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**The Metaphor of “Sheep” and “Shepherd” and
the Security of God’s Flock**

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Consider this that sheep are the most frequently mentioned animal in the Bible. If one combines the words shepherd, sheep, and flocks, there are over 500 references in scriptures. One must consider the fact that “shepherd” and “sheep” were a significant part of the life of the Ancient Near East, and the most common occupation in the nomadic and agricultural life of the Hebrews. It is little wonder that no other words in the Bible compare with them as apt resources for metaphors of spiritual actualities. Right from the very beginning of biblical history, sheep are seen as a central part of the family economy (Gen 4:2). Keep in mind that flocks furnished their owners with a means of exchange, allowing them to barter, many of life’s necessities, such as meat, clothing, milk, and even taxes. As recorded in the Bible, Abraham, Isaac, Moses, David, and Amos were all shepherds. Possession of these animals indicated power and wealth; Job had thousands of sheep, camels, oxen, and she-asses (42:12), and Abraham’s flocks, herds, camels, and asses were counted among his blessings from the Lord (Gen 24:35). Almost all traditional families (Arab villagers and Bedouin today) own flocks of sheep and goats, as did the ancient Israelites. Usually the family flocks are small, from five to fifteen animals. Villagers often merged their flocks and sent them out with one shepherd, making the labor of watching the flocks more efficient. No other phase of life left a deeper impression than

¹ See www.TheVirtualBible.com.

the pastoral upon the literary modes of expression, the ideas, and the institutions of every civilization in the Near East.

At the same time, one of the oldest figures of speech, which we possess, is that of the “Good Shepherd” caring for his flock. Today ministers are regularly called “pastor,” which is the Latin word for “shepherd”; and one often hears reference made to his parishioners as “his flock.” It was shortly after 3000 B.C. numerous centuries before the time of Abraham, when the first rulers in Mesopotamia were spoken of as a “shepherd” of his people signifying their legitimacy to rule by their capability to “pasture” their populace. Several Sumerian deities were known as shepherds. The high god Enlil first attested to about 2500 B.C., was called the faithful shepherd (*ANET*, 337). When ancient Ur was destroyed, a poet compared the city to an abandoned stable and sheepfold; and the goddess Ningal wailed that she herself was like an “unworthy shepherd.” The shattered city was also compared to “an innocent ewe”, bereft of its “trustworthy shepherd” and its “shepherd boy” (*ANET*, 456, 457, 458, 459, 461). In the Babylonian creation epic, Marduk is celebrated as the fertility god of the land, and in this function is called faithful shepherd (*ANET*, 69, 71, 72). The famous Gilgamesh, acting tyrannically over Uruk, was challenged by the people: “Is this our shepherd, Bold, Stately, Wise?” (*ANET*, 73). In Egypt, on the walls of the Karnak temple, Amenhotep III (1411–1374, B.C.) is entitled “the good shepherd, vigilant for all people” (*ARE* 2:365–66). In addition, one of the symbols of royalty carried by the Egyptian Pharaoh was the shepherd’s crook.

The circumstances surrounding that of shepherding in ancient Israel provide the foundation for figurative references. These circumstances were significantly different from contemporary day practices and need to be taken into account by preachers of the biblical text. For example, sheep were not fenced in and left to fend for themselves. Instead, they were totally reliant on shepherds for their safety, grazing, watering, shelter, aid in birthing, and tending to injuries. In fact, sheep would not survive long without a shepherd they are virtually helpless. Sheep are not only dependent creatures; they are also singularly unintelligent, prone to wandering, and unable to find their way to a sheepfold even when it is within sight. These conditions are reflective of the human condition where Christ felt

compassion for those that followed him likening them to “sheep without a shepherd” (Mt 9:36, compare also Num 21:17; I Kg 22:17; Isa 13:14).

When one thinks of the spiritual imagery drawn from this occupation, one immediately thinks of the classic passage of Psalm 23, especially the first four verses. This passage is pregnant with meaning, capturing for us the essence of shepherding and at the same time giving us a graphic image of Yahweh’s relationship to His flock. To fully grasp David’s intended metaphor, this passage must be understood against the backdrop of its historical and geographical context. The circumstances, clearly demonstrate Yahweh’s total provision and protection or security for His flock. It is also important to keep in mind that at times, it is a struggle for the translator to embody the message of both the metaphor and the reality with appropriate English words, for sometimes the translation cannot communicate both adequately. This writer has personally been able to wander countless times the countryside of Israel and witness first hand some of the imagery presented here in this text adding to my varied understanding of the message. A short survey of this passage will demonstrate clearly, however, that the flock is safe and secure within the care of this Shepherd.

