

“The Rock and the Door”

Week 5: Introduction to *The Shepherd of Hermas*

The Shepherd of Hermas is perhaps harder for modern readers to appreciate than for readers of the early church, for whom apocalyptic literature as a living genre. That said, such a work, adapted for the screen, complete with otherworldly cinematic special effects, might just bring this ancient text alive for a modern audience. The nearest New Testament relative to this text is the Book of Revelation, which shares a similar kind of vision of the coming kingdom and church, which remain hidden in this world, yet known through faith.

The author and narrator repeatedly calls himself, Hermas, and relates a series of visions which are explained to him by a shepherd or angel, sent to lead him. Though he does not call himself such, Hermas functioned as a prophet to the early church. Significantly, in his series of visions, Hermas is shown a tower under construction, which he is told is the Church. The tower is being built with stones that represent believers and these stones are cut so precisely that they appear seamless in the structure of the tower. Some stones require their removal, refashioning and refitting, because they require additional repentance and reworking by the master stonemason, who is God.

The themes that emerge through the visions of Hermas are the “double-mindedness” of human beings, who compromise their faith in God by their acceptance of the ways of the world. In this work, Jesus Christ is never referred to by name, but is instead addressed as the “Son of God,” as well as “the rock” and “the door” of the tower. Entrance to the tower or Church, Hermas is told, is only through “the door,” or the one called the Son of God.

Another theme of the *Shepherd* is the worry over what to do about sins committed after baptism. In the early church, though people received baptized, they worried about sins committed after baptism. People often postponed baptism until their deathbed to ensure that the sins of a lifetime would be forgiven in baptism. For modern Christians used to thinking of the faith through theological paradox (for example, “saint and sinner”), this may not seem like a serious problem, but for early Christians, it represented a tremendous dilemma. Hence, the *Shepherd* is very concerned with exhorting Christians to a rigorously ethical life.

The *Shepherd*, as this text is often called, seems to have been held in very high regard in the second and third centuries, at a time when the New Testament canon was still being formed. Early church theologians such as Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen all treated it with respect. The early church historian Eusebius wrote that the *Shepherd* was outside of the canon of scripture, but reported that some had also received it as canonical. It is noteworthy that the *Shepherd* was included in the fourth century Codex Sinaiticus, one of the greatest early manuscripts of the Bible in Greek (located today in the British Library). The *Shepherd* is also included on the earliest known list of the complete New Testament by Athanasius in 367, who said it was non-canonical but could still be used for catechetical instruction.

Finally, the *Shepherd* is mentioned in the Muratorian Canon (c. 170), the oldest known list of books belonging to the New Testament, though this list did not yet include all twenty-seven books. Regarding the *Shepherd*, it stated, “But Hermas wrote the Shepherd ‘most recently in our time’, in the city of Rome, while bishop Pius, his brother, was occupying the chair of the church

of the city of Rome. And therefore it ought indeed to be read; but it cannot be read publicly to the people in church either among the Prophets, whose number is complete, or among the Apostles, for it is after their time.”

Because Pius was bishop of Rome from 140 to 154, the *Shepherd* must be dated earlier than the time of Pius. Modern scholarship tends to date the *Shepherd* at perhaps 110 to 140 CE. This dating makes the *Shepherd* very close to the Book of Revelation and the Gospel of John. Thus, we can say the *Shepherd* occupies a place very close to the apostolic age, was read by some as scripture, but was eventually not included in the canon of the New Testament. Its value for us today is in its vision of the Church in which all believers become living stones in the ongoing building up of the church.



Excerpts from *The Shepherd of Hermas*:

[22] “Do not be double-minded, Hermas.” I began to discuss this with myself and to say, “How can I be double-minded, when I have been so firmly established by the Lord and have seen glorious things?”... “And I remembered the word which I had heard: Do not be double-minded, Hermas.” So, brothers, having put on the faith of the Lord and remembering the great things he had taught me, I took courage and faced the beast. And the beast was coming on with such a rush that it could have destroyed a city. I came near it, and huge though it was, the sea monster stretched itself out on the ground and merely thrust out its tongue, and did not even twitch until I had passed by it...

