

The Good Shepherd

Shepherds are common – literally and metaphorically – in the biblical witness and have come to be widely misrepresented. Perhaps the most egregious misconception comes from the enlightenment’s feminization of Jesus as the “Good Shepherd”.

These depictions are diagnostic of modern, Westernized Christianity – a religion that has idealized and reshaped Jesus to such an extent that He would not be recognizable to the Palestinians of the first



century. In our Western minds we are more likely to picture Jesus as gentle and winsome and not infrequently, as blond and blue-eyed. Seldom do we envision Him in our art or Sunday school books as a swarthy, hirsute, middle-eastern man. Instead, we are most often presented with a westernized, gentle Jesus cradling a lamb, or surrounded by little children, or sitting with a child.

The contemporary Jesus is a thoroughly feminized, emasculated man. In part, this comes from the modern understanding of the shepherd as a caretaker – his principal purpose, that of a fierce and implacable protector, essentially eliminated. So, we ask – was the shepherd really the metrosexual of the Ancient Near East? Did shepherds love to frolic with little children in fields of flowers? Was the life of a shepherd an idyllic life? When Jesus described Himself as the good shepherd did He mean to leave His followers with the impression of a man as idealized in the second stanza of Charles

Wesley's children's hymn:

*Lamb of God, I look to Thee;
Thou shalt my example be:
Thou art gentle, meek and mild;
Thou wast once a little child.*

I suppose you've guessed where this Essay is going. Our modern image of the biblical shepherd (*ro'i* in Hebrew) is not even close to reality, either literally or metaphorically. This essay, then, offers some reflections on how the Bible portrayed shepherds in the hope that you might call into question the view that the biblical understanding of 'shepherd' doesn't connote a gentle, kind, compassionate, and loving man. Jesus is not our kind of shepherd. Indeed, when objectively viewed through the biblical witness, Jesus rarely exhibits gentleness. Nowhere is He pictured as having a kind or encouraging word for His disciples. As a matter of fact, He is rather scornful of them. And don't get me started on the contempt Jesus expressed for the religious elites of His day – even the ones who admired Him. No, Jesus was not the good shepherd of Sunday school fantasies. On the other hand, He absolutely was THE GOOD SHEPHERD, rightly understood.

As in all things, there were good shepherds and bad shepherds. But whether good or bad, ALL shepherds had this in common: they were fierce, courageous, powerful, and dangerous men who took their pleasure when and where they could. Theirs was a rough, brutal, and often short life and the Biblical witness reflects the truth of the shepherd's lot.

In the ancient near east of Jesus's day, shepherds walked alone and carried three weapons:

1. **The rod:** a club, a cudgel often with spikes or wooden nails embedded in the end.

2. **The staff:** a 5' – 6' staff, often with a crook at one end. Used as a weapon and to control sheep.
3. **The sling:** Two strings of leather, with a pocket in which a stone could be placed.

Lions, bears, wild dogs, and wolves (more likely hyenas) roamed the wilds of the middle-east in biblical times. Evidence exists that tigers inhabited the valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates as far west as the Jordan River. Moreover, none of these animals were rare in Biblical times. In our time the closest approximation (and it's probably a good one) to the biblical shepherd are the cattle herders of the African Maasai tribe back, say, at the turn of the 19th century. They carried a spear, usually configured with an extra-long blade – the better to pierce the body of a lion while staying out of reach of its claws.



In addition to natural predators, there were gangs of men who would murder the shepherd and take his flock. The idea of police as protectors or courts as institutions of justice had not yet been invented. Society offered no institutions that could protect (or bring justice to) a shepherd who was subject to attack by thieves. The life of the Biblical shepherd was not a sunny, carefree day frolicking with children in fields of flowers. In truth, the picture of shepherds in the Bible is not a flattering one, as the verse below suggests.

Exodus 2:16-20 – In this verse, Moses rescues the seven daughters of Ruel, a priest of Midian, from the shepherds who attacked them. The daughters use the phrase “Moses saved us from the shepherds” – why would anyone be needing deliverance from meek and mild shepherds whose only desire was to cradle little lambs in their loving arms.

