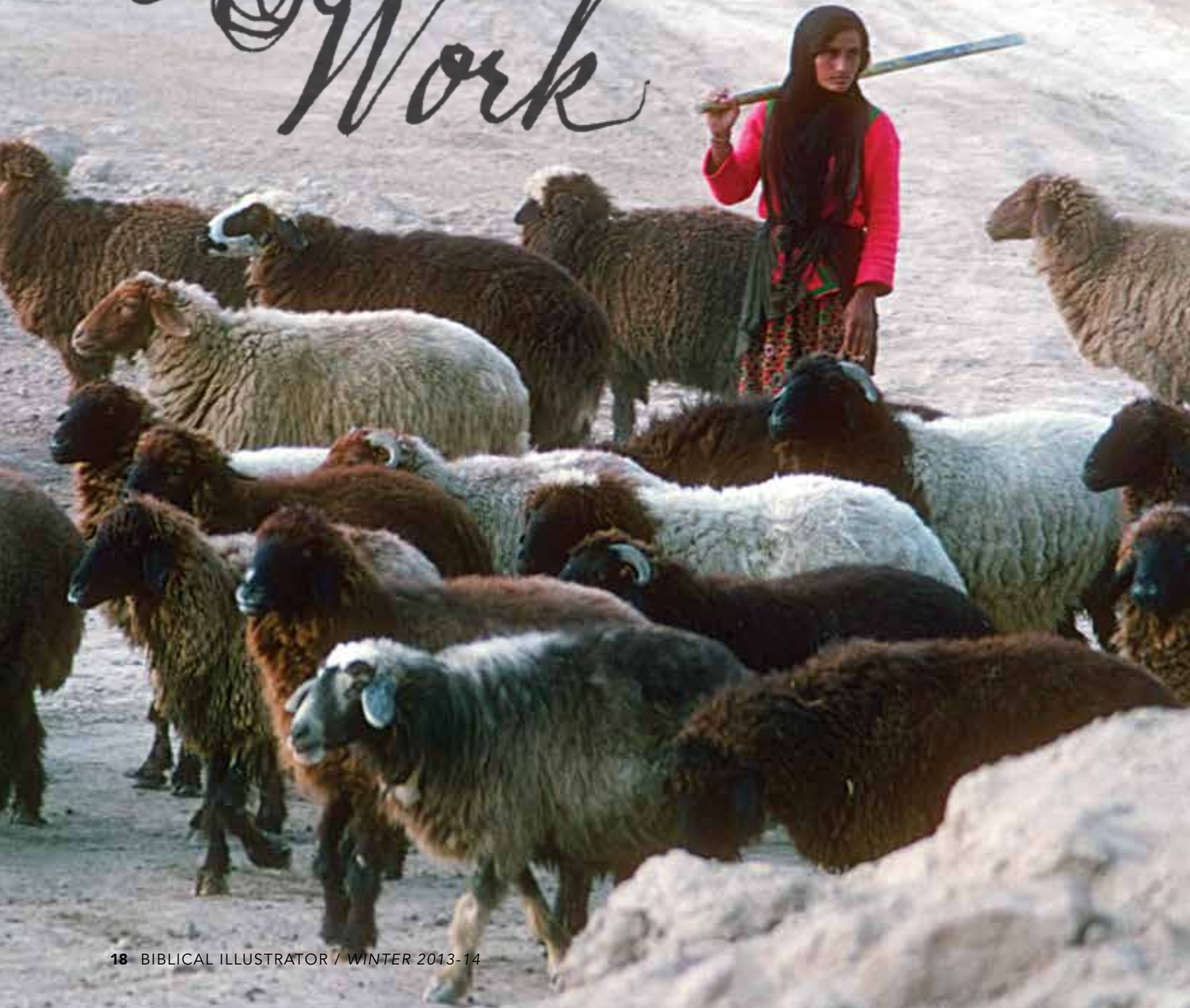




# The Shepherd's Work



“One should not romanticize the occupation of shepherds. In general shepherds were dishonest...and unclean according to the standards of the law.”



**Right: Fragment from a 2nd cent. sarcophagus depicts a ram beside a budding bush.**

**Left: Shepherdess and her flock in the desert of modern Iran.**

**I**N JOHN 21:15-17, Jesus questioned Peter concerning his love. Conservative biblical scholars generally agree that this is a story about Jesus reinstating or re-commissioning Simon Peter.

