

John 10-The Good Shepherd: Background Information- Reserach by Paul Reet

OLD TESTAMENT

Shepherds were usually keepers of a flock of sheep. Abel was a keeper of sheep (**Genesis 4 v 2**) and the Patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) were all pastoral (**Genesis 13 v 1 – 6**). In biblical times there were three types of shepherds – *nomadic, settled and wealthy sheep owners who used servants to look after the sheep*. In many families the **care of the flock was often given to the oldest son (Genesis 30/7 v 2, 1 Samuel 16 v 11 & 19)** or daughter (**Genesis 29 v 9, Exodus 2 v 16 – 17**) or hired servants (**Genesis 30 v 32, Zechariah 11 v 12 and John 10 v 12**).

The person looking after the sheep were often responsible for the loss of sheep to the owner. Under Mosaic Law they had to give a reason why sheep were lost and prove that it was not because of neglect (**Exodus 22 v 10 – 13**). Shepherds knew their own sheep, they were often named and sometimes a group of flocks would gather at night in a sheepfold and looked after by one person (**John 10 v 2 – 5**).

All those who had a position of leadership in the people of Israel were looked on as pastors or under-shepherds. This would include the priestly line and the Kings. Their unfaithfulness was often pointed out by God (**Is 56 v 11**).

God promises through the Prophet **Isaiah in 40 v 11** that as He restores them from their Babylonian captivity He will feed His flock like a shepherd. He sees the people of Israel as His flock and He their Shepherd. In Isaiah 40 v 11 God is the gentle and loving shepherd.

Ezekiel 34 v 23/37v24: The Messianic King will be the shepherd of His people, the ONE shepherd.

Ezekiel 34 vs 1-10: God criticises those shepherds who have not done their job properly, '***I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep,***' in response to their unfaithfulness. This is a theme that becomes more clearer towards the end of the Old Testament.

Zechariah 10 v 2, 11 vs 15-16 tells us about the false shepherds that have lead the people of Israel astray and that a Shepherd will come to care for His people.

NEW TESTAMENT

Jesus in His ministry demonstrated what it was like to be a human shepherd:

Jesus it is who in His life finds the lost sheep- **Matt 18 v 12, Luke 15 v 4**. Jesus saw the crowds that they were sheep without a shepherd.

- He expresses compassion for the lost and hungry- **Matt 9 v 36; Mark 6 v 34**.
- His disciples are his own little flock-**Luke 12 v 32**
- When the shepherd is taken away the flock are leaderless and scatter- **Mark 14 v 27; Matt 26 v 31**.

The picture reaches its complete form in **John 10 vs 1-14**:

- He knows each sheep by name
- He is the one they follow
- He is the door of protection from danger and entrance into safety
- He is not like the hireling who might run away at the first sign of danger but he is willing to go the extra mile and give His life for the beloved sheep.

The picture passed into the language and thought of the early Church. Jesus is the watchman of the souls of men (**1 Peter 2 v 25**). He is the great Shepherd of the sheep. **Hebrews 13 v20, 1 Peter 2 v 25 and 5 v 4**, talk about Jesus being the Shepherd and Chief shepherd of our souls.

In the New Testament the leaders of the Church are likened to shepherds. It is Jesus' commission to Peter to care for the sheep and lambs (**John 21 vs 15-19**). The Christian leader must shepherd the flock of God, not as a matter of pressure, oppression or for pay or prestige but as an example to the flock (**1 Peter 5 vs 2-3**). In the Christian church Elders, Bishops/Overseers, and Deacons are seen as pastors and shepherds of the church of God under Christ the chief shepherd. In **Acts 20 v 28**-Paul instructs the leaders of the Ephesian Church to look after the flock they have been given as guardians and watchmen. The Church has its Pastors (**Ephesians 4 v 11**) and the term Pastor simply means in Latin-'Shepherd.'

Shepherds and their Sheep in Biblical times

A Shepherd's Equipment

The shepherd had a sheepskin robe with the fleece worn on the inside and he used it to wrap himself in (**1 Sam 17 v 40, Je 43 v 12**).