V1. “Yahweh is my shepherd I shall not want” – Yahweh is here called a shepherd (found elsewhere in the Psalms, 77:21; 80:2; 95:7) and as we have noted, one of the oldest epithets used of rulers before this time, but here the writer has personalized the relationship calling Him “my Shepherd.” Moreover, the rulers of old could not offer total provisions for life so that one could say, “I shall not want.” The word “want” (μ¹sør) in this phrase is better translated “I suffer no lack,” for the word is used most frequently in place where the sufficiency of Yahweh’s grace meets the needs of His people (Ex 16:18).

V2a. “He makes me lie down in green pastures” – In the next two verses, one is immediately drawn to the use of the personal pronoun “He.” There is no mistake; the Shepherd is the one who controls and directs the flock for good. If He did not take the initiative, the sheep would perish. He makes me lie down in “green pastures” may sound simple, but is it really? There are only two rainy seasons in Israel, and it rarely, if ever, rains in the summers (May to October). During this time, everything turns dingy brown and the

plants go dormant. The shepherd was on a continuous hunt through the mountainous terrain to find any type of grazing for his flock, but here only Yahweh the good shepherd can supply the plenty to lie down in green pastures even after eating.

V2b. “He leads me besides the still waters” – One needs to understand the geographical setting where this takes place to understand completely the significance of these next statements, in the mountainous hill country of Judah, which stretches to the north and south of Jerusalem. Many of the mountains are joined by very steep and narrow valleys. Access to water is not easy, for the broad valleys, were used to grow food, and sheep were not allow grazing there. Only the Sea of Galilee stands as an open lake in the land. During the raining season, these narrow valleys fill up fast and can act as a violent torrent. If a creature is caught in them, they could be swept away or even killed. But after the storms, small pools of water are left behind in the valley floors which shepherds seek out to water their flock. The Hebrew word used here for “still” (*menuchah*) is better translated “rested” (Gen 8:4), and carries a double meaning, not only the idea of the absence of movement, which describes the calmness of the pool of water, but also the state of being settled in, which applies to the sheep. Hence, the shepherd’s security supplies both repose as well as refreshment.

V3a. “He restores my soul” – Here the word “soul” (*nefesh*) has a variety of meanings (at least 20 different translations in the KJV), but here “life’ would fit best, where in a dry land the good shepherd tries to maintain the ‘life’ of his flock.

V3b. “He leads me in paths of righteousness” – Traveling the countryside, one will quickly notice the maze of interconnecting sheep and goat paths covering the hills, and having traveled them while being chased by Bedouin dogs, if you do not know where you are going you could become lost. Remember flocks do not know where to go by themselves they need the shepherd to lead them to pasturing. The word “leads” (*nachah*) is best-translated “guide,” hence, the psalmist chooses the best word to describe his role of conducting the sheep through the maze of trails. The word “paths” (singular: *ma’gal*) suggests clearly one is not on a highway, but a path which is not easy to navigate. When combined with the word “righteousness,” which may derive from the word “straight,” this

translates as “He guides me in straight paths or tracks.” In Isaiah 40, it is declared that when the LORD returns every valley shall be filled, the mountains brought low and the crooked places made straight. There is comfort knowing we are presently being correctly guided, but there is a time coming when the flock will never have to again worry about losing their way.

V4a. “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me” – Many ideas of this phrase have become tightly fixed in our minds. However, the Hebrew is not describing one as if they were on their deathbed, but rather traveling in the treacherous valley where thieves, robbers, and wild animals can hide out in the caves or high cliffs that have carved themselves out on the sides of the valley. The Hebrew word “shadow” with the word “death” emphasizes the deep darkness of shadows. Flocks prefer the sun-drenched hill tops not the deep, dark, shadow-lying valleys. This scenario is illustrated perfectly with Christ parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37).

V4b. “Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me” - Here another missed concept needs to be clarified. The shepherd is not carrying two types of staffs, but rather this phrase is emphasizing the twofold nature of the shepherd’s staff. It can protect the flock from predators or it can be used as a prod to keep the flock moving or from drifting away. Hence, they are called a comfort (*nacham*) to the psalmist, which carries the thought of to “breathe deeply”, words that were used latter for the exiles in Isaiah’s book of Comfort (Isaiah 40:1).

There is no mistake this passage clearly illustrates God our Shepherd takes total care of His flock, nothing is left to chance, security is not an issue.

