

**What does the phrase “lost sheep” mean?  
A Series on the Old Testament Believer: Part 3**

Throughout the Bible, the noun “sheep” is a common figure of speech for people. Does it refer to non-Believers, Old Testament Believers, New Testament Believers, all Believers or simply Israel? What is the meaning of “lost sheep?” Is it a lost non-Believer, or lost Believer, or lost Israel? Does it refer to the spiritual state of a person or not?

For example, Zechariah’s Messianic prophecy (Zech 13:7-9) appears to use “sheep” as a representation of the nation of Israel. Less clear is whether he intends to mean the faithful who live according to statutes and ordinances of the covenant.

As early as the time of Jacob, the grandson of Abraham, there was the implication that people were figuratively seen as sheep.

But Israel stretched out his right hand and laid it on the head of Ephraim, who was the younger, and his left hand on Manasseh’s head, crossing his hands, although Manasseh was the firstborn. He blessed Joseph, and said,  
“The God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, **the God who has been my shepherd** all my life to this day, the angel who has redeemed me from all evil,  
Bless the lads;  
And may my name live on in them,  
And the names of my fathers Abraham and Isaac;  
And may they grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth.” (Gen 48:14-16)

Here, as Jacob applies the figurative use of “sheep” to himself, it is not entirely clear whether he intends the meaning of a generic person or as a covenant keeping Hebrew.

Later, when Moses uses the term “sheep” in the figurative sense, he intends the meaning of a covenant keeping Israelite.

Then Moses spoke to the Lord, saying, May the Lord, the God of the spirits of all flesh, appoint a man over the congregation, who will go out and come in before them, and who will lead them out and bring them in, so that **the congregation of the Lord will not be like sheep which have no shepherd.**” (Num 27:15-17)

Because the people feared the voice of God and preferred the voice of a human being (Ex 20:18-9), the Lord was no longer the direct Shepherd of His people. This marks the beginning when God appoints human beings as a shepherd representative, which began with Moses. Note that the Levite priests are not given the role of shepherding.

Presumably, because of the infidelity of the nation of Israel (Judg 2:1-3), God did not appoint a shepherd of God’s covenant keeping people after Joshua. And at this time of Israel’s history, judges were introduced and served essentially as national leaders.

When Joshua had dismissed the people, the sons of Israel went each to his inheritance to possess the land. The people served the Lord all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who survived Joshua, who had seen all the great work of the Lord which He had done for Israel. Then Joshua the son of Nun, the servant of the Lord, died at the age of one hundred and ten. And they buried him in the territory of his inheritance in Timnath-heres, in the hill country of Ephraim, north of Mount Gaash. All that generation also were gathered to their fathers; and there arose another generation after them who did not know the Lord, nor yet the work which He had done for Israel. Then the sons of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord and served the Baals, and they forsook the Lord, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt, and followed other gods from among the gods of the peoples who were around them, and bowed themselves down to them; thus they provoked the Lord to anger. So they forsook the

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Lord and served Baal and the Ashtaroth. The anger of the Lord burned against Israel, and He gave them into the hands of plunderers who plundered them; and He sold them into the hands of their enemies around them, so that they could no longer stand before their enemies. Wherever they went, the hand of the Lord was against them for evil, as the Lord had spoken and as the Lord had sworn to them, so that they were severely distressed. Then **the Lord raised up judges who delivered them from the hands of those who plundered them.** (Judg 2:6-16)

After Samson, Eli becomes Israel's next judge, and it is the first time that a Levite priest is a judge.

When he mentioned the ark of God, Eli fell off the seat backward beside the gate, and his neck was broken and he died, for he was old and heavy. Thus he judged Israel forty years. (1 Sam 4:18)

After Eli, the Levite priest Samuel becomes the last judge of Israel, because when he is ready to pass the judgeship on, the nation of Israel indicates a preference for a king.

And it came about when Samuel was old that he appointed his sons judges over Israel. Now the name of his firstborn was Joel, and the name of his second, Abijah; they were judging in Beersheba. His sons, however, did not walk in his ways, but turned aside after dishonest gain and took bribes and perverted justice. Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah; and they said to him, “Behold, you have grown old, and your sons do not walk in your ways. Now appoint a king for us to judge us like all the nations.” (1 Sam 8:1-5)

Despite the nation of Israel's preference of a king instead of God (1 Sam 8:7) and not since Joshua, God chooses David to be His representative as the shepherd of His people.

