

We as Sheep

*Know that the LORD, he is God! It is he who made us,
and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.*
Psalm 100:3

In his book, *Trusting the Shepherd*, Haddon Robinson notes that “Many nations have chosen animals to represent them...[but] As far as I know, though, no nation has ever adopted a sheep as its emblem.”¹ Perhaps there is a good reason. Sheep are not known for their strength or wisdom.

To better understand Psalm 23 and the significance of the Shepherd, we need to understand sheep.

First: The Significance of Sheep

For reference, the word “sheep” occurs 198 times in the *English Standard Version* of the Bible.

a) The first reference to a sheep may be when God clothed Adam and Eve.

Genesis 3:21 – *And the LORD God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them.*

We don’t know this for a fact, but it would be consistent with sheep as sacrificial animals. Consider the Exodus -

Exodus 12:5 - *Your lamb shall be without blemish, a male a year old. You may take it from the sheep or from the goats, ⁶ and you shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month, when the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill their lambs at twilight.*

Exodus 29:38-39 – (Consecrating the priests) *Now this is what you shall offer on the altar: two lambs a year old day by day regularly. ³⁹ One lamb you shall offer in the morning, and the other lamb you shall offer at twilight.*

Numbers 28:4 – (the daily offering) - *The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ² “Command the people of Israel and say to them, ‘My offering, my food for my food offerings, my pleasing*

¹ Haddon W. Robinson. *Trusting the Shepherd: Insights from Psalm 23* (Grand Rapids: Discovery House Publishers, 1968, 2002), 25-26.

aroma, you shall be careful to offer to me at its appointed time.’³ And you shall say to them, This is the food offering that you shall offer to the LORD: two male lambs a year old without blemish, day by day, as a regular offering.⁴ The one lamb you shall offer in the morning, and the other lamb you shall offer at twilight;

- b) The next reference occurs when Abel, who was a shepherd, slew one for a sacrifice.

Genesis 4:2-4 – Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a worker of the ground.³ In the course of time Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground,⁴ and Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering,⁵ but for Cain and his offering he had no regard.

There is, of course, something profound about Abel producing “*the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions*” (Genesis 4:4), i.e., the work of God’s hands and Cain’s presentation of “*the fruit of the ground*” (Genesis 4:3), the work of his own hands.

We don’t have any record of what God told Adam and his sons to bring as a sacrifice, but it does appear that it is in Genesis that God established sheep as the primary sacrificial animal.

When God instructed Abraham not to take Isaac’s life, the relieved father “*took the ram,*” God provided as a substitute “*and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son*” (Genesis 22:13).

The next time the Bible refers to sheep as a sacrificial animal is when God established the Passover through the blood of a one-year-old lamb or goat. The potential sacrificial animal was to be taken from its flock on the 10th day of Nissan and then slain at twilight on the 4th day. Israel used the three intervening days to ensure the lamb was “*without blemish*” (Genesis 12:5). Thereafter, the Hebrews applied the blood of that sacrificial animal to the doorposts and lintels of their homes as protection from God’s wrath on the very night he struck the firstborn of all Egypt.

Of course, the OT Levitical priesthood, the sacrificial system and the sacrifices point to Jesus who will eventually appear as our sacrificial lamb.

1 John 1:29 – *Behold, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.*

Revelation 5:12 – *Worthy is the lamb who was slain...*

In addition to all of that,

- the wool from sheep was used for clothing and tent making.
- Their milk was used for drinking.
- Ram skins were dyed red and used to make the tent covering for the Tabernacle (Exodus 36:19).
- Their meat was used for food and their fat for lamps.
- The horns of rams were used by priests as trumpets (Joshua 6:4) or for storing oil (1 Samuel 16:1).

Second: Sheep in Scripture

Sheep were very important to Middle Eastern cultures.

- Solomon sacrificed 120,000 sheep at the dedication of the Temple (1 Kings 8:63).
- The Philistines brought 7,700 rams and 7,700 goats as tribute to Jehoshaphat (2 Chronicles 17:11).

And some people became rich owning sheep. For instance, Job had 14,000 (Job 42:12).

But shepherding itself was a humble occupation. Owners of flocks and land, as well as families usually employed the youngest children in a family or men who were unskilled or unfit for any other labor.

John David writes, "There are nine different Hebrew terms that are variously translated, sheep, mountain sheep, ewe, lamb, and ram."² But the most usual sheep mentioned in the Bible is called a 'broadtailed' type, so called because their tail can weight up to 25 pounds.³

This is why David was keeping his father's sheep and was not considered worthy to be called to appear before Samuel.

1 Samuel 16:11 - *Then Samuel said to Jesse, "Are all your sons here?" And he said, "There remains yet the youngest, but behold, he is keeping the sheep." And Samuel said to Jesse, "Send and get him, for we will not sit down till he comes here."*

² *Fauna and Flora of the Bible* (London: United Bible Societies, 1972), 75.

³John J. Davis. *The Perfect Shepherd: Studies in the Twenty-Third Psalm* (Winona Lake: BMH Books, 1979), 57.

