

What's the most mentioned animal in the Bible? Any idea?

Sheep. In fact, sheep are mentioned in some way over 500 times in the Bible.

Why sheep?

Well, there's a few reasons. Let's start with some of the most obvious ones.

First, sheep were an important part of life during the time of the Bible. Sheep provided meat, milk, wool and hides for clothing, containers for liquids (from some organs and also the horn for oil specifically), and musical instruments. Some researchers say people have been raising sheep for over 10,000 years!

Since sheep were an important part of daily life and survival, and they've been around for so long, it makes sense they'd be mentioned in the bible so many times!

Since people have been raising sheep for so long, do you have any idea who the first shepherd mentioned in the Bible is?

Able. Unfortunately, he was the first murder victim, too.

Genesis 4:2b-4

² Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a worker of the ground.

³ In the course of time Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground, ⁴ and Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions.

There were lots of other well-known shepherds in the Bible; Abraham, Isaac, Rachel, Jacob (who actually developed a systematic breeding method for his sheep in Genesis chapter 30), Moses, David, and the prophet Amos, just to list a few.

Shepherding was actually one of the first paid jobs in ancient times. The shepherd would take care of someone else's sheep, and be reimbursed for his or her labors. The person who owned sheep was usually considered rich, based on the size of the flock.

Sheep don't really need a fresh, green field to graze in. For example, sheep can clean up in a wheat field that's been harvested and do OK. Not that they don't like nice green grass or leafy green plants, but they can survive OK on the leftovers from a field that's been harvested.

But let's look at sheep specifically. I've been told many times that sheep are stupid; but I don't think that's totally true. Let's look at how sheep behave and make a few decisions about that.

First off, sheep have a natural instinct to follow each other. They "flock" together, if you will. Sheep are very social animals, and prefer to be within visual range of five or six other sheep, but they can't see very far, so they need to stay pretty close to each other. This may be for protection, since there's safety in numbers.

Sheep will instinctively follow the sheep in front of them. They will stick to a path toward food or water, and follow the sheep that's leading the way to where ever they're going. However, the following instinct can be a bad thing, since they will actually follow their leader off a cliff.

Sheep seem to form attachments to other sheep and to other animals that are around on a regular basis, like the shepherd for a particular flock. Sheep can recognize their shepherd by the sound of his voice, their smell, and even what they look like. Some studies have shown that sheep can remember the face of a person or another sheep for up to two weeks without seeing them, so they do seem to develop some sort of attachment. That attachment will also help them follow a shepherd as the leader of their flock, which is how the middle-eastern shepherds used to move their sheep around; lead them from one grazing location to another.

But, we know that sheep don't ALWAYS follow the sheep in front of them. Sometimes, when sheep are grazing, they get out of that sight distance with other sheep, and they get separated from the rest of the flock. Sheep don't do well on their own. They will wander around looking for the other sheep that it knows, and will tend to get lost doing that. Without a leader, sheep will wander looking for the flock until they get themselves into trouble.

Sheep also only have one defense, and that's the flock. Offensively, they're very weak, too. Rams can head-butt, and sheep will kick, but that's about it. In a fight, always bet against the sheep, unless it has a chance to run away.

Now that I've shared all this with you about sheep, maybe we can start to see why we are compared to sheep so much in the Bible. We are social, like sheep, and tend to follow a strong leader anywhere, and that can get us in trouble. On a spiritual level, we don't have many defenses except to flock together. Once we're separated from the rest of the flock, we're very vulnerable to attack. And I could say something about the offensive technique of head-butting, but I think I'll leave that one to your imagination.

So, we have a lot in common with sheep. David probably saw that, and that's why he wrote the 23rd Psalm, probably the best known psalm of them all.

I want to read Psalm 23 to you, but from a different translation than you've probably heard before; I'm going to read from the Complete Jewish Bible. Listen for the difference from what you're used to hearing.

Psalm 23, Complete Jewish Bible (CJB)

(0) A psalm of David:

1 Adonai is my shepherd; I lack nothing.

2 *He has me lie down in grassy pastures,
he leads me by quiet water,*
3 *he restores my inner person.
He guides me in right paths
for the sake of his own name.*
4 *Even if I pass through death-dark ravines,
I will fear no disaster; for you are with me;
your rod and staff reassure me.*
5 *You prepare a table for me,
even as my enemies watch;
you anoint my head with oil
from an overflowing cup.*
6 *Goodness and grace will pursue me
every day of my life;
and I will live in the house of Adonai
for years and years to come.*

Sounds a little different, but the message is about the same.

Let's take a closer look at it, a little bit at a time.

First off, your translation probably starts with "The LORD" and LORD is all in capital letters. The Complete Jewish Bible says Adonai. But that's only if you're reading it to yourself, not out loud, if you're Jewish. You see, in Hebrew the first word is the name of God, YHWH. Over the centuries, the Rabbis put "fences" around the commandment to not take the LORD's name in vain, so they said it was wrong to even pronounce the name of God outside of Temple worship. In order to protect the name of God, they removed all the vowels from the name so it would be unpronounceable, to protect people from using His name in vain. So, instead, the Rabbis trained people that when they're reading silently to themselves, they would read YHWH as Adonai (Lord or Master). However, if they were reading out loud, they would say HaShem, which is literally "The Name". So, this Psalm would start with

Adonai if you're reading it silently or HaShem if you're reading it aloud, if you're a Jew.

By the way, if you're wondering where we got the pronunciation of Jehovah for YHWH, they took the vowels for Adonai from the Hebrew and put them in YHWH, and then pronounced them. That's where we get that God's name is Jehovah.

