of the leaders in the church as a “pastor.” The actual word is *shepherd*. The pastor is in relationship to the Chief Shepherd (1 Peter 5:4) as shepherds would have been to the king’s stockmaster in the days of the kingdom of Israel.

Ephesians 4:11

most valuable wool) or speckled also depended upon inheritance. He believed that the environment at the time of conception was responsible for the colouring of the sheep (Genesis 30:42). Fortunately for Jacob, God overruled his ignorance by ensuring that justice was done and that Jacob got the best sheep out of a bad bargain (Genesis 31:5b–9).

Goats

Goats were normally driven by the shepherd ahead of the sheep. Therefore a goat was up in front and gave Isaiah the picture of the kings leading the people (see Isaiah 14:9; Daniel 8:5; Zechariah 10:12). The sheep and goat relationship might lie behind Jesus’ words that he would separate people as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats (Matthew 25:32), although the staff was used to separate them, the goats being made to go one way and the sheep another—“under the rod.” Sheep and goats were kept nearby because they both needed grazing and because they ate more or less the same thing.

There are a number of differences between the two animals. Goats are generally dark and sheep, white. Goats



An Arab shepherd finds shade from the burning sun for himself and his flock under an old fig tree.

are able to cope with mountains and rocks, but sheep prefer the flatter valleys. Goats eat the leaves of trees (often helped by the shepherd who knocks off small branches with his club), whereas sheep prefer grass. Goats graze all day, but sheep lie down in the shade when the sun is at its hottest (Song of Songs 1:7).

The goat was always less popular than the sheep to most people. It was a goat that became the “scapegoat,” taking the sins of the people to the desert (Leviticus 16:22). The “goats” were reserved for destruction by Jesus in his description of the coming of the Son of Man (Matthew 25:33, 41). This unpopularity may be because the goat is destructive; goats grazed closer to the ground than the sheep and destroyed the pasture. The Greeks believed in mythical creatures, half goat and half man, called satyrs. Bacchus was half goat and half man. Isaiah’s prophecy of judgment upon Babylon mentions goats (Isaiah 13:21; 34:14).

Sheep shearing

There were two very important times of the year for the shepherd: lambing time and sheep shearing. Lambing time was in January/February. Sheep shearing was after the summer grazing when the profits were distributed and several days of celebration followed. 1 Samuel 25 tells the story of a sheepshearing when all those who had been involved in the care of the sheep (in this case, those belonging to a huge estate) were invited to the celebrations. Such was the drinking and rejoicing that it was an effective time for a murder (2 Samuel 13:23).

Shepherding was not always on a small scale. Large sheep farmers employed shepherds to care for their huge flocks. Mesha, king of Moab, had to pay the king of Israel a hundred thousand lambs and the wool from a hundred thousand sheep in protection money (2 Kings 3:4). Job had fourteen thousand sheep at the end of his story (Job 42:12), and Solomon sacrificed



Remains of the elaborate Pool of Bethesda, Jerusalem, which was used in biblical times to bathe sheep.

one hundred and twenty thousand sheep at the dedication of the Temple (1 Kings 8:63). A special gate was built in the northwest corner of Jerusalem to get the sheep into the Temple site for sacrifice. It was called the Sheep

Gate (Nehemiah 3:1), and nearby the pool known as the Pool of Bethesda in New Testament times was used to bathe them (John 5:2). Nabal, with three thousand sheep, was a relatively small sheep farmer (1 Samuel 25:2, 7).

Sometimes caring for sheep was not even on a shepherd scale. The poorest families used the youngest children to look after the sheep. David was in this position when Samuel came to Jesse's home to look for the future king of Israel (1 Samuel 16:1). The poorest families of all would try to buy two lambs at Passover. One would be eaten according to the law, but the other would be kept to be fattened up throughout the summer. It became a family pet in a way that the goat never did. Often it would sleep with the children and even share the same drinking vessels. It was a tragic day for the children when the sheep was killed and preserved in the fat of its own tail. It is this practice that lies behind Nathan's parable in 2 Samuel 12:1-7.

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