Prior to Jesus' arrest, Peter had been quite vocal about his devotion to Him (Matt. 26:33; Mark 14:29; Luke 22:33; John 13:37). Jesus' three questions correspond to Peter's three denials. I don't believe any interpretive distinctions exist between the two Greek verbs Jesus and Peter used for "love," (*agapao* and *phileo*). John used them interchangeably in other places in his Gospel.<sup>1</sup> Likewise, I don't think we should place a great deal of emphasis on the distinctions between the words "tend" and "shepherd" or "lambs" and "sheep" that Jesus used in His charge to Peter.

Using the metaphorical language of shepherding, Jesus charged Peter to provide complete spiritual care for God's people.<sup>2</sup> Jesus' three-fold repetition required Peter to search deep within himself for the truth concerning his love and devotion to Jesus and willingness to follow Him. Three times Jesus asked, "Do you love me?" Three times Peter affirmed his love, and three times Jesus charged Peter to shepherd His sheep.<sup>3</sup>

### The Positive Assumptions

Shepherding was one of the most common occupations in Israel. I have always imagined shepherds

having a certain amount of respect and standing within the Hebrew community. After all, the Old Testament refers to God as the Shepherd of Israel (Gen. 49:24). The same metaphorical use is in the Psalms and prophets (Pss. 23:1; 28:9; 80:1; Isa. 40:11). At least two great national leaders, Moses and David, were shepherds. Plus, in the New Testament Jesus referred to Himself as "the good shepherd" (John 10:11). Shepherding is also the most frequently used New Testament imagery for picturing the leadership, care, and oversight of the church. We can argue that the responsibilities of physically shepherding sheep and spiritually shepherding the flock of God are similar in many ways (see Ezek. 34:11-15).

### The Negative Reality

The reality of shepherding, however, is much different than I imagined. Shepherds were not highly esteemed or well respected. As New Testament professor and scholar Dr. Robert H. Stein warns, "One should not romanticize the occupation of shepherds. In general shepherds were dishonest...and unclean according to the standards of the law."<sup>4</sup> People often viewed shepherds with distrust and even scorn. That distrust could be in part because of the itinerant nature of

the vocation. Shepherds were constantly moving from field to field, town to town. Distrust might also have developed because many who tended the flocks were hired shepherds, meaning they had no ownership or interest in the flock. Jesus pointed out the most glaring difference between hired shepherds and true shepherds in John 10:13. The hired shepherd, Jesus said, "does not care about the sheep" (NKJV). For that reason, hired shepherds were often unreliable.<sup>5</sup> For the purpose of this article, shepherd and shepherding will refer only to true shepherds, not to hirelings.

### The Job Requirements

Like most agriculture occupations, shepherding was a hard and sometimes dangerous job. It required, upon occasion, the shepherd to be firm and to be ready to confront an especially challenging situation or dangerous threat (Gen. 21:25; Ex. 2:15-17; Mic. 5:8).

The shepherd was responsible for the complete care of his flock.

*By R. D. Fowler*

## GREEN PASTURES

The Negev Desert covers just under 5,000 square miles, which is more than half of the country of Israel. Most of the Negev receives less than 8 inches of rain per year. A casual glance could cause one to conclude that the Negev is a barren wasteland of little more than rocks and sand. Such, though, is not the case. In fact, when the Scripture speaks of “green pastures,” it is referring in part to the almost-barren Negev Desert.

For centuries farmers have highly prized the available farm land in Israel. Traditionally, therefore, they have kept shepherds and flocks out of their fields. Shepherds have thus grazed their sheep in the desert. The moist evening air that comes off the Mediterranean and the morning dew is just enough to allow small tufts of grass to sprout around rocks where condensation collects.

“Green pastures” thus does not refer only to lush valleys abundant with grass, like those around Galilee. For much of Israel, the term refers to a desert land with just enough grass to satisfy the immediate need.

*“So don’t worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ For the idolaters eagerly seek all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be provided for you. Therefore don’t worry about tomorrow, because tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.”*

—Matthew 6:31-34, HCSB

Sheep at the edge of the northern Negev desert where it meets the central plains of Israel. The hill country rises in the background.

Being a shepherd thus required keen watchfulness, especially at night. Shepherding also called for extraordinary patience and, at times, great tenderness (Isa. 40:11). These are certainly character traits essential for the spiritual shepherd as well.

