

**OPEN ACCESS**

SUBMITTED 21 January 2025

ACCEPTED 25 February 2025

PUBLISHED 23 March 2025

VOLUME Vol.05 Issue 03 2025

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The Symbolic and Religious Significance of The Shepherd Image

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Abstract: This article explores the image of the shepherd as one of the oldest and most universal symbols in history, reflecting the human connection with nature, as well as the ideas of wisdom, simplicity, and care. The paper examines its symbolic and religious roots, the evolution of the shepherd's image in modern life, and its significance across different historical periods and cultures.

Keywords: Shepherd, pastor, Israel, Amos, Sikhism, symbolism, nature, mythology, association, flock.

Introduction: Shepherding is one of the oldest forms of human activity, originating approximately 5,000 years ago in Anatolia, i.e., Asia Minor. Sheep were bred primarily for milk, meat, and especially wool. Over the following millennia, sheep herding and pastoralism spread across Eurasia. Henri Fleisch suggested that the Neolithic pastoral culture in Lebanon might date back to the Epipaleolithic period and could have been used by one of the earliest nomadic shepherding cultures in the Bekaa Valley.

Initially, a few sheep were kept on family farms along with other animals such as chickens and pigs. However, in order to maintain a large flock, sheep needed to move from one pasture to another. This led to the emergence of a profession distinct from that of farming. Shepherds were responsible for keeping their flocks safe, protecting them from predators, and guiding them to markets in time for shearing. In ancient times, shepherds also regularly milked their sheep and produced cheese from the milk—a practice that only a few still maintain today.

In many societies, shepherds played a vital role in the economy. Unlike farmers, they often worked for wages, tending to the livestock of others. Shepherds typically lived apart from the rest of society, leading a mostly nomadic life. It was predominantly a job for single,

childless men, and new shepherds had to be hired externally. Often, the youngest sons of farming families who did not inherit land became shepherds. In other societies, every family had a member responsible for tending the flock—usually a child, youth, or elder unable to perform heavy labor. These shepherds were fully integrated into the social structure.

Shepherds typically worked in groups, either tending to one large flock together or managing their own flocks while sharing responsibilities. They lived in small huts, often together with their sheep, and purchased food from local communities. Less commonly, shepherds resided in covered wagons that moved along with the herds.

Sheep farming developed only in specific regions. In lowlands and river valleys, growing grain crops was far more efficient than grazing sheep. As a result, sheep herding was concentrated in remote and mountainous areas. Thus, in pre-modern times, pastoralism was primarily practiced in regions such as the Middle East, Greece, the Pyrenees, the Carpathians, Scotland, and Northern England.

Hiring a shepherd could be costly. Additionally, in some parts of the world, the extermination of predators that hunted sheep has reduced the need for shepherds.

METHOD

In a figurative sense, the term "shepherd" (or "pastor") is used to refer to God, particularly in the Judeo-Christian tradition (e.g., Psalm 23, Ezekiel 34). In Christianity, it is also used to describe Jesus, who referred to Himself as the Good Shepherd. The ancient Israelites were a pastoral people, and many among them were shepherds. It is worth noting that numerous biblical figures were shepherds, including the patriarchs Abraham and Jacob, the twelve tribes of Israel, the prophet Moses, King David, and the Old Testament prophet Amos, who tended flocks in the mountainous region around Tekoa. In the New Testament, angels announced the birth of Jesus to shepherds.

The same metaphor is applied to priests: Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and Anglican bishops traditionally carry a shepherd's staff as a symbol of their office (see also *Lycidas*). In both religious contexts, believers are viewed as a "flock" that requires guidance and care. This image is partly rooted in Jesus' instruction to Peter: "Feed My sheep," which serves as a foundational metaphor for pastoral care, including in literary works such as Milton's *Lycidas*. The term pastor, originally meaning "shepherd" in Latin, is now used almost exclusively to refer to clergy across most Christian denominations.

The "Good Shepherd" is one of the central themes of the Holy Scriptures. This image conveys a range of ideas, including God's care for His people. The tendency of humans to put themselves in danger and their inability to guide and care for themselves without direct divine help is reinforced by the metaphor of sheep in need of a shepherd.

According to Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam, every messenger of God was at some point in his life a shepherd, as was he in his youth. Jabir ibn Abdullah narrated: "We were with the Messenger of Allah when he was gathering fruits from the arak trees, and he said, 'Pick the black ones; they are the best.' The companions asked, 'Were you a shepherd?' He replied, 'There has never been a prophet who was not a shepherd.'" (Sahih al-Bukhari, Book of Prophets, Volume 4, Book 55, Hadith 618). This includes Jesus, Moses, Abraham, and all other prophets, according to Islamic tradition.

Pastoral imagery also appears frequently in Sikhism. There are many related references, such as: "We are the cattle; the Almighty is our Shepherd."

The image of the shepherd is one of the most significant messianic symbols in the Bible. Both the Old and New Testaments contain numerous references to shepherds. This is unsurprising, as herding and livestock raising were the primary occupations of the ancestors of the ancient Hebrew people. Even in the early chapters of the Bible, we read that the sacrifice of Abel, a shepherd, was more pleasing to God than that of his brother.

Even in later times, shepherding was regarded as a highly honorable occupation. This is evident in the example of David, who was called from tending sheep to become king: "I took you from the pasture, from tending the flock, and appointed you ruler over my people Israel" (2 Samuel 7:8). It is likely no coincidence that Amos, the first of the writing prophets in the Bible, was called to prophetic service from shepherding: "I was neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet, but I was a shepherd, and I also took care of sycamore-fig trees" (Amos 7:14; see also Amos 1:1).

