

ADVENT: WAITING...



“In the first century, Shepherds were considered the lowest of the low. If they were Jewish, they were Sabbath breaking, unlawful, untrustworthy swine, which is saying a lot about what the Jewish community thought of them. Even in His birth, Jesus reaches out to those in the margins and welcomes them into the family. Instead of requiring humanity to become holy to enter into His presence, He enters into the presence of corrupted humanity and begins to make clean what was unclean. He is still doing this today. How do we wait, as those unworthy, but incredibly loved? What does the Lord promise to those who patiently wait on the Lord? Join us this week as we engage this topic as we continue our Advent series, Waiting...”

Shepherd (רעה, r'h; ποιμήν, poimēn)

A common occupation in the ancient Mediterranean. Responsible for leading, feeding, protecting, and procuring rest for their flock. Used metaphorically throughout the Bible to denote leaders and God.

Biblical Relevance

Sheep were domesticated in the ancient Near East in 7000 bc. They are mentioned more than any other livestock in the Bible, indicating their economic importance as a source of food, wool, and hide. With the primary responsibilities of leading and protecting their flock, the occupation naturally lent itself as a symbol for those in leadership and God.

Ancient Near Eastern Usage

In the ancient world, the metaphor of shepherding is often connected with a “king’s role as just ruler, benevolent provider and/or powerful defender” (Laniak, *Shepherds after My Own Heart*, 58). Gods were known to share this title in the ancient Near East.

Mesopotamian Rulers and Gods as “Shepherd”

- Deities in Babylonian literature are occasionally referred to as “shepherd,” kings wore this epithet more frequently (Laniak, *Shepherds after My Own Heart*, 60n5, 255–59):
- Enlil—the god of agriculture, the storm, and wind, and chief among Mesopotamian deities—was referred to as a shepherd. In a brief Sumerian hymn, he is addressed as “Father Enlil, shepherd of the blackheads” (*ANET*, 576). In another text, Enlil is referred to as “the faithful Shepherd” (*ANET*, 337).
- The *Enuma Elish*—the Babylonian creation story, bestows the title on Marduk: “Let him shepherd all the gods like sheep” (*Ee*, VII, 131).
- An Akkadian hymn from the second millennium bc praises Shamash, the Mesopotamian sun god and the god of justice, for being shepherd of all that is below and guardian of all that is above (*ANET*, 387–88).
- Hammurabi, the famed king of Babylon (ca. 1792–1750 bc), is given this moniker in several places of the prologue and epilogue of his law code (*ANET*, 164; 177–78).

Egyptian Rulers and Gods as “Shepherd”

Egyptian epithets using shepherd as a title for their gods and kings, (i.e., Pharaoh) are rarer than their Near Eastern neighbors, but the concept and the title are still utilized. Amon-Re (the creator and sun god) and Osiris (the god of fertility and resurrection of the dead) wear the title. Osiris is often depicted with a shepherd’s crook. Amon-Re is known as “the good shepherd” (Beyerlin, *NERT*, 13). He created his people, is a “herdsman who loves his herds” (*ANET*, 371), and a shepherd who diligently provides for his people (*NERT*, 40).

Pharaohs were considered god-men. During the Second Intermediate Period of Egypt (1551–1087 bc):

- Amenhotep III (1411–1374 bc) presents himself as “the good shepherd, vigilant for all people whom the maker thereof has placed under his authority, lord of plenty (Breasted, *Ancient Records of Egypt*, 2:365–66).
- Seti I (1313–1292) is depicted as a shepherd-protector, “the good shepherd, who preserves his soldiers alive” (*Ancient Records of Egypt*, 3:86).

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- Merneptah (1225–1215) states that “I am the ruler who shepherds you” (*Ancient Records of Egypt*, 3:243).

Graeco-Roman Uses of Shepherd

Rulers are often depicted as shepherds in Graeco-Roman literature:

- Homer (ca. eighth century bc) equates “shepherd of the people” for “ruler of the people,” especially in the case of Agamemnon, leader of the Achaian host (Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 801; e.g., Il. 2.85; 4.413; 10.3; 19.35; 24.654; Od. 3.156; 14.497).
- Plato (ca. 427–327 bc) describes justice in terms of shepherd and flock imagery, stressing that rulers should be concerned solely with their subjects welfare (*Republic* 1.342, 343, 345).
- Aristotle (ca. 384–322 bc) describes the king as a “benefactor of his people, inasmuch as he devotes his whole talents to their welfare, and tends them as a shepherd does his sheep” (*Eth. nic.* 8.11).