When Jesus identified himself as a shepherd, he defined himself as a person of humble position

Sheep disappear from Scripture after they witnessed the angels heralding Jesus's birth

Luke 2:8-15 - *And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. ¹⁰ And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹² And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!*

Third: God Calls Us Sheep

When we think of sheep, we imagine beautiful, meek creatures, and they are. But except for his relationship to us and the concept of life in the Shepherd's flock, God does not compare us to sheep for complimentary reasons. And there is a reason why David acknowledge the 'need meeting' ministry of his Shepherd.

God called Israel sheep.

Ezekiel 34:7-10 - *Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: ⁸ As I live, declares the Lord GOD, surely because my sheep have become a prey, and my sheep have become food for all the wild beasts, since there was no shepherd, and because my shepherds have not searched for my sheep, but the shepherds have fed themselves, and have not fed my sheep, ⁹ therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: ¹⁰ Thus says the Lord GOD, Behold, I am against the shepherds, and I will require my sheep at their hand and put a stop to their feeding the sheep. No longer shall the shepherds feed themselves. I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, that they may not be food for them.*

Psalm 79:13a – *But we your people, the sheep of your pasture,*

Psalm 100:3 - *Know that the LORD, he is God! It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.*

- a) Sheep are helpless

Sometimes a sheep can fall over on its back and can't right itself. The shepherd's term for this is "cast down." A 'cast' sheep cannot stand back up on its feet and will die unless a shepherd rights it.

Matthew 9:36 – *When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.*

b) Sheep are defenseless

Sheep tend to be oblivious to their surroundings and often unaware of dangers around them.

They have no natural defenses, except they have limited kicking ability with their hind legs. They don't have good eyesight, sharp teeth or claws. They can't stand up on their back legs to make themselves look bigger. They don't fight and are slow, so any flight instinct is of no value.

1 Peter 5:8 – *Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.*

Ephesians 6:11 - *Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil.*

You've never seen an armored sheep

Then again, the problems with sheep come from within the flock also.

Matthew 7:15 - *Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.*

c) Sheep are senseless

The story is told that if you stretch a rope across a barn door as sheep exit, the first few will jump over it. Then, if you cut the rope, the rest of the sheep will keep jumping because the first few did.

We also tend to follow the crowd or to imitate senseless behavior.

Numbers 16:1-3 - *Now Korah the son of Izhar, son of Kohath, son of Levi, and Dathan and Abiram the sons of Eliab, and On the son of Peleth, sons of Reuben, took men. ² And they*

rose up before Moses, with a number of the people of Israel, 250 chiefs of the congregation, chosen from the assembly, well-known men. ³ They assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron...

Acts 13:50 – (Antioch in Pisidia) *But the Jews incited the devout women of high standing and the leading men of the city, stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and drove them out of their district.*

Sheep have a tendency to follow the flock even if the flock has no shepherd.

Hundreds of sheep followed their leader off a cliff in eastern Turkey, plunging to their deaths this week while shepherds looked on in dismay. Four hundred sheep fell 15 metres (49 feet) to their deaths in a ravine in Van province near Iran but broke the fall of another 1,100 animals who survived. Shepherds from a nearby village neglected the flock while eating breakfast, leaving the sheep to roam free. The loss to local farmers was estimated at \$74,000.⁴

Evidently the sheep in back couldn't see the sheep in front so they didn't know what was happening. And the sheep in front couldn't stop because the sheep in back were pushing them forward.

Mark 15:6-11 - *Now at the feast he used to release for them one prisoner for whom they asked. ⁷ And among the rebels in prison, who had committed murder in the insurrection, there was a man called Barabbas. ⁸ And the crowd came up and began to ask Pilate to do as he usually did for them. ⁹ And he answered them, saying, "Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?" ¹⁰ For he perceived that it was out of envy that the chief priests had delivered him up. ¹¹ But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release for them Barabbas instead.*

d) Sheep are directionless

Sheep, according to Stuart Briscoe, have a "remarkable aptitude for getting lost."⁵

Numbers 27:16-17 – *Let the LORD, the God of the spirits of all flesh, appoint a man over the congregation ¹⁷ who shall go out before them and come in before them, who shall lead them out and bring them in, that the congregation of the LORD may not be as sheep that have no shepherd.*

⁴ <https://www.challies.com/christian-living/dumb-directionless-defenseless/> (Accessed June 23, 2023).

⁵ Stuart Briscoe. *What Works When Life Doesn't* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1967), 71.

Isaiah 53:6 – *All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned – everyone – to his own way...*

Matthew 10:5-6 - *These twelve Jesus sent out, instructing them, "Go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans, ⁶ but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.*

1 Peter 2:25 – *For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.*

It may be the one defense sheep have is gathering together. Lions don't traditionally attack a flock but look for lost sheep.

Luke 15:4 - *What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it?*

Isaiah 40:10-11 - *Behold, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. ¹¹ He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.*

All these things are things that we naturally want:

- Assistance
- Protection
- Direction

Conclusion: It may be that we wish God compared us to lions, tigers or bears but there are good reasons why God compares us to sheep.

As the Quakers would often say, Psalm 23 "speaks to our condition," our true condition.

It teaches us essential truths about us and our Shepherd, perhaps most of all that we need a Shepherd so that we will "not want" (Ps 23:1).