

Dr. Don Fowler, Old Testament Backgrounds,

Session 8, Shepherd King

6-min. Video Overview

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Today, we're going to decode one of the most famous metaphors in history. We're going to strip it all the way back to its ancient, powerful, and honestly, almost completely forgotten royal roots. Let's just start with a single word: shepherd.

Seriously, when you hear that word, what's the first image that pops into your head? For most of us, it's probably something gentle, right? You know, a quiet figure out in a field, maybe some fluffy sheep, a really peaceful pastoral scene. Yeah, I'm going to bet it's something like that. But what if I told you the original meaning was something else entirely? That it wasn't a word for the humble, but for the powerful.

Okay. So let's get into it because the way we think of a shepherd today, it's, well, it's not the original meaning. And once you see what it really meant, it changes pretty much everything.

So get this, in the ancient Near East, we're talking Sumerians, Babylonians, Egyptians. The word shepherd wasn't some soft poetic metaphor. Nope.

It was one of the most common and powerful titles a King could have. It was a straight-up declaration of power. So we have to completely shift our perspective here.

The image shouldn't be a peaceful field. It should be a Royal court, a throne room. For them, hearing shepherd was like us hearing president or King.

It meant ruler. And here's the thing. This title wasn't just about power.

It was about responsibility. A King had two main jobs, and they were wrapped up in this single idea. Job one: provide for your people.

Job two: protect your people. Just like a real shepherd takes care of his flock, a shepherd King was supposed to take care of his nation. Okay.

So now that we have this new Royal lens, let's look at one of the most famous poems ever written. I'm talking about a text that you've probably heard a million times, but you might not have heard it like this. So when David, who, by the way, was a King himself, writes, "The Lord is my shepherd.

He's not just being poetic. This is a massive political and theological statement. He's literally saying the Lord is my King.

So that first part of the Psalm, you know, the green pastures, the quiet waters. That's not really about sheep. That's King talk.

It's a perfect description of a King providing for his people, giving them food, water, rest, everything they need. That's job number one: provider. But then halfway through the whole scene just flips.

We go from those peaceful pastures right into the valley of the shadow of death. Suddenly there are enemies everywhere. We're on a battlefield.

And this is where job number two comes in: protector, that rod and staff. They aren't just for gently poking sheep in the ancient world. They were symbols of Royal power.

They were weapons. The shepherd King uses them to crush his enemies and protect his people. He's so victorious.

In fact, he throws a feast for you right in front of your defeated enemies. How's that for protection? So this idea, this shepherd King, it doesn't just stay in the Psalms. It becomes this golden thread that gets woven through centuries and centuries of prophecy, all pointing to some future ultimate ruler.

You see it pop up again and again for hundreds of years. You've got prophets, Micah, Ezekiel, Zechariah, all building on the same idea. They're all talking about a coming ruler from Bethlehem, a descendant of David, who will finally be the perfect shepherd King.

So where does all this lead? Well, it builds to this one huge dramatic moment in the New Testament that, honestly, most of us completely misunderstand. I'm talking about Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey. Now this wasn't just some random humble choice of transportation.

Oh no, this was deliberate political theater. He was acting out this prophecy from Zechariah, word for word, for everyone to see. And you know, we always hear this was an act of humility, right? A humble King on a donkey instead of a war horse.

But to the people there that day who knew these prophecies, it wasn't about humility; it was a billboard-sized declaration that he was the King. He was showing up exactly how the shepherd King was supposed to show up. And believe me, everybody got the message.

The crowds, they're shouting Hosanna, which basically means save us, O King. They're throwing down palm branches. That's the ancient equivalent of rolling out the red carpet for a conquering hero.

Even the Romans like Pilate understood what was happening. That's why they put King of the Jews on the cross. Everyone knew he was claiming to be the shepherd-king.

Okay, so let's bring it all together. Why does this matter? Why is it so important to stop thinking pastoral and start thinking royal when we hear the word shepherd? Because it shows that Jesus took those two ancient jobs of a King- provide and protect- and just exploded them onto an eternal scale. He wasn't talking about providing bread for a day.

He was talking about being the bread of life. He wasn't talking about protecting from Roman soldiers. He was talking about protecting from death itself.

He claimed to be the ultimate provider and the ultimate protector. So you see, getting this one word, right? Understanding shepherd as a royal title. It doesn't just tweak a few verses.

It completely reframes the whole story. It turns what we thought was a gentle, quiet image into this powerful world-changing claim of kingship. And it makes you wonder what else we have been missing.