

An Agricultural Book for Livestock Producers

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During the Christmas season, we are again reminded that the Bible is an agricultural book. Nativity scenes, commonly displayed during this season, have cattle, sheep, and hay as important components. Throughout the Old and New Testament, the writers utilize agricultural terms to illustrate spiritual truths. For instance, the Bible contains the word pasture 170 times, grass 64, cattle 69, oxen 170, sheep 220, horses 163, donkeys 143, goats 147, mules 20, and camels 69. Both the writers of the Bible and their audience were mainly people who raised crops and livestock for their livelihood, acknowledging God's blessings. "I will provide grass in the fields for your cattle and you will eat and be satisfied." - Deuteronomy 11:15. "He makes the grass to grow for the cattle, and plants for man to cultivate—bringing forth food from the earth." - Psalm 104:14.

It is easy for a livestock producer to appreciate the words of Psalm 23:2, "He makes me lie down in green pastures," because of experience on her/his own farm. Good pastures for livestock were such an important factor in the lives of Old Testament nomadic people. "Then they settled in their place, because there was pasture for their flocks," - I Chronicles 4:41.

Knowing something about the climate and soil environment of the area where the Bible originated can help us appreciate the words of the writers even more. It has a Mediterranean climate (like much of California) with relatively mild winter temperatures, autumn and winter rainfall, and hot dry summers. Soils for the most part are calcareous and fairly productive when it rains. With no irrigation, crops such as wheat, barley, peas, flax, rapeseed, and various vegetables were grown in winter. Livestock were grazed on rocky native grassland much of the year and on crop residues or on cool moist mountain

pastures during the dry summer. "I will tend them in a good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land. There they will lie down in good grazing land and there they will feed in a rich pasture," - Ezekiel 34:14.

Drought was a frequent problem and made strong impressions on the writers of the Bible. "The grass is withered, the vegetation is gone, and nothing green is left," - Isaiah 15:6. "The wild donkeys stand on the barren heights, and pant like jackals; their eyesight fails for lack of pasture," - Jeremiah 14:6. "Even the doe in the field deserts her newborn fawn because there is no grass." - Jeremiah 14:5. Any livestock producer suffering drought can identify with Joel 1:18. "How the cattle moan! The herds mill about because they have no pasture; even the flocks of sheep are suffering."

The advent of autumn rains after the summer drought was critical for renewal of the dormant perennial grasses and germination of the myriad of winter annual grasses and legumes such as the reseeding annual ryegrass, crimson, and other clovers native to this area of the world. Thus, there was great joy and thanksgiving each autumn when the first rain showers arrived. "He covers the sky with clouds; He supplies the earth with rain and makes grass grow on the hills. He provides food for the cattle," - Psalm 147:8. The early rains were equally

critical for planting grain and oilseed crops for human food. "He will send you rain for the seed you sow in the ground, and the food that comes from the land will be rich and plentiful. In that day your cattle will graze in large pastures," - Isaiah 30:23. A year of ample rainfall was a time for rejoicing by these Biblical people as it is for farmers today, "The meadows are covered with flocks and the valleys are mantled with grain; they shout for joy and sing," - Psalm 65:13.

The Bible is basically an agricultural book with its beautiful and joyous writing phrased in words that incorporate the rural environment. Perhaps that is why farm people have found it so easy to identify with its spiritual message. Urban people far removed from the land today often have little understanding of what growing crops and livestock entails so you may not relate as well to this agricultural book, the Bible.

Although the beauty and comfort of Biblical language can be appreciated by all people, those involved in agricultural activities have the advantage of close relationships with farming and nature that give them special insights. Familiarity with pastures may help us appreciate the beautiful and prophetic message of Psalm 103:15, "As for man, his days are like grass; he flourishes like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and is gone, and its place remembers it no more."

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