

## What Domestic Animals were key to life in Jesus' Time?

When we speak of domestic animals, we are not speaking here pets. There is no evidence of the ancient Jews keeping animals as pets at all. Hence, the term domestic animals here refers to what we would think of as farm animals, especially sheep and goats, cattle, and beasts of burden.

Domesticated animals were the backbone of rural life. Given the conditions of the roads in both villages in the countryside, carriages or carts could not often be used. The mule or donkey was important as a pack animal, as a beast of burden.



These animals were so valuable, along with the cow, that they were kept in the stable adjacent to the courtyard of the owner, chickens also ran freely in the courtyard of many houses!

Sheep and goats tended to be kept in pens on the outskirts of the village since they needed pastureland to graze. Goat's milk was an important staple of life. Lambs provided wool (Proverbs 27:26–27). Pigeons were also raised on the outskirts of the town, both for food, and as sacrificial animals for the temple. When it came time that an animal must be slaughtered, it was used for many purposes including food. The skins of lambs and goats could be prepared for use as clothing, water carriers, and even prepared for the use in the writing the sacred scrolls. Domestic animals were valued very highly: *And Jesus said to them, "Which of you, having a son or an ox that has fallen into a well on a Sabbath day, will not immediately pull him out?"* (Luke 14:5)

The Animals in particular:



**The ass, or donkey** was a conventional beast of burden. It was able to subsist on very coarse food, and was a very hearty creature. They helped to plow the fields and trample in the seed. If one wanted to ride instead of walk, the donkey was the most probable conveyance. Further, these animals could also be fitted with bags and other ways of carrying loads.

**Sheep** are mentioned over 700 times in Scripture and are undoubtedly the most familiar biblical animal. Sheep are valuable and gentle creatures, but they are wayward and were very dependent upon a shepherd to be watched in the pasture and be led to water and protected from wild beasts. The precious wool of the sheep (often dark-colored) provided warm garments. They were sheared once a year. Sheep meat was a key element in the diet.





**Goats** were sometimes called the poor man's cow. They did not need good pasture, but they were terribly hard on vegetation since they ate almost anything within reach. They would even eat the bark off trees, often killing them. Their excessive numbers have been partially blamed for the deforestation that is evident today in Israel. Nevertheless, to the Israelites in the Bible they had great value. They supplied milk and milk products, and their meat tasted like venison. Goat hair was woven into coarse cloth. Goatskin also made good leather and water bottles. Goats had their drawbacks, they stank and are lively strong-willed creatures, unlike their docile cousins the sheep.

**Cattle** were used more to pull loads than for meat. Goats and sheep provided most of the meat in the Jewish diet. The ancient Israelites used cows more like we use tractors today. They pulled plows and carts, and threshed grain. The full-grown animals were regarded as too costly to slaughter for food or sacrifice. One had to be very wealthy to do that. When it was time finally to slaughter the animal in old age, it would be penned, fed grain, and fattened up for slaughter.

**Camels** were also predominantly a beast of burden. However they are bad tempered, a bit dense, and complain when they have to carry a load. They were thus used more in the desert regions of Judea where their bad temper was balanced by the fact that they could deal well with the arid conditions of the desert.

**Horses** were latecomers to Israel could only be afforded by the very wealthy. They tended more to be associated with warfare and with the Roman occupying army. As time passed horses took their places as riding animals

**Mules** were a hybrid offspring of a male ass and a female horse. They look more like horses but are stronger than asses, and more surefooted and longer lived than horses. Most of them however were imported, since Leviticus 19:19<sup>1</sup> forbade Israelites from mating different animals.



**Cats** were practically unknown in ancient Israel and the Bible does not mention them.

**Dogs** had value as service animals and were domesticated quite early in human history. Job spoke of "the dogs of my flock" (30:1). Dogs were not kept as pets however. Many dogs were also half wild scavengers and could be quite vicious if provoked.

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<sup>1</sup> "Keep my decrees. "Do not mate different kinds of animals. "Do not plant your field with two kinds of seed. "Do not wear clothing woven of two kinds of material. (Lev 19:19)