

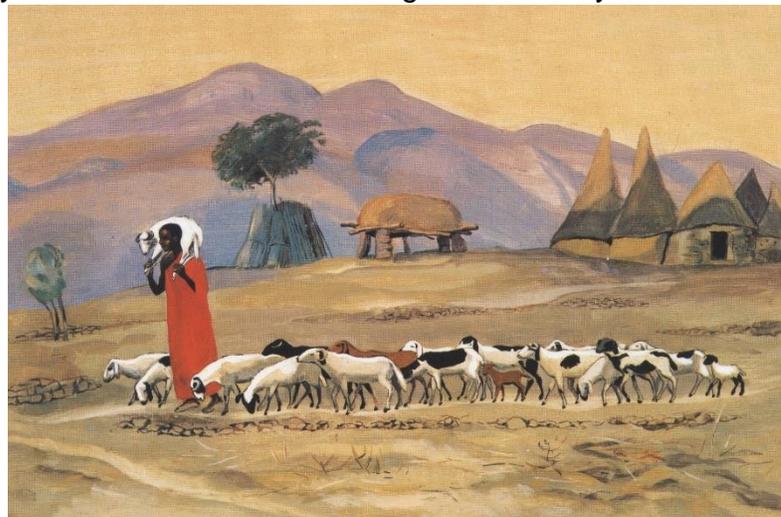
**GRAZING SAFELY**  
**A Devotional Meditation from Ezekiel 24:1-24 and John 10:1-16**  
Albert J. McCarn  
May 22 2021

Think about a shepherd as a metaphor for someone who has the responsibility to care and protect. Now think about artwork you might have seen that illustrates this metaphor.



I can think of a few. Two of my favorites come from different corners of the world and demonstrate the universality of this shepherd metaphor. One is "Stray Lamb," a painting by British artist Richard Ansdale. Ansdale depicts a kilted Scottish shepherd with a lamb in his arm resting wearily on a rocky Highland ledge. Just below him the lamb's mother bleats longingly for her babe as her ram echoes her concern. Their cries seem to betray concern as well for the shepherd, the source of their comfort and protection. We needn't wonder however, why the shepherd did not hesitate to rescue the wandering lamb; his faithful Border Collie stands watch over the flock from the same rocky shelf, providing the necessary vigilance to keep the sheep from harm while the shepherd is away. All the sheep need do is continue their business of grazing through their portion of the Highland meadow.

A different scene with a similar message is captured by an artist of the Mafa people of Cameroon. The painting, titled "The Good Shepherd," shows a Mafa shepherd leading his little flock on a path in front of his village. The West African landscape seems a bit gentler than the Highlands of Ansdale's painting, although there are mountains in the background. The grass is not as green, but there seems to be no concern about finding enough food for the flock. It does take some work, though, which is why the shepherd leads the sheep out from the safety of the village to the hazardous countryside. There they will find pastureland, but they will also find wild beasts eager for an easy meal. It can be a difficult, perilous journey. We see that in the little lamb carried lovingly over the berobed shepherd's shoulders. Other lambs follow their dams, but this one perhaps has demonstrated a tendency to wander, or perhaps it is injured or too tired to walk further. Whatever the reason, the Good Mafa Shepherd, like his Scottish counterpart, doesn't hesitate to provide extra effort for this little one.



There must be something special about sheep and shepherds. It's more than the loving connection one has with a pet dog or cat, and it goes beyond the routine care given

to cattle or pigs. Cowboys and farmers may develop an attachment to their cows and pigs, but it's not quite the connection one imagines with shepherds and their sheep. Herds of cattle get along fine if left alone, and pigs are content to wallow and forage wherever they like, but sheep seem to do best when they have the direct, human connection of a shepherd who knows them and whom they know. Without the shepherd they can survive, but only with the shepherd can they thrive.

