

Who is my shepherd? (Psalm 23)

## **It took me decades to realize Psalm 23 isn't exactly about Jesus.**

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Raise your hand if you memorized Psalm 23 at some point in your childhood. Now raise your hand if, like me, you took a while (decades) to realize that the shepherd in this psalm isn't actually Jesus. That is: New Testament references to Jesus as the Good Shepherd are referencing the psalm, not the other way around. My confusion, I'm sure, came from the fact that I memorized this psalm before I understood in any meaningful way the difference between the Old and New Testaments.

I'm also guessing Sunday school and Bible school story illustrations contributed to this childhood image of Jesus as the shepherd of Psalm 23. An internet image search for "the good shepherd" yields a vast array of both classic Bible illustrations and Eastern Orthodox icons. While many things could be said about the theological aesthetics of these images, I want to reflect on what is lost and what is gained when we conflate these various shepherd images and references.

Since Psalm 23 precedes the incarnation, referring to God as our shepherd is clearly meant to invoke a metaphorical image of God. We know herding was incredibly important to and prominent among the characters we meet in the Hebrew Bible. Again thanks to the imprinting of Sunday school curricula and their illustrations, when we think of shepherds, we think of boys and men—Abraham and David being chief among them.

But we also know that shepherding wasn't solely the province of men. In *Every Living Thing*, Obed Borowski points out that ethnographic studies of the preindustrial Near East paint a picture of shepherding as work done by girls and young women as well as boys and men of varying ages. Rachel (Genesis 29:9) and Zipporah and her sisters (Exodus 2:16) are two biblical examples of young women who are skilled shepherds. This work involved being able to safeguard one's flock with a slingshot and staff.

Since shepherds weren't by definition males—and in fact by definition both males and females—then Psalm 23's metaphor of God as a shepherd need not be limited to being represented as a male shepherd. But we do limit this image when we conflate Jesus with the psalmic shepherd, making them one and the same rather than underscoring the metaphor.

Turning the metaphor into a simile is one way to push back against this reading. We are like sheep, and God is like our shepherd. Jesus is like a good shepherd. This gives us space to use these various references to female and male shepherds to name the qualities of shepherds that characterize Jesus and the Triune God.

I know we are still months away from Christmas, but maybe when rehearsals for the Christmas play begin, we can resist the temptation to make all the shepherds male and instead celebrate the liberating quality of the shepherd, a powerful symbol of God's compassion, protection, care, and saving grace.