Literal shepherds were not highly esteemed in Graeco-Roman literature (e.g., Ovid, *Her.*, 5.79). Aristotle speaks negatively of the shepherd when he writes that among men, “the laziest are shepherds, who lead an idle life, and get their subsistence without trouble from tame animals; their flocks wandering from place to place in search of pasture, they are compelled to follow them, cultivating a sort of living farm” (*Politics*, 1.8; cited in Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World*, 21).

Old Testament

Examples of shepherds in the Old Testament:

- (Gen 4:2)—Abel is the earliest biblical shepherd. He is identified as a “keeper of flocks.”
- (Gen 24:35)—Abraham is described as “rich” and blessed by God due to his accumulation of flocks, herds, camels, and donkeys.
- (Gen 26:13–14)—Isaac is described as a rich man due to his accumulation of herds of sheep, cattle, and servants.
- (Gen 29:6, 9; 30:40)—Jacob cared for Laban’s flocks as did Rachel, Laban’s daughter.
- (Gen 37:2, 12; 46:32–34; 47:3)—Joseph tended to flocks as did his brothers.
- (Exod 3:1)—Moses was tending to his father-in-law’s flock when he met God at Sinai.
- (Job 1:3)—Job had some 7,000 sheep.
- (1 Sam 16:11, 19; 17:15)—David was a shepherd in Bethlehem, eventually leaving his flock to another in order to fight Goliath at the Valley of Elah (1 Sam 17:20). His background as a shepherd would later define his role as king of Israel (2 Sam 7:8; Psa 78:70–71).
- (Amos 1:1; 7:14–15)—Amos was not from the guild of professional prophets, but was a shepherd by trade.

Due to the economic importance of sheep, a shepherd’s role was marked by a sustained vigilance for his flock. Shepherds dealt with inclement weather, substandard lodging, and the threat of dangerous animals intent on preying on the flock (Gen 31:40; Joel 1:17–20; Amos 1:2; 3:12; Isa 31:4; 38:12; 1 Sam 17:34–35; Mic 5:8). A shepherd’s equipment includes:

- A heavy cloak (Jer 43:12)
- A staff—used to negotiate difficult terrain and to count sheep (Mic 7:14; Lev 27:32; Jer 33:13; Ezek 20:37)
- A rod—used to defend sheep from predators (Psa 23:4)
- A sling—also used to defend sheep from predators (1 Sam 17:40)

Shepherds also guided the flock to sustenance and places of rest (1 Chr 4:39–41; Psa 23:2; Gen 33:13). He was responsible for keeping the flock together and finding any that were lost (Ezek 34:11–12).

The nature of a shepherd’s work lends itself to rich metaphorical usage for God and his agents—kings (Laniak, *Shepherds after My Own Heart*, 31–41). God is seldom called “shepherd,” but imagery portraying Him in this role is plentiful:

- He is depicted as Israel’s shepherd and protector (Gen 48:15; 49:24; Pss 23:1–4; 28:9; 80:1; Eccl 12:11; Isa 40:11; Jer 31:10).
- He leads his people like a flock of sheep (Pss 77:20; 78:52; 80:1).
- The Israelites are His sheep and He is their God (Pss 74:1; 79:13; 95:7; Ezek 34:31; Zech 9:16).
- God, as shepherd will look after his scattered sheep and give them rest (Ezek 34:12–15).

This symbol is used of the exodus and in comparing Israel’s return from the Babylonian exile with the Exodus (Exod 15:13, 17; Pss 70–72; 78:52–55; Isa 63:11; Jer 23:1–8).

“Shepherd” is never a title explicitly used of a king in Israel, but God appoints kings to shepherd His people, Israel. This includes David and his lineage (2 Sam 5:2; 1 Chr 11:2; Psa 78:70–72; Ezek 34:23; 37:24). Cyrus, king of Persia (ca.

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590/589 bc), is also called to be shepherd of God's people. He is the only king mentioned in the Old Testament deemed "shepherd" by God (Isa 44:28). Other leaders failed in their role of shepherding Israel, with their "fundamental sin" perfectly by the question in Ezek 34:2: "Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves. Should not shepherds take care of the flock?" (Moore and Brown, "*tson*", 3:730).