Abbreviations

- ARE *Ancient Records of Egypt*, 5 vols., ed. J. H. Breasted. Chicago, 1906. Repr. New York, 1962
- ANET *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3d ed. with suppl., ed. J. B. Pritchard, Princeton, 1969

Sources

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The Good Shepherd Protects His Sheep

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Jewish leadership would normally be identified through the metaphor of shepherd over Israel.² Unnamed Jewish leaders would usually be identified in this manner as evil shepherds.³ By contrast, the Messiah was anticipated in second Temple Judaism to be called the good shepherd of Israel.⁴

Jesus is presented in the Gospel of John as the Good Shepherd, on the foundation of a parable⁵ about sheep in a sheepfold, similar to that of Ezekiel 34. John folds two events together into a single narrative account: 1) instructing the spiritually blind religious leaders by the sheep fold parable in their exclusion of the healed man born blind (Jn. 9:27–10:5), and 2) a discussion of the receptivity of Jesus' disciple sheep to hear His voice and be benefited, which occurred at the feast of Hanukkah, celebrating the divine gift of light in the Temple (Jn. 10:22–42).⁶ The spiritually blind leaders (who do not believe Jesus to be the Son of Man; Jn. 9:35–47), who have excluded the healed man born blind (Jn. 9:27–34), are trying to inappropriately enter the sheepfold to influence believers (Jn. 10:1). In the same vein as texts that identify the religious leaders as evil shepherds, these ones are worse than hirelings; they are thieves and murders. The legitimate shepherd enters by the door (by aid of the doorkeeper) and calls each of his sheep by name (Jn. 10:2–3). The sheep know his voice and he

² Moses: Isa. 63:11; Ps. 77:20; Heb. 13:20; *1 En.* 89:35; *L.A.B.* 19.3, 10; *Sipre Deut.* 305.3.1; *p. Sanh.* 10.1.9; *Pesiq. Rab. Kah.* 2.8; *Ex. Rab.* 2.2; 5.20; *Tg. Ps.-J.* on Gen. 40:12 (Moses, Aaron and Miriam); *1Q34*; *1Q34 bis*, 3 2.8. David: 2 Sam. 5:2; 1 Chr. 11:2; Ps. 78:70–72; Ezek. 34:23; 37:24; *4Q504* 4.6–8; *Gen. Rab.* 59.5. The prophets: *Mek. Pisha* 1.162–3. Ezra: *4 Ez.* 5.18.

³ Especially unjust leaders of Israel, causing God's judgment were called evil shepherds: Num. 27:17; 1 Kgs. 22:17; Isa. 56:11; Jer. 3:15; 10:21; 22:22; 23:1–4; 25:34–36; 50:6–7; Ezek. 34:1–12; Zech. 10:3; 11:5, 15–17; 13:4–6; *Mek. Pisha* 1.162–3; *CD* 19.8–9.

⁴ Jer. 23:1–6; Ezek. 34:23; Mic. 5:4; Zech. 13:7; *Ps. Sol.* 17.40; *Tg. Neof.* 1 on Ex. 12:42 as a new Moses; perhaps *4Q165* frg. 1–2.

⁵ John's use of *παροιμίαν* (Jn. 10:6) is synonymous to the synoptic use of *παραβολήν* and the Hebrew *mashal*/משל, which they both translate.

⁶ Earle Ellis, *The World of Saint John* (New York: Abingdon, 1965), p. 70 stresses that David as shepherd-king was mentioned in the Hanukkah lection, which might metaphorically extend the shepherd imagery into the context of Jn. 10:22–42.

leads them, because the sheep know his voice (Jn. 10:3–4). The sheep will not follow a stranger, because they do not know the stranger’s voice (Jn. 10:5).

Jesus’ unbelieving audience did not understand what Jesus was saying even accusing Him of having a demon (Jn. 10:6, 19–21). The unbelievers demand answers about whether Jesus is Messiah but don’t hear Jesus when He has shown them His answer (such as healing the man born blind, Jn. 9:27–34; 10:24–26, 32).

Jesus announced to the people that He is the door through which salvation life is to be obtained (Jn. 10:7, 9). Jesus identified that previous religious leaders were charlatans to steal and kill, and then flee the responsibility in difficult times (Jn. 10:8, 10, 12–13).

Contrasting to their selfishness, Jesus identified that He is the Good Shepherd as evidenced because He willingly lays down His life for the sheep (Jn. 10:11). Such commitment to lay down His life for His sheep fosters the Father’s love for Jesus (Jn. 10:17).

As the Good Shepherd, Jesus knows His own and His own know Him as Messiah and follow Him (Jn. 10:14, 24–27). This intimate recognition between Jesus and His disciples is enriched by Jesus intimacy with the Father (Jn. 10:14).⁷ Jesus gives His sheep everlasting life, such that they will never perish, and no one will ever snatch them out of His hand (Jn. 10:28). Additionally, Jesus announced, “My Father, Who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand” (Jn. 10:29; maybe alluding to Ps. 95[LXX 94]:7). The comparison of the Father’s and Son’s hand keeping Jesus’ disciples safe within everlasting life implies both Son as well as Father is divine and able to keep them safe. So the disciple of Jesus is strongly protected within the privilege of everlasting life.

⁷ This reflects O.T. Divine shepherd intimacy with flock Israel (Isa. 40:11; Ezek. 34:12–16).