This may be why shepherds and sheep have served as metaphors for the Creator and His human offspring for time immemorial. The Bible is full of references to sheep, especially in describing the covenant nation of Israel as the sheep of God's pasture. One of the most scathing rebukes in the prophetic writings concerns the shepherds of Israel who have failed to look after the flock given into their care. Listen to these words spoken through the prophet Ezekiel:

Therefore, shepherds, hear the word of *ADONAI*: "As I live"—it is a declaration of *ADONAI*—"as surely as My sheep became prey and My sheep became food for all the beasts of the field, because there was no shepherd, nor did My shepherds search for My flock, but the shepherds fed themselves and did not feed My sheep," therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of *ADONAI*, thus says *ADONAI Elohim*: "Behold, I am against the shepherds and I will demand My flock from their hand. I will dismiss them from tending the flock. The shepherds will no longer feed themselves. I will rescue My sheep from their mouth, so they will not be food for them." (Ezekiel 34:7-10 TLV)

This is a frightening word, not only for the priests, kings, and prophets of ancient Israel, but for all who stand in that place today. It seems that even the anointed servants of God have a tendency to usurp their authority and scatter the flock as much as they gather and nurture. This is why God promises to rescue and gather the sheep Himself. It is also why Messiah Yeshua spoke directly to Ezekiel's prophecy in the Good Shepherd chapter of John's gospel:

"Amen, amen I tell you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door, but climbs in some other way, is a thief and a robber. But he who enters through the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the doorkeeper opens, and the sheep hear his voice. The shepherd calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. . . . When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them; and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will never follow a stranger, but will run away from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers. . . . I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. . . . I am the Good Shepherd. I know My own and My own know Me, just as the Father knows Me and I know the Father. And I lay down My life for the sheep. I have other sheep that are not from this fold; those also I must lead, and they will listen to My voice. So there shall be one flock, one Shepherd. (John 10:1-5, 11, 14-16 TLV)

What a tremendous comfort to know that God Himself will search out His sheep, wherever they may be scattered across the world, and that His Messiah began that work two millennia ago. One would think that the process of gathering the sheep and bringing them into one flock and one sheepfold would have been finished long ago, but apparently it is more difficult and complicated than our limited human perceptions can grasp. For one

thing, we sheep have trouble staying gathered. We tend to wander out of the safe places where our Shepherd has put us. Worse yet, we tend to seek advantage over our fellow sheep, taking what is allotted to them and acting like the very predators from which the Shepherd is protecting us. Even in ancient times this was so, which is why Ezekiel included a word specifically for us sheep:

“I will seek the lost, bring back the stray, bind up the broken and strengthen the sick. But the fat and the strong I will destroy—I will tend them with justice. As for you, My flock”—thus says *ADONAI Elohim*—“behold, I will judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and male goats. Was it too little for you that you were feeding in the good pasture? Must you trample down the rest of your pastures with your feet? You were drinking clear water. Must you muddy the rest with your feet? Yet My sheep must eat what you have trampled with your feet and drink what you have muddied with your feet!”

Therefore thus says *ADONAI Elohim* to them: “Behold, I Myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. Because you thrust with your side and with shoulder and gore all the weak with your horns, until you have scattered them all over, I will save My flock. They will no longer be prey. I will judge between sheep and sheep. So I will set up One Shepherd over them, My servant David—He will tend them, He will feed them Himself and be their shepherd. I, *ADONAI*, will be their God, and My servant David will be Prince among them. I, *ADONAI*, have spoken.” (Ezekiel 34:16-24 TLV)

Maybe the reason our Messiah hasn't returned yet, and why Israel is not yet fully restored under His rule is because we sheep are still trying to play the role of shepherds over our own little flocks. Instead of resting contently where He has put us, we seek to build our own little sheepfolds, complete with luxurious accommodations for those sheep of our own stripe, rather than listen to the one by whose stripes we are healed. We all want to enter the greener pasture of heaven's eternal Kingdom, but until it comes, let's learn to abide in the green pasture our Shepherd has already provided, and welcome those He brings in to graze beside us.

*Special thanks to Sarah Kellam for preserving and promoting the artwork of her great-great-grandfather, Richard Ansdell RA, at <http://www.richardansdell.co.uk>.*

*Special thanks also to Carole Presburg of the Border Collie Museum (<http://www.bordercolliemuseum.org/>) for permission to use Richard Ansdell's painting, “Stray Lamb,” and for inspiring the opening line to this podcast.*