

What was a shepherd in the Bible?

A shepherd during the time of the Old Testament was often, but not always, a child. Whatever his age, the shepherd's job was to protect his flock and guide them to good pastures with plenty of food and slow-moving, easily accessible water. If fed grass of poor quality, the sheep would be malnourished. If the water moved too quickly, the sheep would be too afraid to drink from it. Guiding the flock of sheep to a good location was an extremely important task for a shepherd because good pastures kept his flock healthy.

A shepherd typically carried a few items with him to aid him in his task of caring for the sheep. First, he would have a rod. The rod was a sturdy stick with a knob at one end. Sometimes the knob even had nails in it to make it a better weapon. The shepherd used his rod to protect his sheep from wild animals or other threats. The shepherd also carried a long staff. The staff was used as a walking stick for the shepherd, who also used it to maneuver sheep when needed. For further protection, shepherds often carried a sling, comprised of a leather pouch on a string. Placing a stone in the pouch, a skilled shepherd could fling rocky projectiles over a good distance in order to scare off or wound wild animals.

During biblical times, families in the Middle East relied upon sheep to provide food, wool, and sheepskin. Because sheep were so valuable, shepherds would stay with the flock to protect them day and night. Frequently, the youngest boy in the family served as a shepherd until he grew older and could do harder manual labor. David was a shepherd for his family, and he often used references to shepherding in the book of Psalms. One of the most well-known psalms, Psalm 23, describes the Lord as the Great Shepherd:

“The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.

He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside quiet waters,
he refreshes my soul.

He guides me along the right paths
for his name's sake.

Even though I walk
through the darkest valley,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.

"You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies.
You anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.

Surely your goodness and love will follow me
all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

Notable shepherds in the Old Testament, besides David, are Abel, Moses, Amos, and, for a time at least, Zechariah. In the New Testament, shepherds near Bethlehem are the ones chosen to witness the heavenly announcement of Christ's birth. And Jesus claims to be the Good Shepherd who truly cares for His sheep—so much so that He lays down His life for them (John 10:1-16).

Just as shepherds guarded their sheep and cared for them day and night, so does God care for us. Even when life gets difficult, God protects us, guides us, and never leaves us. We can trust that God is the perfect Shepherd.