Shepherds, whether good or bad, earned their keep by being as ferocious and courageous as the predators who threatened their flocks. In the biblical narratives, shepherds epitomized these virtues.

1 Sam 17:35-36: David boasts of killing lions and bears as a shepherd. As a boy, David gets the nod from King Saul to fight Goliath – principally on the strength of being a shepherd.

The prophets often pictured the shepherds metaphorically as fierce and powerful fighters – sometimes as opponents, sometimes as allies

Micah 5:5 --...If the Assyrians come into our land and tread upon our soil, we will raise against them seven shepherds

Micah 7:14 – Rule the people with thy rod, the flock of thine inheritance.



Jeremiah 25:35 – One sign of God’s power is His ability to defeat shepherds. The people of that time viewed shepherds as more powerful than warriors. We see this in the writings of Jeremiah, the prophet. In Jeremiah’s view, the shepherd was the symbol of strength and courage in battle. It is little wonder that shepherds were viewed metaphorically as a foil when expressing the power of God.

“Wail, you shepherds, and cry out; roll in ashes, you lords of the flock, for the days of your slaughter have come...³⁵ Flight shall fail the shepherds, and there shall be no escape for the lords of the flock”

Jeremiah 49:19 – Through the prophet, God asks, “*Who is the shepherd who can stand before me?*” The context of the verse is that shepherds are mighty and fierce like lions and only God can overcome them.

God is stronger than a lion, and the proof is that while shepherds can overcome lions, they cannot overcome God.

Jeremiah 51:23 “I will shatter shepherds and flocks, shatter lords and their oxen, shatter captains and rulers.”

Ezekiel 37:24 My servant David shall be king over them; and they shall all have one shepherd. They shall follow my ordinances and be careful to observe my statutes. Here, Ezekiel is equating shepherds and kings.

Amos 3:12 *Thus says the LORD: As the shepherd rescues from the mouth of the lion two legs, or a piece of an ear, so shall the people of Israel who live in Samaria be rescued.* – A particular vivid image of the expectations the culture held for shepherds. When a lion, bear, or other predator took a sheep, the shepherd would pursue and kill it. Metaphorically, God is claiming that it will require a shepherd to rescue Israel.

Shepherds were erotically charged – like the “bad boy” of so many romance novels.

Psalms 2:16 “*dodi li va’ani lo haro’eh bashoshanim*” -- *My lover is to me and I to him. [He is a] shepherd among the flowers.* The picture the psalmist paints is one of contrast – pretty flowers, swaying gently in the breeze while in their midst stands her physical lover, a shepherd, a man’s man who takes what he wants and defends to the death those he loves.

Finally, the [well-deserved] reputation of shepherds was used by the psalmist to imagine the shepherd as a heroic figure:

Psalms 23: Reread Psalm 23 with the word ‘Hero’ instead of “shepherd”. We see that the psalm is so much more than the ability of shepherds to provide comfort and rest. The psalm also serves as homage to

the manly virtues of a defender (God) of the weak (us): gallantry, courage, boldness, and faithfulness in the face of mortal danger. These are men who stand on the ramparts so that the rest of us might have lives of tranquility and comfort.

To summarize, the Bible portrays shepherds as

- fierce and powerful men and men who march to their own drummer. Defeating a [metaphorical] shepherd was one way the prophets sought to portray the power and capability of God.
- Rulers and leaders – fearless defenders of those entrusted to their care.
- Erotically charged. The shepherd was the James Bond of his day.

When first century writers portrayed Jesus as the ‘good’ shepherd, they were not using the word ‘good’ as a synonym for ‘kind’. They viewed Jesus as described above – fearless in His teaching, fierce in His defense of the non-elites. That Jesus enjoyed the company of women was probably not because He was a modern-day apologist for femininity. These women may have been (were?) attracted to Jesus the shepherd in much the way many women are attracted to modern romance novels – the bare chested, long-haired hero beneath whose bad-boy exterior was a fierce protectiveness only the heroine could see.

Now, go and study,