Then all the tribes of Israel came to David at Hebron and said, “Behold, we are your bone and your flesh. Previously, when Saul was king over us, you were the one who led Israel out and in. And the Lord said to you, **‘You will shepherd My people Israel, and you will be a ruler over Israel.’**” So all the elders of Israel came to the king at Hebron, and King David made a covenant with them before the Lord at Hebron; then they anointed David king over Israel. (2 Sam 5:1-3)

Like his patriarch Jacob, David himself viewed God as his personal shepherd (Ps 23:1-3). And Asaph and his sons, ordained by David to lead the people in worship (1 Chron 25:1), also recognized God as the Shepherd of Israel's people (Ps 74:1-2; 78:52; 79:13).

With this commission, David understands his role and uses the term “sheep” as a designation of God's people.

Then David spoke to the Lord when he saw the angel who was striking down the people, and said, “Behold, it is I who have sinned, and it is I who have done wrong; but these **sheep**, what have they done? Please let Your hand be against me and against my father's house.” (2 Sam 24:17; 1 Chron 21:17)

But as in Joshua's time, the kings following David did not keep their covenant nor recognize their responsibility of shepherding God's people. God ceases to appoint a naturally born human being to ever be a shepherd for His people. The prophet Micah introduces the idea of lost sheep without a shepherd in his prophecy against the king of Israel.

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“I saw all Israel  
Scattered on the mountains,  
Like **sheep** which have no shepherd.  
And the Lord said, ‘These have no master.  
Let each of them return to his house in peace.’” (1 Kings 22:17; 2 Chron 18:16)

From king Solomon onward, the Old Testament prophets spoke against bad shepherds (Jer 23:1; 50:6), the consequences of no shepherd (Zech 10:2-3) and of God’s future response to His people needing a shepherd (Ezek 34:1-31). One of Ezekiel’s oracles clearly indicates what God desired with His shepherd:

They will no longer defile themselves with their idols, or with their detestable things, or with any of their transgressions; but I will deliver them from all their dwelling places in which they have sinned, and will cleanse them. And they will be My people, and I will be their God. My servant David will be king over them, and they will all have one shepherd; and **they will walk in My ordinances and keep My statutes and observe them.** (Ezek 37:23-24)

Here, as Ezekiel refers to one from the House of David, the King and Shepherd will lead God’s people to a life of fidelity and loyalty to the covenant. The prophet Mica offers another prophecy of the future and indicates that God’s Shepherd will be from Bethlehem (Micah 5:1-4).

With prophecies of the New Covenant (Isa 59:21; 61:8-9; Jer 31:31-34; 32:40; Ezek 34:25-31; 36:25-28; 37:26-28; Zech 13:7-9) and numerous prophecies of the Messiah, Jesus enters the world to “to fulfill the Law” (Matt 5:17) and redeem the world (“did not come to call righteous but sinners” [Matt 9:13; Luke 4:16-21; 9:55-56]).

In fulfillment of prophecy, Jesus sees Himself as the Shepherd of God’s people – primarily the covenant keeping Israelite (an Old Testament Believer) (John 10:1-18).

Jesus was going through all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness. Seeing the people, He felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and dispirited like **sheep without a shepherd.** (Matt 9:35-36)

These twelve Jesus sent out after instructing them: “Do not go in the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter any city of the Samaritans; **but rather go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.** (Matt 10:5-6)

But He answered and said, “I was sent only to the **lost sheep of the house of Israel.** But she came and began to bow down before Him, saying, “Lord, help me!” And He answered and said, “It is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” But she said, “Yes, Lord; but even the dogs feed on the crumbs which fall from their masters’ table.” Then Jesus said to her, “O woman, your faith is great; it shall be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed at once. (Matt 15:24-28; Mark 7:24-30)

When Jesus speaks of “sheep” is it limited to the Jewish Old Testament Believer? The answer is yes and no.

**Yes.** Before His resurrection, Jesus speaks of “sheep” with the same figurative meaning as Moses (Num 27:15-17). His ministry included synagogues, the Temple and Jewish gathering places (i.e. mikvahs, etc). The only people who would look for the Messiah were those who knew of the Messianic prophecies in Scripture and had a genuine faith in God.

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The Jews then gathered around Him, and were saying to Him, “How long will You keep us in suspense? If You are the Christ, tell us plainly.” Jesus answered them, “**I told you, and you do not believe; the works that I do in My Father’s name, these testify of Me.** But you do not believe because you are not of My sheep. My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand. I and the Father are one.” (John 10:24-30)

Jesus knows who is a genuine Believer of His Father (an Old Testament Believer). Jesus knows who will recognize that He is the fulfillment of the Messianic prophecies. Jesus knows who has salvation. And Jesus provides assurance of salvation to the Old Testament Believer accustomed to the conditional nature of the Mosaic Law.

