

Animals of the Bible (8) The Goat



In Biblical times, goats were very important as a source of milk, meat, hair and hides. The word “goat” appears 136 times in the Bible, and the word “kid” 51 times. As the word “kid” is now commonly used to refer to a human child, some modern versions use the term “young goat” instead.

Leviticus 16 gives an account of the ceremonies that took place each year on the Day of Atonement. These included casting lots over two goats. One was sacrificed as a sin-offering. The other was released into the wilderness, symbolically carrying away with it the sins of the people. This practice has given us the term “scapegoat” for any unfortunate person who is made to take the blame for the wrongdoings or failings of others.

The Lady Lever Art Gallery in Port Sunlight has a striking painting of the scapegoat by Holman Hunt, who depicted the animal as a symbol of Christ, who took upon Himself the sins of the world. The goat in the painting appears hardly able to stand, as if weighed down by the burden of the sins placed upon it. The scarlet thread wound around the goat’s horns, part of the ceremony of the laying on of sins, suggests the crown of thorns.

The frame above the picture bears the words from Isaiah 53: 4, in the Authorised Version: “Surely He hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows; yet we did esteem Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted.” The desolate background is an actual scene painted by Hunt when he visited the shores of the Dead Sea. Horns and bones lie nearby, the remains of scapegoats of former years.

The poet Robert Graves used similar imagery in his poem “In the Wilderness”. He writes of Christ fasting in the desert surrounded by all manner of creatures, real and mythical, and concludes with these words:

And ever with Him went,
Of all His wanderings
Comrade, with ragged coat,
Gaunt ribs – poor innocent –
Bleeding foot, burning throat,
The guileless old scapegoat;
For forty nights and days
Followed in Jesus' ways,
Sure guard behind Him kept,
Tears like a lover wept.

A prayer:

O Jesus, crowned with thorns and hailed in derision;
O Jesus, burdened with our sins and the curses of the people;
O Jesus, affronted, outraged, buffeted, overwhelmed with injuries, griefs and humiliations;
O Jesus, hanging on the accursed tree, bowing the head, giving up the ghost, have mercy on me, and conform my whole soul to thy holy, humble, suffering Spirit.

(John Wesley, 1703 – 91)

- Rev John Barnett

Image: "The Scapegoat", Holman Hunt (Lady Lever Art Gallery)