A shepherd in Jesus's day would have:

- **A 'scrip'**- which was a bag made from the skin of an animal and in it he would carry his food-bread, dried fruit, olives and cheese.
- **A sling**- men were skilled at using a sling. He had no dog to help him so he would send a stone to stop just in front of the straying sheep so that the sheep was warned and turn back
- **A staff**- a long crooked stick, he would walk with it in his hand and when a sheep showed signs of straying he would pull it out with the crook (**Ps 23 v 4, Mic 7 v 14**).
- **A rod**- carried at his belt. Piece of wood, around three feet long, the size of an orange at one end. He used this to fight battles on behalf of the flock. At evening the Shepherd would lead the flock to the sheepfold. He would hold his rod across the entrance, close to the ground and each sheep had to pass under the rod and he was able to check if the sheep were not injured. It is what it means in **Ezekiel 20 v 37**, 'I will make you pass under the rod.' It is a lovely picture of God's loving care for His people.

Nature of a Shepherd:

- **The Shepherd was the way or doorway to into the Sheepfold:** The Sheepfold or Sheepcote was an enclosure for sheep.(**Jeremiah 20 v 23**). It usually comprised of a stone wall. The sheep were gathered together usually at night and the wall was often surrounded with thorny shrubs. The sheep would lay under the open sky and the early sheepfolds would not have a door but the shepherd would sit in the doorway to the sheepfold.
- **Shepherds knew their sheep:** Often the shepherd was with the same sheep for eight or nine years and so each sheep had a name like, 'Brown Legs' or 'Black Ears.' As a result the sheep knew the shepherd's voice (**John 10 v 3**). Each shepherd had a call or cry for the sheep that would be familiar to them.
- **Shepherds led their sheep:** The Shepherd would lead the sheep not drive them ahead (**John 10 v 4**). He would go ahead to clear the way for the sheep to minimise danger. **Psalms 23 v 4** illustrates this.

- **Shepherds fed and cared for the sheep:** The shepherd led his own flock of sheep to find pasture and was always with them (**Genesis 31 v 40, Song of Songs 1 v 7**). The shepherd defended his sheep from wild animals (**1 Samuel 17 v 34 – 35, Isaiah 31 v 4**), searched for stray sheep and brought them back (**Ez 34 v 12**) and tenderly cared for the delicate, weak and injured (**Is 43 v 11, Ez 34 v 4 & 16, Zec 11 v 9, Genesis 33 v 15**).). The Shepherd's care was constant- food was sometimes scarce in the autumn and winter and the lambs had to be cared for that were weak or injured He was responsible for the flock at all times, even at night. Sheep in the East were never left alone.
- **The Shepherd and the Hireling:** In Jesus' time the Shepherd owned the sheep or He was the son of the owner. If he was not the owner he was hired and would be paid in the produce from the sheep. Hirelings were those people hired for the day, who really had no long term investment in the sheep. Often they would flee for safety if danger came.

Shepherds in Jesus' Day

Shepherds were despised by the strictly orthodox. Because of the demanding work of looking after the sheep the shepherds simply did not have the time to observe all the complicated hand washing rules and rituals imposed by the religious leaders. He could not observe the stated hours of prayer but it is worth noting that because they lived outside and under the stars they were possibly in a position to be very close to God, irrespective of the religious system of finding God. They were exposed to the elements and in danger of attack.

East and West Shepherds have some big differences. Sheep in the West are mainly kept for meat, in Jesus's day they were friends of the shepherd for their wool and milk. Usually in one flock there would be both sheep and goats.

Summary of the verses:

John 10 v 1 – 5: *This is a parable and tells us about voice hearing, a door, an enemy and a shepherd who leads and guides*

John 10 vs 7 – 13: *Jesus explains He is the door (v7 – 9); others before are not the way to God (v 8); Jesus comes to give us abundant life (v10); Jesus protects the sheep in such a way He dies for them to make them His (v 11 & 15); the enemy is real (v 11 – 13)*

John 10 vs 14 – 18: *The shepherd is described in more detail, those who are His know His voice. There is one fold and Jesus wants to bring both Jews and Gentiles into it and He is going to do this by laying down His life.*

John 10 vs25 – 29: *Jesus deepens the teaching and declares that He Is the Good Shepherd but not only this but that He is God by using the prefix "I am".*

It is Jesus who alone gives life, '**No one knows what real life is until he has lived life with Jesus Christ.**' (William Barclay).

William Barclay says of Jesus as the 'Door': '**He is the door to the knowledge of God; He is the door to security and peace; He is the door through which we enter to find the fulfilment of the hearts deepest desires; He is the door to the life which is real life.**'