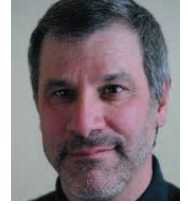


Psalm 23: Finding Safety in the Wilderness*John Beck, PhD*

Experience: Writer and permanent adjunct faculty at Jerusalem University College, Israel.

Do you think everything in the Bible is there for a reason? Even its unrecognizable place names? I've spent nearly thirty years studying this question. Join me to experience how the regions of the Holy Land are part of the story. I'm Jack Beck, and this is the Holy Land.

Con: All right Jack, so this is a really spectacular place with a spectacular view. Where are we?

I never miss an opportunity to introduce someone to the land that has hosted so many well-known stories.

Jack: We are between Jerusalem and the Dead Sea, in an ecosystem that's called the Judean Wilderness.

This land is as much a character in the biblical narrative as the people themselves.

Jack: Just take a look at this. The amount of plants that exist in here that you just don't notice when you're looking at the horizon, you just don't see how much vegetation there is out here.

So when I heard that Dr. Con Campbell, author of many New Testament academic books, was visiting Israel, I told him, "You have to see this place!"—the Wadi Qelt. Understanding how this place is a character in the Bible helps you understand another recurring character: a shepherd with his flock.

Con: What are all these lines I see going down the slopes?

Jack: It almost looks like a geologic formation, but it's imposed on the land, as the sheep and goats move horizontally across those ridges.

Con: No way! They're everywhere.

Jack: They're everywhere. Think of this for millennia as being a wilderness pasture for Judean shepherds.

Con: Shepherds will tend flocks in this area. I find that really hard to believe, right?

Jack: You're not the first one to find that hard to believe, and I imagine the shepherds are among those maybe who first found that. So think about what's available for the shepherds of Judah. They've got some really nice fields near their towns and villages. The issue is those are going to be dedicated to the growing of grain, and about the last thing you want is a bunch of hungry sheep and goats chewing up your grain field. So they're pushed away.

Con: Expel them to the wilderness.

Jack: Expel them to the wilderness.

Con: You know, I guess I've always thought of shepherds as being a sort of rough and dirty, kind of lower-class kind of job. But when I imagine them tending sheep in a place like this, the wilderness, I mean, that just makes it all the more, you know, stark and dramatic.

Jack: And it's incredibly dangerous, you know, and look at the terrain, this is anything but user friendly.

Con: Yeah, you can so easily slip.

Jack: And as you move the livestock, you're having to choose just the right path. I'm thinking Psalm 23, you know, that you're choosing the right path for the sake of your name, your reputation as a shepherd is in part built on how well you move the flock through this terrain.

Con: It just, for me, just adds this extraordinary dimension to Jesus' statement in John 10:11,

"I am the good shepherd." I mean, the fact that He calls Himself a shepherd, Jesus laying down His life, because He is the good shepherd who lays down His life. So the humbling service, right?

Jack: I love that last part, too. Think of Psalm 23 again, you've got livestock, you know, out here, and one of the members gets

separated and they start walking through the valley of the shadow of death. What happens? The shepherd doesn't stand up on the ridge and say, "Hey, come back here." The next thing we read is, "Your rod and your staff will comfort me." You're right there with me. So you have moved from the place of safety to the place of harm to make sure that I return to the place of safety.

"The lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

That spark of understanding the Bible more deeply, of seeing people connect the character of the shepherd with the land of the shepherd, it's what keeps me coming back here. It's what motivates me to share the importance of geography as a character in the biblical story.

Now, Con had to get on with his own trip. But while out in the wilderness, I wanted to experience something that, though I've come to this land for over twenty-five years, I haven't had the chance to do: spend a day walking with an actual flock of sheep and goats.

This land changes people. It shapes them. And I'm excited to hear and see and smell the life of the shepherd boy transformed to king: King David, the author of the 23rd psalm. So I'm headed deeper into the Judean Wilderness.

Jack: They think we're trouble.

Khalid: They know the stranger.

This is Khalid. He and his family have been herding goats and sheep for generations. He's hospitable and patient, so I ask him all my goat and sheep questions.

Jack: I wouldn't want to get in their way right now. They're so busy they don't really care that I'm here.

Khalid: Now in summer, this is the only chance to eat.

Jack: Ah, because now there's no winter grasses for a few months. There is grass out here and you can take the animals.

Khalid: No, no, just for two months.

Jack: Just two months.

Khalid: Yes, when this area finish from grass, we move to another area in Hebron. Bedouin traveler. Their culture to travel from place to place to find water, and grass for goats.

I come from the Midwest, the great state of Wisconsin, a land filled with acres of lush green grass, mostly emptied of apex predators. Wisconsin is nothing like this place. And like Con, I have to remind myself that David did not have lush pastures and safety when he wrote his famous psalm. And his culture was shaped by the rock, the dust, and the demands of sustaining life in this environment.

Jack: Yeah, sounds just like home when I hang around goats. They speak the same language. Do you think your goats would understand my goats from my home?

Khalid: No, no, but I think they have a way to communicate.

Jack: If you have the animals out, you always bring them back and put them here. Why is that important?

Khalid: Because at night there are wolf catch them, kill them. Many this year, this year happen. Those dog to protect them.

Jack: The dogs protect them.

Sheep and goats are very gregarious animals. They have no effective way of defending themselves against predators on their own, so they get very uncomfortable when they see the group move, and you can see as soon as one of the members of this group moves, everybody's on the run. Except for that guy, who's coming.

Khalid: Now we are going to make them food. Something little, as you see, nothing to eat here.

This is a place where a flock is dependent on the shepherd for everything: food, water, and safety. The flock would quickly

succumb to hunger, thirst or predators without the shepherd's guidance, guard, and care. It's a land that, for a sheep, demands faith and trust in a shepherd.

Jack: You know, what I have never experienced before in doing what we're doing right now? The sound.

Khalid: The sound of goats and sheep?

Jack: The hooves.

Khalid: Ah, when they are walking.

Jack: Yeah, I never knew that sound was there before. It's so cool.

Khalid: It's goat music.

Jack: It's goat music. It is goat music.

Khalid: But in our culture, also, if your mood very bad, and not good, you can go with goat and sheep, you become relaxed. You're hurt—useful, peaceful.

Jack: It's a quiet place to be, reflection.

Khalid: No city, no car, no people, no anything.

Jack: I need to be a shepherd, because that way I won't have so much stress.

This is the setting, a land which seems to lack everything, where David composed Psalm 23. It promises that when I look to God as my shepherd, He provides just what I need. Not more, but just enough. Food, water, safety, security, all of those things are lacking in this place. But the psalm isn't about what you don't have, but what you do, and when the Lord is the shepherd of the flock, then this land lacks nothing whatsoever.

So when I meet the wilderness in my Bible, yes, of course, I see it as a place of hardship and a time of danger. But mostly, I see it as a place where God is near, providing what I need. It's a place that allows focused meditation and reveals God's loving provision. And that's the wilderness experience that can change us, if we learn to live the wilderness experience like the livestock, like the sheep and the goats, we won't be looking at what we don't have

in this austere space, we'll be looking at what we have in the Good Shepherd. And then the land that lacks everything will become the land that lacks nothing.

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