



BY HAROLD R. MOSLEY



# SHEEP

FOLDS

*Their Construction and Use*



THE WORLD OF THE BIBLE was largely a rural one. The frequent description of Israel as “a land flowing with milk and honey” derives from a rural background. Most characters in the Bible were either inhabitants of small villages or dwellers in the open countryside. This is certainly true of the Old Testament setting. Even in the New Testament, although set at times in Jerusalem, the people were familiar with agrarian practices and habits. Jesus often drew illustrations depicting the common rural experiences of His audience. Within this world, sheep and shepherds formed a common element.

Many of us in the English-speaking world are largely unfamiliar with practices associated with sheep and shepherds. Because of this, we sometimes miss the subtle nuances of a narrative, a parable, or a psalm. Even the beloved Psalm 23 is not grasped in its emotional entirety because of our unfamiliarity with the relationship between the sheep and the shepherd. The more we understand the cultural world of the Bible, the better we are able to grasp not only the meaning of a passage but also the subtle aspects of that particular passage. Because of the widespread references to sheep and shepherds in Scripture, at least a basic knowledge of these seems vital to understanding the meaning of many passages.

The sheep of the Bible were probably of the fat-tailed Awassi variety. Ancient paintings and depictions of sheep from across the Middle East indicate this breed was the most common across the area in antiquity. This is also the variety commonly found in the region today. The Awassi sheep are generally white with brown feet and head, although all-white sheep or sheep with a black head and feet

are also frequent. All-black, gray, or dappled sheep are much rarer.<sup>1</sup>

Sheep formed an important component in the area’s economy in that the flocks provided milk, yogurt, butter, cheese, and meat as well as wool for clothing and tents. In large part, a person’s wealth could be determined by the size of his flocks and herds.<sup>2</sup> Abraham’s flocks and herds formed an important part of his wealth (Gen. 24:35). Likewise, Job’s wealth was measured, among other assets, by his sheep (see Job 1 and 42). In addition to sheep’s economic importance, they formed an important part of the worship setting in that they were among the animals designated as sacrifices.

Sheep depend almost entirely on the shepherd for provision and protection. This is especially true at night when the dangers of wild animals and thieves increase. The sheepfold provided a necessary place of refuge. The shepherd would construct a permanent sheepfold as a home base of the sheep. The main enclosure consisted of stones stacked four to six feet high topped with briars and thorn bushes. A low building in the rear of the enclosure afforded shelter from the cold and storms. A watchman would guard the one entrance.<sup>3</sup> The reference in John 10:1-3 has this “gatekeeper” as the background.

Shepherds often led their flocks great distances from home in search of pasture. The picture of the patriarchs is one of a nomadic and semi-nomadic existence as they led their flocks from field to field seeking pasturage. For example, Abraham crisscrossed the land from Shechem south to Beersheba, a distance of some 75 miles. The grazing territory for the sheep often included hilly and steep terrain. Visitors to the hills of Israel even today can see trails etched by the feet of countless sheep and goats. Many natural caves and overhangs dot Israel’s mountains. These provided temporary refuge when the sheep were away from their

permanent enclosure. To construct such a temporary sheepfold, the shepherd built a wall of stones and briars across the mouth of an overhang or cave. The cave’s inner recesses afforded refuge from the elements during storms. Or, if the weather was mild, the enclosure provided safety for the animals at the mouth of the cave.<sup>4</sup> The shepherd slept across the entrance to the pen in order to provide protection.

A group of shepherds sometimes combined their flocks in a single sheepfold at night. In the morning, the shepherds stood apart from each other and called to their sheep. Each shepherd had a peculiar call that was unique. The sheep, recognizing the call of their respective shepherd, followed that voice and separated themselves to their own flock.<sup>5</sup> This practice is behind the statement of Jesus, “My sheep hear My voice...and they follow Me” (John 10:27, HCSB).

The shepherd had a unique relationship with his sheep. The relationship sometimes went beyond the normal setting to that of the sheep being considered, what we would call, a pet. Nathan’s parable to David concerning David’s sin spoke to this relationship (2 Sam. 12). David, a shepherd in his early years, understood well how closely someone could become attached to a sheep and was furious because of the story. The analogy of Jesus as the Good Shepherd shows the care and the love Jesus has for His flock. **B**

1. Oded Borowski, “Sheep” in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 1203. This fact has relevance for Gen. 30 and 31 in the account of Jacob and Laban.

2. *Ibid.*, 1203.

3. Fred H. Wight, *Manners and Customs of Bible Lands* (Chicago: Moody, 1953), 154-55.

4. *Ibid.*, 154.

5. George Adam Smith, *The Historical Geography of the Holy Land*, 25th ed. (New York: Ray Long & Richard R. Smith, 1932), 311-12.

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**Left: Stone-wall sheepfold at Heshbon, east of**

**the Dead Sea. The city of Heshbon was part of Moab.**