

ANIMALS AT THE MANGER

One of the things we look forward to every year as we prepare for Christmas is the many different nativity sets and scenes we find in our own homes, at church, and around our community. They can be sweet, nostalgic, challenging – even controversial.

We can date the tradition of living nativity scenes back to Saint Francis of Assisi. He worried that people were losing the message of Christ's birth. So, he thought that recreating the scene would help people reconnect with the miracle of Jesus's life. In the year 1223, he set his scene in a cave in Italy and even included live animals to make it come alive!ⁱ

The nativity scene was quite popular and the tradition quickly spread far and wide. It included not only live recreations, but also creche scenes made as artwork for display. The Bible doesn't specify what animals were present – it just says that Jesus was born and laid in a manger. Yet, most nativity scenes feature a lot of the same animals – most commonly sheep, cattle, and donkeys.



*A Nativity from Quito, Ecuador at the San Francisco Museum.
Photo by Micaela Avala*



Orthodox Christmas Decoration, from Church of the Resurrection in Valjevo, Serbia 2010.

1. What do we learn from nativity scenes today?
2. Each week, you will be invited to bring the animal from your nativity scene that matches the animal we are focusing on. If you have a sheep with you, what makes it special?
3. When you think of sheep and the Bible, what verses, stories, or images do you think of?

SHEEP!

Sheep had been domesticated as early as 11,000 to 9,000 BC,ⁱⁱ possibly with the help of dogs.ⁱⁱⁱ (For reference, we think Abraham lived around 2000-1900 BC).^{iv} Sheep were valued for their wool, meat, milk, and skins as well as their role in fertilizing pastures and part in sacrifices for worship. Wool could symbolize wealth or purity. Mutton has a good flavor from

young and older sheep in contrast to goats. Wool was made into clothing and was used for trade in woven goods.^v

Sheepskin was also associated with the clothing of prophets (i.e. the “hairy mantle” as in Zechariah 13:4). This helps us understand Jesus’s statement in Matthew 7:15, “Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing.”^{vi}



An Ovis Musimon at a zoo in Torun, Poland. Photo by Eder Thorunensis



Urial Sheep (Ovis vignei) at the Berlin Animal Park. Photo by GodeNehler, 2019.

PSALM 95:1-7

- ¹ O come, let us sing to the LORD;
let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!
- ² Let us come into God’s presence with thanksgiving;
let us make a joyful noise to God with songs of praise!
- ³ For the LORD is a great God,
and a great King above all gods.
- ⁴ In God’s hand are the depths of the earth;
the heights of the mountains are God’s also.
- ⁵ The sea is God’s, for God made it,
and the dry land, which God’s hands have formed.
- ⁶ O come, let us worship and bow down,
let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker!
- ⁷ For this is our God,
and we are the people of God’s pasture,

and the sheep of God's hand.

O that today you would listen to God's voice!

1. Imagine that this is the only scripture passage you have ever seen. Who is God and who are we? What is God's job and what is our job?
2. In verse 7, It says "we are people of God's pasture." This could also be translated, "we are people of God's flock."^{vii} What does it mean to part of God's flock or the sheep of God's hand? (Notice all the times that the word "hand" appears in this passage.)
3. In Hebrew, the word "listen" means both "hear" and "obey." It was presumed that if you listened, you would understand, and then act.^{viii} Does thinking of ourselves as sheep help us hear/obey God's voice?

JOHN 10:11-16

¹¹[Jesus said] "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹²The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. ¹³The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep.

¹⁴I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep.

¹⁶I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.

1. The Greek word for "good" in "good shepherd" means one who is noble, beautiful, or worthy. It speaks of good character demonstrated in virtuous actions rather than intrinsic goodness.^{ix} What does it mean to you to say that Jesus is the good shepherd? How do we know that he is worthy?
2. In verse 11, it says the good shepherd, "lays down his life for the sheep." The word for "life" can refer to one's life literally, but also to one's breath, personality, will, or individuality.^x Thinking about the broader meaning of this word, what did Jesus "lay down" for our sake?
3. Who do you think the hired hand and the wolf might be?
4. Jesus says in verse 14, "I know my own and my own know me." What does it mean to know Jesus? Is this a hard bar to reach or an easy one?
5. Who do you think the other sheep are? Is there a word of challenge for us today in this part of the passage?

6. What does it mean that we belong to one flock with one shepherd? Should we not be in different churches or different denominations? What does this say to us when we have church conflict?



Nativity by an unidentified Kenyan artist, perhaps early 21st century.

ⁱ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nativity_scene

ⁱⁱ <https://www.jyi.org/2012-february/2017/9/17/our-furry-friends-the-history-of-animal-domestication>

ⁱⁱⁱ G.S. Cansdale, "Sheep," in *The Zondervan Encyclopedia of the Bible*, ed. Merrill C. Tenney and Moises Silva (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 2009), 461-462.

^{iv} S. Schultz, "Abraham, Abram," in *The Zondervan Encyclopedia of the Bible*, ed. Merrill C. Tenney and Moises Silva (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 2009), 26.

^v G.S. Cansdale, "Sheep," in *The Zondervan Encyclopedia of the Bible*, ed. Merrill C. Tenney and Moises Silva (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 2009), 461-462.

^{vi} Ibid.

^{vii} <https://biblehub.com/hebrew/4830.htm>

^{viii} <https://biblehub.com/hebrew/8085.htm>

^{ix} <https://biblehub.com/greek/2570.htm>

^x <https://biblehub.com/greek/5590.htm>