

Though we sing about shepherds at Christmas, the biblical perspective is more on Jesus as God's promised Shepherd. God became man to save His people from their sins and to shepherd His people. This fulfils a long history of seeing God's provision for His people pictured in shepherding (e.g., Genesis 48:15; 49:24; Numbers 27:17; 2 Samuel 5:2; 7:7; Psalm 23:1; 80:1; Isaiah 40:11; Ezekiel 34), which comes out in Matthew's reference to Micah 5:2–4. Ezekiel, a still later prophet, helps us understand the expectations for a shepherd and prepares us to see its fulfilment in Jesus.

I. *Israel's expectations for a Shepherd*

1. *God's clear purposes for His Shepherd:*

God would remove the faithless shepherds of Israel (Ezekiel 34:1–10), who looked out for themselves rather than for God's flock. God would provide in their place faithful shepherding, a welcome message for those who understood it rightly.

2. *God's "confusing" provision of a Shepherd:*

On the one hand the Sovereign LORD (Adonai Jehovah) will Himself shepherd Israel (Ezekiel 34:11–22). Yet on the other hand Israel will have one shepherd, God's servant David (Ezekiel 34:23–24). (For the use of "David" to refer to David's descendants and/or the Messiah see 1 Kings 12:16; Hosea 3:5; Jeremiah 23:5; 30:9.) The same apparent conflict of the Messiah as the Lord or David's Son is seen in Psalm 110:1 which Jesus used to confound the Pharisees.

3. *Contrary responses to God's provision:*

Some opposed the coming of the Shepherd, like Herod, who desired to kill any competition, or the Jewish leadership, who did not wish to lose their position of influence. Others simply wanted select benefits without submitting to the rule of the Shepherd.

II. *God's provision of a Shepherd*

God's provision of a faithful shepherd ran counter to all the intuitive ideas of first century Jews.

1. *Resolution of the "confusing" provision*

There was no conflict in Ezekiel's prophecy because the Shepherd of Israel was both the LORD Himself and the Son of David, because God became man in Jesus Christ. Hence, Jesus could rightly claim deity in calling Himself the "Good Shepherd" (cf. John 10). Though the Jews wanted to kill Him for this claim, the wise men rightly came to worship Him and those in Jerusalem at the time of His birth, like Simeon and Anna, saw in Jesus the salvation of God and gave thanks.

2. *Expansion of the purpose & function*

God became man not only to shepherd Israel but all His people that would come as well from among Gentiles (cf. John 10:16). He would shepherd with the understanding of a man and with the infinite ability of God. He would give His life for the sheep (John 10:11, 18). Jews who did not believe thought Jesus to be mad or demon-possessed.

3. *Demand for submission*

To be shepherded by Jesus requires being His sheep, that is, having a personal relationship to Him (being known by Him, John 10:3–4, 27), which reveals itself in listening to His voice and following Him. People who do not believe Jesus reveal that they do not know Him or God the Father (John 10:26).

Christmas is a call to hear the voice of the Shepherd and a reason for all who listen to rejoice. Those whose sins are forgiven in Christ respond to the voice of their Shepherd. He leads us on the path of righteousness and brings us safely home to Himself. Celebrate Christmas with joy because God has become man, Jesus, to shepherd His people.

Questions for further reflection:

- What means does Jesus use to shepherd His people? Are you taking the optimum advantage of all?
- What significance does it have in your life that Jesus shepherds you?
- How do you experience His shepherding tasks: leading, strengthening, feeding, etc.?
- What are the dangers of failing to hear the voice of the Shepherd and to follow Him?