[27] He said to me, “Be sincere and innocent, and you will be like little children who do not know the evil that destroys the life of a man. First, speak evil of no one, and do not enjoy listening to someone who does. Otherwise you, the listener, will be responsible for the sin of the one speaking evil, if you believe the slander which you have heard, for by believing it you yourself will hold a grudge against your brother. In this way, you will become responsible for the sin of the one who speaks the evil. Slander is evil; it is a restless demon, never at peace but always at home in dissension. So avoid it, and you will always have success with everyone. Clothe yourself with reverence, in which there is no evil cause for offense, but all things are smooth and joyful. Work at that which is good, and out of your labor, which God gives to you, give generously to all who are in need, not debating to whom you will give and to whom you will not. Give to all, for God wishes that from his own gifts, gifts should be given to all...”

[43] ...“Put your trust in the Spirit that comes from God and has power, but do not trust in any way the earthly and empty spirit, because it has no power, for it comes from the devil. Listen to the parable I am about to tell you. Take a stone and throw it toward the sky; see if you can reach it. Or, another example, take a water pump and squirt it toward the sky; see if you can penetrate it. “How,” I asked, “can these things be, sir? For both these things you just said are impossible.” “Well then,” he said, “just as these things are impossible, so are the earthly spirits powerless and weak. Now take the power that comes from above. A hailstone is a very small pellet, but when it falls on a man’s head, what pain it causes! Or, for example, take a drop that falls on the ground from the roofing tiles, and wears a hole in the rock. You see, that even the smallest things falling on earth have great power; so also the divine Spirit that comes from above is powerful. So put your trust in this Spirit, but have nothing to do with the other one.”

[47] ...“If then,” he said, “man is lord of all God’s creatures and rules over everything, can’t

he also master these commandments? The man who has the Lord in his heart,” he said, “can master everything, including all these commandments. But to those who have the Lord on their lips but whose heart is hardened, who are far from the Lord, these commandments are hard and difficult. You, therefore, who are fickle in the faith, put the Lord in your heart, and you will realize that nothing is easier or sweeter or more gentle than these commandments...”

[79] ...And the Shepherd said to me, “Why are you debating with yourself and becoming perplexed, and troubling yourself? Do not attempt, as though you were intelligent, to understand the things you cannot comprehend, but ask the Lord that you may receive the intelligence to understand them. You are not able to see things behind you, but you do see what it in front of you. Let what you cannot see alone, and do not trouble yourself about it; but master those things that you do see, and do not concern yourself about the rest. But I will explain to you everything that I show you. So carefully watch the rest.”

[89] “First of all, sir,” I said, “explain this to me: Who is the rock and the door?” “This rock,” he said, “and the door are the Son of God.” “How is it, sir,” I said, “that the rock is old, but the door is new?” “Listen,” he said, “and understand, foolish man. The Son of God is far older than all his creation, with the result that he was the Father’s counselor in his creation. This is why the rock is old.” “But why is the door new, sir?” I said. “Because,” he said, “he was revealed in the last days of the consummation; that is why the door is new, in order that those going to be saved may enter the kingdom of God through it. Did you notice,” he said, “that the stones which came through the door have gone into the construction of the tower, but those which did not come through it were returned to their own place?” “I noticed, sir,” I said. “In the same way,” he said, “no one will enter the kingdom of God unless he receives the name of his Son. For if you want to enter some city, and that city is walled around and has only one gate, can you enter that city except by the gate it has?” “How, sir,” I said, “could it be otherwise?” “If, therefore, you cannot enter the city except through its gate,” he said, “so too a man cannot enter the kingdom of God except by the name of his Son, who was loved by him...”