**No.** Jesus’ figurative use of “sheep” was not limited to Old Testament Believers who were ethnically Jews; He used it in the context of any Old Testament Believer regardless of ethnicity.

**I have other sheep, which are not of this fold;** I must bring them also, and they will hear My voice; and they will become one flock with one shepherd. (John 10:16)

This explains why the faith of non-Jews, such as the Syrophenician Woman (Matt 15:21-28; Mark 7:24-30) and Centurion (Matt 8:5-13; Luke 7:2-10), were commended and their pleas for a miraculous healing were granted. Only those who believed and were confident of the Messiah knew that He could heal as only God could.

The New Testament Believer is not in view yet, because Jesus has not been crucified; thus, the New Covenant has not been inaugurated.

If Jesus intends the figurative meaning of “sheep” as the Old Testament Believer, what does He mean by “lost sheep?”

Jesus’ use of “lost sheep” is exactly with the same sense as Moses’ use, namely Old Testament Believers, the congregation of God’s people, need God’s appointed shepherd to lead them in the keeping of His ordinances and statutes. “Lost sheep” meant that God’s people were without a divinely appointed shepherd.

Understanding what Jesus meant by “sheep” makes a distinction; He does not mean it as a generic person, and Jesus does not use the phrase “lost sheep” to figuratively mean non-Believers.

Bereft of the likes of God’s appointed shepherds (Moses, Joshua and David) who personally spoke with God, the only means of teaching was through oral tradition. Without a divinely inspired shepherd, many Old Testament Believers were led astray by false teaching.

They will ask for the way to Zion, turning their faces in its direction; they will come that they may join themselves to the Lord in an everlasting covenant that will not be forgotten.

**“My people have become lost sheep;**

Their shepherds have led them astray.

They have made them turn aside on the mountains;

They have gone along from mountain to hill

And have forgotten their resting place.

“All who came upon them have devoured them;

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And their adversaries have said, ‘We are not guilty,  
Inasmuch as they have sinned against the Lord who is the habitation of righteousness,  
Even the Lord, the hope of their fathers.’ (Jer 50:5-7)

All of us like sheep have gone astray,  
Each of us has turned to his own way;  
But the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all  
To fall on Him. (Isa 53:6)

Just as the Shepherd gathers His sheep because the kingdom of God is near, the motif comes in full circle as Jesus predicts what will happen when His time on earth ends.

Then Jesus said to them, “You will all fall away because of Me this night, for it is written, ‘I will strike down the shepherd, and the **sheep** of the flock shall be scattered.’” (Matt 26:31; Mark 14:27)

It is a reference to the Messianic prophecy of Zechariah 13:7-9; however, Jesus is speaking of “sheep” as a reference to genuine Old Testament Believers (who see Him as the Messiah). No one else in the first century followed Jesus while He was alive on earth.

With the New Covenant, God accomplishes His objective of providing a Shepherd for His people in a radical manner. By providing the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, God gives each Believer a personal Shepherd; the Spirit of Jesus is in each Believer (Acts 16:6-7; Gal 4:6; 1 Pet 1:11)!

It might be significant to note that Peter is asked to tend to Jesus’ sheep as a shepherd after the resurrection. However, unlike a shepherd who trains his sheep to recognize his voice, the shepherds of Jesus’ sheep are to serve as an example for the flock (1 Pet 5:1-4) and keep them focused on Jesus’ teachings (Tit 1:5-9).

So when they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these?” He said to Him, “Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.” He said to him, “**Tend My lambs.**” He said to him again a second time, “Simon, son of John, do you love Me?” He \*said to Him, “Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.” He said to him, “**Shepherd My sheep.**” He said to him the third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love Me?” Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, “Do you love Me?” And he said to Him, “Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You.” Jesus said to him, “**Tend My sheep.**” (John 21:15-17)

Before His crucifixion, Jesus speaks of the future and here He uses “sheep” to mean the New Testament Believer.

All the nations will be gathered before Him; and He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the **sheep** from the goats; and He will put the **sheep** on His right, and the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on His right, “Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.” (Matt 25:32-34)

Jesus refers to “goats” figuratively to mean non-Believers.

In the very beginning, Christianity was viewed as a sect within Judaism which caused considerable discord in the synagogues during the first century. It is the account of Peter’s dream and the Gentile Cornelius (Acts 10:1-11:18) when the apostles learn of the Gentiles receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 10:47) and conclude that God granted Gentiles “repentance into life” (Acts 11:18).