



Redeeming the Starving Shepherds

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As we drove into a private hospital compound to see a doctor, we could not help but notice the beautiful landscape with colorful flowers and well-trimmed lush green grasses. While we were admiring the beauty, something totally different was going on in the mind of Jamil, our Moor friend, who had traveled from the village to visit us in town and ended up accompanying us to the hospital. “Oh, what a delicious meal for my rams these grasses would have been!” he exclaimed. Almost in unison, we all burst into laughter hearing him talk about feeding the decorative grass to his flock. What we did not realize was the extent to which he loved his animals, and if we could see through a shepherd’s eyes, good grass, especially in a region with little rainfall, wasn’t for landscaping but food for hungry sheep because they have high value for their livestock. David J. Phillips was right when he said that “the pastoralist’s animals not only give them subsistence but they also shape

their society and the way they think....The personal standing of each pastoralist depends on his family connections as well as on the number and quality of his animals.”¹ Unfortunately, while he was so concerned for his animals, Jamil himself was in need of physical and spiritual nourishment, just like many others like him. This article seeks to briefly bring to the foreground the Black Moors of southwestern Mali and to present their plight, with the hope that spiritual shepherds come to end their starvation.

Jesus the Good Shepherd, and Standard for Shepherds

In John 10:11, Jesus referred to Himself as the Good Shepherd, and among Christians, this portrays the relationship between Jesus and His followers. A good

¹ Phillips, David J. 2001 *Peoples on the Move: Introducing the Nomads of the World*. Carlisle, UK: Piquant, 15.

shepherd is one who recognizes his sheep and vice versa; who protects his sheep at all costs; who leads, grooms, feeds, and waters his sheep; and one who is willing to give his life for his sheep. It was the same in the Old Testament, where the relationship between God and His people was exemplified using a shepherd and his sheep. As David says, *The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul* (Ps. 23:1–3a).

But should a shepherd tend his flock, and himself suffer starvation? As the standard, Jesus portrayed sound spiritual and physical health, and these put together, brought about the goodness of His shepherd-hood, which in turn led to the thriving of His sheep. As the Bible says, *...And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him* (Luke 2:40). No wonder His disciples, after undergoing this type of shepherding, were themselves able to be responsible shepherds of God's flock under them, not because they owned livestock, but because they had the characteristics of Jesus Christ.

So it would not be out of place to say that one is not a good shepherd simply by owning livestock but by possessing the qualities of a shepherd in a state of soundness spiritually and physically.

Peter will go further to encourage church leaders saying, *Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away* (1 Peter 5:2–4). So it would not be out of place to say that one is not a good shepherd simply by owning

livestock but by possessing the qualities of a shepherd in a state of soundness spiritually and physically. We have seen some of these qualities in Jamil and his kinsmen, and I wonder how much better they will be having the transforming Holy Spirit in them, becoming more like Christ.

Jamil and His Brothers, the Starving Shepherds

Why are Jamil, our dear Moor friend, and his fellow kinsmen struggling to flourish, even though they have a heart of care and preservation for their herds? A brief look at their background may help us understand them better.

Learning about their history from some of their chiefs, I found out that for decades and even for centuries, the Black Moors were brought up in Mauritania as slaves. They suffered from negligence and persecution by the government and the public dominated by the White Moors. They were marginalized and gained no access to equality in earning rights for education, jobs in the government department, and other social privileges. Garba Diallo depicted this ill-treatment while narrating the story of Abidi, a Black Moor and a slave to his White Moor master:

Abidi is not responsible, nor is he a human being with feelings or the right to make a family. He is a machine that works like hell without pay or rest. Like the machine, Abidi needs only to be fed to oil his black muscles from cracking. His master can take him anywhere and make him carry out any task. He can be legally sold, given away, used to pay bride price, or castrated to avoid mating with the master's harem. The master's right comes before God, and he has the right to sleep with any of Abidi's relatives, as they are by law his concubines.²

² Garba, Diallo. 2014 "Mauritania—They Live in Slavery." In *Justice and Human Dignity in Africa: Collection of Essays in Honor of Professor Austin Chukwu*. GMT Emezue, et al., eds. IRCHSSA, 491

These factors demeaned them and created a deep hurt in their view of themselves in relation to others, resulting in a sense of inferiority, passivity and low initiative, and isolation.

Eventually, many migrated to southern Mali. Some settled forming communities and villages. Socially and economically, the Black Moors became semi-nomads, partly herding livestock and also farming.

They tend to be accommodating to outsiders and are hardworking, but their communities are devoid of good roads, schools, or health-care facilities. Their youth prefer to travel to neighboring towns or return to Mauritania for menial jobs due to the economic hardship.

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These Black Moors are starving spiritually not only because of their suppressing history but also due to the absence of spiritual shepherds. They also struggle physically and economically due to insufficient pasture and inadequate farm yield to meet their yearly needs, as their region experiences little annual rainfall. Outside help has been slow in getting to the Moors because of insecurity in the country, which has led to the departure of many NGOs and mission organizations.

Shepherding the Shepherds

In the past, a few Moor villages had some visits by some political and developmental organizations with empty promises, but recently, some good shepherds have been providing help through potable water supply and irrigation farming. Still, little has been done in the areas of health care, especially for children and women, and education.

Perhaps if one is wondering if there are ways to ameliorate the lives of Jamil and his kinsmen, there are ministry opportunities available for exploration, which include fields such as human and veterinary health care, adult and children education, agriculture, water engineering, fishery, etc. David Phillips rightly says, that “reaching people such as these will require a realistic commitment, demonstrated by the size and duration of a missionary team.”³

But one should come not only with the intention of rendering help but with an open mind to learn the Hassaniya language and to experience the beautiful culture of these herders, which is relatable to some biblical culture.

Conclusion

It is not enough for us to know that our dear friend Jamil cares so much for his herd but to see that he and his kinsmen are also cared for. While they see to the welfare of their livestock, they themselves are indeed in a state of starvation due to their physical and spiritual poverty. Those who live in spiritual and material abundance are obligated to look in their direction and render help. 🏡

³ Phillips, *Peoples on the Move*, 97.