[105] ...“So consider yourselves blessed; indeed, think that you have done a great work if any of you suffers for God’s sake. The Lord is granting you life, but you do not realize it; for your sins weighted you down, and if you had not suffered for the sake of the Lord’s name, you would have died to God. I say these things to you who are hesitating about denial or confession. Confess that you have the Lord, lest by denying you get thrown into prison...Rid your hearts of these thoughts, so that you may live to God forever.” (from *The Apostolic Fathers*. Trans. Lightfoot & Harmer, Ed. by Michael W. Holmes, 2nd edition, 1989).



Meditation

The writing known as the *Shepherd of Hermas* reveals a truth about the Christian life of faith that is still true today. The truth of living single-mindedly with faith is that God infuses us with grace that empowers us to live for others. In the words of the *Shepherd*, the life of faith is a life of discipleship to “the Son of God,” and this happens over a lifetime. In the *Shepherd*, God is the stonecutter who is building the Church, continuing to refashion and shape us into evermore faithful and perfect saints with God’s life-shaping grace.

Double-mindedness, which was a concern for Hermas, echoes Jesus’ words regarding hypocrisy in the Sermon on the Mount. There, Jesus talks about giving and praying, saying, “Do

not be like the hypocrites,” but give alms and pray in secret “*and your Father who sees in secret will reward you*” (Matthew 6:1-6). The life of faith is one of remembering that one’s relationship with God is first and foremost before all other relationships, and the grace of this relationship with God infuses grace into all of our other relationships. The Shepherd said to Hermas, “Put your trust in the Spirit that comes from God and has power, but do not trust in any way the earthly and empty spirit.” The Holy Spirit, which we celebrate at Pentecost, is the life giving and direction setting power of God in our lives.

The Shepherd also shared with Hermas about the hiddenness of God. The Shepherd said, “Let what you cannot see alone, and do not trouble yourself about it; but master those things that you do see, and do not concern yourself about the rest.” A central part of Luther’s theology was about the hiddenness of God revealed in Christ’s cross. For Luther, God is hidden from humanity, and only reveals what is helpful for humanity through Jesus and his cross. Luther used the example of Jesus pointing to himself when Philip asked to be shown the Father. Jesus said to Philip, ‘*He who has seen me has seen the Father*’ (John 14:9). Luther commented, “For this reason true theology and recognition of God are in the crucified Christ, as it is also stated in (John 14:6): ‘*No one comes to the Father, but by me,*’ ‘*I am the door*’ (John 10:9), and so forth” (*Luther’s Works* 31:53).

God’s hiddenness is something we are meant to struggle with over a lifetime, because the hiddenness of God draws us into prayer and the presence of the sacred mystery of God. For Luther, the hiddenness of God is revealed in the suffering of Jesus and his cross. This is why the ideal of imitating Christ and his suffering through a life of loving service for others remains the goal and ideal of the Christian life. Yet, this life as faith active in love needs prayerful attention to the “*Father who sees in secret.*”

In the *Shepherd*, this idea of our lives reflecting our faith in service to others is seen in the image of the Church, always under construction. The tower that Hermas saw being built, which is the Church, is made up of living stones constantly refashioned by God the master stonecutter. Christ, we are told is the rock of the Church, and is older than all creation, while at the same time, Christ is the door and entrance into the Church. Jesus is “the door of the sheep” (John 10:9), through which we enter the Church. The church is built up over successive generations by the living stones that are its members, whom God is always refashioning. As long as we live, we become part of God’s ongoing building of the eternal Church.

Like the Shepherd’s image of a drop of water that, falling on the ground, wears a hole in the rock, successive generations of human footsteps have left their mark, gradually wearing down the steps leading to the entrance of the church. Each of us leaves our footprints upon the church as we live for Christ and others. Jesus is the rock and the door of the church. The journey of faith leads us to steps upon which the saints have walked ahead of us, and to the door of Christ through which we return again and again. When we put our trust in God, all things become possible through the Spirit who lives in us. We are living stones, fashioned by God’s Spirit, so that our lives will leave a divine mark upon the church and the world. Amen.



For further reading:

The Apostolic Fathers. Translated by J.B. Lightfoot and J.R. Harmer, Edited by Michael W. Holmes, Grand Rapids: Baker, (1891; second edition, 1989), third edition, 2006.