God, Israel's true shepherd, promises punishment on those who did not care for His flock (Zech 10:3). These shepherds are "senseless"—as a consequence, their flock is scattered (Jer 10:21). God pronounces a woe oracle promising punishment to the shepherds who scatter the sheep (Jer 23:1–3). These shepherds have provided no direction for God's flock, causing them to wander and to be defeated by their enemies (Jer 50:6; Ezek 34:5–7; 50:17). Zechariah 11:7–17 portrays a shepherd who deserts his flock and is punished by God. God promises "shepherds after my own heart" who would be attentive to His flock come from the Davidic line—the Messiah (Jer 3:15; 23:4–6; Ezek 34:23; 37:22–24; Mic 5:2–4).

"Shepherd" in Second Temple Sources

The uses of "shepherd" in Second Temple Sources follow the Old Testament, beginning with God as the chief shepherd (Sir 18:13; 1 En. 89:16; LAB 28:5; 30:5; Apoc. Ezek. 5:1; compare Pss 23:1–4; 74:1–2). Other shepherds include:

- Moses (1 En. 89:34; LAB 19:3, 10; compare Isa 63:11)
- David (4Q504 4.6–8; compare 2 Sam 5:2; Ezek 34:23)
- The Messiah (Pss. Sol. 17:23–46; 2 Esd 2:34; compare Mic 5:4)

Seventy nations appointed to judge Israel are called shepherds (1 En. 89:59–60, 62–63). From Qumran, the Damascus Document (CD 13:7–10), describes the overseer's duties: "He shall have pity on them as a father of his children and shall carry them in all their dependency as a shepherd his flock."

New Testament

The only literal reference to shepherds in the New Testament occurs in Luke's birth narrative, where shepherds come to see Jesus in a manger (Luke 2:8–20). Other uses are metaphorical, much like the majority of Old Testament uses.

In the Gospels, Jesus is portrayed as the "good shepherd":

- He exhibits compassion for the helpless (Matt 9:6; Mark 6:34)
- He seeks out his lost sheep of Israel (Matt 18:12–14; Luke 15:3–7)
- His mission is to gather those who have been scattered (Matt 10:6; 15:24)

Matthew's Gospel prepares the church to understand Jesus in fulfillment of Mic 5:2–4 (Matt 2:6). John 10 exhibits extensive use of shepherd imagery. Jesus' shepherding activity in John 10:11–18 exhibits the following characteristics:

- As the good shepherd, He will sacrifice His own life for the sake of the flock (John 10:11, 15, 17, 18)
- He knows His sheep (John 10:14–15, 27)
- His sheep know Him and follow Him (John 10:4–5, 15, 27)

Jesus utilizes shepherd imagery to announce His death and resurrection to His disciples (Mark 14:27–31; see Zech 13:7), and to gather the nations for eschatological judgment (Matt 25:32). As shepherd, Jesus separates the sheep from the goats—the former receive mercy (the inheritance of God's kingdom [Matt 25:34]), the latter receive a curse (eternal fire [Matt 25:41]).

Jesus is referred to as a shepherd outside of the Gospels:

- (Heb 13:20)—"The great shepherd of the sheep"
- (1 Pet 2:25)—"The shepherd and guardian of your souls"
- (1 Pet 5:4)—"The chief shepherd"

In Acts, Paul warns the Ephesian elders of false teachers (i.e., "the wolves") and admonishes them to shepherd and care for the flock—"the church of God" (Acts 20:28–30). In Ephesians 4:11, Paul references offices that Christ ordained to strengthen the Church. The position often translated "pastor" is the same Greek word (ποιμήν, *poimēn*) that is usually translated as "shepherd." In 1 Corinthians 9:7–12, Paul defends his apostolic right to be paid for preaching the Gospel of Christ by asking a series of rhetorical questions, one of which states: "Or who shepherds a flock without using some of the milk from the flock?" (1 Cor 9:7 NAB). In Revelation, Jesus' roles as shepherd and lamb are closely connected due to His leadership of the flock and His death and resurrection (Rev 7:17; see Isa 49:10).

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Montonini, M. (2016). [Shepherd](#). In J. D. Barry, D. Bomar, D. R. Brown, R. Klippenstein, D. Mangum, C. Sinclair Wolcott, ... W. Widder (Eds.), *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.