In the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, God refers to the Persian king Cyrus as His shepherd: "who says of Cyrus, 'He is my shepherd and will accomplish all that I please'" (Isaiah 44:28). In his eschatological prophecies, the prophet Jeremiah speaks of future shepherds who will tend the people with knowledge and understanding: "Then I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will lead you with knowledge and understanding" (Jeremiah 3:15).

The image of the shepherd is also found in the writings of the Prophet Micah, a contemporary of Isaiah and Amos. In Micah's prophecy regarding the birth of the Messiah in Bethlehem, it is foretold that the Messiah

Himself will be a shepherd to the children of Israel: "He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God" (Micah 5:4).

This prophecy is followed by a passage mentioning seven shepherds who will stand against the Assyrian invasion: "When the Assyrian invades our land and marches through our fortresses, we will raise against him seven shepherds, even eight commanders, who will rule the land of Assyria with the sword, the land of Nimrod with drawn sword. He will deliver us from the Assyrian when he invades our land and marches into our borders" (Micah 5:5–6). It is apparent that the "shepherds of the people" here symbolize the leaders or rulers of the nation.

In Chapter 4, describing the eschatological times, the prophet Micah presents God as the One who will compassionately gather the lame, the scattered, and the exiled—that is, the broken and previously rejected people—under His rule on Mount Zion (Micah 4:6–7). Biblical commentators see in these words a reference to the foundation of the Church of Christ, whose loving Shepherd is the Lord Jesus Himself. Although God is not directly called a shepherd in this passage, His actions align closely with the pastoral role as described in many other biblical texts.

In Chapter 7 of the same prophet, we encounter a comparison between God's people and sheep, and God as their shepherd. The prophet speaks of the people of God as a lost flock. Although God punished His people, He is also the one who will heal them (Micah 7:11–20).

In prophetic texts, there is often a contrast between good shepherds—including God Himself as the ultimate Shepherd—"I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign Lord" – Ezekiel 34:15), and corrupt, self-serving shepherds ("Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock?" – Ezekiel 34:2; see also Isaiah 56:11). The good shepherds care for their flocks—that is, the people—while the bad ones look only after themselves.

The image of the shepherd takes on particular significance in the writings of the prophet Ezekiel, a visionary who was taken into Babylonian captivity and prophesied between 592 and 563 BCE [2, p. 462]. Ezekiel saw the heavenly gates opened and witnessed the glory of God. He prophesied about the Good Shepherd—the Son of Man (Ezekiel 34:30–31), and of the resurrection, of which Jesus Christ became the firstborn (Ezekiel 37:6–27).

The book of Ezekiel contains an extended prophecy dedicated to the shepherds of God's people. The

prophet criticizes the corrupt shepherds—interpreted as leaders, rulers, and priests—who failed to care for their flocks and instead looked only after themselves:

"Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool, and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally." (Ezekiel 34:2–4)

As a result of such negligence, the flock was scattered:

"So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals. My sheep wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. They were scattered over the whole earth, and no one searched or looked for them." (Ezekiel 34:5–6)

God declares that He will remove the flock from these wicked shepherds and will shepherd His people Himself:

"For this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness. I will bring them out from the nations and gather them from the countries, and I will bring them into their own land. I will pasture them on the mountains of Israel, in the ravines and in all the settlements in the land. I will tend them in a good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land. There they will lie down in good grazing land, and there they will feed in a rich pasture on the mountains of Israel." (Ezekiel 34:11–14)

God promises to be the true Shepherd—good, caring, and just:

"I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign Lord. I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice." (Ezekiel 34:15–16)

At the same time, the prophet Ezekiel speaks of how God will appoint a new shepherd—David (i.e., the Messiah)—over His people:

"I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd. I the Lord will be their God, and my servant David will be prince among them. I the Lord have spoken. I will make a covenant of peace with them and rid the land of savage beasts so that they may live in the

wilderness and sleep in the forests in safety.” (Ezekiel 34:23–25)

From the prophetic text of Ezekiel, it is clear that God cares deeply for His people: He gathers the lost, heals the wounded, and provides His people with what they need—help, comfort, and promise.

The image of the shepherd holds great significance in the Old Testament, where both God and the Messiah are depicted as shepherds. The Old Testament prophets condemned the corrupt shepherds, foretold the coming of new, righteous shepherds, described their qualities, and likened the people to a lost flock that would be gathered and healed by God Himself. They spoke of God and David as the true shepherds of the people.

The Christian Church has long interpreted the "lost sheep" as representing fallen humanity, expanding the metaphor beyond the boundaries of the Israelite nation. In the image of the Good Shepherd, the Church has always seen Jesus Christ—the incarnate Word of God—who bore upon Himself all of human nature.

In the New Testament, Jesus Christ frequently used the image of the shepherd, identifying Himself with it directly. In doing so, He undoubtedly referred back to the prophetic texts we have examined. For this reason, Christians often see in Christ the fulfillment of the image of the Good Shepherd.

Saint Simeon the New Theologian, with fervent prayer, addressed Christ—the Good Shepherd and Lover of mankind: “Yes, compassionate Shepherd, good and gentle, who desires that all who believe in You may be saved, have mercy, hear my prayer...”

The image of Christ as the Good Shepherd is also deeply rooted in Christian liturgical tradition. During worship, the bishop symbolizes Christ as the Good Shepherd. This is reflected in the small episcopal omophorion, which depicts the lost sheep—symbolizing both each individual sinner and fallen human nature as a whole.

CONCLUSION

The figure of the shepherd in literature serves as a multifaceted symbol reflecting the cultural, social, and philosophical transformations of different historical periods. Its study not only offers insights into key aspects of literary heritage but also invites a deeper contemplation of eternal questions of human existence—such as the search for harmony, care for others, and the pursuit of wisdom. Exploring the image of the shepherd also contributes to fostering a spirit of patriotism among younger generations.

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