It's interesting to me that David, who was a shepherd for many years, would associate himself with sheep with respect to God. He knew how helpless sheep can be, and what their nature was, so I think it's a good comparison between us and God. We're like sheep compared to God. We have needs we can't take care of, and to Him, it's nothing.

God, as our Shepherd, provides for our every need; we lack nothing that we **NEED** (we may **WANT** more than we have, but He meets our **NEEDS**). In fact, He gives us beyond what we need, giving us green pastures to lie in and munch on (even though we'd be quite content to have wheat stubble), quiet water to drink and cool off in, and safe paths to walk.

Verse 4 of the 23rd Psalm is the dark and scary part, if there is one. There's a couple of ways of looking at this verse. First, in most translations it says "shadow of death", which could imply death really isn't there, it just makes you fearful of death. But the Complete Jewish Translation I just read from says "death-dark". It makes it more of a fearsome place.

Think about life as a sheep, following your shepherd around, and he takes you to a place you've never been before with steep walls and very little light. It's a scary place, because you've got no place to run if you run into trouble. You either keep going the direction you're going, or you turn back and go back to where you were. But because your shepherd is leading you through this place, it's not so scary, because you know he'll protect you.

That brings us to the term “rod and staff”. For the longest time I thought this was two terms for the same thing, but it’s not. The rod can be a few things, but the Hebrew word that’s translated as rod here could also be scepter or club; so it’s a symbol of status or a weapon. The staff is the device that the shepherd would use to push the sheep back onto the path the shepherd wants them to walk on. So, the rod is the weapon the shepherd uses to protect the sheep when walking through that dangerous looking ravine. The staff is what the shepherd uses to keep the sheep going in the right direction.

In verse 5, David moves away from the sheep / shepherd motif, and uses references that seem a lot more familiar to us; a banquet. He says God provides a banquet for him while his enemies watch, and presumably go hungry. Not only that, but He anoints his head with oil. What’s that supposed to mean, anyway?

Anoint. It’s a funny sounding word. It comes from a Middle English word that basically meant to smear with ointment. Anointing was a common practice back in the ancient Middle East. Obviously, showers weren’t very easy to find, and baths were rare. The heat is unbearable. When people got the chance to clean up, they would use perfumed oils so they’d smell good for a longer time, even if they were all hot and sweaty. It’s a practice that is still common today.

Also, when you’d come into someone’s house, they would anoint your head with a little perfumed oil to make you welcome. In verse 5 here, David says that God does more than just make us feel welcome; He anoints our heads with oil from an overflowing cup. It just keeps going. He’s constantly welcoming us into His house, constantly pouring oil out onto our heads. This is another example of God providing more than we actually need.

Verse 6 is the kicker.

First off, what is this goodness and mercy, or grace as the Complete Jewish Bible calls it?

Like I usually do, let's go back to the Hebrew.

The Hebrew word that's translated as "goodness" here is *tobe*. It's the same word used in Genesis 1 to describe God's handiwork during creation – He saw that it was good. To me, that's a powerful thing to think about, God's perfect goodness.

Let's add on the Hebrew word translated here as grace or mercy, which is *kkeh-sed*. That's the same word used for God's "steadfast love" that endures forever in Psalms 117, and 118.

Now one final step on this sentence. The Complete Jewish Bible says "will pursue me", most of our translations probably say "will follow me". I think pursue is a better translation of the word. The Hebrew word here, *raw-daf*, is the same word used in Genesis 14:14, 15.

Genesis 14:14, 15

14 When Abram heard that his kinsman had been taken captive, he led forth his trained men, born in his house, 318 of them, and went in pursuit as far as Dan. 15 And he divided his forces against them by night, he and his servants, and defeated them and pursued them to Hobah, north of Damascus.

It's not just following, it's an active pursuit, chasing, like running after someone.

Goodness and Grace (or mercy) don't just follow me around, they actively chase after me, trying to keep up because I'm always getting myself into trouble, going into those death-dark ravines.

The final part of that last verse, "I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever" or "live in the house of Adonai (ha-shem)"; what does that mean? Well, we don't just spend our spare time there; it's where we

always come back to. Do you have a favorite place you like to go, a place where your heart is, but you don't always physically spend a lot of time there? That's what David is talking about here. Even when I'm not physically there, I want to be in God's house, the place where He is. His sheep pen where we feel safe.

So, how do we get there? How do we get to the point of finding our way to God's sheep pen, as the sheep we are, wandering around without a shepherd? We look for the Good Shepherd, Jesus, and follow Him home.

Opening Scripture

Micah 5:2-4

- ² *But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah,
who are too little to be among the clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to be ruler in Israel,
whose coming forth is from of old,
from ancient days.*
- ³ *Therefore he shall give them up until the time
when she who is in labor has given birth;
then the rest of his brothers shall return
to the people of Israel.*
- ⁴ *And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD,
in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God.
And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great
to the ends of the earth.*

Closing Scripture

John 10:1-18

¹*“Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber.*
² *But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. ³ To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴ When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. ⁵ A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers.” ⁶ This figure of speech Jesus used with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.*

⁷ *So Jesus again said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. ⁸ All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the*

sheep did not listen to them. ⁹ I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. ¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. ¹¹ I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. ¹³ He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. ¹⁴ I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶ And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. ¹⁷ For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. ¹⁸ No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father.”

Questions:

1. In what ways are we like sheep compared to God? In what ways are we different?
2. Goats have a different temperament than sheep. Goats are strong willed and independent. Do you see a similarity between goats and non-Christians and sheep and Christians?
3. Read Matthew 25:31-46. With what we've learned about sheep and goats, how is this more meaningful?