Shepherds were regularly exposed to the extreme elements of nature (Gen. 31:40). The shepherd’s wardrobe consisted of a woolen garment that provided protection against rain, wind, and cold. Shepherds also commonly had a mantle or cloak, usually made of sheepskin, that served as both a coat and blanket; a goatskin bag for food and other supplies while in the fields (1 Sam. 17:40); and a pail for carrying water.

Caring for his flock often brought the shepherd face to face with wild animals (vv. 34-37) and thieves. Consequently shepherds carried a rod and/or a staff (Ps. 23:4). The rod was a short, heavy stick with a knot or knob on one end, used mainly for protection. The staff was longer, usually about six feet, sometimes with a crook on the end. While the staff was primarily a walking stick, the shepherd could also use it to nudge wayward sheep or lambs back to the rest of the flock or as a weapon if necessary. In addition to a rod and staff, shepherds might also carry a sling for added protection (1 Sam. 17:40).

Defending the flock was just one of the shepherd’s many duties. Each morning he would lead the sheep to pasture. For me the concept of herding any type of livestock involves driving them from behind. Eastern shepherds, however, did not drive their sheep; they led them. This serves as an important theological image for effectively shepherding the flock of God.<sup>6</sup>

Finding adequate pasture sometimes required traveling a great

distance, especially during the dry months when both food and water were scarce.<sup>7</sup>

Keeping sheep watered could also be a challenge. Sometimes a well with a trough or stream might be near the pasture (Gen. 29:7; 30:38; Ex. 2:16). In the dry season, however, a shepherd could search for hours before finding water. If water was not available nearby, the shepherd might have to transport water in the pail he carried. Having numerous sheep meant he would have to repeat this task many times in order to water his entire flock.

At the end of the day, the shepherd would gather his sheep. Should any sheep have strayed along the way, the shepherd would search for it and bring it back to the flock—bearing it on his shoulders, if necessary (Matt. 18:12; Luke 15:5). The shepherd carefully counted each sheep, as they entered the fold (Jer. 33:13). Although a shepherd at times may have had to watch his flock at night in an open field (Luke 2:8), a sheepfold provided more protection and security for the sheep. Types of sheepfolds varied and included caves (e.g., 1 Sam. 24:3), temporary pens made from thorn bushes, and more sturdy structures made with stone walls.

The shepherd would guard his flock by sleeping in the entrance of the fold overnight. At times, more than one flock would be in a single sheepfold. In such a case the shepherds would take turns guarding the fold. Each morning the shepherd would again count his sheep and lead them to pasture. Even with different flocks sharing a single fold, separating the flocks was not difficult because each shepherd knew his own sheep, often having named them. Further, the sheep knew the voice of their shepherd (John 10:27).

**Right: Sousse, Tunisia, in northern Africa, a wall carving of the Good Shepherd. Depictions of a shepherd carrying a sheep across his shoulders became a popular Christian figure, especially in the Byzantine Era.**

**Below: Men outside of Madaba, Jordan, shearing sheep. The task of shearing sheep typically occurs in the months of May and June in the Middle East.**




ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO (35/91/83)



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ LOUISE KOHL SMITH (32/8/15)

He called his sheep, whistled, and gave them verbal commands; and His sheep followed him until they again reached pasture (vv. 1-5).

The shepherd invested his life in his sheep—a life of great commitment and great devotion. When Jesus charged Peter to shepherd His sheep, He likewise called him to a life of discipleship, devotion, and commitment as a shepherd of God's church. 

1. D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 676.

2. For a thorough discussion of the variation in word use in this passage, see Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 869-70. William Hendriksen supports a different view in his

commentary *Exposition of the Gospel According to John: New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1954), 486-87.

3. Merrill C. Tenney correctly points out: "This threefold injunction does not necessarily give Peter sole responsibility for the oversight of Christ's followers." "The Gospel of John" in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, gen. ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 9 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 202. See also 1 Peter 5:2; Peter gave these same instructions to other leaders in the church.

4. Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, vol. 24 in *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 108.

5. See Ezekiel 34:2-11, a prophecy that metaphorically compares unreliable shepherds of the flock to unreliable spiritual shepherds.

6. God calls spiritual shepherds to lead His church, never to force, bully, or drive it.

7. For a more complete discussion of the climate of the region see John H. Paterson, "Palestine" in *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, gen. ed. Merrill C. Tenney (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 4:576-83.

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